

## Prologue – The First Flame

Long before stars had names, before memory carved maps across the sky, there was only the Aetherion.

It moved through all things — silent, unseen, eternal. The breath between creation and collapse.

In that age, two forces emerged.

One to build.

One to break.

The Builders — the Ancients — shaped galaxies from dust and will. They wove light into form, thought into matter.

But the Others (their name forgotten in time) came like rot through roots. Silent at first. Then sudden.

And the war that followed tore time asunder.

Worlds died screaming. Suns were swallowed whole.

The Builders fled — scattered across young galaxies, carrying only fragments of their knowledge. In time, they seeded life again, forging alliances with rising stars, guiding newborn civilizations toward light and order.

But the Others came still.

And what the Builders rebuilt, the Others destroyed.

A terrible war reignited — fire across every corner of the stars.

The Aetherion raged. Entire systems fell silent.

Young, unshaped worlds were forced to choose sides.

Some rose in defiance. Others vanished.

For a time, it seemed all would fall to darkness.

That the thread of existence itself would be unmade.

But not all was lost.

On a raw, fractured world near the galaxy's edge, the last ember of the Builders' flame was hidden in flesh.

A child, born of two bloodlines. One ancient. One mortal.

And when the dark threatened to devour the stars, he rose.

He fought. He bled. He led.

And they drove the darkness back.

His blade carried starlight.

His name carried fire.

The First Flame.

His story passed into legend.

But his bloodline endured.

And though his power slept, it was not lost.

It waits.

For when the galaxy begins to burn again...

The flame will rise again.

## Chapter 1 – Ashes of Aegerion

The world was silent.

Not peaceful. Not calm. Just silent — the kind of silence that comes after devastation. The kind that clings to burned stone and empty air, as if the planet itself is holding its breath.

Prince Mar of the House of Mar, second of his name, walked alone through the ruins of Aegerion.

He stands tall — impossibly tall — at seven feet, two inches, a towering embodiment of Spartan strength. His frame is power forged into motion: broad-shouldered, muscular, yet fluid — not lumbering, but coiled like a drawn blade. Every movement, every step, radiates purpose.

He moved like a shadow carved from steel.

Seven feet, two inches of Spartan steel, wrapped in scorched armour and a war-worn cloak. His body was a monument to survival — shaped by tradition and the quiet fury of purpose. A long, pale scar traced from his right brow to the edge of his jaw — earned as a child, saving Vireya from a falling crystal in the gardens of Virellien.

He could have healed it. He didn't. He kept it as a promise. As proof. As memory.

His eyes are steel-grey, cold and unreadable to most — but when the Aetherion stirs within him, they shimmer faintly, like starlight glimpsed through deep water. There's intensity in his gaze. A storm barely held back.

His hair is jet black, thick and tousled — often unkempt from battle or travel, falling in dark waves just past his ears. He sometimes ties it back before battle, but most days it falls free, shadowing his sharp features and furthering the myth.

His jaw is square, his face angular, sculpted in the Spartan Mold — but where others are stern, Mar carries a hidden weight. An exhaustion beneath the stone. A sadness just behind the pride.

Ash clung to his boots as he stepped over cracked ferrocrete and warped steel.

Once a quiet farming world, Aegiron had become a secret Spartan fortress — secure, sacred, and silent.

Now it was bones and dust.

Twisted spires reached toward a grey sky. The buildings, once proud, leaned like broken teeth. The wind carried no sound but its own hollow breath.

Aegiron had fallen five years ago. But Mar had survived.

They said he stayed behind to buy time for the evacuation. That he died a warrior's death. They were wrong.

He didn't stay because he was brave. He stayed because he couldn't leave.

And maybe, in some way, he had died here — not his body, but something deeper.

Across his back hung the Sunbrand — the legendary blade of the first Spartan king. It had been claimed by Mar on Harvest — a world burned to ash a couple of years before the destruction of Aegiron during a terrible battle. His grandfather's final breath had been a whisper: a mission, a task, a destiny. Not because Mar was ready, but there was no one else who could achieve it.

The Aetherion stirred again. Right now, I'm guessing you are asking what the Aetherion is. The Aetherion is not just power. It is presence. Essence. The unseen thread that binds life to light, time to space, breath to being.

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It lives in all things — stone and storm, star and soul — but only a few can touch it. Even fewer can bend it.  
And fewer still... are born of it.

When a User Draws Upon the Aetherion

The air changes first.

Stillness, like the breath before thunder.

A faint hum, like a note of music only the bones can hear.

Then: light — not bright, but deep. Not cast onto the world, but from within it.

The space around the user seems to bend slightly, as if reality itself leans closer. Hair rises. Shadows shudder. Dust swirls in patterns that echo ancient geometries.

Their eyes glow — not white, not blue, not gold — but a light *without colour*. Aetherion light. It pulses, breathing with them, through them. It is a glow that suggests both infinity and ending. A candle flames the size of a star.

When they unleash it, it's like tearing a hole in the fabric of the world — force without weight, sound without noise, motion without movement.

It is the language of creation. The echo of the first spark. And when someone like a omega touches it fully, the universe *listens*.

He stopped. Closed his eyes and then it came — like a tide of fire breaking through his mind.

A vision. Flames. Screaming. Sparta burning.

The skies of his home world torn apart by war. Ships falling from orbit. Smoke curling over the broken towers of the Aegis Spire. And in the heart of the chaos: Vireya. Her face streaked with ash. Her voice raw with terror. But she wasn't screaming for herself. She was screaming for a child. A girl. No more than five. Curled in shadow. Crying. Reaching out — not for her mother. For him.

The vision shattered. Mar stumbled against the wall of a collapsed dome; breath sharp. His heart thundered beneath the weight of something unspoken. A child? His mind denied it. But his blood knew. The Aetherion didn't lie. He pushed forward through the ruins. Every broken wall, every shattered dome whispered stories. Some he knew. Some he'd lived. Others he had tried to forget. And as he walked, the memories returned.

While walking along the edge of the collapsed dome, he saw it.

A Spartan shuttle — buried in ash and forgotten by time — sat quietly in the shadow of a shattered tower.

Unscathed. Untouched.

Mar's eyes narrowed as he stepped closer, boots crunching over broken glass and ferrocrete. His hand brushed the side of its scorched, dust-caked hull.

The name was still barely legible: Zendeya.

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An Ember-Class shuttle.

Small, fast, built for cargo runs and field deployments — the kind his unit used during the early days.

A model used by the Phoenix Legion.

Mar let out a dry chuckle.

“Zendeya... still here after all this.”

It brought memories rushing back. Old missions. Old comrades. The way the shuttle used to hum just before take-off — the smell of burning ion coils and bloodied Armor.

He hadn’t expected to feel anything.

But something about it made Aegiron feel less empty.

Historical Context:

The Ember-Class was developed early into the Zenthari War as a tactical alternative to the bulkier Titan-Class Dropships. Its design was inspired by the battlefield need to extract wounded operatives and critical intelligence assets from high-risk zones — quietly and fast. The shuttle earned its name after a widely publicized rescue during the Siege of Kaldris, where a single Ember-Class, call-sign Ashlight, flew into a burning city and extracted nine survivors under fire. The vessel was half-melted by the time it returned — glowing like an ember against the night.

Since then, Phoenix Legion squads often refer to the Ember as “the little flame that always comes back.”

Mar braced himself against the side panel and dug his fingers into the emergency release seal. The outer hatch groaned — age, dust, and impact welds resisting him.

He gritted his teeth.

“Come on...”

With a sharp twist and a surge of brute force, the hatch snapped loose and hissed open.

He ducked inside.

The cockpit was cramped, dark, and coated in ash. Dust particles drifted through thin shafts of sunlight piercing the cracked canopy. He moved through the interior like a ghost in armour, fingers trailing over long-dead systems.

He found the manual ignition, pried open the access panel, and began checking the fuel cells, geo-scopes, and navigation memory cores. One by one, they hummed to life — faint glimmers of old power returning.

This was what the Ember-Class had been made for. Fast. Durable. Spartan to the core — like the people who built them.

As the systems stabilized, Mar leaned back in the pilot’s seat.

The stars on the navigation console stirred memories.

The Shape of the Galaxy come flashing into his mind,

The galaxy — Andromeda — had once been ruled by peace. At least, that’s what the Concord liked to say.

The Galactic Concord liked to call itself a republic of worlds — unified by law, diplomacy, and mutual defence. But Mar had seen the truth beneath the banners.

The galaxy was vast, home to species shaped by fire, ice, and silence — crystalline minds, aquatic empires, beings who dreamed across stars.

But when it came to power — to war, to influence — the ones seated at the table all looked the same.

Humanoid. Familiar. Comfortable.

Spartans, Virellien, Concord delegates — different bloodlines, same shape. Two arms. Two

legs. Eyes that could cry in the same direction.  
The Concord spoke of unity. But when Sparta bled, they looked away.  
Thousands of civilizations, one charter.  
And still, somehow, always alone.

Sparta was part of it.

But it never fit. Sparta did not believe in compromise. It believed in strength. In sacrifice.  
In survival. Its people did not build for comfort — they built for war. Yet they were  
indispensable. When diplomacy failed, the Concord called Sparta. And when Sparta bled, the  
Concord looked away and Aegiron was there result.

Long before the Concord, before Sparta, before memory, there had been two ancient  
civilizations — one of creation, the other of entropy. Their war burned across galaxies. The  
victors — known now only as the Ancients — retreated into silence, leaving behind  
fragments of their power. Relics. Bloodlines. Warnings. And on the edge of the galaxy, on a  
raw and brutal world, they left one last ember. Sparta.

From its fire rose a people who believed not in comfort, but in discipline.  
Not in peace, but in strength.  
And when war came again, they stood where others fell.  
They called themselves Spartans.

The ancient Spartans

Forged in the crucible of lost wars and brutal moons, they trusted only their own kind. They  
didn't trade bloodlines. Didn't mix with other species.  
To be Spartan was to be pure — in body, in code, in history.  
And yet...

Mar had loved someone not born of Sparta.

A girl who would become a woman — a woman the galaxy would one day call the most  
beautiful in a hundred-star systems. A diplomat. A warrior. A mystery.  
Vireya.

She wasn't Spartan.

But she was his.

Her blood sang with the ancient Aetherion. Her heart, with compassion. Her mind, with fire  
sharp enough to match his own.

To love her had been a rebellion.

To leave her had been the cost of war.

And to see her again now — in visions, in memories, in silence — reminded him of the only  
truth that still mattered:

He had never stopped.

Vireya.

He remembered the way the wind moved that day.

Not the ceremony. Not the vows exchanged.

Just the wind.

It caught in her braid as she turned toward me, loose strands of silver dancing like flame.

She smiled — that small, quiet smile I loved more than victory.

He wasn't a prince.  
He wasn't a soldier.  
He was just a boy marrying the only person who ever saw all of me... and didn't flinch.  
She wore Virellien white, stitched with old runes I still don't understand. Her eyes held no fear — just that calm fire she always carried. The one that steadied me before battle... and shattered me in silence.  
When he spoke the words — the binding vow of Sparta — his voice didn't shake.  
But inside? He was already undone.  
Because he knew.  
He would spend his life fighting for Sparta, for legacy, for blood.  
But in that moment, he would've given it all up — the title, the lineage, the name itself — just to be hers.  
He never asked permission.  
They were only fifteen.  
It wasn't official. It wasn't public.  
It was a hidden ceremony. A stolen hour.  
A vow made not by law... but by love.

Vireya of Virellien

Titles: Princess of Virellien, Secret Wife to Mar

There are many across the galaxy who call her the most beautiful woman in a hundred-star systems — but Vireya's beauty is not the kind found in paintings or poems. It is deeper. Sharper. The kind that commands rooms, softens tempests, and silences empires.

She carries the unmistakable grace of her mother's lineage — an Ancient who once emerged from hidden isolation to walk among mortals and fell in love with the king of Virellien. The result was Vireya — a daughter born of starlight and sovereignty, who bears the proud bearing of a leader forged in the fires of politics, war, and survival.

Tall, though not imposing, she stands just under six feet, every inch of her sculpted in elegance and quiet strength. Her figure is slender but athletic — the result of a lifetime spent mastering diplomacy by day and combat forms by night. She moves like water and shadow — never rushed, always aware, always in control.

Her skin is pale gold, kissed with a faint ethereal luminescence that marks her ancient blood. In soft light, it glows — as though the stars themselves once whispered her name and left a trace behind.

Her hair is silver, white, long and straight, often braided in the traditional styles of Virellien nobility or worn loose in regal waves. The strands shimmer like moonlight caught in motion.

Her eyes are what most remember — brilliant amethyst, edged with flecks of crystal blue, ancient and ageless, capable of disarming senators and unsettling warlords. When she is angry, they shine like twin Novas. When she loves, they soften like dusk across a tranquil sea.

He met her when they were four — a child of light and starlit grace, daughter of Elyra. Raised on Virellien, a world untouched by war. Gentle. Still, he fell in love instantly. Not in

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the way children understand love — but in the way that lives in the blood. She didn't like him. Thought he was a brute. A loud, stomping boy in metal boots.

Until he saved her life. A falling crystal. A push. A scar. She never forgot. Neither did he. They trained together later at the Selenar Academy, the elite force school for Aetherion users. Only the rarest were admitted — those who could bend the current, not just feel it. They were opposites. He struck. She flowed. He burned. She negotiated.

They moved like gravity — separate yet drawn together by a force they never named. They shared visions. Shared breath. Shared silence. And then... shared something more.

she is Vireya — the starlit rose of Virellien, and the only one who ever made Mar — the Sword of Sparta — kneel without drawing a blade.  
And now, he had to return. He had been gone too long. He had left her in silence, in shadow... and the visions would not let him forget.  
He saw her in fire. In fear. Crying out not for safety — but for the child.  
And he knew: if he didn't go back now, he might lose her forever.

## Chapter 2 – Shadows Beneath the Flame

The stars were waiting.

Mar sat alone in the cockpit, hands braced on the controls, his armoured shoulders stiff against the worn flight harness. Around him, the shuttle hummed with life — artificial, aged, but loyal. Systems flickered online one by one, casting soft golden light across his scarred feature.

The silence inside was different from Aegiron. It wasn't dead. It was pregnant — with memory, with movement, with the hum of fate turning over in its sleep.

A soft click echoed as the launch thrusters cycled.

He didn't look back.

Five years of dust and war and quiet rebellion lay behind him. He had hesitated once but not now. Instead, he stared forward — out through the scratched canopy at the void beyond the mountain pass, where the upper atmosphere still shimmered with the auroras of long-dead orbital bombardments. He watched them dance like ghost fire on the edge of the sky.

His hand hovered over the ignition rune.

The Aetherion stirred.

And with it came another whisper of a memory.

Six Years Ago – The Battle of Harvest

The scream of engines. The stink of fire and blood. And the iron weight of war pressing down like a god's hand.

Harvest had once been green. Now the sky was red screams and explosions in the air,

Mar stood at the edge of a burning wheat field, knees in the dirt, cradling the body of his grandfather — High Marshal Vaelor Mar, warrior-king, first blade of Sparta.

The old man's chest rose once. Then fell.

In his final breath, he opened his fist — and within it, still pulsing with ancient light, lay the Sunbrand.

Mar had returned it, cradled in trembling hands — the weapon he had once claimed in fire and fury.

Now he tried to give it back — as if, somehow, the act might return strength... restore life... hold off the inevitable just a moment longer.

His grandfather looked at him — eyes dimming, breath shallow — and whispered.

A request.

An order.

A hope.

Words that would shape Mar for the years to come.

Mar reached for the hilt.

The moment his fingers closed around it, the blade ignited — a brilliant line of molten gold, searing the air with a scream of Aetherion resonance.

Every soldier stopped. Because in that moment, the blade did not destroy him.

It crowned him.

Present day came flashing back during the Ascent

The shuttle roared to life beneath him.

Dust swirled. Old stone trembled. The mountain hangar split open to the sky like a wound healing in reverse.

Mar gripped the controls.

Then he launched.

The planet fell away behind him, a grey shadow swallowed by stars. Ahead: the open void — and the long path home.

But in his mind's eye, he saw more than stars.

He saw a tower collapsing in flame.

He saw his brother, older now, staring into the fire.

He saw Vireya, her voice like a blade of light — not calling his name... but someone else's.

And he saw the child again.

Who was she?

Familiar... yet distant. Her eyes, wide and bright, held something he recognized but could not name.

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His heart clenched — but the moment shattered.  
Alarms blared around him, screaming into the silence.  
Red lights erupted across the console. Proximity alerts. Collision warnings. Something huge filled the void ahead.  
Mar's eyes snapped to the viewport.  
There, scattered across the darkness like shattered bones, drifted the remains of war — a graveyard of broken ships, torn and rusting, forgotten by time.  
He knew this place.  
Once, it had been Hub Station 14 — a strategic docking nexus for the Spartan fleet. Before the battle, its levels had teemed with life: traders, engineers, warriors, children. He remembered its cathedral-like docking halls, the hum of orbital elevators, the smell of oil and spice.  
Now it was dust and debris.  
A mausoleum.  
He eased the throttle, weaving the shuttle between twisted hulls and skeletal wreckage. Some bore the markings of Spartan cruisers. Others — Zenthari.  
He drifted past a shattered frigate, its nameplate still barely visible.  
“Orelas' Wrath.”  
He remembered that ship. Remembered the captain — a woman who once called him “boy” in mockery and later saluted him on Harvest after he held the Sunbrand. Mar swallowed hard. Aegiron had fallen. But the echoes of war were still out here, bleeding across the stars.  
He navigated the graveyard slowly, the shuttle weaving through twisted metal and drifting silence.  
All around him were the corpses of war — shattered Spartan frigates, gutted Zenthari cruisers, and unknown hulls twisted beyond recognition. Lifeless. Forgotten. The wrecks drifted in a slow, endless ballet, their remains glowing faintly in the scattered light of the nearby Nebula Arkaris.  
The Arkaris Nebula.

### The Perfect Veil

The Arkaris Nebula is a massive, dense stellar formation located in the far-flung rim of the Andromeda Galaxy, well beyond most charted trade routes and communication relays. Thick with volatile gas clouds, electromagnetic storms, and gravitational anomalies, it spans several lightyears and distorts both sensor readings and long-range communications.

Most concord cartographers labelled it as “astronavigationally unstable” — a region where even advanced Concord sensors failed to scan clearly. Civilian and Concord fleets avoided it entirely. As far as most of the galaxy was concerned, it was a dead zone.

To the Spartans, it was the perfect hiding place. At the nebula's outer edge lies a narrow gravitational corridor — a hidden slipstream tunnel known only to the Spartan High Command and accessible only through specific, encrypted navkeys.

Inside that corridor, behind a veil of ion storms and magnetic distortion, sat Aegiron — a planet terraformed decades ago and transformed into a military world, off-grid and off-record.

- Sensors couldn't penetrate the nebula's outer wall.
- Slipstream drives misfired without exact coordinates.

- Communications were scrambled or redirected by the charged particles surrounding the system.
- Even scouts and spies couldn't survive long enough to report back.

Only Spartan warships, equipped with specialized nav systems and familiar with the shifting gravitational patterns of the Arkaris field, could traverse the region safely.

To the outside galaxy — even to the Concord — Aegiron simply did not exist.

### Then The Secret was Exposed

It was only after the Zenthari Dominion launched their surprise assault — slipping through the nebula with experimental drives and information gained from unknown sources — that the truth came to light. The Concord was outraged, not only by the sudden appearance of a hidden Spartan military world, but by the implication that Sparta had a world they knew nothing about, no control no say, a world that could be used as a weapon against them.

What was once Sparta's greatest shield became their greatest political liability.

And Aegiron — the hidden anvil on which Spartan warriors were forged — became a graveyard

Its clouds made a mess of sensors, scrambled short-range systems, and blocked nearly all comms unless you had a broad-spectrum Aetherion antenna — rare tech, and mostly classified.

The nebula loomed ahead — thick, burning with chaotic colour. Vivid blues, sickly greens, streaks of violet and gold. It twisted like a living thing, its roiling mass a storm of magnetic distortion.

Mar tapped the console, adjusting thrust and angle as a burnt-out gunship scraped past his field of view. Its hull was marked in deep Spartan red, though half its emblem had been scorched away.

He remembered this place.

He remembered how the fleets gathered here before been deployed to the fronts— proud, bright, unstoppable. Now... only ghosts.

Mar noticed a few comm towers and relays still standing amid the graveyard, flickering weak signals. He was surprised they hadn't been destroyed in the fighting. But he couldn't linger.

He had to reach the outer edge — the edge of the nebula — where the clouds thinned and long-range nav could reinitialize. Only there could he calculate a safe jump.

The turbulence grew sharper. The shuttle groaned as invisible waves of force tugged at its hull, the stars warping and flickering through the storm outside. The console flared red again. "Gravitational shear increasing. Course deviation imminent."

Mar narrowed his eyes and corrected manually. The warning blared again. He couldn't help it — he chuckled. "Don't underestimate gravitational shear," came a voice from memory. Old. Stern. Crusted with decades of disappointment.

Instructor Kevarin.

Selenar Academy.

Second year.

They'd been learning subspace navigation theory. Mar had yawned through most of it. He'd always preferred blades to equations. Vireya had been seated beside him, arms folded, golden braid looped neatly over her shoulder. She hadn't even looked at him — just muttered under her breath: "You're going to get yourself killed. Or worse — thrown out."

Mar had whispered something cocky back. She hadn't spoken to him for three days. Now, as the shuttle rattled under the pressure of the nebula's pull, he could almost hear her voice again — that soft, disapproving sigh.

That tiny shake of the head she reserved only for him. "Reckless," she would say.

"You enjoy breaking rules." He smiled faintly. "Maybe," he muttered aloud, "but I still made it to the top of the class, didn't I?"

The ship groaned again. Not in agreement. Mar's smile faded. He tightened his grip on the controls. "Just get me to the edge," he whispered to the stars.

The turbulence steadied. For now.

Mar leaned back in the pilot's chair; eyes fixed on the distorted swirl of stars ahead. But his thoughts drifted again — not into war, not into ruin, but into something gentler.

Years Ago – Selenar Academy, Inner Gardens

The breeze was warm beneath the silver-leafed trees. He remembered the way the light spilled through the branches — soft, golden, fractured. Somewhere beyond the walls, the towers of the Academy shimmered under the twin moons, but here in the gardens, everything was quiet. He was lying back on the grass. She was beside him — legs curled beneath her, head resting lightly on his chest. Vireya. She traced a line down his arm, her fingers gentle, curious.

The way she always was when they were alone. There was no judgment in her touch — only memory. Only affection. He reached up, brushing a strand of hair from her face. Her skin was soft and cool, and when he leaned in, she smiled — slow and knowing.

"You're thinking too loud again," she whispered. He chuckled. "Just memorizing this." "My face?" she said. He shook his head. "Everything." She fell silent. He felt the weight of it in her breath.

"You're going, aren't you?" she said at last. He didn't answer. He didn't need to.

The war had already started. A great offensive by the dominion had started, and so his grandfather was looking to strike back push the dominion away from spartan territory. But here, in this moment, he wasn't a prince. Wasn't a warrior. He was just a boy lying beneath a tree with the girl who had become his whole world. He kissed her then — slow, deep, uncertain if it would be the last time. She didn't cry. She only held him tighter.

Present – Edge of the Nebula

A red light blinked on the nav board. Proximity marker. Mar blinked, the memory still warm behind his eyes. The last days of his old life.

The nebula thinned. Colours faded from the canopy — no more twisted auroras, no interference. Just the still, sharp black of deep space and a sea of waiting stars. The shuttle's sensors pinged back online, stable.

"Gravitational interference below threshold. Slipstream drive online."

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Slipstream travel is the backbone of interstellar movement across the Andromeda galaxy. Unlike traditional warp drives or hyperspace jumps, slipstream is not instantaneous — it's directional, predictive, and dangerously temperamental if misused.

At its core, slipstream technology allows a vessel to fold space in real time, forming a temporary corridor between two distant points in the galaxy. The ship is not jumping from point A to B — it is slipping through an artificially compressed layer of subspace, where distance behaves like a liquid current, rather than a fixed path.

Time within slipstream is distorted — a ship might travel dozens of lightyears in a few hours, but it's not instantaneous. A full galactic jump could take half a day or more, depending on the hazards along the route.

For passengers, entering slipstream feels like a sudden drop into silence — gravity fluctuates, light bends at the edge of perception, and the stars appear as elongated ribbons rushing past the viewport. The hum of the engines shifts into a lower frequency, almost like a heartbeat.

Sensitive Aetherion users often feel pressure in their skulls, or a sensation like being underwater in a vast, cosmic ocean. Some even claim to hear whispers — echoes of the ancient energies slipstream travels through.

Slipstream can be disrupted by advanced technology, dark matter mines, or planetary interference — and a collapse in a slipstream corridor mid-flight can strand or destroy a ship without warning.

Mar leaned over the console as a line of blue light carved across the nav screen — a projected corridor, flickering faintly with layered coordinates and pulse-routes. A slow smile ghosted across his lips. There it was. Sparta. Two sectors over. Less than 2 days by slipstream.

“Course plotted. Estimated travel time: 38 hours, twenty-eight minutes. Comm relays re-established.”

He sat back, letting the hum of the engine wrap around him like Armor. The nebula was behind him now. But ahead... A home that believed him dead. a brother who'd buried him in stories. A woman who had once loved him beneath silver trees. He set the slipstream charge, fingers brushing the Sunbrand once more out of habit. The shuttle shuddered as the corridor opened — a tunnel of warping starlight and thinned reality, pulling at the edges of time. The drive ignited. And the stars stretched into infinity.

### Chapter 3 – The Long Shadow

The sun had not yet risen over the Concord Spire, but Vireya was already awake.

She stood by the arched window of her private chamber on Concordia, the capital world of the Galactic Concord.

The Capital of the Galactic Concord

*“Where stars meet in counsel, and peace is carved in debate.”*

Concordia is not just a planet — it is a statement.

A declaration of unity, order, and civilization in the galaxy. Located at the precise intersection of several major slipstream lanes, it serves as the beating heart of the Galactic Concord.

The surface of Concordia is almost entirely urbanized, save for curated natural preserves, ceremonial gardens, and ancient monuments protected by law.

Its architecture is a blend of every major civilization in the Concord: domed structures of crystalline glass, spires etched with alien glyphs, towering civic halls forged from starsteel and living vines. Everything about Concordia says order, culture, diplomacy.

At the core of the capital stands the Senate Spire, a colossal white obelisk of seamless alloy and shimmering forceglass. It rises miles above the city skyline and can be seen from space. Within it are:

- The Senate Chamber, shaped like a tiered star-map with floating platforms for each representative.
- The Hall of Origin, where the Concord Charter was first signed.
- The Library of Unity, storing every major historical treaty, war record, and philosophical doctrine in the galaxy's history.

Concordia is where decisions are made — treaties forged, wars ended, policies passed. But it's also where power struggles simmer, where lobbyists, spies, and ambitious senators walk the same halls as peacekeepers and visionaries.

Despite its beauty, Concordia is often described as “a serpent with a silver tongue” — elegant, wise, but dangerous if underestimated.

Due to its political significance, Concordia is heavily fortified: Planet-wide orbital shields, Senate Guard, a specialized force drawn from multiple species, Advanced counterintelligence arrays, Hidden Concord Navy fleets stationed in-system

Far below, the city stirred — spires glinting like blades in the pale blue dawn, traffic streams curling through the skies like silver thread. Peaceful. Structured. Controlled. She hated it.

No, that wasn't true. She admired it. Revered its order, its ambition. It was a place built on unity — a union of Thousands of worlds, each with its voice. Her world, Virellien, was among the oldest of them, its people descended from the Ancients who once healed this galaxy's wounds.

“It's not just my home. It's the last place the stars still sing.”

“They call Virellien a paradise. A world untouched by war. They speak of it in hushed tones across the Concord, as if to describe it too loudly would break whatever spell protects it.

But they do not understand.

Virellien is not paradise because it is perfect — it is paradise because it remembers what the galaxy has forgotten.

Our skies shift like painted silk — rich violets at dawn, silvered indigo at night, with two moons that dance above the crystalline canopy. The trees of Virellien are tall and aglow — not from sunlight, but from within. Their leaves hum softly when the wind brushes through them. That's how I slept as a child. Not to silence, but to the soft singing of the woods.

Our cities don't scrape the sky. They grow into it. Spires made of living crystal and carved stone, suspended above the lakes by roots of light and memory. We walk barefoot on our world — not out of ritual, but because Virellien itself listens. It remembers every step. Every sorrow. Every promise.

We are not warriors.

We are not conquerors.

We are caretakers — of beauty, of knowledge, of power tempered with purpose.  
But make no mistake — we are not weak.  
The blood of the Ancients runs through us. It runs through me.  
When he first visited Virellien, I thought him a blade wrapped in stormclouds. Loud. Heavy.  
Spartan.  
But when he stood in the heart of our gardens — watching the starlight reflect on crystal  
water — he was quiet. Still.  
Virellien isn't just beautiful.  
It's truth, preserved in crystal and wind.  
And the day it burns... is the day the stars weep."

And Vireya? She was the Princess of Virellien, she was their voice is dark and cold galaxy  
she was there hope there future.

And yet... she had not slept.

The dream still clung to her — not in images, but in sensation. Heavy boots. A torn cloak.  
Grey eyes like frozen fire. A voice she hadn't heard in five years, and a face she had trained  
herself not to see. "He is gone," she whispered aloud.

The room did not answer.

She turned from the window, letting the light fall across her features. High cheekbones. Calm  
eyes. A stillness that had taken years to master.

The robes of office — white and silver, stitched with ancient runes — lay folded on the bench  
beside her. She dressed in silence, letting the rhythm of the motion bury the memories  
clawing at the edges of her thoughts. He was just a dream. A shadow. A ghost with a  
warrior's voice. There were more important things now.

The corridors of the Concord Citadel were quiet at dawn.  
Vireya moved through them like starlight wrapped in silk — graceful, deliberate,  
untouchable. Her robes flowed behind her, trimmed in the silver-green of Virellien royalty,  
their fabric whispering over polished stone. Two members of her personal guard, clad in  
ceremonial Armor laced with ancestral runes, flanked her in silence. They did not speak.  
They never needed to.

Just before leaving her suite, she had paused at the child's door  
The child still slept in the adjoining suite — curled beneath a blanket of pale stardust silk.  
Vireya had checked on her earlier, fingers brushing her dark curls, her forehead warm and  
steady. She did not think of resemblance. She did not compare features. She had learned to  
block such thoughts. There were duties to fulfil.

A soft breath from within. Steady. Untroubled.  
Ardenne, the Virellien nanny assigned by the royal court, had already risen and stood watch  
just inside, a quiet shadow in white and gold. She inclined her head to Vireya — a silent  
promise. Nothing would disturb the child's sleep.

Vireya hadn't stepped into the room.

A long hallway led to a private elevator shaft, then to a glass-hover transport that carried her  
across the upper city. The towers of Concordia rose around her like carved crystal, catching  
the light of the rising sun. Below, the city stirred — transports rising like birds, banners  
unfurling, citizens waking into another fragile day.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

As she neared the Senate Rotunda, the guards peeled away — only Virellien's voice was allowed in the chamber.

She entered alone.

A princess. A senator. A mother.

But never all three at once.

The Grand Rotunda of the Concord Senate glittered like a jewel beneath the morning sun.

Vireya sat in silence as the chamber stirred to life — hundreds of senators from across the Andromeda galaxy filing into their floating platforms, each bearing the crest of their world. Voices overlapped in a controlled murmur. Holograms flickered. The central sphere, a levitating hub of translucent light, pulsed softly, waiting for order.

She stood at her platform — the silver and green of Virellien glowing behind her — poised, serene, unreadable.

But her hands were tight behind her back.

A bill was up for final argument.

Resolution 312-A: The Strategic War Access Initiative — an emergency clause allowing Concord-aligned private banks to open war-credit lines to select planetary sectors and military blocs, including the Spartan arm of the Concord.

“A gift-wrapped method,” she'd said last week in committee, “to sell blood for interest.”

They had not appreciated her phrasing. Now they waited for her response. A senator from Kostari Prime was still speaking — some old merchant lord with a voice like molasses and the moral spine of wet cloth. “...access to credit markets strengthens our outer colonies, offers liquidity to defence operations, and stabilizes interplanetary trust in our mutual deterrent posture...” Vireya's eyes didn't flicker. But inside, she burned. War had its place. But the Zenthari weren't just fought with fleets. They were fought with truth, with discipline. And if the Concord mortgaged its values now, it would not recover. The speaker's time expired. A quiet chime. Vireya's platform floated forward into the central light.

All eyes turned. She spoke, calm and clear. “This resolution does not strengthen the Concord. It strips it. Of ethics. Of autonomy. Of memory. Let us not forget — Sparta did not fall back because it lacked ships. Aegiron did not fall because it lacked credits. They fell because too few stood before the fire and said: No more.”

She paused.

“If we trade our principles for temporary profit, we trade our future for a convenient lie.”

Silence rippled through the chamber. She bowed her head. “Virellien votes no.” Her platform withdrew. But in her heart, the fire kept burning.

Her platform withdrew in silence.

Dozens of senators watched her — some with respect, some with cold calculation. None dared speak. She had given them the truth, and truth always echoed uncomfortably in political halls.

The platform eased back to the Virellien position near the eastern curve of the rotunda.

She stood still, eyes lowered, breathing slow.

But something inside her cracked.

Flashback – Years Ago, Selenar Academy Gardens

A breeze through silver trees.

She sat beneath the largest one, its branches stretching wide across the glowing canopy. The air was warm. Quiet. Safe. Mar lay beside her in the grass, his cloak bunched beneath his head, his hands behind his neck — too casual for the moment, as always.

He had been tracing shapes in the leaves above, talking about a war he hadn't been ordered to fight yet. But she hadn't been listening.

She was watching the way the light hit his face. The small cut on his jaw from sparring. The way his mouth twitched when he was trying not to smile.

He turned to her then, reached for her hand, ran his thumb along the edge of her wrist.

"I want to remember you like this," he'd said.

She had smiled.

"Reckless," she'd whispered, but her voice had trembled.

Present – Senate Chamber

The vision shattered. Vireya hands curled into fists at her sides. Her composure snapped back into place like a blade re-sheathed.

How dare her mind betray her like that?

How dare he still haunt her, like a shadow stitched into the roots of her thoughts?

She hadn't spoken his name in years. Hadn't allowed herself the weakness of remembering the touch of his hands, the way he said her name like a vow.

He left. He vanished. He died. She inhaled sharply. Her heartbeat slowed. She was Senator Vireya of Virellien. And she would not let a ghost unmake her.

She turned from the chamber's edge, retreating into the shadows behind her platform, away from the gazes of the other senators. The pulse of Concordia beyond the glass dome faded into background noise.

And yet... the image lingered.

The sound of his laugh. The weight of his body beside hers in the grass. The memory of fingers on her skin, rough with training but trembling when he touched her like she was something sacred. She shut her eyes. Was that why she was thinking of him again? Not because of some dream. Not because of the stars.

But because guilt was creeping in.

Because Lucan — his older brother, the man who had stood beside her through everything — had suggested they stop pretending. That they become more than co-parents. More than allies. That they try... something real.

Lucan had raised the child he had never knew. He was steady, noble, respected across the Concord. Handsome, too — in a colder, quieter way than his brother. Not fire and fury, but stone and strength. And he looked at her with hope.

And gods help her, sometimes... she looked back. She wondered — if she let him touch her, would it feel like it did under the silver trees? Would her body remember the shape of the man who left her?

Or would it let itself be rewritten by the man who stayed? Her breath caught. She opened her eyes again. "Foolish," she whispered. Then she straightened her shoulders. There were no answers in dreams. Only choices.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft



She stumbled back to her private residence located in the Concord Citadel

The apartment was quiet — high above the city, where the windows opened to the velvet black of space and the soft golden lights of Concordia's upper districts.

Vireya stepped through the entryway, loosening her cloak, the tension of the Senate still clinging to her like smoke. She passed the twin guards who stood respectfully at attention and gave a nod to Ardenne, who bowed and returned to the study.

In the sitting room, a soft light glowed.

Her daughter sat cross-legged on the couch, wrapped in a nightrobe the color of early morning mist, carefully fitting holocrystals into a small learning sphere. She looked up as Vireya entered, her face brightening.

“Mama!”

Vireya smiled — gently, if not easily — and crossed the room. She knelt and smoothed back the girl's hair.

“Did you finish your reading?”

The child nodded solemnly. “And I packed my bag. Ardenne checked it.”

“Good. We'll leave at first light.”

The girl tilted her head, thoughtful. “Will Uncle Lucan be there?”

Vireya nodded. “Yes. And your grandfather. And your great-grandmother Solenne. They've all asked to see you.”

“Will I get to see the old gardens?”

“Of course.”

There was a long pause.

Then the girl looked up, blinking — the way she always did before asking something serious.

“Mama,” she said slowly, “I had a dream last night.”

Vireya froze slightly, though her smile remained.

“A dream?”

The girl nodded. “There was a battle. And a soldier was standing in the middle of the fire. He was tall. His eyes were grey. And he had... a sword.”

Vireya's heart caught.

“What kind of sword?”

“The glowing kind. Like the one in the palace, the one uncle Lucan showed me but won’t tell me the story the one behind the glass.”

Vireya said nothing.

She knew the sword her daughter meant.  
The Sunbrand. The blade of the House of Mar.  
The weapon that only answered to true blood.

“It was just a dream,” she said softly.

The girl looked unsure. “But he looked at me. Like he knew me.”

Vireya pulled her close, pressing a kiss to her forehead, though her arms tightened a little too hard.

“Dreams are just memories from a world we haven’t lived yet,” she whispered.

She told the child but even as she turned away, the words echoed in her mind.

“He looked at me.”

#### Chapter 4 – The Weight of the Throne

The halls of the Aegis Bastion rang with the rhythm of discipline.

##### *Citadel of Kings, Heart of Sparta*

Rising from the ancient bedrock of Sparta’s capital, the Aegis Bastion is more than a fortress — it is the unshakable heart of an empire forged in war.

Built from darkstone quarried in the oldest mountains of the planet and reinforced with Aetherion-infused alloys, the Bastion has stood for over ten thousand years. Each layer of its foundation is etched with the names of kings, warriors, and battles long forgotten by the rest of the galaxy. But not by the Spartans. They remember everything.

The Aegis Bastion dominates the skyline — a vast, angular complex of towers, bridges, and tiered battlements built with one philosophy: function over beauty, power over pride. Yet there is beauty in its brutality — in the precision of its lines, the disciplined geometry of its towers, and the way it casts long, indomitable shadows at dusk.

Key locations within the Bastion:

- The Hall of Shields – a grand corridor where the crests of every noble Spartan house are displayed. New banners are only added after blood has been spilled in their name.
- The Throne of Flame – the seat of the Spartan kings, forged from melted weapons of fallen enemies during the War of Seven Moons. It sits on an elevated platform within the inner sanctum.
- The Wartable Vault – the command hub for all of Sparta’s military campaigns, equipped with real-time galactic holomaps and encrypted Aetherion-sensing relays.
- The Catacombs of the Crown – hidden beneath the Bastion, these tunnels contain ancestral tombs, forbidden archives, and secret paths only known to the ruling bloodline. Mar’s secret study is found here.

The Bastion is the most heavily fortified structure on Sparta:

- Aetherion Shields resistant to orbital bombardment.
- Sun Lances mounted on the towers — relic weapons powered by crystal cores from before the Concord's formation.
- Phoenix Guard — an elite force of Spartan warriors loyal only to the royal family, many personally trained by Lucan.

No force has ever successfully breached the Bastion from within the atmosphere. Those who've tried did not live to remember the attempt.

To the galaxy, the Aegis Bastion is a monument to Spartan arrogance.

To Spartans, it is a living memory — of sacrifice, sovereignty, and survival.

It is said that when the Bastion falls, Sparta dies with it.

Boots against steel. Orders over comms. The quiet hum of war in waiting.

Lucan Mar, First Commander of the Spartan Core, strode through the inner war chamber of Sparta's High Command, cloak trailing behind him like a shadow of the old kings. Officers stepped aside as he passed. Not out of fear — but respect.

He was the son of a legend. The heir apparent.

And the man who bore the burden his brother had left behind.

The chamber doors hissed open before him. Inside, the holo-table glowed — a shifting projection of the sector's outer defenses, ship patrols, and threat signatures. His officers stood at attention.

"Status?" he asked, voice firm.

Admiral Tyros, a seasoned veteran with half his body replaced by war-forged augmentics, stepped forward.

"Slipstream lanes are secure. Patrols rotating on seven-hour cycles. No incursions reported along the Zenthari line for thirteen days."

Lucan nodded. "Bring planetary shields to half-tier readiness. Quietly. No alerts."

"Expecting something?"

Lucan didn't answer right away.

"No," he said quietly. "Just tired of being surprised."

The officers moved to their stations. The holo-table pulsed quietly.

Lucan didn't follow. He stood still, hands clasped behind his back, eyes fixed on the starmap looking at Concordia— where Vireya and her daughter, Sereya, were likely preparing for their return.

He exhaled slowly.

They called him Commander.  
First of the Spartan Guard. Voice of the Shield.  
But some days... he felt like little more than a caretaker.

A caretaker of fading legacies. Of a child not his own. Of a throne that still he didn't deserve to inherit.

He thought of Sereya — her sharp eyes, her strange wisdom for one so young. The way she looked at him when he told stories of old Sparta. The way she tilted her head when he lied and knew it.

She was too much like her father. And not enough. But he loved her anyway. Not because she was a Mar. Because she was hers and his.

Vireya. He tried not to say her name, even in thought. Tried to bury the way it burned in his chest.

He had watched her grow from a bright-eyed girl chasing his reckless little brother through the palace halls, to a senator cloaked in dignity and moonlight. A princess who belonged to the stars. A woman who never looked back. And yet...

He remembered the months after Aegiron fell. After Mar's transmission ended. After he knew his brother had died fighting for a hopeless cause.

She had come to him. Not with tears. But with a child.

When Vireya didn't cry — just stood on the balcony of the tower, face turned to the void and said nothing at all.

And he had accepted it. Because someone had to.

He had raised the girl. Protected her. Guarded them both from rumour, scandal, truth. And in doing so, something changed. He found himself watching Vireya — not just with duty. But with longing. Shameful. Quiet. Persistent.

There were nights — gods, far too many — when he dreamed of her lying in his bed. Her hair spread like starlight over his chest. Her hand on his scarred shoulder. Her breath in his ear, whispering a name that wasn't his.

He would wake with guilt flooding through him like ice.

Not because she didn't belong to him — but because part of him still hoped she might.

He turned away from the window, clenching his jaw.

"Would she ever accept it?" he muttered.

The question didn't need an answer. Not yet.

A few hours later – The Throne Room, Aegis Bastion Sparta

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

The great doors opened with a low grind of stone and steel.

Lucan Mar stepped through alone.

The Throne Room of the House of Mar was not built for comfort. It was built for memory. Dark stone columns rose like sentinels along the walls, each engraved with the name of a fallen king. Banners of crimson and obsidian hung silent in the vaulted heights. In the center, raised above the star-etched floor, sat the Throne of Flame — a relic of the first era, forged from obsidian, burnished gold, and alloy taken from the wreckage of a fallen ancient ship.

And yet the man who sat on it stood just beside it — tall, worn, and weathered by time.

King Vaeran Mar.  
Lucan's father.  
Mar's father.

"He was never just a father. He was a crown with skin."

"My father was born with the war in his blood. Not because he loved violence, but because he knew peace would never last. He ruled with discipline, with silence, with expectation. Everything about him was carved from stone — not just the way he stood, tall and cold and impossibly still — but the way he looked at you. As if he were weighing your soul on the scales of history."

"To most, he is King Vaeran of the House of Mar — son of Titans, bearer of the bloodline that traces back to the First Flame. But to me? He was the man who sat on that cursed throne while my mother bled out from wounds no blade delivered."

"He was always there — present, but never with us. He trained us like soldiers, not sons. He taught us duty before dreams. Honor before heart. And when Mar disappeared after Aegiron... when Sparta thought him dead... he did not mourn. He did not rage. He simply stared out from the Bastion's throne, still as stone, and whispered, 'Then we survive without him.'"

"There are days I wonder if he loved us at all... or if he simply loved what we were supposed to become."

"And yet — despite it all — I admired him. Feared him. Wanted to be him."

"Because Vaeran Mar wasn't a king born.

He was a king forged — in fire, silence, and sacrifice.

He stood not as a king, but as a man bent by years of war and loss. His cloak was draped over one shoulder. His hair, once black as pitch, was streaked with silver now. The lines around his eyes were deep, but his stance was still strong — his presence still commanding.

Lucan approached and saluted with a fist to chest.

"Father."

Vaeran turned slowly. His eyes were sharp — always reading, always measuring. But his voice was quiet.

"You've come from the War Council?"

“Aye. Preparations remain stable. Defense networks active. No breach along the Zenthari corridor.”

Vaeran nodded once. Then fell silent.

Lucan waited.

It was always like this — moments of stillness between them. Not coldness. Not warmth. Just... gravity.

Vaeran turned his gaze to the empty throne.

“seven years,” he murmured.

Lucan didn’t respond.

“Seven years, and still the seat feels heavy. Still the name echoes.”

“We have moved forward,” Lucan said. “Sparta endures.”

“Sparta survives,” his father corrected. “There’s a difference.”

The silence grew again.

Then:

“Do you ever wonder what he would say, if he walked through those doors?” Vaeran asked.

Lucan swallowed hard.

“Every day.”

His father turned to face him fully now.

“And Vireya?”

Lucan blinked. He had not expected the name to be spoken aloud.

“She is well. Strong in the Concord. Loyal.”

Vaeran raised an eyebrow. “And to you?”

Lucan hesitated. Then looked away.

“I’ve asked nothing of her she did not choose to give.”

Vaeran stepped forward — slowly, but with purpose.

“She was your brother’s heart. But Sparta was always yours.”

“I do not seek her because of duty,” Lucan said quietly.

“No,” Vaeran replied. “You seek her because despite your honour, and all your caution, you love her. And whether she knows it or not, she may one day look to you for the same.”

Lucan lowered his eyes.

“Do you approve?”

“It does not matter if I approve,” Vaeran said. “But if you do take that path... prepare yourself. Shadows walk with her still. One.”

Lucan lifted his gaze.

The silence between them lingered — heavy, royal, bitter.

Lucan took a breath.

And then it broke.

“You speak of shadows, Father,” he said, voice low. “But some of them were cast by your own hand.”

Vaeran turned toward him slowly. “Careful.”

But Lucan didn’t stop.

“I wouldn’t be chasing ghosts. I wouldn’t be raising a child that’s not mine. I wouldn’t be trying to patch together a house cracked from the inside—if you hadn’t abandoned Aegiron.”

Vaeran’s eyes narrowed. “We had no choice.”

“There’s always a choice,” Lucan snapped. “And you chose to pull the fleet. You left my brother with three divisions and broken supply lines against a full Zenthari assault.”

“He refused the retreat order.”

“Because he believed in the people still on that world!” Lucan shouted. “The farmers. The militia. The wounded. You told us to hold it — and then you ran.”

Vaeran stepped down from the dais. Slowly. Measured. But there was fire in his voice now.

“I am the King. I chose to preserve what was left of the Core Worlds. You think Aegiron was the only world dying?”

“No,” Lucan said. “But it’s the only one I heard my brother dying on.”

The words echoed through the chamber like the crack of steel.

Lucan’s hands were shaking now, clenched at his sides.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“I remember the last days,” he said softly, bitterly. “The last transmission. Him yelling over comms, refusing extraction. I ordered him to fall back. He laughed at me. He told me I never understood what it meant to fight for something that couldn’t be rebuilt.”

He looked up at his father.

“And he was right.”

Vaeran didn’t answer immediately. He turned, one hand resting on the cold arm of the throne.

“You blame me because I made a king’s choice. But I lost him, too, Lucan. He was my son.”

“Then you should’ve fought for him like he fought for us.”

Silence again. Longer this time. Deeper. Lucan exhaled sharply, running a hand down his face.

“I didn’t want Vireya. I didn’t want any of this. I just didn’t want Sparta to forget him.”

A quiet sound — no more than the shift of silk across ancient stone — echoed at the far end of the throne hall.

Both men turned.

From the shadows beneath the arch of the ancestral alcove stepped a figure robed in deep violet and black, her presence as commanding as any blade.

Solenne Mar.

Matriarch of the House of Mar.

Mother of Vaeran.

grandmother to Mar and Lucan.

They say the flame of Sparta never dies. I’ve seen it. It lives in her eyes.”

“They say Solenne is older than the Bastion’s outer walls. Older than most living memory. No one speaks of her as a woman. They speak of her as if she were an institution. A force of nature. A storm that learned to wear silk.”

“When I was young, I feared her more than I feared my instructors. She never raised her voice. She didn’t need to. Solenne could undo you with a single glance — not with anger, but with disappointment. As if she had already foreseen every mistake, you’d ever make... and was merely waiting for you to realise it too.”

“She walks without sound. Speaks in riddles. Smiles like she’s playing a game only she knows the rules to. But beneath the warmth of her voice, there’s steel. The kind that doesn’t rust.”

“She loved my mother, I think. As much as someone like her could. But she never forgave the Queen for believing words could solve what war could not. And she certainly never approved of my father stepping back when the galaxy needed fire.”

“She says little about Mar. And yet, when he died I swear I saw something like hope flicker from her eyes. Not joy. Not fury. Hope. And that terrified me more than any prophecy.”

“Solenne doesn’t rule Sparta. But if the kings fall and the warriors die... she’ll still be standing — whispering to the next one: ‘Remember who you are. Or I will.’”

She walked without aid, though her years must have numbered over two centuries. Her white-silver hair was braided in the old Spartan style — coiled like a crown, threaded with



star-metal. Her eyes, clouded but unblinking, held the sharpness of someone who had long ago given up illusion.

“Enough,” she said, her voice soft but shaped like iron.

Lucan bowed instinctively. Vaeran straightened, his jaw set.

“You both speak of loss and blood,” she continued, “but neither of you speak of duty.”

She moved slowly toward the dais, her hands folded in front of her.

“I held your grandfather’s body after he died on Harvest,” she said to Lucan. “I burned the names of your uncles into the wall of the Citadel when they fell on Narthuun. I watched Vaeran take the crown with smoke still in his lungs.”

She stopped before the throne.

“Do you think you are first to lose a son or brother?” she said sharply. “Do you think you are the first kings to send their children into fire?”

Neither man answered.

She looked to Vaeran.

“You chose the fleet. You saved Sparta. That was your burden.”

She turned to Lucan.

“You chose Sparta. You chose its future. That is your duty.”

“And Mar?” Lucan said, voice low.

“Mar chose fire. That was the blood in him — fire and storm and prophecy. He made his choice.”

Her eyes settled somewhere between them.

“And now the past stirs again. Which means your duty is not to regret, but to prepare.”

Solenne’s gaze swept slowly across the chamber — the banners, the throne, the broken silence that lingered like dust between generations.

“Sparta does not need mourning,” she said. “It needs leaders. It needs strength. It needs hope.”

Her voice, though low, filled the hall like a litany — shaped by centuries of ritual and iron.

“The House of Mar has stood for over hundred thousand years. Through the Ascension Wars. Through the Cleansing of the Outer Sectors. Through the Long Night when Concord fell and rose again. We have endured because we did not weep at loss — we forged it into purpose.”

She turned to Vaeran, her son, her king.

“You bear the crown, but not the Sunbrand. You carry the weight, but not the fire. That makes you wise. But wisdom without conviction breeds caution.”

Then she turned her eyes — sharp and silvery — to Lucan.

“You were forged in your brother’s shadow. But you stood in it without breaking. That makes you loyal. But loyalty without strength becomes servitude.”

Lucan stiffened. Vaeran’s brow furrowed.

“You both wait for answers,” she continued. And yet, neither of you act. Sparta does not wait. The galaxy does not wait.”

Then, with a breath — quieter, but edged with something personal:

“Your mother,” she said slowly, “was a woman of light. Of peace. I respected her. But she believed words could save empires. That kindness alone could restore the balance the Ancients once held.”

She let that hang in the air — deliberate. Measured.

Vaeran’s jaw clenched. “Do not speak ill of her.”

Lucan’s voice followed — sharper than intended. “She stood beside you. She continued the line of Mar.”

Solenne raised a brow — but her lips curled ever so slightly.

“Ah. There you are. Together, at last.”

Both men blinked.

“You—”

“—manipulated us,” Lucan growled.

“Of course I did,” Solenne replied, stepping toward the throne and resting one hand on its cold arm. “I am old, not dead. And I have no patience for fragile egos.”

They both frowned.

She smiled wider.

“Perhaps now you will remember that Sparta’s strength does not come from a throne, or a sword, or a name.”

Her eyes glinted.

“It comes when the house of Mar stands as one.”

Solenne began to descend the dais, her long robes whispering over ancient stone. Neither man moved to speak.

She paused just before the steps, turning slightly toward Lucan.

“Prepare the Citadel,” she said gently, as if it were a casual thing. “Our beloved guests arrive soon.”

Lucan straightened. “You mean Vireya and—”

“Yes, yes. The Senator and the child,,” she waved a hand. “I’ve already had the guest quarters opened. The old garden as well. Sereya always liked the crystal lilies. I’ve had sweets prepared.”

She gave him a knowing glance, mischief dancing faintly behind the ancient eyes.

“There is no shame in treating the next generation with joy, Lucan. Let the girl laugh in a place that remembers peace.”

Lucan managed the smallest hint of a smile. “She’ll like that.”

Solenne nodded. But before she turned to leave, her voice dropped lower. Not ominous — but anchored in something beyond words.

“The winds shift in the Aetherion,” she murmured. “Something stirs. The garden will change. Soon.”

Lucan frowned slightly. Vaeran looked toward her, but she gave no explanation.

Just a quiet smile.

And then she walked away — robes trailing behind her, vanishing into the carved shadows of the ancestral corridor.

## Chapter 5 – The Return

Two slipstream signatures tore open the edge of Spartan space at the same moment — twin scars in the black, folding and then unfolding the stars.

From one: a sleek, silver-winged diplomatic cruiser bearing the royal crest of Virellien.

From the other: a battered, scorched Spartan military shuttle... long thought lost.

Aboard the Virellien Cruiser – Orbit of Sparta

Vireya stood at the forward observation deck, hands clasped loosely behind her back, gaze fixed on the planet slowly swelling in the viewport.

The slipstream tore away behind them like ribbons of blue fire, collapsing into nothing as the stars reformed around her.

And there it was —

Sparta.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

A world of storms and stone, silhouetted in grey and bronze beneath the glare of a dying star. Not beautiful, not gentle... but powerful. Commanding. It hovered like a clenched fist in the void, wrapped in defensive rings and orbiting gunships that glinted like sharp teeth.

She'd seen a thousand worlds.

Virellien, her own, was light and bloom and ocean — a symphony of colour.

But Sparta was carved from defiance.

It was a planet that refused to kneel.

Below, great mountain ranges cut across the surface like battle scars, flanked by steel cities built into the rock like Armor plating. The glimmer of ancient towers reached skyward — not to worship the stars, but to challenge them.

She folded her arms, watching in silence as the ship banked to begin descent.

“You haven't changed,” she whispered. “Still too proud to die.”

The gravity shifted. The ship rumbled.

And still, she couldn't look away.

Sparta did not welcome guests.

It endured them.

The world she'd avoided it for nearly five years.

Its grey mountains. Its ring of defence satellites. Its jagged, regal silhouette rising through the clouds like a crown of iron.

As the cruiser began its descent vector toward the Citadel Spire, Vireya felt it — a flicker.

A presence.

Not loud. Not sharp. Just... familiar.

A signature in the Aetherion, faint and fractured. Like a voice heard underwater.

She closed her eyes for a breath. And a imagine flashed across her mind

She shook her head gently. Foolish. It was only the pressure of the slipstream ending. The proximity to Sparta. The weight of returning to a place where memory slept like embers under snow.

She exhaled. Let it go.

“Maintain diplomatic approach,” she said to the pilot. “Notify the Citadel of our arrival.”

“Yes, Senator.”

The cruiser dipped toward the shining arc of the capital — a path of peace.

Aboard the Spartan Shuttle – Outer Orbit, Unmarked

Mar sat silently in the cockpit, jaw clenched, eyes scanning the flickering holo-display.

His systems were fried — the slipstream burst had been rougher than he expected.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Communications: offline.  
IFF beacon: disabled.  
Weapons: dormant.

“Perfect,” he muttered.

Then, alarms.

Red flashes danced across the cracked control panel.

Multiple vessels locking scan.

He looked up.

Through the forward viewport, a spread of Spartan military craft dropped out of orbit — sleek, black, angular. Fighters. Frigates. A command vessel, trailing like a leviathan.

They formed a net around him — weapons not active, but ready.

He cursed under his breath and raised his hands from the controls.

“Come on, big brother,” he muttered. “Tell me that’s you in charge of these.”

But no answer came.

Just the cold hum of a ship long forgotten, carrying a man long believed dead...

...returning home.

Citadel Platform – Sparta, Midmorning

The Virellien cruiser descended in a soft halo of blue flame, its polished silver hull gleaming in the crisp Spartan light. The great towers of the Citadel Spire loomed above, casting long shadows across the ceremonial landing pad.

A squad of royal Spartan honour guards stood at attention in full regalia — crimson cloaks, obsidian armour trimmed in gold, halberds glittering. Waiting at the front: Lucan Mar, cloaked in the dark green of Spartan high command.

The ship touched down with a hiss of pressurised air and ceremony — not much pomp, not on Sparta, but enough to draw the eyes of the Bastion’s guard and the old court stewards. Lucan stood at the edge of the landing platform, arms folded behind his back, gaze fixed on the hatch as it began to descend.

The hatch hissed open.

He’d been looking forward to her return to Sparta  
That the daughter of Mar and Vireya would finally rewalk the red stone of her father’s world.  
That a child of two bloodlines — flame and starlight — would stand where ancient kings  
once stood.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

He expected a nervous child.  
A shadow clinging to her mother's dress.  
But that wasn't what he saw.  
She stepped out with her chin lifted and her eyes wide — a deep storm-grey like her father's, but clearer. Younger. Unhardened. Her hair caught the wind, and for a moment he saw Vireya in her face.  
Five years old.  
And yet, the moment her feet touched Spartan soil...  
Lucan felt it.  
The Aetherion stirred. Subtle.  
Like the planet itself had noticed.  
Vireya followed just behind, regal and composed as always. But Sereya walked ahead — not pulled, not prompted.  
She walked as though she belonged.  
Lucan swallowed the knot in his throat.  
"You're braver than your father ever was," he muttered under his breath.  
And as she approached him, pausing with wide-eyed curiosity at the Armor he wore, she tilted her head and gave him the smallest, proudest smile he'd ever seen on a child.  
He didn't kneel.  
He bowed.  
"Welcome home, Princess Sereya."

The girl bowed slightly at Lucan, more confident than she should be for her age.

Lucan smiled faintly, eyes moving from Sereya to Vireya — and softening for just a moment.

"Welcome home," he said.

Vireya offered the faintest nod, formal but not cold.

"Commander Mar."

"Senator Vireya. The Queen's Garden has been reopened. Your chambers are prepared."

Sereya beamed. "Will there be sweets?"

Lucan laughed softly. "Great-grandmother has already arranged them. She's expecting you in the garden."

"She's scary," Sereya whispered behind her hand, grinning.

"She terrifies all of us," Lucan said quietly, eyes flicking to Vireya with unspoken depth.

They began to walk toward the armoured transport. Formality gave way to a more relaxed stride — two leaders who had spent years holding up a fragile peace between them, wrapped in a web of unspoken past.

As they entered the vehicle, Vireya turned once, glancing toward the sky — frowning slightly.

Something still itched at the edge of her mind.

But the moment passed.

At that exact moment some miles below a shuttle touched down harder than it should have — no guidance, heavy escort, no clearance codes. The moment its landing struts groaned onto the ferrocrete, six armoured transports surrounded it in a tight circle.

Heavy boots hit the ground. Spartan soldiers fanned out.

Weapons primed. Commands shouted.

The shuttle hissed, steam and heat rising from its long-abused frame.

Inside, Mar remained still, watching them through the cracked viewport.

His voice was dry.

“Well. This is familiar.”

The ramp began to lower.

Outside, the Spartan captain barked an order:

“Occupant of shuttle, exit immediately and identify yourself! You are in restricted Spartan airspace!”

No answer.

Then:

A figure stepped through the mist.

Cloaked. Armoured. Massive.

The soldiers raised their weapons instinctively — then faltered.

Because the figure held something glowing in one hand — not drawn, not active, but unmistakable.

The hilt of the Sunbrand.

A weapon that could only belong to one bloodline.

A weapon long lost... like the man who carried it.

The halls of the Citadel of Mar were quiet in the early afternoon, sunlight streaming in slanted beams through the stained-glass windows. The air smelled faintly of old stone, polished steel, and desert blooms from the reopened Queen's Garden.

Vireya walked beside Lucan in silence, her long robes brushing the floor with each measured step. Sereya had already been whisked away by attendants to the garden, her laughter echoing faintly down the long corridor.

Now, only the two of them remained.

They entered a private chamber — the Mar Solarium, once a place of reflection for kings and queens alike. Tall windows framed the highlands beyond the Citadel, and a soft light bathed the gold-veined floor.

Lucan stopped near the centre, hands folded behind his back. His voice, when it came, was quiet.

"She's grown," he said.

Vireya nodded, though her eyes stayed distant.

"She reminds me of her father," Lucan added.

Her breath hitched. She turned away.

"Don't."

He hesitated, then stepped closer.

"Vireya, I'm not trying to hurt you. But we can't keep avoiding this. Not here. Not now."

She spun to face him — not angry, but fragile, raw.

"Avoiding what, Lucan? That I can barely look at this place without feeling like I'm drowning? That every corridor, every face, every silence reminds me of him?"

He said nothing.

She stepped forward, voice rising just a fraction.

"You want to talk about us, but I don't even know what that means. You've been there for me. For her. I know that. I owe you more than I can say."

Her hand trembled slightly at her side.

"But when I close my eyes... it's still him. It's always him."

Lucan's voice lowered.

"You think I don't know that?"

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“Then why—why push this?” she snapped. “Why force something that’s built on guilt and grief and—”

“Because I love you, Vireya.”

The words silenced the room.

He hadn’t raised his voice.

He hadn’t even looked at her when he said it.

But they hung between them like a blade balanced on the edge of time.

Vireya stepped back, suddenly breathless, tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

“You don’t understand,” she whispered. “If I say yes... If I let go... then what we had, what I had with him—what I lost—it dies.”

Lucan looked at her, face unreadable. A thousand memories sat behind his eyes.

“Maybe. Or maybe... it finally starts to mean something again.”

Vireya turned from him again, pacing, breathing hard. Her hands trembled.

“You think love is enough?” she said bitterly. “That all this time, all this pain, can be washed away by loyalty and longing?”

Lucan didn’t answer.

“Fine,” she spat. “If that’s what you want—take it.”

She turned toward him, tearing open the sash of her robe, stepping forward with eyes full of pain rather than invitation.

“Take your reward, Lucan. Take what’s left. Let it mean something to someone.”

The silence after her words was heavier than before.

Lucan stared at her — not with hunger, but with fury.

Then, wordlessly, he stepped forward. Not to accept, but to reach out. He caught the folds of her robe and pulled them back around her with a firm, almost reverent motion.

“Don’t do that,” he said quietly. “Don’t destroy what you’ve protected so long just to prove you’re still broken.”

Vireya’s breath hitched again — and then she broke, sinking to her knees.

Lucan knelt beside her, arms around her shoulders, not as a lover but as a man who had carried a burden too long for too many.

“I don’t want what’s left of you, Vireya,” he whispered. “I want what you choose to give. When you’re ready.”

Vireya stood, her robe now clutched tightly around her as she turned from Lucan, her voice sharp and shaking.

“You think you know me? You think standing beside me all these years makes you understand what I’ve lost?”

Lucan’s jaw tightened. “I don’t claim to understand. I only wanted to help—”

“You wanted to replace him!” she shouted, the words tearing out of her like knives. “You wanted to rewrite a story that never truly ended!”

Lucan’s face hardened. “And what would you have me do, Vireya? Watch you bleed for a ghost? Raise his child while pretending she isn’t mine in every way but blood?”



Vireya's breath caught.  
She turned, eyes wet and furious, her voice breaking as she whispered—  
“If he could see me now...”  
The words hung there, fragile and exposed.  
Then—  
A sound.  
Soft. Familiar.  
Footsteps.  
Both turned toward the doorway.  
And there he stood.  
Mar.  
Alive.  
Older. Scarred. Silent.  
His cloak still dusted from battle, the Sunbrand sheathed across his back.  
He didn't speak. He didn't need to.  
The silence shattered something in both.

## Chapter 6 – Echoes of Flame

The air froze. No words. No movement. Only the sound of Mar's boots echoing softly across the marble floor of the solarium. He stood in the doorway — gaunt, shadowed, real. His eyes swept the room once.

They locked on Vireya, then shifted to Lucan, and finally returned to her. Five years of silence passed in a single, breathless heartbeat. Vireya backed away a step, as if her mind couldn't make sense of the image her eyes were giving her.

“You...” she whispered. “You're not—” “Dead?” Mar said, voice rough from disuse. “Not yet.” Lucan stood frozen — not in fear, but in disbelief. The man he'd mourned, buried in stories, buried in duty, was alive. Right here. In the same room.

“How—” Lucan began, then stopped. He wasn't sure what to ask first. How he survived? Why he came back? Or why the Aetherion in the room felt like it was shifting around Mar like a second skin?

Mar's eyes flicked between them. “Didn't mean to interrupt,” he said.

Vireya turned away, suddenly unable to meet his gaze. Her shoulders shook — not from fear. Not quite from relief either. Something rawer. “Why now?” she asked, voice trembling. “Why this moment?”

Mar's hand — the one that wasn't resting near the Sunbrand — flexed slightly.

“I came home.”

He stepped into the room fully now. The door hissed shut behind him.

“I didn't know you'd be here.” That lie was almost convincing.

Lucan narrowed his eyes. “Do you know what this will do to the city? To Sparta? You just appear out of thin air.

“My shuttle didn’t have any comms we really should carry another form of communication has anyone got a tablet to right that idea down?” he said trying to break the tension

He noticed Vireya wasn’t remotely amused

“Anyway,” Mar said. “Comms were dead. They surrounded me ready to blow me sky high”

He looked to Vireya again. “I let them.”

“You should have told us,” Lucan said tightly. “Have you not been listening I had no comms”

Vireya stepped forward now, her voice shaking not with fear, but fury.

“You vanished.” Her fists clenched at her sides.

“You left me all alone at the academy”. No goodbye. You burned with a world and didn’t even try to come back.” Mar raised an eyebrow, mouth curving ever so slightly. “I did try. Took me a few years, but... well. Slipped my mind.”

The words were light, almost teasing — a shield he’d always used when his feelings were too deep to touch. But this time, it didn’t land.

Lucan turned sharply. “Mar—” Too late.

Vireya’s hand shot forward — not a slow build, but an instinctive, full-force slap that cracked across Mar’s cheek. The sound echoed in the chamber.

Mar didn’t move. He just blinked once, slowly, his head turned slightly from the force. When he looked back at her, there was no anger.

Only silence.

Vireya’s voice trembled again — but now it was broken.

“Do you think this is a joke?” she hissed. “You left us. You left everything. You think you can walk in with your cloak and your sword and your clever smirk and everything will fall back into place?”

“I never said that.”

“No,” she spat. “But you just assumed that.”

Lucan stepped between them now, hands out in a calming gesture, though his own voice cracked under the strain.

“Both of you—enough. You’re both bleeding through words neither of you are ready to say.”

“He should say them!” Vireya cried. “He should look at me and explain why he let me all alone!” Mar’s jaw worked, but no sound came. Vireya turned away again, pacing, shaking. Lucan looked to his brother — a thousand thoughts crashing behind his eyes.

“Mar...” he said, quietly. “Why now? Why did you come back?”

Mar finally answered, voice soft. “Because I saw Sparta burn...I’ve come back to stop it before it does.” Lucan and Vireya both looked up. “I saw her,” Mar added, eyes flicking to Vireya. “Screaming. Holding a child.”

“What child?” Lucan asked carefully. Mar looked between them, confusion flashing across his face. “I don’t know,” he said. “But she called for me.”

The silence after Mar’s words was heavy — not just with meaning, but with danger.

Vireya turned slowly, her expression shifting from rage to something colder, sharper.

“Then the dream means nothing,” she said tightly. “Whoever you saw — it’s no concern of yours.”

Mar’s brow furrowed. “What are you talking about? I saw you. You were screaming for—”

“It doesn’t matter,” she snapped. “Dreams lie. So do ghosts.”  
Lucan stepped forward; voice low but firm. “Vireya—”  
“Don’t,” she said without looking at him. “Not now. Not you.”  
Lucan closed his mouth.  
Vireya’s eyes burned — not with tears, but with fire.  
“You should never have come back, Mar.”  
“I—”  
“You should have stayed dead,” she screamed.  
And with that, she turned and walked out of the room — not fast, not frantic. Just deliberate.  
Final.  
The doors hissed closed behind her.  
For a long moment, neither of the brothers spoke.  
Mar stared at the spot where she had been standing, then slowly turned to Lucan.  
“What’s wrong with her?”  
Lucan didn’t answer immediately.  
His jaw worked, his fists clenched and unclenched at his sides.  
Then, quietly:  
“You” the way only an older brother could answer a question.

Meanwhile in The Queen’s Garden – Citadel of Mar

The air in the garden was warm with early spring, and the scent of crystalline lilies drifted on the breeze. Ancient trees stretched overhead, their silver-veined leaves rustling with quiet grace. The marble pathways wound through fountains and old stone benches where Spartan queens had once meditated in silence.

Sitting among the petals, small hands folded neatly in her lap, was Sereya.

She was humming softly, the learning sphere balanced on her knees, flickering with constellations she didn’t need to study — because she remembered them. Somehow.

Beside her stood Solenne Mar, tall and quiet as the trees.

The great-grandmother watched the child with an unreadable expression — not stern, not kind, but knowing. The kind of gaze only a woman with centuries of memory could carry.

“You feel it, don’t you?” Solenne asked gently.

Sereya looked up, frowning. “What do you mean?”

Solenne didn’t answer right away. She took a slow step forward, kneeling beside her.

“The Aetherion hums louder today. The garden listens.”

Sereya blinked. “It’s loud in my chest.”

She pressed her hand to her sternum, where a faint glow had begun to shimmer beneath her skin — soft, like starlight beneath water.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Solenne touched her shoulder, and her ancient eyes flicked to the east — toward the Citadel, toward the room where Mar had just returned.

“It draws you there” she whispered. “You feel great power a conduit”

Sereya opened her mouth to ask what that meant—

—and then gasped.

Her eyes widened. Her breath caught.

And she slumped forward into Solenne’s arms.

Just at that Moment Vireya Arrives

The garden door burst open.

Vireya ran in, eyes wild, hair loose from the braid she had twisted too tightly hours before. Her boots crushed fallen petals underfoot.

“Sereya!”

Solenne looked up calmly from the bench, the child cradled in her arms.

“She’s not hurt,” the old woman said.

“Then why—what—?” Vireya dropped to her knees beside her daughter, checking her pulse, brushing her hair back with trembling fingers. “She’s unconscious!”

“She felt it,” Solenne said.

“Felt what?”

“Blood calling to blood.”

Vireya froze.

“It’s him,” she said, voice hollow. “He’s the cause.”

Solenne tilted her head, silent.

Vireya stood, shaking, gathering Sereya into her arms.

“I won’t let him have her,” she whispered. “I won’t let him touch her.”

“Won’t let who touch him?” Solenne asked softly.

Vireya didn’t answer.

She turned and fled the garden, her daughter in her arms.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

As she ran into Interior Hallways, she seen tall shadows and the loud footsteps of two spartan princes running

Lucan and Mar moved quickly through the arched corridors of the Citadel, footsteps pounding in tandem.

“Where is she going?” Mar asked, voice sharp as she seen Vireya fly down the hallway

“she’s heading to the west wing but why there’s only the medical bay down there” mar said to his brother

Lucan replied. “But Vireya knows this”

“She’s carrying someone” mar said to her brother as they sped up to her

“Something’s wrong.” Lucan panted

Mar’s breath tightened.

His pulse had been hammering since Vireya fled the room. The Aetherion inside him still pulsed — but not wildly. Deliberately. Like it was trying to draw him forward.

They turned a corner—and there she was.

Vireya, robe unfastened, eyes wide and glowing faintly with Aetherion energy, clutching Sereya tightly in her arms as she rushed down the corridor. Her face was pale with fear.

“Vireya!” Lucan called.

She turned, saw them.

Stopped.

For a moment, it was just silence — her heavy breathing, the soft rise and fall of the child’s chest.

Then Mar stepped forward, slowly.

“That’s her,” he said quietly, as if putting the pieces together for the first time. “She’s the one I saw. In the visions. The child in the fire...”

His eyes flicked from the girl to Vireya.

“She’s—”

“Don’t say it!” Vireya snapped, voice shaking with emotion and power. “Don’t even look at her”

Mar’s mouth opened again, soft. “She’s mine.”

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Vireya's grief twisted into rage.

"You don't get to claim her now."

A shockwave pulsed from her body — the Aetherion surging outward in a wave of gold and blue. Mar was thrown back, crashing against the wall, Armor cracking against the stone.

Lucan caught the edge of the blast, stumbling — but stayed upright.

"Vireya—Vireya, stop!" he said, stepping in. "Let me take her. We'll get her help."

Her breath was ragged now. She looked down at Sereya, saw the faint shimmer in her skin. Her own fear overrode the fury.

She passed the child into Lucan's arms — reluctantly, as if pulling her heart from her own chest.

"If she dies, so help me—"

"She won't," Lucan promised.

He turned and ran toward the medical wing.

Vireya stood there, trembling, eyes locked on Mar as he pulled himself back up, blood at the edge of his mouth.

"Go back into being a myth and legend" she could barely look at him tears down her eyes

Then she turned and walked away down the chasing after Lucan and left mar all alone.

Mar leaned back against the wall, chest rising and falling in silence.

## Chapter 7 – Eyes of the Dominion

The throne-world of Drakhal Varn glowed like a burning coal in the dark of space — its surface cloaked in storms; its skies patrolled by black-armored leviathans. The towers of the Citadel Ascendant pierced the clouds like knives, each one a monument to conquest.

In the heart of the citadel, deep beneath the upper spires, the Dark Council gathered.

A dozen voices echoed across the obsidian chamber, each seated on a floating disc, encircling a central platform of black stone shaped like a fractured star.

"The Concord is weak—"

"Sparta bleeds—"

"We must strike before the Houses regrow their teeth—"

Their words spiralled like a storm, each louder than the last.

Standing just behind the shadows, cloaked in violet silk and black armour, was Princess Kaelira — daughter of the Zenthari Emperor, Watcher of Flame, and rumoured heir to the Iron Mantle.

Kaelira didn't walk into a room — she arrived.

Tall and poised, she carried herself like a blade drawn slowly from its sheath — measured, lethal, deliberate. Her presence bent the air, demanding attention even in silence.

She was breathtaking, not in a soft or delicate way, but like the moment before a storm breaks. High cheekbones, sharply angled features, and piercing violet eyes that shimmered with ancient power marked her as Dominion royalty — but something deeper lingered beneath the surface. Something darker.

Her hair was long, obsidian-black, straight and lustrous, often braided back in a warrior's fashion or wrapped in regal coils when duty demanded it. Her skin held a pale, silvery hue, touched faintly with the glow of Aetherion — a trait shared by those of mixed ancient blood. Her voice was low, velvet over steel. She rarely raised it. She didn't need to.

Kaelira had been raised in war.

Trained in politics. Forged in expectation.

She was both daughter and dagger — taught to command and to seduce, to strategise and to kill. The court whispered her name like prophecy. The battlefield remembered it like legend.

She said nothing.

She listened.

Her eyes, dark and cold as void-glass, swept the chamber. Her face was unreadable — but her mind was sharp, always watching for fractures.

She had been taught since childhood: Learn before you strike.

And she learned quickly.

Then, without warning, the temperature in the chamber dropped.

A pulse — faint but undeniable — rippled through the air, as if the Aetherion itself had inhaled.

The voices stopped.

A new presence entered the room, and every councillor fell silent.

From the arch above the central platform, a tall figure emerged — robed in black and crimson, his skin marked with ancient sigils that shimmered like molten silver beneath his hood.

Emperor Malgus Vel-Kareth.

He was not wholly Zenthari.

A being not born but forged.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

He stepped to the centre and spoke — voice low, layered, resonant.

“There will be no invasion.”

A pause.

The council stirred in confusion, anger, disbelief.

“But the Spartan line will shatter with a push—”

“Now is the moment to burn Concordia—”

He raised a hand, and the chamber froze.

The Aetherion pulsed again.

“Something has changed,” he said. “A current moves beneath the surface. One I have not felt in many lifetimes”

His eyes — glowing faintly with layered light — flicked toward his daughter in the shadows.

“He has returned.”

Kaelira’s brow twitched. Just once.

“Who?” one councillor dared to ask.

The emperor’s gaze burned through him.

“The last ember of a broken bloodline.”

Memories of Fire echoed in Kaelira head

Kaelira remembered the transmissions.

The fire. The screaming. The sudden silence.

She had been barely sixteen — already a trained observer in the war command chamber, already whispering warnings her father ignored.

And then came the report:

Her uncle, Adrax Vel-Kareth, commander of the eastern Zenthari front, slain.

Not by an army.

Not by a fleet.

But by a single Spartan — barely more than a boy — wielding a weapon that should not have answered to him.

The Sunbrand.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft



Her father had gone silent for three days after.

And she remembered the footage — grainy, war-damaged, almost corrupted. A towering Spartan wading through fire, light blazing from his hand, his face streaked with blood and ash.

Prince Mar of the House of Mar.

He had vanished not long after.

And for years, the Dominion whispered that he had died a martyr. But Kaelira...

Kaelira never forgot the look in his eyes.

She drawn back into the present the noise of the Dark Council chamber being emptied in hushed silence after the emperor's pronouncement. None dared challenge it.

Kaelira now walked alone through the glass-panelled corridors that overlooked the storm-choked skyline of Drakhal Varn, her cloak trailing like a shadow. She passed black-armoured guards who bowed as she moved. None met her eyes.

She preferred it that way.

But not all Zenthari knew their place.

A voice echoed behind her.

"Your Highness."

She turned slowly.

Lord Tyzen — a senior strategist, all arrogance and cybernetics — approached with a smug tilt of his head.

"You've been quiet today," he said. "Strange, for someone whose blood ties sit nearest the throne."

"Not all power is measured by volume," she replied coolly.

"Nor by silence," he said, circling. "Surely you, of all people, don't believe the emperor's... tremors and whispers. This 'return'—a myth."

She stopped. Looked him directly in the eye.

"You think my uncle died by myth?"

He hesitated.

"I think we've wasted five years being scared of ghosts."

She stepped closer, voice low and razor-sharp.

“And I think if you ever suggest my father is a fool again, you’ll leave this hallway in pieces.”

Tyzen blanched slightly. Tried to smile. “Of course, Highness.”

Kaelira held his gaze a moment longer — then walked away.

Behind her, the hallway seemed colder.

She continued down the corridor, slave’s, guards and lords bowed she pressed towards her Private Quarters

She entered the storm outside pulsed against the black-glass walls, flickering shadows across the chamber. Kaelira stood alone, gazing down at the war-scarred city, her reflection split in the obsidian panels.

She remembered Aegiron.

Not just the flames. Not just the broken towers.

But the silence.

She had gone down with her squad under the pretence of “containment operations.” But they all knew the truth: they were hunting ghosts — the last flickers of Spartan resistance. The plan was not annihilation, not yet. It was control. Extraction. Weakness disguised as mercy.

She had expected desperation. Chaos. Surrender.

Instead, she found fury.

They emerged from the ruins like revenants — half-armoured, bloodied, outnumbered but unbroken. Spartan warriors who no longer fought for victory, only for each other.

And through the haze of soot and fire... she saw him.

A lone figure standing between her and the civilians they’d cornered.

Not in power Armor. Not even a commander’s cloak.

Just a tall, blood-covered man in battered gear, holding a scorched blade and staring down a Dominion strike team like they were insects.

At first, she thought it was a ghost.

Or a legend come to life.

He was titanic — at least seven feet tall, body like sculpted iron, Armor clinging to his frame like a second skin. He moved like something out of time — no fear, no hesitation, only purpose.

His face was scarred — a long cut from brow to jaw — and his eyes glowed faintly with something she could only describe as... ancient. Not like her people’s control of the Aetherion. No. This was something older. Wilder.

He should've killed her.  
Her entire squad had fallen around her.  
But when she faced him — heart pounding, sword shaking — he just looked at her.  
Not with rage.  
Not with mercy.  
With recognition.  
And then... he let her live.  
Turned his back.  
Walked away as if she didn't matter — as if the fate of Aegiron was already written and she wasn't a part of it.  
That was the day she stopped believing in Dominion invincibility.  
That was the day she began to wonder...  
“Why, why had a walking god spared her?”  
She then sprang to life she needs to get to the Inner War Archives

Kaelira moved through the high-security corridors without a sound, her cloak drawn tight around her shoulders, her face hidden behind a light-shifting veil of command clearance.

Few in the Dominion could walk unchallenged through the War Archives.

Fewer still knew how to access the classified layers that even the Dark Council rarely touched.

But Kaelira had never been content with titles. She had studied everything — battle logs, psychic resonance reports, fractured Aetherion readings from dead zones. She had spent years cataloguing inconsistencies about the final battles of Aegiron, Harvest, and the collapse of the Spartan war front.

And now she seen it the signals matched.

Two hours ago, a long-range covert Dominion deep scan flagged a slipstream rupture near Sparta — a Spartan military signature that hadn't pinged in five years. Officially buried. Ghost-tagged.

“Cross-reference,” she murmured. “Ship model ID: Arch-Class Courier 17-B.”

A soft chime.

Ship lost at Aegiron. Commander: Unknown. Tactical logs corrupted.

Kaelira's fingers tightened around the console.

“Run biological trace match. Spartan Prime House lineage... designate: Mar.”

A low hum. The database worked.

Then—

Match probability: 86.7%.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Her breath caught — just slightly.

It wasn't proof. But it was close.

Her father had been right.

He was alive.

“And walking straight back into spartan territory,” she whispered.

She leaned back from the terminal, her thoughts racing.

This changed everything.

Not just tactically — not just politically. Personally.

She needed to know why he spared her. What he had become. What his return meant for the bloodlines.

And if he still remembered her.

She straightened.

“Patch a transmission to my forward operatives on Sparta,” she commanded. “Encryption tier omega. I want eyes on Sparta. Quiet eyes. And I want a presence waiting.”

The AI confirmed the order.

Kaelira turned toward the exit.

As the door sealed behind her, she whispered to herself:

“You will tell me why mar, or ill break you”

## Chapter 8 – Embers of the Past

The sky cracked with fire.

Plasma bolts tore the heavens apart as the Dominion forces descended on Harvest. Once a peaceful, fertile world at the edge of the Spartan frontier, it now groaned beneath the weight of war.

Fifteen-year-old Mar, cloaked in the armour of a Phoenix Legion foot soldier, stood among thousands—unrecognized, unnamed, unseen. He fought with a standard blade and rifle. Nothing about him marked him as heir to the House of Mar.

And that was how he wanted it.

Hours into the battle, after blood soaked the fields and smoke blotted the sky, Mar spotted his grandfather—King Raen Mar—locked in battle with the Zenthari Emperor’s brother. The old king fought valiantly, surrounded by his Royal Guard, but he was outmatched.

Then it happened.

A mortal wound. The king fell to one knee. The enemy raised his blade for the final strike.

And Mar leapt forward.

His own weapon met the blow, shattering on impact. His helmet was torn away, revealing his face to soldiers on both sides—his grandfather included.

Mar? he gasped

But there was no time for conversation. His enemy was getting ready to strike again, he needed a weapon to defend him he used the Aetherion to help him,

The Sunbrand—the ancient weapon of Sparta’s kings—answered the call. It tore through the air, flying into Mar’s outstretched hand. It ignited in a blaze of golden fire.

silence rippled across the battlefield.

And then, Mar fought.

Steel clashed against power. Flames danced along the edge of the Sunbrand as Mar pushed back the emperor’s brother. When he finally struck what he believed to be a killing blow, the enemy’s guards fled with the body, and Mar—believing the warlord dead—rose in triumph.

He turned, Sunbrand raised, and rallied Sparta’s warriors into a final charge that forced the Dominion retreat.

Later, Mar knelt at his grandfather’s side as the old king lay dying.

“Protect Sparta,” Raen whispered. “Protect the Concord... It’s your destiny.”

Mar wept.

Present – Medical Wing, Spartan Citadel

Sereya lay still.

It had been two days since her collapse. Monitors pulsed gently. Her skin glowed faintly with residual Aetherion.

Vireya sat at her side. Lucan stood watch nearby.

“Where is he?” Vireya asked quietly.

“Mar?” Lucan shook his head. “I haven’t seen him since you—since you pushed him away.”

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She didn't respond. The silence between them was tight.

"You know," Lucan added, "part of me still doesn't believe it's him."

"He's changed," Vireya said. "But it's him."

They fell into silence again until the doors hissed open.

Solenne Mar entered with regal grace.

"How is she?" she asked.

Lucan answered: stable, no change.

Solenne rested a hand on the pod.

"She's dreaming. Listening."

Lucan frowned. "Where's Father?"

Solenne's answer was quiet but heavy.

"Out. Searching for his reborn son."

below in the Royal Catacombs, Beneath the citadel

The corridors were narrow and ancient — stone carved in ages past, untouched by light or ceremony.

Few knew this place existed.

Fewer still were allowed within.

Mar stood in silence, his armoured gauntlets resting on the edge of a forgotten console. The chamber around him was lined with old Spartan banners, dust-covered data scrolls, and a single Aetherion-lit sculpture of the First Mar, encased in crystal.

This had once been the private study of his first ancestor.

Now it was his refuge.

In the centre of the room, a glowing holo-table displayed forgotten archives, lost history — and bloodlines older than the Concord.

Mar's eyes were heavy. His breath shallow.

"A child," he muttered. "My child..."

His mind drifted to the vision — the flames, the girl's cry, her face.

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And then: a whisper behind him.

“You’ve always preferred the past to the present.”

Mar turned.

King Vaeran Mar stood in the doorway, not in full regalia, but with the weight of a crown all the same. His voice was low. Steady. Tired.

“All these years, and you haven’t changed.”

Mar narrowed his eyes. “You came down here to lecture me?”

Vaeran gave a slight chuckle. “No. I came to find my son. But I suppose I found a ghost.”

Mar stepped away from the console, fists clenched.

“You abandoned Aegiron.”

“I made a decision to save what remained.”

“You left us to die!”

The words rang through the stone.

Vaeran’s gaze darkened. “I left a planet in ruin. You chose to stay.”

Mar’s voice cracked. “To protect people. Civilians. Children. I held that line until nothing was left.”

“And I mourned you,” Vaeran said sharply. “I buried my son in every way that mattered.”

Mar turned away.

“I had to stay. I couldn’t leave them. I wouldn’t.”

A pause.

“And now?” Vaeran asked.

“Now... I found her.”

Varan’s eyes softened, slightly.

“The child?”

“My daughter.”

Mar’s voice trembled.

“A vision. A warning. A life I never knew I had.”

Vaeran crossed the chamber.

“You can’t call yourself a father if you don’t even know her name.”

That hit deeper than any blade.

Mar's fists shook. “I never knew. No one told me. If I’d known—”

“You would have what?” Vaeran challenged. “Abandoned your duty? Abandoned a broken world”

Mar spun around.

“I would have come back!”

The words echoed.

Silence followed.

Then another voice.

Vireya.

She stepped into the light, followed by Lucan and Solenne.

“He didn’t know,” Vireya said, quieter now. “I tried to tell him... but Aegiron come under attack when I did”

Mar's eyes met hers. “Why didn’t you try again?”

“Because I thought you were dead.”

“And now you wish I still was?” he snapped.

Vireya’s face twisted with pain.

Lucan stepped forward. “Enough. This isn’t helping.”

Solenne raised a hand. “We’re wasting time with blame. The child — Sereya — is upstairs, unconscious, after tapping into Aetherion energy none of us have ever seen. She needs guidance. Unity. You need to be her father.”

Mar looked between them — his family, fractured and worn.

Then he turned to Vireya.

“Let me see her.”



Vireya said nothing. But as she turned and left in a hurry, Mar followed her.

Running up the ancient staircase

“Why are you so cold?” Mar demanded. “If I’d known about her, I would have returned the moment I could!” “I would never have ignored my child”

“Child?” she snapped. “She has a name. Her name is Sereya.”

Her voice cracked. All the pain spilled forward—years of silence, of fear, of holding their daughter alone.

“You left us,” she said.

“I didn’t know—”

“You didn’t ask!”

“You never told me!”

“You never gave me the chance!”

He reached for her, but she stepped back.

“You want to be her father? Then earn it.”

And she walked away.

Mar stood alone.

Again.

Vireya returned to the medical room, there she reached out and touched her daughter with the Aetherion there she felt it,

She dreamed of fire.

She dreamed of her mother and father—young, in love, under a tree.

She saw the sword.

She saw the war.

She saw his face—her father’s face—burning with light.

“You never said goodbye,” she whispered in her dream.

And in the real world...

Her fingers twitched.

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The first thing Sereya felt was the warmth.

Not the cold touch of the stasis canopy. Not the flickering heat of Aetherion surging through her veins.

But something gentler.

Older.

A presence, just beyond the veil.

She gasped — a sharp, sudden breath like she'd been underwater too long. Monitors screamed into life. The canopy hissed as the stabilization field began to dissolve.

Across the chamber, Lucan bolted to his feet after returning with Vireya,

“Sereya!” Vireya’s voice cracked with panic.

The child’s eyes fluttered open — glazed at first, then blinking quickly as if adjusting to the world’s return. Her skin still shimmered faintly with aftershock, but she was conscious.

“She’s awake,” Lucan whispered, relief washing over him.

Vireya was already kneeling beside the bed, brushing hair from her daughter’s forehead, fingers trembling.

“Sereya... it’s alright. You’re safe. You’re alright.”

Sereya stared up at her for a long, silent moment. Then she reached up — slow, tentative — and placed a hand on her mother’s cheek.

“I saw him,” she whispered.

Vireya stiffened.

“Who?”

“The boy with the sword.” Sereya’s brow furrowed. “The one in the battle. His sword burned like a star. He cried when the old man died.”

Lucan’s breath caught.

“What else did you see?” he asked gently.

Sereya looked between them — her mother and her uncle, two pillars of love and truth... but not the whole story.

“I saw you too,” she said to Vireya. “When you were little. In a garden. You were laughing.”

Vireya looked stunned.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“And under a tree,” Sereya added. “You were crying. He left you there.”

She paused.

“Why did he leave?”

Vireya couldn’t answer.

Lucan moved forward. His voice was soft but steady.

“What was his name, Sereya?”

Sereya hesitated. Her fingers twisted in the edge of the blanket. She looked past them, toward the far wall, as if speaking not just to them — but through them.

“Mar,” she said. “His name was Mar.”

Vireya covered her mouth. Her eyes filled with tears.

Lucan looked down.

“She knows,” he murmured.

Vireya nodded, her voice barely a breath.

“She’s always known.”

## Chapter 9 – The Weight of the Crown

The door to the ancient study creaked open again.

This time, it wasn’t locked.

King Vaeran Mar stepped inside, his boots echoing lightly against the stone. The soft hum of ancient power still radiated from the crystalline consoles, but they were quiet now — untouched.

And there, slouched in one of the arch-backed iron chairs, head tilted against the wall, was his son.

Mar.

The Sunbrand leaned beside him, dimmed and inert.

A half-empty flask of Spartan blackroot liquor lay on the floor, its contents staining the edge of a parchment scroll that had fallen from the desk.

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Mar didn't look up when he heard footsteps.

"Don't say anything," he muttered, voice rough.

Vaeran crossed his arms.

"Drinking in the tombs. A proud return for a warrior-prince."

Mar chuckled bitterly.

"It's either this or punch another wall. The liquor's cheaper."

Vaeran didn't laugh.

"So, this is what the saviour of Aegiron has become?"

"Aegiron is dead," Mar said, reaching for the flask. "So are most of the people I knew. And apparently, I've missed out on fatherhood, a throne, and a decade of family drama."

"You've always been dramatic."

"You've always been absent."

That earned a pause.

Vaeran stepped forward slowly. Not threatening. Just tired.

"You think you're the only one who lost something, Mar?"

Mar looked up now — bloodshot eyes, hollowed by memories he couldn't erase.

"No," he said. "But I'm the only one being punished for it."

"Vireya doesn't owe you forgiveness," Vaeran said.

"I don't want her forgiveness."

"Then what do you want?"

Mar didn't answer.

Instead, he stood — a little wobbly, but tall. The flask dropped to the floor and rolled away.

He looked his father in the eye.

"I want to not feel like a ghost in a place that has my face carved into every damn wall."

Silence.

Then, for the first time in years, Vaeran's voice softened.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“You were never supposed to be the one who came back.”

Mar blinked.

“What?”

“I buried you the moment Aegiron went dark,” Vaeran said. “I grieved you. I buried your armour. I crowned your brother. And I told myself I’d done the right thing.”

A beat passed.

“And now... you’re back. Alive. Angry. And carrying the weight of the very sword that built our line.”

Vaeran looked at the Sunbrand, its golden edge dulled against the dark.

“You scare people, Mar. You scare me.”

The heavy silence hung between them — two generations of kings, one broken by legacy, the other haunted by destiny.

Then the door creaked again.

Softly. Deliberately.

And in stepped Solenne Mar.

No guards. No aides. Just her long silver cloak trailing behind her like mist in a mausoleum.

Her eyes, sharp and ancient, landed on the two men without hesitation.

“What a pathetic sight,” she said.

Neither man moved.

“One drunk on regret,” she nodded in Mar. “The other still drunk on guilt.”

“This isn’t your concern, mother,” Vaeran muttered.

“Everything involving this family is my concern,” she replied crisply. “Especially when its so-called leaders start acting like orphans.”

Mar sank back onto the edge of the stone desk, rubbing his face with one hand.

“If you’re here to lecture me—”

“I’m here,” she cut in, “because the Aetherion shifted again. Because your daughter stirred. Because this house doesn’t have the luxury of falling apart while a girl lies in bed alone wondering why the people who made her can’t speak her name without arguing.”

That struck Mar hard.

Vaeran turned his back.

“You want to blame someone, Solenne? Blame me. I left him at Aegiron. I told the concord to go to hell I let Vireya raise that girl without proper support—”

“No,” she said coldly, “you don’t get to steal all the blame just to absolve yourself. This isn’t about pride. It’s about consequence.”

She stepped between them.

Her presence was somehow greater than both men combined.

“This family doesn’t need another soldier. It doesn’t need another martyr. It needs a father.”

Mar looked up.

His voice was low.

“I don’t even know how to be one.”

Solenne softened — just barely.

“No one does. But you’ll learn. Or she’ll teach you.”

She turned to leave. But before she did, she paused in the doorway.  
“Come see her, Mar. Before she sees through you like the rest of us already have.”  
And then she was gone.  
The corridors were quiet.  
Most of the palace slept or pretended to. The flickering lights overhead cast long shadows as Mar walked alone through the sterile hallways, the echo of his boots muffled by polished stone.  
He didn’t remember picking up the bottle again, but it was still half-full in his hand.  
He wasn’t staggering. Not exactly.  
But his balance swayed more from memory than drink — as if his footsteps carried the weight of fields burned long ago and names, he couldn’t bring himself to say.  
When he reached the door to the medbay, he paused.  
He could hear the faint hum of machines inside.  
Her breath on the monitors.  
The girl.  
Sereya.  
His daughter.  
He had said the word only once since learning it. He still didn’t feel like he had the right.  
Mar placed the bottle gently on the wall beside the doorway and stepped inside.  
The lights were low, a warm golden glow enveloping the pod. She wasn’t in the canopy anymore — just resting on a cot now, the energy field around her dimmed to a flicker.  
She was curled on her side, one hand tucked under her cheek, her other resting open on the blanket — as if she’d fallen asleep dreaming of something important.  
Mar stopped a few steps from her.  
He didn’t speak.  
He didn’t know what to say.  
He just looked at her.  
The curve of her cheek. The way her brow furrowed slightly, even in sleep. The rise and fall of her breathing.  
He dropped to one knee without realizing it, elbows resting on his thighs, head bowed.  
“I’m sorry.”  
His voice was hoarse. Quiet. Slurred, just slightly.  
“I should’ve been there. I should’ve known. I should’ve... gods, I should’ve come back the moment I felt the fire.”  
He swallowed.  
“I’ve killed men. Saved people. I’ve walked through hell so many times I started thinking maybe I belonged there.”  
His hand reached out — trembling — and hovered just above hers.  
“But if you give me a chance... just one... I swear to you; I’ll be someone worth calling father.”  
He finally let the silence settle.  
And in that silence... a small sound broke through.  
A breath.  
A rustle.  
Her hand shifted.  
Her fingers touched his.  
And her voice, soft and groggy, drifted into the quiet.  
“You smell like fire and sadness.”  
Mar laughed — a broken, breathless sound — and bowed his head again.  
“Yeah,” he whispered. “That sounds about right.”

The first light of day crept slowly across the polished floor, warm and golden, kissing the edge of the bed where Sereya now slept peacefully — her head resting against the chest of the man who had once been only a face in a dream.

Mar lay beside her, one arm draped gently around his daughter. The bottle of liquor was long forgotten. His breath was steady now. His expression — for the first time in years — was calm.

They had spoken little after she stirred.

But they didn't need to.

In that quiet hour before sleep claimed them both, Sereya had asked questions. Not many. Not directly.

“Did you miss me?”

“I missed something I didn't know I had. Every day.”

And then she had curled into him.

And he had held her like a man afraid to let go.

The door opened softly.

Vireya stepped inside.

She didn't expect what she found.

Mar and Sereya, curled together on the too-small bed, fast asleep.

Her breath caught in her throat.

She took a step forward — then stopped. Her hand gripped the frame of the doorway, fingers tightening against the cold metal.

She had dreamed of this moment.

Feared it.

Needed it.

But now that it was real...

She felt like an outsider in a memory that had never belonged to her.

Behind her, she heard a whisper of robes.

Solenne appeared, serene as always.

“You’re late,” she said gently.

Vireya didn’t look away.

“I didn’t think he’d come.”

“You didn’t want to believe he would,” Solenne replied. “It was easier to hate him.”

“It still is.”

“And yet...”

They stood in silence, two generations of women — one who had seen the cycle turn before, and one watching it begin again.

“What happens now?” Vireya asked.

Solenne looked toward the child.

Toward the man who once carried the fate of worlds and now held something infinitely more fragile.

“Now,” she said, “we see what kind of father he becomes.”

### Chapter 10 – Ashes and Bloom

The garden had barely changed.

The crystalline trees still bloomed pale lavender, their blossoms gently pulsing with morning Aetherion. The stone paths curved in silent memory. This place had once been their haven — tucked behind the outer walls of the Citadel where they hid when they caused mischief in their younger days.

Now it was just quiet.

And dangerous.

Vireya stood beneath the old flowering arch, arms crossed, her posture tense. Her hair was pinned back, her robes elegant, her face unreadable.

Mar walked toward her slowly.

No Armor. No cloak. Just a simple dark tunic, and the faint glimmer of golden light still clinging to his skin where the Sunbrand had rested.

They didn’t speak at first.

The wind moved around them. The flowers shimmered.

Then she said:

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft



“Where have you been, Mar?”

The words weren’t cruel. But they cut like a blade.

Mar took a breath and met her eyes.

“If you want the truth,” he said, “I’ll give you everything.”

Vireya’s jaw tightened. She gave a small nod.

“Then start talking.”

He Confessed everything only she would know the full story

Mar sat on the low bench beneath the old vine tree. Vireya remained standing for a long moment... then sat beside him, not touching, but close enough to hear everything.

He told her everything.

Not the story the Concord had whispered. Not the Spartan myth.

The truth.

How the last days of Aegiron weren’t an ending, but a choice.

How, as the evacuation ships left and the planet cracked open, he had led a group of forgotten civilians deep into the under lands.

How they had found shelter — a buried structure of unknown origin, possibly Ancient.

How they had built it into something more.

“Avalon,” he said. “That’s what we called it.”

Vireya said nothing, her expression slowly softening.

“We survived on scraped tech, old food stores, and the belief that someday we could make something new. I taught children how to hold a blade. I held the hands of dying mothers. I buried warriors without names.”

He looked away.

“They wanted me to rule. I said no. I didn’t want a crown... I just wanted them to live.”

Vireya’s voice finally came, softer than before.

“You were their king.”

“No,” he said. “I was their shield.”

She didn't reply immediately.

The quiet between them shifted. Became something gentler.

"And what made you leave?" she asked.

Mar's hand rested lightly on the stone.

"A vision. A warning. You, in fire. Sereya... screaming."

"You knew it was her?"

"Not at first. But my blood knew."

Vireya looked down.

"But what about Avalon" Vireya asked concerned to him

Avalon wasn't meant to last.

Not when it started.

It was just a handful of civilians. Scared. Broken. Trapped beneath the wreckage of a planet the galaxy had already written off.

Hidden within the bones of a shattered valley, where the mountains curved like shields and the storms of the Arkaris Nebula masked all sensor sweeps, it was invisible to orbit. Cloaked by nature. Defended by resolve.

The entrance was narrow — a winding chasm no warship could fly through. But within?

A city.

Homes carved into stone. Wind turbines and geothermal towers rising like spires of defiance.

Hydroponic farms clung to cliffside terraces. Reclaimed tech salvaged from the husks of downed Spartan ships kept the city warm, lit, alive.

There were watchtowers. Armed patrols. Roving defence drones scavenged and repurposed from Dominion wrecks. Every building doubled as a bunker. Every child knew where to hide. Every adult was trained to fight.

Avalon wasn't just hidden. It was ready.

For five years, Avalon survived without the Concord. Without Sparta. Without war.

It became something the galaxy had forgotten how to build: a place that chose hope over hatred.

She looked at him stunned after this description

"I tried to tell you," she whispered. "When I found out I was pregnant... I tried. But the attack cut the transmission."

He nodded.

"I know."

They sat like that for a while. Not touching. Not needing to.

Then finally, Vireya reached for his hand.

“You came back,” she said.

“Too late.”

“Not for her.”

She turned toward him.

Her fingers brushed his face — slow, unsure — tracing the scar from temple to jaw. The one he earned saving her all those years ago.

“I don’t know if I can forgive you,” she said.

“I’m not asking you to.”

“But I never stopped loving you.”

She kissed him.

Not with fire. Not with fury.

But with grief, and hope, and years of silence finally broken.

He wrapped his arms around her as she leaned into him, her forehead against his, the old garden holding them in stillness.

But above them over the garden wall

Lucan Mar stood in silence, watching from a high corridor above.

He had followed them. He hadn’t meant to.

But now he couldn’t look away.

The way she leaned into his brother.

The way his brother held her.

Something twisted in his chest — sharp and cold.

He said nothing.

But his hand clenched into a fist at his side.

And he turned away, walking back into the halls of Sparta alone.

Weeks passed by news of the princes returned ignited a fire in the spartan people

Inside Spartan High Quarter, Royal Wing love was been reforged,

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

The morning light spilled lazily through the wide windows of Vireya's private chamber, casting golden lines across silk sheets tangled around two bodies at rest.

Mar lay with one arm wrapped around Vireya, her hair spilling across his bare chest, their skin still warm from the night before.

There was peace here.

For the first time in years, it didn't feel borrowed.

It felt earned.

Vireya stirred slightly, sighing against his skin.

"You're warm," she murmured.

"You steal the blankets," he replied.

She smiled without opening her eyes.

"I steal nothing. I share tactically."

He laughed quietly, then kissed her hair.

But the moment broke when a low chime pulsed from the corner of the room.

A summons.

Military-coded.

Mar sat up slowly, muscles rippling beneath old scars, his mind sharpening.

Vireya blinked up at him, watching him swing his legs over the side of the bed.

"They still treat you like a ghost," she said softly.

"I'm technically just a lieutenant," he muttered, reaching for his undershirt. "They don't owe me a seat."

"But you're going anyway."

"I'm not here to be museum piece."

He got dressed quickly and walked towards the war Council Chamber guards stood to attention as he walked past

The chamber doors parted with a hiss as Mar entered, armoured now, his expression composed.

Dozens of generals and command staff turned as he stepped into the ring-shaped room, where strategic holomaps hovered in the center.

At the far end of the table, King Vaeran sat in his elevated chair. His expression unreadable.

To his right stood Lucan, in full command dress, eyes narrowing slightly as he caught sight of his brother entering.

“You weren’t summoned,” Lucan said flatly.

“Didn’t know I needed a formal invitation to listen,” Mar replied.

Lucan opened his mouth again, but Vaeran spoke first.

“He stays.”

All eyes shifted to the king.

“He may not hold rank worthy of this room,” Vaeran said evenly, “but he holds something else. He survived Aegiron. He did what no one else could. And if the Sunbrand hasn’t rejected him, neither will this council.”

Lucan said nothing.

A few murmurs passed among the generals.

Then they continued.

Mar stood to one side — watching. Listening.

Silent.

But inside, the fire was already building.

He wasn’t here to reclaim a title.

He was here because war was coming again.

And this time, he wouldn’t watch from the edge of the galaxy.

The holomap in the center of the chamber flickered to reveal the spinning projection of an asteroid belt on the galactic rim, pulsing with resource tags.

Lucan stood beside it, gesturing crisply as he spoke.

“The Dominion has fortified three of the main mining outposts along the Vortan Belt. If they maintain control, they’ll cut off our titanium-lattice shipments within two weeks.”

He rotated the map, highlighting weak points in the field.

“We deploy two regiments through the shadow path here. I’ll lead the hammer strike through the breach corridor—”

“No, you won’t,” Mar cut in.

Heads turned.

Lucan’s eyes darkened.

“Excuse me?”

Mar stepped closer to the map, pointing at a narrow ridge flanked by gravitational turbulence.

“That corridor’s too unstable. Dominion ships are heavier. They’ll ride the shear while we break apart trying to follow them in tight formation.”

“I know the math,” Lucan snapped.

“Then do it again,” Mar said. “Or send your men to die and call it strategy.”

The room tensed.

“You think because you played hide and seek for five years that you understand war better than I do?” Lucan said, voice rising.

Mar didn’t flinch.

“I think I’ve bled enough to speak.”

“You weren’t even supposed to live.”

“No,” Mar said. “But I did. And now I’m here.”

“You left her,” Lucan hissed, voice low now. “You left them both. And now you just—what? Take her back like none of it happened?”

The room fell dead quiet.

Mar’s face didn’t change, but his hands curled at his sides.

“This isn’t about her,” he said defiantly

“It’s always been about her,” Lucan said bitterly.

And that was it.

The room erupted.

“Enough!”

Vaeran's voice roared across the chamber like thunder.

Everyone went silent.

The king rose from his chair, eyes burning.

"You want to fight? Do it in the field. You want to be men? Earn it."

He looked between them — his sons. Two halves of a legacy threatening to tear itself apart.

"The Dominion grows bolder by the day. If they hold Vortan, they will cut through our eastern flank within the month."

He turned to Lucan.

"You will lead the assault."

Then to Mar.

"And you will serve under his command."

Lucan stared.

"What?"

"The Phoenix Legion will deploy as the spear. You'll strike first. Reclaim the fields. Prove that House Mar still fights with one arm."

The council murmured.

Mar simply nodded.

"When do we leave?"

Vaeran's eyes narrowed.

"You depart in three days."

## Chapter 11 – Before the Storm

The door slammed.

Vireya paced across the royal chamber, her eyes blazing, voice sharp enough to cut steel.

"You idiots!"

Lucan stood just inside the door, shoulders stiff, jaw clenched — his ceremonial Armor only half-fastened. He looked like he was ready for war, but not the one in this room.

“You humiliated him in front of half the council,” she spat. “You humiliated yourself. Do you think anyone cares who kissed me first when the Dominion’s burning down systems?”

Lucan said nothing.

“You’re not boys in the citadel courtyard anymore worrying about who the nanny likes more,” she continued, stepping closer. “You’re brothers. Leaders. Warriors. And you're tearing Sparta apart because neither of you can face what really hurts.”

Lucan finally spoke — low, tight.

“He left you, and you welcomed him back with open arms”

“it isn’t as simple as that, I’m doing it for sereya as much as it for me”

“no you just wanted someone to spread your legs and comfort you”

The silence after that hit like a crack of thunder.

Vireya’s face softened only slightly — her fury giving way to something older. Wounded.

Lucan turned away.

“I didn’t mean to,” he said. “But I loved her. I loved you. I still do.”

She inhaled sharply, closing her eyes for a moment.

“You were there when he couldn’t be. I won’t pretend that didn’t matter. You mattered.”

Lucan turned back to face her.

“Then why does it feel like I’m the villain in your story now?”

“Because you’re not the one I saw in every vision when I was afraid,” she said quietly.

“Because it was always going to be him — even when I didn’t want it to be.”

Lucan didn’t argue.

He looked tired now. Older than before. Not from age — from hope that had worn too thin.

She stepped forward, close enough to reach out — but didn’t.

“Just promise me one thing.”

Lucan met her eyes.

“Bring him back. Bring yourself back. In one piece.”

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft



He gave a small, bitter smile.

“I’ll do my best.”

She leaned forward and kissed his forehead gently.

“That’s all I’ve ever asked.”

Meanwhile down below in the Garden

Mar sat beneath the old flowering tree, cross-legged in the grass.

Sereya lay beside him, sketching something into her notebook — a starship, a sword, maybe both. The sun filtered through the petals above them.

Neither spoke.

But they didn’t need to.

For the first time in a long time, this — this quiet, this moment — felt like a kind of home and he needed this, to remind him what he was fighting for and why he needed to come back.

Him and Lucan departed next day to meet the attack force assembling near the Vortan Belt – Dominion-Controlled Mining Region, there the war would be renewed there sparta would show the dominion they never forget they never forgive.

The sky burned silver as plasma fire lit up the fractured asteroid field. Explosions rippled through the mining rigs suspended along the outer ring, debris scattering into the black void.

The Phoenix Legion surged like a firestorm.

"From fire we rise. From ashes, we return."

— *Inscription above the Phoenix Bastion, Sparta*

The Phoenix Legion was not born in a war room.

It was forged in fire — thousands of years ago, during the ancient war that nearly shattered the Andromeda galaxy.

The records are old. Fragmented. But all versions agree on one thing:

The first Mar, the warrior-king who led the Spartans against an enemy beyond imagining, created the Legion in the darkest hour of that ancient war. A final stand. A last hope.

Made of only one hundred elite warriors, the original Phoenix Legion was a strike force unlike any the galaxy had ever seen. Not just strong — but chosen. Each one was marked by the Aetherion, trained to perfection, and bound by a vow never to fall in retreat or surrender. They were the ones who held the line when all others fell.

The ones who infiltrated the ancient enemy’s strongholds.

The ones who died, over and over... and somehow rose again.

The name came later — whispered by those who saw them return from missions no one could survive.

Phoenixes. Creatures of myth. Burned to ash, reborn in flame.

As the centuries passed, the Phoenix Legion became more than a military unit.

They became a symbol.

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The Legion is larger now but always elite.

It disappears for decades, only to rise again when Sparta needs it most.

During the beginning of the Zenthari War, it was used as the vanguard Mar, second of his name. Disguised. Hidden. Just a boy at the time, he joined the ranks under a false identity.

And on the fields of Harvest, he showed the galaxy that the Phoenix had risen again and was to be feared.

Today, the Phoenix Legion remains one of Sparta's most feared and revered forces. Its members are not merely soldiers — they are heirs to a legacy that stretches back thousands of years.

They do not wear the traditional Spartan blue.

They wear black and ember-red, like coals before the flame.

Their emblem: a flaming bird rising from shattered steel.

Their creed: "Ashes remember. Fire returns."

At its head — Mar.

Cloaked in Aetherion and smoke, he cut through enemy lines like myth incarnate.

The Sunbrand burned in his hand, its golden blade cleaving Dominion machines apart with precise, fluid arcs.

His armour bore fresh scorches.

His face was marked with sweat, blood, and the fire of momentum.

"Push forward!" he shouted through comms. "Cut them off at node seven! No mercy!"

Behind him, his soldiers followed without hesitation. They weren't just winning.

They were terrifying the Dominion.

You knew a Dominion soldier by the sound first — a low mechanical hiss that followed their breathing, amplified by the filtration vents in their helmets. Then came the footfalls. Heavy. Synchronized. Dozens moving as one.

They were bred for war.

Tall and imposing, most stood between 6'6" and 7 feet, though never quite matching the raw mass of a Spartan. Their bodies were a blend of organic muscle and synthetic reinforcement — enhanced from birth through genetic grafting and Dominion bio-rituals. Every muscle a weapon. Every step, precision.

Their Armor was obsidian black, streaked with dark violet markings that shimmered under low light — ceremonial war paint, signifying bloodlines and campaign victories. The plating was angular and brutal, built for intimidation as much as protection.

Most bore the Varkari Crest — the mark of the Zenthari Emperor — etched into their breastplates or scorched into shoulder pauldrons. Some bore clan runes or kill-count sigils welded directly into their gauntlets.

Their helmets were insectile — smooth and faceless, with a single horizontal slit of red or violet light that served as their vision array. The sight of that glowing strip moving in the dark was enough to freeze untested soldiers in place.

Every Dominion soldier was equipped with:

- Plasma halberds or energy-forged blades
- Wrist-mounted blasters or retractable claws

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- Graviton pulse grenades for disabling enemies or collapsing cover
- Internal Aetherion inhibitors, allowing resistance to weaker Force-sensitive combatants

Unlike Spartans — who valued personal honour, discipline, and adaptability — Dominion troops were trained for unquestioning obedience. They moved like parts of a war machine, executing commands with eerie synchronicity.

They didn't speak in combat. They didn't scream. They hardly ran.

And when they were dying, they often tried to detonate themselves — taking their killers with them in one final act of service.

In the field, they were often led by Saber-Princes or Dominion Heralds, who carried the emperor's authority and kept the ranks in terrifying lockstep.

Some rumours say the soldiers don't remove their Armor. That they are *born* into it.

Others say that what lies beneath the helmet isn't quite human anymore.

Meanwhile in the Command Center on a orbiting Spartan Warcruiser

*SWS First Flame – Oldest dreadnought in the fleet; symbolic of Sparta's founding.*

Lucan stood above the central holomap, arms folded, jaw tight.

He watched as Mar's forces continued their assault — faster, harder, further than planned. Entire segments of the enemy line were collapsing before the rest of the Spartan assault teams had even deployed.

"He's breaking the formation," Lucan growled.

"Sir, Phoenix Legion has seized platforms four, five, and six," one of the tacticians reported. "Dominion forces are routing in that sector."

Lucan didn't smile.

"He's taking risks. That ridge wasn't even cleared. He's cutting deeper than our flanks can support. If they regroup—"

"Sir," another voice cut in. "Dominion forces are in full retreat across grid sectors eight through ten."

Lucan stared at the display.

Mar's signal pulsed at the tip of the Spartan advance — always ahead. Always just beyond reach.

"Damn it, Mar..." he muttered.

The battlefield didn't belong to the strategy anymore.

It belonged to the legend.

"tell him to halt, till forces catch up before he assaults the stronghold he hasn't got then"

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But the order was ignored mar charged on

Crimson not from the sun — which was long eclipsed by the smoke — but from the atmosphere tearing under the pressure of re-entry pods and flak fire. Thousands of drop canisters screamed through the clouds like arrows shot from the heavens, their hulls glowing white-hot as they hurtled toward the jagged Dominion fortress below.

Vortan was more than a stronghold.

It was a bastion, hewn into the basalt cliffs of a dying world, shielded by overlapping energy domes and miles of subterranean fortifications. The Dominion had turned it into a citadel of pain — a war-foundry for breeding and deploying their cyber-clad elite.

And the Spartans had come to rip it apart.

As the first wave of Phoenix Legion pods slammed into the charred rock, the ground quaked. The Spartans emerged like gods of metal and flame, weapons drawn, shields active, advancing under withering fire.

Their warcry echoed across the plateau:

“For Sparta. For Aegiron. For the Fallen.”

The air ignited.

Dominion soldiers poured from bunkers — towering, black-armored beasts with glowing red visors, moving in precise formation, their rifles humming with plasma charge. They expected resistance.

They hadn’t expected Mar.

He landed at the tip of the spear, the Sunbrand erupting into brilliant golden light as it carved a burning arc through the first wave. Flanking was the the Phoenix elite — maneuvering between bursts of graviton fire and Dominion bladeguards.

"Breach formation!" came the command.

Plasma cracked against kinetic shields. Spartans advanced anyway.

Explosive charges detonated along the fortress walls. A shockwave shattered the outer barrier, followed by waves of disruptor drones. Dominion defenses realigned — turrets pivoted, heat signatures swelled.

That’s when the siege striders came.

Massive walker mechs, four-legged monsters of armor and pulse cannons, thundered from the cliffside tunnels. One took out an entire Spartan squad with a single energy burst.

Mar sprinted into the line of fire — leaping, twisting midair, Sunbrand cleaving through one of the strider’s power cores in a flash of molten light.

“Push forward! Inside now!”

Phoenix forces surged. Explosives were planted. Gates cracked. The main breach came with a thunderous collapse as molten steel and shattered rock erupted outward.

Spartans poured into the stronghold. Room by room, corridor by corridor, the bastion was cleared. Blood and fire followed them.

They didn’t stop until they reached the inner sanctum — where the Dominion command node awaited.

Mar stormed through the final corridor of the outpost’s command tower. Flames licked the walls, Dominion soldiers fleeing in every direction, many dropping their weapons at the sight of the Sunbrand.

One Dominion commander, in full armour, stepped into his path.

“You’re too late,” the soldier snarled. “We mined everything worth taking.”

Mar raised the Sunbrand.

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“Then you’ll have nothing left to die for.”

One strike.

The Dominion commander fell.

Behind Mar, the Phoenix Legion poured into the stronghold, raising the Spartan banner over the central rig.

The Vortan Belt was theirs.

But far above hiding in the asteroid belt hidden from sensors, was a lone Dominion Cruiser – Distant Retreat Point- DCS *Nightborne Ascendant* – *Kaelira’s ship, dark-plated and sleek, used in elite infiltration and strike coordination.*

In the shadows of retreat, a hooded figure stood before a hologram of the battlefield.

Kaelira Vel-Kareth narrowed her eyes as she watched Mar's advance unfold.

One of her captains appeared beside her, breathless.

“He’s alive. It’s him. The same one.”

“I know,” Kaelira said coldly. “And he’s sending a message.”

She turned toward the darkness of space.

“We must send one back”

Six Months Later, passed by, 6 months of brutal fighting 6 months of Mar and Lucan not seeing eye to eye, 6 months of them missing Vireya and Sereya, Sereya wasn’t told where they were, but she heard rumours, heard the whispering knew what they were doing.

The stars themselves seemed to burn with war.

The Dominion front was collapsing.

World by world, sector by sector, Sparta reclaimed what had been stolen in fire and betrayal nearly a decade before.

And at the centre of it all — the Phoenix Legion, led by the one warrior whose name now echoed like prophecy Mar.

Spartan Forward Base – Council Briefing Room

Holograms shimmered above the war table. Dominion territory blinked out one red sector at a time.

Lucan stood stiffly as officers saluted Mar’s entrance with reverence.

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Even high commanders deferred to him now.

“You’re pushing too fast,” Lucan warned. “We need to consolidate. Rebuild garrisons. Establish defences—”

“They’re running,” Mar interrupted. “For the first time in years. We can end this.”

Lucan’s jaw clenched.

“And if it’s a trap?”

“Then I spring it with a blade,” Mar said cockily. “We reclaim the final sector. We erase the last red line on this map.”

He turned to the gathered officers.

“We take back Velkar Ridge. The same ground we bled for and lost which lead to Harvest falling.

We go at dawn.”

The officers erupted in cheers.

Lucan stayed silent.

But he didn’t stop him.

He couldn’t.

Velkar Ridge – Dominion Stronghold

Final Spartan Offensive

The winds of Velkar Ridge screamed like tortured ghosts across the mountain passes, howling through broken stone and shredded armor. It was the last line — a fortress built into the knife-edge of a crag that divided the eastern badlands from the fertile valleys below. The Dominion had fortified it for years.

But now, the Spartans had come to tear it down.

Smoke coiled into the pale sky, where Spartan dropships circled like hawks above a dying beast. The battlefield stretched for miles — jagged rock, broken siege towers, and the skeletons of earlier assaults. Dominion banners, dark as pitch, snapped violently in the wind. Beneath them, Zenthari warriors stood shoulder-to-shoulder — the last true defenders of the ridge.

They weren’t just defending a stronghold.

They were protecting a symbol.

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A symbol of Dominion resistance.

And the Spartans were determined to shatter it.

Phoenix Legion led the charge — their emblem burned into their pauldrons, their formations honed like blades. At the center of it all stood Commander Mar, his armor charred from weeks of battle, the Sunbrand across his back glowing dimly — waiting.

As the call to attack echoed across the comms, Mar raised his gauntlet.

“Burn it to the ground.”

Spartan artillery opened.

Orbital lances struck the ridgeline.

The ground quaked as fortified bunkers collapsed inward, spilling Dominion defenders into the open.

From the shadows of the rock crevices came Spartan shock troops — moving like phantoms, blades drawn, rifles silent.

The Dominion responded with everything.

Velkar Ridge roared back.

Autoturrets screamed to life. Graviton mortars rained havoc. Bioweapon drones, twisted by Zenthari science, filled the air with shrieks.

The sky turned black.

But the Spartans pressed forward — relentless, iron-willed, born in flame.

At the centre of the breach, Mar carved through the chaos like a force of nature.

The Sunbrand erupted with blinding light, slicing Dominion siege walkers in half, its hum rising like a war-song. Behind him, the Phoenix Legion and a recruit he had persuaded Lucan to promote to lieutenant who wasn't of age, but a hell of a fighter advanced with unshakable precision.

Kaen stood at the edge of the courtyard, eyes scanning the horizon like he expected a fleet to rise from the ground. There was a stillness to him, not the kind born of calm, but of control — tightly wound, honed like a blade that had never known rest. Built lean, but corded with muscle from years of training, Kaen moved like a shadow. His hair was kept short, his Armor bore the marks of use, and his eyes... those eyes were older than his face. He reminded Mar of himself — not in skill, though Kaen was deadly and precise — but in how he carried the weight of silence.

There was pain behind that silence.

Pain he never spoke of.

Mar respected that.

He'd watched Kaen grow from a quiet cadet to a man feared by Dominion strike squads and respected by the Phoenix Legion. They couldn't believe a 14-year-old who pretended to be in his early 20's could handle so much pressure, could be such a hero.

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On the far ridge, Lucan Mar coordinated fire-strikes, his voice firm through the storm of chaos. Each squad moved as one, pushing deeper toward the Dominion's heart.

They reached the command spire at dusk.

The final battle began in fire and ended in blood.

Dominion generals fell. The stronghold walls cracked.

And as the final explosion lit the night, Velkar Ridge burned — not as a defeat, but as a warning.

The Spartans were done retreating.

They were coming for everything.

The sky split open with fire.

Spartan drop ships screamed toward the surface, carving through smoke and stormclouds. Ground forces marched in waves, precision and fury dancing side by side.

At the front of it all — Mar, the Sunbrand glowing in his hand like a star reborn.

He cut through enemy ranks like the wind through wheat, his cloak shredded, his Armor scarred. Aetherion crackled around him in arcs, shattering shields and sending Dominion war-machines collapsing into molten slag.

The Phoenix Legion moved behind him in perfect formation.

A song of war.

A memory of vengeance.

The Dominion fell back—again and again—until only the inner courtyard of the final fortress remained.

And then... silence.

A shadow dropped into the smoke.

A ripple in the Aetherion.

Mar turned instinct already screaming.

And from the haze stepped Kaelira Vel-Kareth.

She wasn't afraid. That much was clear.

Even as Spartans surged past him, even as Phoenix Legion tore through Dominion lines, she walked straight toward him, her sword drawn and dragging sparks behind her.

She was a predator.

And Mar... he realized he was no longer the hunter.

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He was the challenge.

She wore blood-black Armor and a crown of silver thorns. Her personal guard — elite Dominion zealots — flanked her, weapons humming.

She drew her blade — darksteel alloy pulsing with inverted Aetherion.

“You should’ve killed me,” she said coldly. “Back on Aegiron.”

Mar raised the Sunbrand.

“I can quickly fix that.” He said strongly

“You won’t get a second chance.”

And then they collided.

Aetherion clashed in a storm of gold and violet. Sparks lit the battlefield as their swords met again and again, each strike louder than the last.

Mar fought like the storm itself — power, precision, weight.

Kaelira fought like flame — speed, fury, calculated madness.

Her guards closed in, but Mar spun with the Sunbrand in a wide arc, cleaving through two before dodging a third’s spear. He dropped to one knee, thrust upward, and sent another flying with a blast of raw energy.

Kaelira struck again — blade to blade.

“You should’ve stayed buried in that rubble,” she hissed.

“You should’ve stayed in my past,” he growled.

The air shimmered with heat.

They broke apart, both breathing hard.

And then Mar charged.

He didn’t hold back.

Not now.

Not after six months of fire.

Not after ten years of loss.

He struck with everything — the Sunbrand blazing like it remembered the blood of gods.

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And Kaelira... staggered.

Her blade dropped.

Mar pressed forward—

“Enough!” she snarled — not with defeat, but power.

A pulse of something — deep, ancient, wrong — surged from her Armor.

Mar was blasted backward, skidding across stone.

But the Aetherion around him flared again — brighter, purer — and he rose.

Ready.

The wind screamed through the broken fortress.

Mar advanced again, the Sunbrand blazing golden in his grip, its edge humming with rising intensity. Kaelira staggered, her blade flickering with unstable energy, her breaths coming sharp and ragged.

The pulse she had unleashed — ancient and vile — had failed to stop him.

Now she could barely hold her footing.

“You don’t understand what you’re doing,” she spat, blood on her lips.

“No,” Mar said coldly, stepping forward. “I understand exactly what I’m doing.”

He struck.

Kaelira deflected, barely.

He struck again — spinning, bringing the blade down like judgment.

She fell to one knee, forced to the ground, her weapon skittering away.

The Sunbrand’s tip hovered inches from her throat.

Around them, Spartan soldiers stormed the courtyard, cheers rising as Dominion banners fell. The last of the enemy forces were being captured, disarmed, or fleeing.

The Ridge was theirs.

The war for Sparta’s soil... was won.

Kaelira looked up at him, eyes burning.

“Kill me, then.”

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“No,” Mar replied. “You don’t get an end.”

He turned the blade, deactivating it with a low hum.

“You get a cell.”

Behind him, Phoenix Legion troopers moved in, weapons ready.

Kaelira gave him one last glance — not hatred, but something colder.

“This isn’t over,” she whispered.

“I believe it is.”

As she was dragged away, the Spartan banner rose over Velkar Ridge for the first time in nearly ten years.

Lucan arrived moments later, blood on his armour, panting from the battle above.

He looked at the scene — Kaelira in chains, Mar at the centre of a crowd of soldiers cheering his name.

The fires of the fortress reflected in his eyes.

“So,” he said grimly. “We won.”

Mar nodded, slowly.

“Cheer up big brother, now is the time to party.”

## Chapter 12 – The Crownless Commander

Plans were made, garrisons were deployed, defences were fixed ready for a counterattack that would never come. Soldiers celebrated but there was no celebration for two princes and the phoenix legion they had been summoned back to Sparta, for a victory parade.

The streets thundered with joy.

Spartan banners streamed from every tower, their red and gold emblems dancing in the wind. Confetti—real and holographic—drifted down like snowfall, catching in the armor of soldiers standing at perfect attention along the wide causeway.

And at the front of the procession rode two brothers.

Lucan Mar on one side — commander, strategist, heir.

And beside him, slightly ahead even without trying — Mar.

The Sunbrand rested across his back, and the cheers that rose from the crowd as they passed were deafening.

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“Mar! Mar! The Phoenix lives!”

“Glory to the Flame-Bearer!”

“Long live the warrior prince!”

Lucan waved mechanically. He could hear his name, too—of course he could.

But it was swallowed beneath the roaring tide that surged for Mar.

they passed beneath the towering Gates of Unity,

Forged from obsidian-colored alloy and veined with glowing lines of ancient Aetherion script, the Gates of Unity rise like a pair of monolithic sentinels at the heart of Sparta's capital, standing guard before the Aegis Bastion.

They are fifty feet high, etched with reliefs of Spartan heroes from every age — warriors, kings, queens, and scholars — all locked in eternal formation, shoulder to shoulder, representing the unity of purpose that built Sparta's enduring strength.

At the center of each gate is the Crest of the House of Mar: the twin phoenixes, wings outstretched, encircling a burning sun. It pulses faintly with Aetherion energy when a royal bloodline approach — a phenomenon that no scientist or priest has ever explained.

During times of war or mourning, the gates close and glow red, and no one — not even royalty — may pass alone. It takes two Spartans, side by side, to open them fully. A symbol that no Spartan fights alone — not in war, not in grief, not in life.

Beneath the gates lies a black marble causeway, known as the Path of Oaths, where every Spartan commander swears allegiance before deploying into war. Thousands of names are etched into its stone — some living, most fallen.

The phrase inscribed above the arch reads:

"Together we endure. Divided, we are nothing."

During coronations, weddings, parades, and state funerals, the Gates of Unity open wide, and the entire Spartan capital gathers to watch those who pass through — because only those chosen by Sparta herself are permitted to walk the centre path.

Behind them, chained and surrounded by Spartan elites, Kaelira Vel-Kareth walked in silence, her head high despite her bonds. Her silver-and-black armour was scorched and stripped of rank. Yet her violet eyes scanned the crowd with razor clarity.

she shifted her gaze toward Lucan.

She saw the twitch in his jaw.

The way he looked at his brother.

The smile that didn't reach his eyes.

And she filed it away like a weapon.

That night, the palace was lit with firelight and song. Musicians played old ballads. Feasting tables overflowed with meat and spice and wine. The Victory Hall had not seen such revelry in years.

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Soldiers from across the sectors toasted to the end of the Dominion incursion.

At the head table, King Vaeran stood with both sons at his side.

He raised a cup.

“To our warriors — and to the steel of Sparta.”

The crowd erupted.

Then came the honours.

Lucan was recognized first — his medals redoubled, his command reaffirmed.

But then...

Vaeran turned to Mar.

“The Phoenix has burned brighter than we dared to dream.”

He drew a sword — ceremonial but centuries old — and placed it against Mar’s shoulder.

“Let the world know that Mar, second of his name, shall henceforth serve as Commander of the Phoenix Legion, with full honours and trust of Sparta.”

The room roared.

Mar bowed his head, eyes steady.

Lucan drank deeply.

And said nothing.

The celebrations continued into the night Mar stepped out from the glow of the hall, needing breath and quiet. The sounds of celebration echoed behind him like a dream.

Vaeran approached with a glass of blackroot.

“You don’t look like a man who just got everything.”

“That’s the problem,” Mar muttered. “It doesn’t feel like everything.”

He took the drink but didn’t touch it.

“Where are they?”

“Vireya and Sereya?” Vaeran asked.

Mar nodded.

“Gone. Returned to Concord three days ago. Something about diplomatic hearings, quiet reassignment.”

“They didn’t wait for me.”

“You were at war.”

“I’m always at war.”

Vaeran didn’t reply. He just left the glass behind and returned to the hall.

Mar stood alone under the stars.

Far below, the people still chanted his name.

But the people he wanted most...

Were no longer there.

Days past, Spartans recovered from Indulgent of drink and food but the holding level beneath the palace was quiet — too quiet for most soldiers’ comfort. The cells were shielded with energy barriers, lined with layered plasma steel, and reinforced with Aetherion-suppressive runes etched from wars long past.

Kaelira Vel-Kareth sat cross-legged on the cot inside the central chamber.

Her silver hair, tousled but clean, framed a face carved from cool defiance. Her Armor had been replaced with a simple black dress — sleeveless, flowing, subtly regal even in captivity. The bruises from the battle were healing. The fire in her violet eyes hadn’t dimmed.

The door outside hissed open.

She didn’t rise. She didn’t flinch.

She just smiled.

“Lucan Mar,” she purred. “The loyal brother. The overlooked heir. Sparta’s dutiful shadow.”

Lucan stepped forward, his coat hanging heavy with command medals, his expression cold but alert.

“You’re bold for a prisoner.”

“I’m honest. It’s one of my better flaws.”

The energy shield lowered just enough for him to step into the observation chamber — close, but not within reach.

Kaelira slowly rose from the bed and stepped closer. Not too close. Just close enough to let her presence press.

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“You came alone,” she said. “I’m flattered.”

“You have ten minutes,” Lucan said.

“I only need two to read you.”

She circled slightly, letting her fingers trail along the edge of the barrier field, her posture fluid. Every movement deliberate.

“You burn for her, don’t you?” she said softly. “Vireya. But she sleeps in your brother’s bed now. Carries his name. Loves his child.”

Lucan’s jaw tensed.

“How do you know that, Shut up.”

Kaelira stepped even closer, her eyes never leaving his.

“But what if you didn’t have to be the forgotten one? What if you didn’t have to stand in his shadow anymore?”

She let her voice drop, sultry, dangerous.

“You command armies. You hold the people’s love. You saved Sparta as much as he did — more, perhaps. And yet they scream his name.”

Lucan looked away for the briefest second — and she saw it.

“You think I’m just a weapon,” she whispered. “But I could be so much more. Dominion politics are... flexible.”

Her hands brushed her waist, subtle, drawing attention to the curve of her body.

“I could offer you alliances. Secrets. Power.”

Lucan didn’t move.

She tilted her head.

“Or something far simpler.”

She stepped into the soft light of the cell, letting the dress catch the angle of her body in just the right way — sculpted, poised, wickedly composed.

“You want a queen who understands sacrifice. Who doesn’t ask for love. Only loyalty. Someone who will never choose your brother over you.”

She met his eyes — almost touching the glass between them.

“Say the word. And I’ll give you everything he takes for granted.”

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Lucan was frozen for a moment — not because he was tempted, but because she had cut so close to the truth.

Then he stepped back.

“Your time is up.”

Kaelira smiled, unfazed.

“I’m patient. Shadows always find their cracks.”

The cell door hissed closed behind him.

And Kaelira was alone again.

But her smile never faded.

He didn’t remember walking back to his private quarter, he just remembered opening the door,

The door sealed shut behind him with a final hiss.

Lucan Mar stood in silence, shoulders trembling beneath his uniform coat. The glow panels dimmed, casting long shadows across the spartan furnishings of his room — no medals on display, no banners, just the weapons rack and his command console blinking unread messages.

He unbuckled his chest plate slowly.

Let it fall.

Then the tunic.

Then silence.

He sat at his desk, staring at the floor like it might offer answers.

But all he found was reflection.

He blinked once.

And they were there.

Vireya, radiant and familiar — her hair loose, her robe sliding down bare shoulders. Eyes full of warmth that wasn’t for him.

And beside her — Kaelira, a dark twin, silk-clad in shadow, smirking like she knew every hidden corner of his mind.

They stood at the foot of his bed.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft



Both untouched.

Both unreachable.

“Do you want us?” Vireya whispered.

“Do you deserve us?” Kaelira added, voice velvet-smooth.

He reached for them — but before his fingers brushed skin, Mar stepped into view.

Naked. Crowned in firelight.

He wrapped one arm around Vireya, the other around Kaelira, and pulled them both close. They laughed — not cruelly, but with devotion.

“All hail King Mar,” they said in unison.

“The only true heir of Sparta.”

Lucan tried to speak.

Tried to scream.

But no sound came.

Only heat.

Rage.

Shame.

His breath exploded outward.

The air shimmered.

And then — boom.

The bedframe cracked in two.

The mattress flung backward.

The lights burst in a flash of white sparks.

The room went still.

Lucan stood in the rubble, chest heaving, hands still crackling with uncontrolled Aetherion.

He fell to his knees.

Alone.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

The echo of laughter — not real — still ringing in his ears.

### Chapter 13 – A Promise at the Edge of Stars

The capital city of the Galactic Concord never slept.

But in the private quarters of the Virellien Embassy, time seemed to slow. The sweeping view from the upper dome flickered with soft starlight, and the hum of traffic beyond the glass was a distant murmur — a galaxy at peace, if only for a night.

Vireya lay wrapped in satin sheets, her breathing even, one hand curled near her chin. The room around her was serene. Comfortable. The kind of place she had tried to rebuild her life in.

She didn't hear the ship dock.

She didn't hear the door unlock.

She didn't hear the footsteps cross the carpet.

But she felt it.

A presence — familiar, steady, burning like a distant sun she thought had long gone cold.

Her eyes fluttered open.

And there he stood.

Mar.

Silent.

Unarmoured, Unclothed.

Just him.

Her breath caught in her throat.

“You're not supposed to be here,” she whispered, not rising.

“I know,” he said.

A pause.

“I needed to see you.”

“You could have called.”

“I didn’t want words.”

Another pause. The space between them tense, electric.

“I thought you’d be celebrating,” she murmured.

“It doesn’t feel like victory without you.”

He stepped closer.

Slowly.

Gently.

She didn’t move — not until he sat on the edge of the bed, his eyes still locked with hers.

“Does she know?” Vireya asked softly.

“Sereya?” He nodded. “She’s the reason I came.”

“You came for her.”

“I came for both of you.”

She hesitated — then reached out, fingertips brushing his hand.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t.”

“I was afraid I wouldn’t deserve to.”

She pulled the sheet aside just slightly — not invitation, but welcome.

“You still smell like fire,” she said.

“You still feel like home.”

He lay beside her.

They didn’t speak again for a long time.

And when sleep took them, it was with their foreheads touching, breath shared beneath stars.

The first rays of golden sun spilled across the pale crystal domes of Concordia, casting shifting patterns on the walls of the Virellien Embassy.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Inside, the chamber was still quiet.

Mar stirred slightly beneath the covers; eyes half-open. Vireya remained beside him, her body warm against his, arm draped across his chest. For a moment, all was still — no titles, no wars, no memories heavy enough to drown them.

Then the door burst open.

“Mama!”

Sereya’s voice rang through the hall before her feet even hit the carpet.

Mar blinked in surprise — just as the six-year-old charged full speed into the bedroom and froze.

Her bright violet eyes widened.

Then narrowed.

“...Why are you both in bed?”

Vireya’s face flushed instantly as she sat up quickly, trying to pull the covers up higher.

“Sereya! Sweetheart—”

“You’re both naked,” Sereya declared flatly.

Mar choked on a laugh, trying to find a way to sit up that didn’t make it worse.

“Technically, I’m... mostly covered,” he muttered.

“Not the point,” Vireya said through her teeth, shooting him a glare.

Sereya tilted her head in that far-too-intelligent way children do.

“Does this mean you’re staying?” she asked.

Mar’s expression softened instantly.

He reached one hand out from under the sheets, palm up.

“If you want me to.”

Sereya didn’t hesitate. She jumped onto the bed and hugged his arm tightly.

“Only if I get eight birthdays’ worth of presents. Since you missed seven.”

Mar laughed, heart full in a way it hadn’t been since he was a child himself.

“eight?” he said. “That’s robbery.”

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“I’m six now soon seven. And one extra for the time you disappeared.”

“Hm,” he said. “I think I might have just the thing.”

Vireya arched a brow.

“Do you?”

“A perfect gift,” Mar said, winking at Sereya. “But you’ll have to wait till your official birthday”

Sereya gave him a very serious look.

“You better not disappear before then.”

“I’ll try not to,” he promised, pulling both close.

And for one perfect moment, under the early light of a new world, a broken family began to feel whole again.

They had breakfast in bed then Sereya wanted to go walk the gardens and show her father the beauty of it

The sky above the Concord Senate Gardens shimmered with layered atmospherics — soft gold and blue light diffused through floating flora, walkways of crystalline stone winding between diplomatic pavilions, flowering trees, and hovering fountains.

It was a place built to look peaceful.

But peace was often the most carefully staged illusion.

Vireya walked between the glass-leafed trees, posture tall, eyes sharp. Dressed in the deep indigo robes of a Virellien senator, her every step drew attention.

To her left walked Mar — not in armour, but in a simple high-collared tunic with a Spartan insignia embroidered near the collarbone. He was clearly military, clearly dangerous, but uncharacteristically at ease.

And between them, holding both their hands, was Sereya — skipping slightly, chattering about birds made of light and whether she’d be allowed dessert before dinner since they were technically guests.

Their presence in the Senate Gardens was impossible to ignore.

And that was the point.

Senators Approached them

The first to break rank was Senator Tarlon Kure, a Concord traditionalist from the Core Worlds.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“Senator Vireya,” he greeted with a rehearsed smile. “And... Commander Mar. A pleasure.”

“Senator,” Vireya said coolly.

“I trust your presence here is temporary?” Kure asked, tone dipped in velvet disdain. “The halls of diplomacy can be quite delicate.”

Mar gave a polite smile.

“Don’t worry. I only break things on the battlefield.”

Kure stiffened, bowed faintly, and made a swift retreat.

Then came others.

Senator Dalen Vos from the Rim Territories offered a respectful nod to Mar, clearly impressed by recent victories. Senator Laeri of the Midreach Colonies even crouched to greet Sereya, whispering, “You’re a lucky girl to have both parents.”

And with each new conversation, Vireya’s political stock rose.

She was no longer just a graceful diplomat from a beautiful world.

She was now the partner of the Phoenix reborn.

And that terrified many.

From the upper levels of the Concord dome, shaded by reflective canopy glass, a group of aides and political analysts watched the trio below.

One turned to her companion.

“She was manageable before,” the aide said. “But now...”

“Now she’s a queen without a crown,” the analyst replied. “And he’s a weapon without a leash.”

“Should we notify the Core Assembly?”

“We already have.”

Far below, Mar leaned slightly toward Vireya.

“They’re planning something.”

“Of course they are,” she murmured. “You terrify them.”

“And you don’t?”

“Only when I smile.”

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Sereya tugged both their hands.

“Can I go chase the floating fish?”

“Ten minutes,” Vireya said.

“Seven,” Mar added.

“Six,” Sereya countered.

And with that, she was off — laughing, light on her feet.

As her parents watched, a dozen political eyes watched them.

And every one of them wondered:  
What do you do with a legend who refuses to fade?

Later that evening, Vireya stood in the Glass Atrium, a high chamber wrapped in curved crystal panes that looked out over the capital skyline. The stars above Concordia flickered in pale lavender through the filtered dome.

She wasn’t alone.

Across from her, seated with the calm certainty of one who wielded power through patience rather than force, was Senator Arion Dael — representative of the Core Meridian Worlds, known reformist, and whispered heir to a quiet political rebellion.

He poured Vireya a glass of emerald spice wine without asking, his manner deliberate.

“It’s strange, isn’t it,” he said, “how war heroes can shift the balance of politics without ever setting foot in the Senate?”

Vireya didn’t sip the wine. She only raised an eyebrow.

“If you brought me here to flatter me, Senator Dael, you’ve already lost me.”

Arion chuckled softly.

“No. I brought you here because I think you know what’s coming.”

He leaned forward, his tone lowering.

“The Concord is rotting, Vireya. We speak of peace while letting the Outer Systems decay. We pretend neutrality while letting megabanks hold sway over food lines. We call Sparta a partner, but we let them bleed alone.”

She didn’t interrupt.

He went on.

“And now... your Mar returns. Alive. Victorious. Worshipped. That terrifies the corrupt. But it inspires the rest of us.”

Vireya’s eyes sharpened.

“You’re asking me to use him.”

“I’m asking you to trust him,” Arion replied. “And bring him to our next meeting. Not the open floor. A private summit. Core world reformers. Outer world populists. Military dissidents. People tired of pretending the Concord is still what it claims to be.”

He stood, stepping closer, his voice dropping lower.

“You hold the key to change, Vireya. You and the man the galaxy thought was dead.”

She stared at him for a long moment.

Then set the wine down — untouched.

“Send the details,” she said. “I’ll... ask him.”

“You already know his answer,” Arion said.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

As she returned to find Mar watching Sereya sleep under a starlight dome, her thoughts churned.

She had once loved him for his courage.

Now the galaxy might love him for it, too.

And that made him powerful.

Dangerous.

Irreplaceable.

She didn’t know yet if she would let the galaxy have him.

Or keep him for herself.

Mar stood near the balcony; arms crossed as city lights shimmered behind him. The night was warm, but the air between him and Vireya had cooled with silence.

She stood near the console, hands clasped in front of her, watching him.

There she thought she might as well ask, might as well lunge into the deep end

“You’re serious,” she said quietly.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft



“I’ve never been more serious,” Mar replied. “Politics isn’t war, Vireya. It’s performance. Half-truths wrapped in ceremony. I can’t pretend I belong in those rooms.”

“You do belong. More than half of them. They fear you.”

“Good,” he said. “They should. But they won’t control me.”

Vireya sighed and stepped closer.

“You could change things.”

“So could you.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do, Mar.”

He looked at her — the same look he’d worn before every charge, every stand.

“You asked if I came here for you. I did. But if you’re asking me to play the game... I can’t. I won’t.”

There was pain in her eyes.

Not disappointment.

Understanding.

Resigned.

“Then go home,” she said softly.

“What?”

“Take Sereya and return to Sparta. Be a father. Be the commander they need. Let me handle this.”

He hesitated.

“You’ll say I support this meeting?”

“Only in spirit,” she said. “I’ll use your name, your victories — everything you’ve become — to move pieces where they need to fall.”

“You’ll lie.”

“No,” she said, touching his chest. “I’ll protect you from what you hate.”

Mar studied her, jaw set.

Then nodded once.

“You always were better at this than me.”

“And you were always better when you were free.”

A Few Days Later at the Concordia Star port Mar prepared to leave with Sereya, she was nervous to leave her mother but excited to return to Sparta where Mar assured her, he would host her the best birthday party ever with the best present.

Vireya herself didn't even know what the present was much to her anger “it better not be dangerous Mar” to which he smiled and laughed

The shuttle doors hissed open. Sereya, backpack slung over her shoulder and stuffed with gifts, skipped ahead down the ramp, grinning.

“Do I get a sword now that I'm going to be a warrior's daughter?”

“No, your mother would kill me,” Mar muttered, following her with a wry smile.

“You owe me seven years,” she replied without turning.

Mar glanced back at the starport, where Vireya stood watching from a distance, her face unreadable — wrapped in indigo, proud and still.

They locked eyes.

No words.

Only the weight of what was understood.

And then the shuttle doors closed, and Mar and his daughter flew toward the stars.

#### Chapter 14 – The Gift of Flame and Fur

The sky over Sparta was clear, the twin suns cresting over the golden towers and casting long shadows through the capital's marble streets. Within the Royal Gardens, a small crowd had gathered — family, a few guards, and most importantly, a girl about to turn seven.

Sereya stood in the grass, barefoot, her violet eyes wide with anticipation as her father knelt before her.

“Are you ready?” Mar asked, grinning.

“Yes!” she bounced in place. “You said it was alive! Is it dangerous?!”

“Not yet,” he muttered.

From behind the hedges, a crate slid forward — buzzing, glowing faintly from the inside.

Mar tapped the release, and out tumbled... a small, dog-like creature, all oversized ears, shimmering black fur, and an excited yip that sounded more like a war cry than a bark.

Sereya gasped.

The creature leapt into her arms and began licking her face furiously.

“He’s a Varnhound pup,” Mar explained. “Rare. Loyal. Used to run with the warrior-kings of old. They bond for life.”

Bred for generations in the mountains of Old Sparta, the Varnhound is a massive quadruped creature resembling a cross between a wolf, a lion, and something wholly alien. Standing nearly shoulder-height to a grown Spartan, it is covered in dense, obsidian-black fur streaked with faint lines of silver bioluminescence that shimmer when the creature is alert or agitated.

Its eyes are golden and intelligent, with vertical pupils that adjust to even the dimmest light. Beneath its heavy mane lies a thick armoured ridge running from skull to spine, evolved to absorb impact from blades and energy weapons alike. Its teeth are bone-white, each capable of biting through titanium, and its claws can tear through combat Armor with ease.

Varnhounds are not simple beasts. They are semi-telepathic, able to bond with a single master — often from childhood — forming an emotional and instinctual link so deep that the two can sense each other’s fear, pain, or intent across great distances.

They do not obey anyone but their chosen companion — and will fight to the death to protect them.

Tactical Role:

- Used by Spartan scouts and elite warriors for recon, assault, and personal protection.
- Capable of leaping massive distances, tracking targets across miles of terrain, and resisting most stun-based weaponry.
- In times of peace, they are deeply affectionate with those they trust, especially children — but in battle, they become terrifying and unstoppable.

Lore:

The first Varnhound was said to have followed Mar the First into battle against the Ancient enemy — and legends claim it died at his feet protecting him from a blade meant for the stars.

Varnhounds are never bought or bred for profit — they choose their companions, often inexplicably, and once bonded, cannot be transferred.

It’s said:

“You do not tame a Varnhound. You earn one.”

“He’s PERFECT,” Sereya beamed, hugging the creature tightly. “I’m naming him Ashfang!”

“Of course you are,” Mar said with a smile.

Nearby – Watching the Chaos Unfold

King Vaeran rubbed his temples from the edge of the garden.

“We kept those beasts out of the capital for a reason.”

Solenne raised a brow, arms crossed.

“I once saw one tear a raider apart mid-leap. She’s going to ride it through the halls in six months.”

“I give it two weeks,” Vaeran muttered.

“I give it two hours till Vireya shows up” solenne said back

Lucan stepped onto the lawn, dressed in his formal Spartan black and silver. Behind him, a handmaid carried a carefully wrapped gift-box, and besides that, a shimmering dress-box, glimmering with strands of starlight thread.

“For the birthday girl,” Lucan said warmly.

Sereya ran over, still holding the wiggling pup.

She opened the toy first — the most coveted hover-construct set in all of Sparta. Her eyes lit up. Then the dress — and she gasped, speechless.

“Uncle Lucan, it’s beautiful!”

Lucan smiled, pleased.

“You’ll look like a princess.”

“But I’m a warrior princess now,” she giggled, holding up Ashfang. “I have him.”

Lucan’s smile twitched.

“Yes... yes, you do.”

Mar smirked from the side.

“He’ll be the size of a hover-tank in a year.”

“Gods help us,” Vaeran groaned.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“I think I love them both,” Sereya said, spinning in her new dress with the pup still in her arms. “But this one’s mine.”

Lucan nodded, quietly watching.

Everyone laughed — but the twist in his chest stayed.

She loved him.

But she belonged to Mar.

The party had spilled into the sun-dappled courtyards of the royal gardens. Guests mingled beneath colourful ribbons strung from the towering crystal trees. There was laughter, cake, and holograms of glowing animals dancing for the children.

Sereya, wearing her radiant new dress — now slightly fur-covered — raced through the garden, Ashfang bounding behind her like a bolt of joy.

Then the crowd parted slightly.

Vireya arrived.

Draped in formal Virellien robes, her expression composed... until she caught sight of the beast chasing her daughter through royal hedgerows.

“Mar...”

He looked up from eating a cake slice.

“Before you say anything—”

“Is that a Varnhound?”

“Yes.”

“In the capital?”

“Technically, near the capital—”

“I cannot believe—!”

But her voice broke slightly as Sereya squealed, giggling, tumbling into the grass with Ashfang licking her face.

“She’s like you,” Vireya murmured.

“You mean brave?” Mar said with a grin.

“I mean reckless.”

She turned back to Mar and smacked him lightly on the shoulder.

“You’re impossible.”

“And yet you still love me.”

She rolled her eyes.

“That’s the problem.”

Lucan stood in silence as one of the guards approached.

“Commander... she’s asking for you.”

Lucan didn’t reply.

He simply nodded — and made his way through the shaded halls beneath the celebration.

Inside the cell, Kaelira lounged casually in the low light, her black dress offset by the faint shimmer of the Aetherion suppressors around her.

“You look tired, Lucan,” she purred. “Long day? Lots of cake?”

“You said it was important.”

She stood, moving closer, hands brushing over her own arms as if cold.

“So serious. Like your mother.”

Lucan’s face tightened.

“Leave her out of this.”

There memories flashed before Lucan eyes; she had a laugh that could stop a war. That’s how Lucan remembered her most — not in her royal garb or during the ceremonial addresses, but in the quiet evenings by the fire, her hair loose, her voice soft, telling him and Mar stories of distant worlds and ancient heroes.

She wasn’t born Spartan, but somehow, she *understood* Sparta better than anyone who was. Not its strength — but its pain. Its loneliness. Its weight. And she carried that weight with grace, even when the High Council doubted her, even when the people whispered that an outsider had no right to wear the silver and crimson of the House of Mar.

She had eyes the colour of dusk — deep, tired, wise. Lucan used to think she could see into the future with how calm she always was. Now he knew... she was just always afraid. Afraid for them.

For him.

For Mar.

For Sparta.

She believed peace was possible — not through weapons, but through *understanding*.

Through *compassion*. Through *change*.

And Sparta never forgave her for it.

Neither did the galaxy.  
She was too kind for the Senate. Too hopeful to avoid a war. Too kind for a world forged in steel.  
And Lucan... Lucan had failed her.  
He hadn't been there when she needed him.

"You miss her," Kaelira said, stepping forward. "She was too good for your father. Too soft for the court.

"too dangerous to be left alive so they killed her, Lucan."

He froze.

"What?"

"You think it was a battlefield raid," she whispered. "A skirmish gone wrong. But the Dominion was paid to hit her convoy. By men in robes and gold — Concord senators. She was gaining influence. Too much peace. Too much truth."

Lucan's voice dropped to a growl.

"You're lying."

Kaelira stepped even closer — her eyes aflame.

"They sent assassins. But they failed."

She leaned in, mouth nearly to his ear.

"failed she died, I buried I cried for her"

"oh she was killed but our men failed, because she wasn't killed by them. She was killed... by your brother."

Lucan's blood froze.

"You're lying."

"A surge of uncontrolled Aetherion. A boy with power and rage. A broken body on the floor."

"SHUT UP."

"He's the reason she's dead, Lucan."

Silence.

Then A roar that startled the jail guards who rushed to their prince.

Back in the Gardens – Moments Later

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Sereya was lifting her cake when the air cracked like lightning.

Lucan exploded through the hedges, his blade igniting mid-leap, and tackled Mar to the ground.

“YOU KILLED HER!”

Gasps rang out.

Mar barely had time to raise his arm before the blade struck — cutting deep across his side.

Lucan rained down punches, screaming, “Murderer! Liar! Pretender!”

Guards shouted, but none moved.

Vireya tried to push forward, and Ashfang snarled and barked, protecting Sereya.

Then—

A surge.

Of blinding Aetherion.

Sereya, crying, trembling, raised one tiny hand.

“STOP!” she screamed

Lucan was flung backward by a massive blast of light, smashing into a marble pillar.

Silence.

Everyone turned.

Sereya ran to her father, who bled across the grass, his breathing shallow.

Her hands glowed.

She placed them on his chest — and healed him.

The wound closed.

The light faded.

Mar breathed.

“Sereya...”

She collapsed into his arms, sobbing.

Across the garden, Lucan, panting and shaking, stood. Kaelira was at his side, somehow free.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft



The crowd parted.

“This isn’t over,” he growled. “You took everything from me.”

“Lucan—” Vaeran shouted from the steps above.

But Lucan turned.

And vanished with Kaelira into the shadows.

## Chapter 15 – The Truth We Carry

The citadel felt like a tomb.

Celebration banners had been taken down. The laughter that once echoed through the halls was now whispers and footsteps. The aftermath of Lucan’s betrayal lingered like smoke in a battlefield long cleared.

In her quarters, Sereya lay curled beneath her sheets, eyes red from crying. Ashfang rested at her side, unmoving — as if sensing that the time for play had passed.

Outside her door, Vireya stood with her arms folded tightly, trying not to let her worry consume her.

She had seen many strange things in her life — wonders born of the Aetherion, technologies left behind by the Ancients, impossible feats made real by will.

But never this.

Never a child channel the Aetherion to heal.

“Only the Ancients could do that,” she whispered.

She turned as Mar approached, his steps slow but firm despite his healing wounds.

“Is she still asleep?” he asked.

“She’s awake,” Vireya said softly. “But she hasn’t spoken.”

They stood in silence.

Then Vireya turned to him, her expression caught between awe and fear.

“What she did... no child should have that kind of power. Not unless—”

“Unless she’s like you, like your mother” Mar finished quietly.

Vireya nodded.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“There were whispers, once. That in the Old Wars, some of the Ancients could use the Aetherion to restore life. To mend what couldn’t be healed.”

“And now our daughter just did it,” Mar murmured, glancing toward the door.

Mar stood alone in one of the citadel’s lower chambers — one of the rooms where his mother used to sit and watch the stars.

His fists trembled at his sides.

“It was me,” he said aloud, as if daring the walls to argue. “I tried to protect her. I let the fire inside break loose. And I killed her.”

She died screaming my name.

That’s the part that never leaves me. Not the blood. Not the fire. Not even the sound of her body hitting the stone floor beneath the palace dome.

It’s her voice.

That *desperate, shaking, terrified* voice.

Calling out to me — not as a prince, not as a soldier.

Just as her son.

I was seven.

We were supposed to be safe. Inspecting the new farming colony. Just a mother and her boy, far from politics and war.

And then the sky broke open.

Gunfire. Explosions. Her guards falling around us like leaves in the wind.

I remember the fear — sharp and cold, like a blade in my gut. I remember her grabbing me, pulling me behind her, *shielding me*.

And I remember... *losing control*.

The Aetherion surged through me — wild, unfocused, *angry*. It was like something ancient had cracked open inside me, and all I could feel was rage.

I wanted to protect her. I *tried* to protect her.

But the power didn’t listen. I didn’t know how to aim it. How to control it.

The blast that came from my hands... it wasn’t meant for her. It never was.

But she turned. Reached for me. Whispered my name again.

And then — just silence.

Her body crumpled in front of me like a broken statue. Still. Lifeless.

And I knew. Even before the royal guards and my father arrived. Even before healers come flying in,

I knew what I’d done.

And I’ve carried it every day since.

Lucan didn’t know. My father didn’t know. To ashamed to ever tell them.

Only Vireya knew she was the only one he could confine in. Only she ever looked at me like she knew what I’d lost... and what I’d become because of it.

But it was me.

I didn’t fail to save her.

I killed her.

And no crown. No sword. No war. No peace treaty will *ever* wash that blood off my hands.

The door creaked open behind him.

Vireya, followed by Vaeran and Solenne, entered quietly.

He didn't turn.

"Lucan was right," he said. "I'm a monster I'm a murderer, im sorry I should have told you."

"We did know," Solenne said gently.

Mar turned now, eyes wide.

"What?"

Vaeran nodded, voice low.

"I was there before the medics arrived. I saw the marks. Felt the burn. The Aetherion was thick in the air."

"And you never said anything?"

"Because you were seven," Solenne said, stepping forward. "And you loved her."

Vireya took his hand.

"They didn't tell you because they knew what it would do to you. And I didn't know until now. But even if I had... I would have loved you all the same."

Mar's voice cracked.

"I see it every night. I feel it."

"So do I," Vaeran said. "Every father who fails his son carries that weight. But I never blamed you. Not for a second."

Solenne touched his other hand.

"You didn't kill her, Mar. You were a child. The Aetherion was untrained. Wild. And she died trying to protect you."

Tears filled his eyes — and he let them fall.

For the first time in years, he let himself cry.

Vireya pulled him into her arms, and this time he didn't resist.

That night, he sat quietly at the edge of Sereya's bed, watching her sleep. Her breathing was calm now, her face serene.

Ashfang watched him silently from the floor.

“I don’t know what you’re becoming,” Mar whispered. “But I swear on everything I have left... I’ll protect you from it. From me. From all of it.”

Sereya stirred, her eyes blinking open.

She looked at him — and smiled.

“Hi, Daddy.”

His chest tightened.

“Hi, little flame.”

End of Book 1 Part 1

### Chapter 16 – Five Years Later

The first light of Concordia filtered through the diamond glass windows, gilding the room in warm gold. Vireya stood at the edge of the balcony, a steaming cup in her hands, staring across the silver spires of the capital.

Five years.

It felt like both a lifetime and the blink of an eye.

The galaxy had changed — slowly, stubbornly, and not always for the better.

But she had changed, too.

Her hand traced the subtle scar at her temple, a reminder of battles fought not with weapons, but with words — in senate halls, on committee floors, behind closed doors where power shifted on whispers. She was no longer just Princess of Virellien, no longer simply Senator Maren-Vireya.

She was a force.

And beside her — always — was Mar.

She smiled faintly.

Their love had never been stronger. What once felt impossible now felt inevitable — forged in loss, tempered in truth. They had rebuilt something between them that no war, no exile, no broken past could touch.

But not all things had healed.

Her smile faded.

“Lucan...”

His name still ached in her chest. She didn't speak of him often — neither did Mar. His betrayal had cut deep, but what pained her most wasn't the anger.

It was the not knowing.

Where he was. If he was still alive. If the man, he used to be still existed beneath whatever Kaelira had done to him.

She still dreamed of finding him.

Of making it right.

In the distance, her thoughts were drawn elsewhere — across oceans and stars to the Selenar Academy, where her daughter now trained.

Sereya.

Twelve years old.

Brilliant. Fierce. Aetherion-gifted in ways few had ever seen.

And more than that — a child of both Sparta and Virellien. A bridge. A symbol. And sometimes, Vireya feared... a target.

But Sereya was strong. Stronger than either parent dared admit aloud.

The console chimed behind her.

Another senate session. Another debate.

Another fight to change the Concord, one fractured law at a time.

She placed her cup down gently and turned, her robes catching the morning light.

"Let them come," she whispered to herself. "We're not done yet."

The hover-platform waited outside her residence, its sleek curves surrounded by no fewer than eight armed guards in polished black-and-gold Spartan Armor. Each carried plasma-spears slung across their backs and wore the sunburst insignia of the Phoenix Legion — Mar's personal insistence.

Vireya gave them a look somewhere between irritation and affection as she approached.

"This is a senate session, not a battlefield."

The lead guard, a silent woman named Kira, offered a slight bow but said nothing. Orders were orders. Mar hadn't left room for interpretation.

Vireya sighed and climbed aboard the platform, the city rising beneath her as they ascended toward the glimmering rotunda of the Galactic Concord Senate.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Concordia – Concord Senate Building, Upper Chambers

The building shone like a temple of light, its vast domes catching the sun like molten pearl. Inside, however, the light dimmed — filtered through the thick fog of bureaucracy and political inertia.

Vireya walked the corridor flanked by aides and officers, each handing her data pads and summaries. Her eyes flicked from one to the next, parsing numbers, projections, and rebuttals.

Inflation.  
Devaluation of borderworld currencies.  
Shipyard overrun costs.  
Energy subsidies stalling.

“Five years of war,” she thought bitterly, “and what have we done but survive?”

The war with the Dominion had stalled.  
Not peace. Not defeat. Just... stalemate.

Small strikes. Sabotage. Proxy skirmishes in the outer sectors. But neither the Concord nor the Dominion had committed to a full-scale campaign since the loss of the Mining Belt years ago.

And the people were paying for it.

“We’re bleeding slowly,” she muttered aloud, “and pretending we’re not wounded.”

Inside the chamber, the usual noise swelled — senators from across the galaxy arguing, posturing, bargaining over resource access, defence treaties, and war taxation.

Vireya stood slowly, hands clasped behind her back, her voice cool and precise as it cut through the din.

“We speak of defence, but not of recovery.  
We speak of threats, but not of growth.

Five years we’ve spent maintaining the line — not pushing forward, not negotiating peace, not investing in the citizens we claim to represent.

Inflation continues to rise. Outer rim infrastructure is failing.

And instead of long-term investment in stability, we discuss troop deployments and ship production like it’s the only language we remember how to speak.”

Some senators muttered. A few nodded.

One of the elder Core representatives leaned forward.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“And what would you suggest, Senator Vireya? That we pause military funding in the middle of a galactic standoff?”

Her gaze didn't waver.

“I suggest we stop acting like a standoff is the same as a war. I suggest we invest in our people before they stop believing the Concord exists to protect them.”

A long silence followed.

The session adjourned hours later — not with change, but with delay.

Delays were the Concord's specialty.

Vireya exited the main chamber into a private corridor, the heavy marble columns lined with light-panes displaying the founding charter of the Galactic Concord. She barely glanced at them anymore.

Her aide, Taron, caught up to her.

Tall. Sharp. Fiercely loyal. And always three steps ahead of every political manoeuvre.

“They're circling,” he said under his breath. “Two governors from the Inner Mid-Rim want a closed-door meeting. The Core Bloc is calling your proposals radical.”

“Let them,” Vireya said, walking briskly. “They can't argue forever.”

“They're not trying to argue,” he replied. “They're trying to isolate you.”

She stopped walking.

“Who exactly?”

Taron hesitated.

“The Velar Dominion Systems. Several banking delegates. Even the Decran Security Alliance.”

Vireya's eyes narrowed. That was half the voting spine of the Concord's central policy council.

“They're worried,” she said. “And when they're worried, they smear. What are they saying?”

Taron pulled up his holopad, flicked through a few feeds.

“That you've grown too close to Sparta. That your alliance with Mar compromises your neutrality.”

“Of course it does,” she said flatly. “I never claimed to be neutral. I claimed to give a damn.”

They turned the corner and passed a few lingering senators, all of whom lowered their voices as she passed. Eyes followed her — not with admiration, but with calculation.

One senator, a Chavari diplomat with silver rings across her brow, gave a clipped nod.

“Senator Vireya. You speak well... but you pick dangerous allies.”

Vireya met her gaze without blinking.

“So did the founders of the Concord. And unlike most of you, they meant every word of it.”

The Chavari woman smiled thinly and moved on.

As she reached her private office suite, Taron leaned close again.

“I can buy you a few days. But you’ll need to choose — push this harder or pull back. They’re already talking about stripping you of committee leadership.”

“Then let them,” Vireya said. “Let them try. I’d rather lose a chair than sell my voice.”

Taron sighed. “And Mar?”

She hesitated.

“Mar will support me. Even if I don’t ask him to.”

She entered her office and sealed the door behind her.

The lights dimmed. The city outside shimmered.

She moved to the window again, one hand resting gently over her chest — not in fear, but in preparation.

The storm was coming.

And she had never stood taller.

The lights came on low as Vireya stepped into her office... and stopped.

He was already there.

Leaning against the far wall, arms crossed, dressed in polished but battle-scarred Spartan blacks — the kind worn only by commanders who still walked the front.

Mar.

Her breath caught, just for a second. Five years together hadn’t dulled the reaction — if anything, it had made it more dangerous.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft



“You’re early,” she said.

He smiled. “You’re late.”

She crossed the room, the weight of the day falling off her shoulders as she stepped into his arms. They held each other quietly for a moment — a rare peace, stolen between wars of words and wars of steel.

“How was Sparta?” she asked.

“Tense. The border watch claims Dominion patrols are testing old channels again. No direct incursions, but enough to keep the commanders restless.”

“And Sereya?”

He smiled faintly. “Her instructors said she’s weeks ahead of her class. Master Telyn calls her a ‘storm in soft shoes.’”

Vireya laughed softly, leaning her head against his chest.

“She gets that from you.”

“The soft shoes?”

“No,” she murmured, “the storm.”

The door chimed.

Mar’s arm dropped reluctantly as Vireya turned.

“Enter.”

The doors parted.

Three senators stepped in, robes immaculate, eyes sharp.

Senator Vorn of the Mid-Core.

Councilor Ashari of the Outer Trade Accord.

And Representative Kez of the Concord Banking Guild.

Vireya’s posture changed instantly — warmth replaced by steel.

“You’re early,” she said.

“We heard your speech,” Vorn said smoothly. “And we’re concerned.”

“Concern,” Mar muttered behind her, “is the polite word for fear.”

Ashari's eyes flicked to him. "I see the commander has returned. How convenient."

Vireya didn't blink. "Mar is here as a private guest."

Kez stepped forward. "Private or not, his presence has influence. Your alignment with Sparta—"

"Has kept half this sector from collapsing," Vireya cut in. "Or would you rather Dominion flags fly over the border colonies again?"

Silence.

Ashari recovered first. "No one questions your commitment to the Concord. But the methods—"

"Are necessary," she snapped. "You've let rot fester in these halls while the people suffer. I won't be complicit."

"What you are," Vorn said, voice colder now, "is dangerously close to becoming a populist threat. And if you keep this up, you may not be a senator much longer."

A pause.

Then Vireya smiled — slow, calm, unyielding.

"Then strip my title. But remember this: when the people come asking who stood for them... they won't remember your seats. They'll remember your silence."

Mar, behind her, crossed his arms.

The senators glanced at him once more — and left.

The door hissed shut.

Vireya exhaled. Mar looked at her with that half-amused, half-admiring glint.

"You should wear Armor to those meetings."

"I do," she said. "It just doesn't show."

Mar gave her a lopsided grin as the doors slid shut.

"You wear Armor well, Senator."

"Do I?" she smirked.

"Yes. Though if I'm honest..." he stepped closer, voice lower, "I've been thinking about getting you out of it since you walked in."

Vireya raised a brow. "How very undiplomatic of you."

"That's why I'm not a politician."

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

She laughed, soft and warm, and tugged him forward by the collar.

Several hours later – Private Quarters

The golden light of Concordia's setting suns cast soft lines across the sheets.

They lay entangled in silence, warmth between them, the din of the city forgotten.

Vireya traced a finger along Mar's scar, resting her chin against his chest.

"We never get enough time," she whispered.

"We make the most of it," he replied, brushing her hair back.

He paused. Something stirred in the air — a tremor not felt, but sensed.

He sat up.

"What is it?" Vireya asked.

Mar didn't answer immediately. He rose from the bed, silent and bare, his body tense.

"Aetherion..." he said under his breath. "Something's off."

Vireya, still wrapped in a light cover, smirked at the sight of him moving toward the window in nothing but tension and instinct.

"Ancients protect us," she muttered. "What if the maid walks in?"

And then — the glass shattered.

A sonic boom rippled through the chamber as the windows exploded inward. Three figures in black armour and jetpacks streaked into the room — rifles raised; eyes hidden behind chromed visors.

"Down!" Mar shouted.

The first trooper landed hard — aiming directly at Vireya — and Mar tackled him midair, slamming him into the wall with a sickening crack.

A second attacker fired, narrowly missing Vireya as she rolled off the bed and grabbed a fallen gauntlet.

Mar disarmed the third with a crushing blow to the wrist, spinning his opponent into the other, but a grenade rolled from the armoured belt — ticking, pulsing.

Mar's eyes locked on Vireya.

No time to think.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

He grabbed her, pulled her into his arms, and dived through the shattered window.

Wind roared around them. The city lights blurred.

Vireya clutched him tight, gasping.

“Mar—!”

He reached deep, into the Aetherion, and pushed outward — a sphere of force enveloping them as they fell stories down toward the lower garden tiers.

They struck hard — the field slowed the fall, but not enough. The force blast cracked the stone beneath.

Vireya tumbled free.

Mar didn’t move.

“Mar!”

She crawled to him — blood on his brow, chest rising shallowly.

The building above lit with flashes of gunfire. The attackers hovered above, ready to finish the job — until security forces arrived, weapons blazing.

Jetpacks screamed as the attackers retreated into the night sky, vanishing behind the towers.

Guards surrounded the scene.

Vireya held Mar close, fury in her eyes and power rippling in her veins.

“You’ll regret coming for him,” she whispered to the night.

Chapter 17 – The Watcher’s Shadow

Selenar Academy – Outer Training Spire, Morning Drills

Sereya hated mornings.

She hated drills. She hated protocol. And above all, she hated the tall shadow that followed her everywhere.

“Six feet behind, Lieutenant,” she snapped without turning around.

The shadow didn’t reply.

Of course he didn’t.

Lieutenant Kaen, age twenty-one. Spartan-born. Steel-boned. And — unfortunately — her assigned guardian, as decreed by her ever-so-paranoid father.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Kaen looked like he'd been carved from stone and war stories.

Tall — far too tall. Broad-shouldered. His dark armour always polished but worn at the edges, like it had seen more battles than he had years. His hair was short and swept back in that annoyingly perfect way, and his eyes... his eyes were sharp, like twin blades always watching, always judging.

Most days, he looked like a statue — still, cold, unshakable. She'd watched him stand for hours without moving, like his bones were made of iron and his will made of fire.

But there were moments — quiet ones — when his mouth almost smiled. When the corners of his lips would twitch after one of her jokes. Or when she caught him sneaking a scrap of food to Ashfang when he thought no one was watching.

He always wore the Phoenix insignia on his chest, proud and silent. The youngest Spartan ever assigned as a personal guardian — her father's hand-picked shadow.

And her shadow he was. Always behind her. Always beside her. Always in the way.

She hated it.

She *hated* how safe he made her feel.

He was everything Sereya didn't want in a babysitter: silent, dutiful, emotionally unshakeable, and — worst of all — impossible to lose.

She tried once. She took a hoverboard and jumped off the balcony of the east wing library.

He was already waiting at the bottom.

"You're not fun," she had told him.

He didn't even blink. "I'm not here to entertain you."

Now, she stood in the sparring circle of the Academy's Aetherion field, braids flying behind her, fists clenched, breathing hard.

Two other students circled her — older, stronger.

She didn't care.

She moved like a flame — swift, unpredictable, sharp at the edges. She didn't just dodge; she danced. She didn't just strike; she wove power into every blow.

Still, one blow landed — hard — and she hit the mat with a grunt.

The instructors stepped in.

Kaen was already moving toward her.

"I said don't touch me!" she barked, brushing dust from her uniform and standing back up.

He stopped three feet away. "You're bleeding."

"It's called training. You should try it sometime."

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

His jaw flexed. A pause.

“I’ve killed more enemies than you’ve had birthdays.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, wow. So impressive. Want a medal or a personality?”

Some of the nearby cadets stifled laughs.

Kaen didn’t react. He never did.

But Sereya saw the smallest twitch of a smile.

Maybe.

Afternoon – Library Annex

She sat cross-legged in the archives, data-scrolls floating around her like a solar system of thought. Ancient Spartan history, Concord trade treaties, Selenar training manuals.

Kaen stood by the door — as always — arms folded, eyes scanning for threats that didn’t exist.

“You know,” she called, “if you ever blinked, I bet the galaxy wouldn’t explode.”

Silence.

“Are you allowed to speak? Or do Spartans come pre-programmed?”

Still nothing.

“Do you even have hobbies?”

A pause.

Then, quietly: “I carve.”

She blinked.

“Carve what?”

“Wood. Statues. Animals. Whatever comes to mind.”

She stared at him for a long moment. “Okay. That’s... less boring than expected.”

No reply.

But something shifted.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

For the first time, she wasn't entirely sure if she hated him.

Selenar Academy – Upper Archives Hall, Midweek Rotation

Sereya excelled in nearly every subject.

Tactical theory, diplomacy, star-map calculus, Aetherion focus control — she absorbed it all like light drawn to crystal.

The instructors often whispered that she was a fusion of her parents' best traits. From her mother, she had inherited a razor-sharp political mind and command of diplomacy far beyond her years. From her father... power. Quiet strength. Relentless will.

It was a reputation she bore with mixed feelings.

"You're not just Sereya," one tutor had told her. "You're Mar's daughter. You're Vireya's heir."

She had smiled politely at the time.

But deep down, she didn't want to be known for them. She wanted to be known despite them.

Lunch Courtyard – Academy Commons

The courtyard was buzzing with noise — students flitting between classes, friends gathered around tables, datapads open with notes, projects, and the occasional secret holo of someone's crush.

Sereya sat under the central shade tree, surrounded by a few close friends.

Nira — a sharp-tongued girl from the Vossan Reach.

Daryn — a boy with silver eyes and too much charm for his own good.

And Talis — quiet, curious, obsessed with Aetherion history and always carrying three books.

"So," Daryn said casually, leaning forward with a grin, "my room assignment just got shifted. Turns out I'm on the same corridor as you now."

Sereya didn't even look up from her tablet.

"How tragic for you."

"You wound me." Daryn said

"Not yet. But keep talking."

The group laughed. Even Kaen, standing a few meters behind, looked vaguely amused.

Later – Outer Practice Fields

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She was heading back to the dormitories when she heard it.

Raised voices. A scuffle.

Around the corner, two younger cadets — maybe ten — were squared off. One had a split lip. The other clenched a fist, ready to swing again.

Sereya didn't hesitate.

She stepped between them, palm raised, eyes glowing faintly.

“Stop.”

Both boys froze.

One of them — the aggressor — sneered. “What, you gonna tell the instructors?”

“No,” she said calmly. “I’m going to show you what happens when you act like a coward.”

She stepped forward, just once.

The Aetherion pulsed around her — not violently, but enough to make the boy’s bravado shrivel. He muttered something and ran.

The other boy sniffed, looking up at her.

“Thanks...”

She smiled softly. “Next time, hit lower. The ribs are soft.”

Later that night, back in her room, she stared out the window — the stars glittering over the Academy spires.

Kaen stood just outside the threshold, as always.

She hadn't said anything to him all evening.

But just before closing the curtain, she paused.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

He blinked. “For what?”

“For letting me handle it.”

And for once, Kaen smiled.

Selenar Academy – Arrival Platform, Dusk

The bell rang late that evening — not a lesson chime, but a signal few students ever heard.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft



New arrival.

It was rare for transfers to come mid-rotation. Rarer still for them to be greeted by the Academy's senior instructor personally.

Sereya leaned on the upper balcony of the Commons, watching as a slim shuttle touched down on the platform below. The hull bore no insignia. Its finish was matte black — Dominion-grade stealth plating.

Her brow furrowed.

From the shuttle stepped a boy — maybe thirteen. Tall for his age. Hair dark. Expression unreadable. His uniform was standard issue, but his posture wasn't. He moved like someone trained since childhood to not be noticed... and only succeeded because he let you think he was ordinary.

Beside her, Kaen shifted — subtly, but alert.

"You see it too?" she asked.

"He's masking," Kaen said under his breath. "Well."

Curiosity won over suspicion.

Later – Academy Commons

She found him alone, reading in the corner alcove of the lounge — a digital journal open on his lap, brows furrowed as he flipped through Aetherion primer equations most new students couldn't pronounce.

"You're new," she said, stopping in front of him.

He looked up. His eyes were violet.

Unusual.

"Yes," he said calmly. "I'm... still catching up."

"I'm Sereya."

He closed the journal and stood — not nervously, but formally, like someone taught to respect protocol but not trust it.

"I know."

"That's not creepy at all."

"You're famous."

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“And you’re weird.”

He smiled.

“You don’t know that yet.”

She raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite herself. “Name?”

He hesitated.

“Call me Riven.”

She narrowed her eyes. “That your real name?”

“It’s the one I’m using.”

Something in her Aetherion stirred — not warning, exactly... more like a note left by a stranger in a familiar handwriting.

“Well then, Riven,” she said finally, “you’re with us now.”

She extended a hand.

He shook it.

Behind her, Kaen watched silently... and made a note to have Riven’s background rechecked by every contact he had.

Selenar Academy – Day Three

Riven settled in fast — too fast, Sereya thought.

He already knew the Academy’s schedule. Knew the layout. Knew how to slip into classes without drawing too much attention — and how to just barely avoid getting noticed by the instructors. It was a talent she didn’t trust... but admired.

They crossed paths in the Aetherion Tuning Lab two days after his arrival.

He was floating three stones perfectly — control smooth, rotation clean. Most first-years could barely lift one.

“Show-off,” she said, stopping beside him.

“Says the girl who bent light around a training drone last week.”

“That drone was asking for it.”

He chuckled.

She found herself smiling back before she realized it.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

## Selenar – Midweek Strategy Drill

In the hologrid room, cadets were assigned teams for a simulated border defense.

Sereya was squad captain.

Riven was placed under her command.

“Let me guess,” he said, glancing at the terrain schematic. “You’re going to flank west, mask a decoy at the comm tower, and hit their fusion core on a delay trigger.”

Sereya blinked. “That’s exactly the plan.”

He shrugged. “It’s what I would do.”

She paused. Then: “Congratulations. You just got promoted to field strategist.”

He saluted her in mock seriousness.

“Yes, Commander.”

## Commons Gardens – Later That Night

They sat beneath the glowing trees of the Academy’s biosphere — a place where students came to relax, meditate, or study. Sereya sat on a bench, eyes scanning a datapad, while Riven leaned against a nearby stone pillar, idly tossing a glowing ball of condensed Aetherion between his hands.

“Why are you really here?” she asked suddenly.

Riven caught the sphere and held it still. “What do you mean?”

“You’re smart. Too smart. You learn fast. You know things no one tells new students. And you don’t talk about your home.”

He was quiet for a long time.

“Let’s just say... my home isn’t somewhere I’d go back to if I had a choice.”

She nodded, slowly.

“That makes two of us.”

For the first time, she saw something vulnerable flicker in his violet eyes — a sadness carefully tucked away.

## Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

And for the first time, she didn't think of him as just a mystery.

Observing – From Afar

Kaen watched all of it.

He saw the way Riven's eyes followed Sereya. The way he adjusted his behaviour to match her pace, her rhythm. The way he spoke carefully — too carefully.

And Kaen didn't like it.

Not one bit.

The stars had begun to rise above the Academy spires, casting long shadows across the courtyard.

Sereya stretched, leaning back against the soft slope of the garden hill where she and Riven had been talking. For once, she felt... peaceful.

That peace shattered the moment Kaen's wrist-comm buzzed — the soft chime coded in sharp pulses. His face changed instantly. His hand went to the sidearm clipped beneath his long coat.

"What is it?" Sereya asked, already picking up the shift in his posture.

He didn't answer.

"Kaen?"

He stepped forward, took her by the wrist — not roughly, but firmly.

"We're going. Now."

"Wait, what? I'm not done here—!"

"This isn't a debate, Sereya."

His voice had changed. Cold. Steel-lined. All familiarity stripped away.

Riven stood as well, watching silently.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

Kaen ignored him.

"Back to your quarters. Now."

Sereya struggled, digging in her heels as Kaen marched her through the corridors of the Academy.

"Kaen! Tell me what's happening! Is it my parents? Is it S-Sparta?"

He didn't flinch.

"I said no questions."

They reached her dormitory.

Kaen keyed in a security override on the panel — his private Spartan code. The door locked behind them, reinforced with an extra shield barrier.

"You're on full lockdown until I receive new orders," he said.

"You can't just—!"

"I can. I have orders. You are my assignment."

He turned and stood by the door, silent and unmoving.

Sereya stared at him — stunned, furious, afraid — and suddenly very aware that whatever had happened... it was bad.

She sat on the edge of her bed, fists clenched.

"You're not telling me because you think I'll break."

Kaen didn't respond.

But his silence told her everything.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

## Chapter 18 – Ghosts in the Fire

### Zenthari Dominion – High Citadel, Orbital Palace of Vel-Kareth

The sky above the capital glowed crimson — a permanent reflection of the vast volcanic plains far below. The light filtered through translucent walls of obsidian and alloy, casting Lucan Mar's face in sharp shadows.

He stood at the edge of the balcony, overlooking a world not his own. Behind him, banners of the Dominion hung in solemn silence. Above them, the insignia of the Vel-Kareth Dynasty shimmered with ancient menace.

But this balcony was not part of a prison.

It was part of a home.

A home he still didn't understand how he had chosen.

"You've been up here a long time."

The voice was soft, familiar — velvet with steel beneath.

Kaelira emerged from the doorway, her royal robes exchanged for a black silk tunic. She was radiant as always, beautiful in a way that could freeze a battlefield or melt a man. Her presence had once been a threat to him.

Now she was his wife.

And the galaxy didn't know.

"I needed air," Lucan said, not turning.

Kaelira stepped beside him, her hand brushing his arm. "You always need air when you start thinking about them."

He didn't deny it.

Sparta.

Mar.

Vireya.

Sereya.

His niece. His family. His life.

And he had thrown it away.

"Do you ever regret it?" he asked quietly.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Kaelira tilted her head. “What? Choosing me?”

“No. Choosing vengeance.”

She didn’t answer right away.

“Revenge is a purpose,” she said. “But it doesn’t fill the void. Only love can do that.”

He turned to her finally. “And yet I’m more lost now than ever.”

They walked inside the chamber — quiet, warm, strangely peaceful for a fortress belonging to the most feared regime in the quadrant.

On a table sat a datapad. Lucan’s fingers hovered over it. Names scrolled across the screen — political dossiers, intercepted messages, financial records.

Concord Senators.

“They were behind it,” he said. “Kaelira, I know it. My mother wasn’t killed by chance. The Dominion were paid. Pushed. It was a political execution.”

She nodded. “We’ll find them. We’ll expose them.”

“I don’t want war with Sparta,” he said.

Kaelira raised an eyebrow. “Even after what happened?”

Lucan looked her in the eye. “Sparta didn’t kill my mother. They did.”

He pointed to the names on the list.

“And when I find them... I’ll make them pay. But not with armies. With truth.”

Kaelira kissed his cheek gently. “You’re not who I thought you were, Lucan Mar.”

“Neither am I.”

And yet... he missed home. Every day.

Especially the girl who still called him Uncle Lu in his dreams.

Zenthari High Citadel – Days Later

Their life in the Dominion was one of sharp edges and ceremonial armor.

Kaelira had returned to her duties as High Princess of Vel-Kareth — commanding fleets, managing court politics, and walking the line between heir and weapon. And Lucan... Lucan had adapted.

He'd learned the Dominion tongue. Trained with their generals. Stood beside Kaelira in council, despite the sideways glances from nobles who still saw him as an outsider — a Spartan deserter.

"They'll never trust me," he'd told her once.

"They don't have to," she'd replied. "They only have to fear what you'll become."

Together, they had shaped a careful life. Tactical. Focused. Bound not by conquest, but by purpose.

Until the news arrived.

War Chamber – Dominion Intel Hub

Lucan stood frozen, his eyes locked on the report scrolling across the holotable.

ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT – SENATOR VIREYA  
LOCATION: CONCORDIA – INNER SANCTUM RESIDENCE  
DETAILS: SURVIVED. MAR INJURED. ATTACKERS UNIDENTIFIED.

The blood drained from his face.

"No..." he muttered.

He turned sharply, storming down the obsidian hall, shoving past guards and aides until he reached her.

Kaelira's Private Quarters

She looked up from her tactical display just as Lucan entered — eyes blazing.

"Did you know?"

"Know what?"

"Someone attacked her." His voice cracked. "Vireya. On Concordia. They nearly killed her. Mar was injured."

Kaelira blinked. Then frowned.

"You think I ordered that?"

"Did you?!"

She rose slowly.

"Lucan—"

"Answer me!"

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Silence fell between them, thick and cold.

Kaelira stepped forward, her eyes hard. “If I wanted Vireya dead... I wouldn’t send mercenaries. And if I wanted Mar dead—” she leaned in, voice sharp as a blade, “I’d do it myself.”

Lucan didn’t flinch. But his breath was shaking.

“So it wasn’t you?”

“No,” she said. “And if someone is trying to make it look like it was, they’re either suicidal... or smart enough to know it’ll pull you back to them.”

Lucan stepped away, running a hand through his hair.

“I need to find out who it was. Because if they try again—”

“You’ll what? Go running back?”

“If they hurt her... or Mar... or Sereya...”

Kaelira looked at him then — really looked. “You still love them.”

He didn’t deny it.

“Yes,” he said. “And that’s why I can’t let them get pulled into this war.”

Kaelira stepped forward, closing the distance between them.

The fire in her eyes didn’t dim — but it shifted. No longer sharpened by offense, but warmed by something far more personal. Her voice dropped to a velvet murmur.

“You still carry their names like wounds... but they are not your life anymore, Lucan.”

He said nothing.

She reached up, fingers brushing the edge of his jaw. “I am your life now. This is your home.”

He looked away, guilt threading behind his eyes.

“I didn’t ask for this war between the past and the future,” he said quietly.

She leaned closer, her breath brushing his lips. “No... but you chose me. And now you’ve chosen something else, too.”

She took his hand and slowly placed it against her stomach.

Lucan froze.

His eyes flicked to hers — stunned.

“You’re...?”

She nodded. “Two months.”

He stared at her for a long moment — then let out a breath that trembled like a storm passing.

“You should’ve told me.”

“I wanted to,” she whispered. “But I also wanted you to see what matters now. And that... is us.”

He pulled her into his arms, holding her tighter than he had in weeks. For a brief, fragile second, all his regrets and fears melted under the weight of something new — a future not tied to vengeance or guilt, but to life.



To legacy.

They kissed beneath the bloodlight of the Dominion sky, not as soldiers or rulers...  
...but as two people who had risked everything to rewrite fate.

As they lay tangled beneath the silk-black sheets of their private chambers, the lights of Vel-Kareth city pulsing beyond the tall windows, Kaelira nestled against Lucan's chest — quiet, warm, and for once, unguarded.

Her hand slid lazily along his chest, fingers drawing idle patterns across old battle scars.

"You've been carrying so much," she said softly.

"I still am."

She lifted herself slightly to meet his eyes.

"Then let me give you something to ease the weight. A gift. Soon."

He raised a brow. "What kind of gift?"

"One that will make you very happy. You'll know it when it arrives."

There was something playful in her tone, but Lucan knew better than to press. With Kaelira, gifts came wrapped in strategy — and shadow.

The Next Morning

Lucan woke first, sunlight casting a crimson-gold hue across the obsidian walls. Kaelira stirred beside him, stretching like a cat, eyes half-lidded with amusement.

"You're watching me sleep," she murmured.

"I still can't believe I wake up here."

"With me, or inside the heart of the Dominion?" she teased.

"Both."

She sat up, brushing her hair back. "I'm going to see my father today."

Lucan's smile faded. "Then I'm not coming."

"No," she said, slipping out of bed. "He wouldn't receive you anyway. You're still a threat to him — even now."

Lucan stared at the ceiling. "He thinks I'm here to undermine the Dominion."

Kaelira pulled on a dark crimson robe embroidered with black serpents — a symbol of her house. "He doesn't think. He knows you're dangerous. That's why I love you."

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

She turned to him at the doorway.

“I’m proposing a new strategy. Something bolder. Something that might finally change the board. If he approves, you’ll be the first to know.”

Lucan sat up slowly. “And if he doesn’t?”

Kaelira smiled — not cold, not cruel, but calculated.

“Then we move without him.”

## Chapter 19 – The Knife Beneath the Mask

Point of View: Vireya

The halls of Concordia felt colder now.

Not from the broken window or the fire-scorched stone where the attackers had landed — that had been cleaned, repaired, wiped away by the Senate’s tireless maintenance crews like a smudge on a silver plate.

No. The cold came from within.

Vireya’s robes swept silently through the corridor as she moved toward the high council chamber. The guards at her sides were doubled now — six Phoenix Legionnaires, their faces grim behind darkened visors.

“You were supposed to be the target,” Taron had told her the morning after. “Not Mar.”

But Vireya had seen the grenade. The way the soldiers moved. They hadn’t aimed for her. They’d aimed for him. Straight through the window. Straight into his chest.

“Unless...” she murmured.

Unless they had always known what he would do. That he’d jump in front of her. That he’d take the hit.

“Then maybe the real target,” she whispered, “was both of us.”

Mar was alive.

Bruised. Burned. Still healing.

But alive.

And angrier than she’d seen him in years.

He wanted blood. Names. A mission.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

She wanted something else.

“I want the truth,” she’d told the Intelligence Oversight Committee two days ago. “I want to know who thought they could kill a sitting senator and a Spartan commander in the capital of the Concord and walk away.”

But so far? Nothing.

No names. No claims. Just shadows.

And behind those shadows... silence.

Today she wasn’t attending a debate. She was delivering a warning.

“If they think I’m weak,” she muttered to herself as the lift rose toward the Upper Senate Tower, “they’ve forgotten who I am.”

The doors opened.

She stepped out — chin high, stride unshaken.

But even as she entered the chamber, one thought whispered in the back of her mind like frost on glass:

Where is Sereya?

She hadn’t heard from her in three days.

The debate had barely begun when the chamber exploded — not with weapons, but with shouting.

Senators were on their feet. Voices clashed. Names were thrown like knives.

Vireya blinked as a dozen datapads lit up at once around her, aides scrambling to interpret the flood of messages and alerts pouring into the chamber.

“What is happening?” she asked sharply.

Her senior aide, Taron, leaned close with eyes wide and pale.

“It’s Mar.”

Her stomach dropped.

“What about him?”

“He’s stormed the Inter-House Judiciary offices. Arrested three senators. Personally.”

Vireya stared at him. “What?”

“Accused them of treason. Said they were involved in the assassination attempt. Ordered Phoenix Legion squads to seize anyone who has spoken out against you in the past five years.”

The room roared around them.

Some were shouting for Mar’s resignation. Others were praising him. A few were trying to flee the building entirely.

Vireya stood motionless, heart hammering.

Suddenly, Senator Elyan Rho, one of her long-time allies, burst through the aisle between the seats and reached her.

“Vireya—Senator—please,” he gasped, “you must stop him. He’s unraveling the Concord.”

“I didn’t order this,” she said through clenched teeth.

“But he’s doing it for you. That’s what they’re saying. He’s cleansing the halls in your name.”

“Where is he now?”

“He’s headed to the central comm vault. Says he’s going to ‘flush out the rot with flame.’ You need to talk to him. Now.”

She was already moving, robes sweeping behind her like a stormfront, heart pounding harder with each step.

Mar, what have you done?

The man she loved — the man who once protected the weak and stood silent in the ruins of Aegiron — was now tearing apart the Concord, one senator at a time.

And The halls of Concordia echoed with panic.

Senators fled their seats, guards scrambled to reestablish control, and couriers barked conflicting orders across every floor. Lights flickered across security boards. The command structure of the Galactic Concord — centuries-old, once immovable — was fracturing in real time.

Vireya stormed through the central corridor, her allies forming behind her like a rising tide. Senator Rho.

Councilor Alin Deyra.

Even old Chancellor Vol Emerr, long since retired, had come out of seclusion to stand with her.

They walked like a wall — not to wage war, but to stop it.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“Where is he?” she barked.

Taron, a step ahead, pointed toward the Vault of Records — where central communications, judiciary transcripts, and sealed indictments were stored. The heart of the Concord’s integrity. The blast door had already been blown open.

And there, amid the debris, flanked by two Phoenix Legion guards, stood Mar.

His armour was scarred. His crutch was steel-forged. One arm bore the marks of healing — still rigid from the blast he’d taken for her.

And in his eyes...

There was fire.

“Mar!” she shouted across the threshold.

He looked up, face gaunt with fury and pain.

“They tried to kill you,” he growled. “They tried to kill you, Vireya. I won’t stop until they pay.”

“This isn’t justice,” she said. “This is vengeance. And it’s tearing the Concord apart.”

“Then let it tear,” he snapped.

“You swore to protect it.”

“I swore to protect you.”

That stopped her.

She stepped forward, slowly now, allies halting behind her.

“And I’m asking you,” she said softly, “not to become the man our enemies already say you are.”

His fingers tightened on the crutch. Around him, his guards shifted uncertainly.

“They buried evidence. Lied to the people. Funded assassins. Do you want me to wait until they succeed?”

“I want you to lead,” she said. “Not burn.”

A long silence stretched between them.

Behind her, she could hear the Supreme Concord Leader’s voice echoing from the broadcast towers, begging for calm, calling for order.

But it was Vireya’s voice Mar heard.

He looked at her, jaw clenched, crutch trembling under his grip.

Finally... he nodded.

Once.

“Only because you asked.”

The guards lowered their weapons.

The senators watching didn’t know whether to cheer or run.

But Vireya let out a quiet breath — one she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding.

The fire wasn’t out.

But it hadn’t consumed them.

Not yet.

she had no idea how to stop him.

The polished stone of the upper levels was gone here — replaced by black alloy walls and low, flickering light panels that had long since faded from public memory.

Only five people stood around the circular table.

And Vireya was one of them.

Her hood was drawn low. Her voice calm. The chamber silent but for the soft hum of energy shields isolating the room from all surveillance.

Senator Rho leaned forward, voice barely above a whisper.

“He almost destroyed the chamber, Vireya.”

“He didn’t,” she said evenly. “He did exactly what was needed.”

A murmur passed between the others.

“You knew he would do this,” said Councilor Deyra. “You knew he wouldn’t hold back.”

Vireya met her gaze with steel in her eyes.

“Of course I did. That’s why I married a Spartan. You don’t aim a storm and expect it to whisper.”

Rho exhaled. “And the senators who fled?”

“Exactly the ones we hoped would.” She slid a glowing holodisc onto the table.

“Twelve left the chamber within minutes. Of those, nine have been on sealed corruption dockets for years — protected by protocol and power.”

“And the other three?” Deyra asked.

Vireya’s voice turned cold. “They’ve been in contact with Dominion intelligence fronts for over a decade. One of them personally funded the firm that staged the attempt on my life.”

There was silence.

Then slow, growing awe.

“You turned Mar into the torch that revealed the shadows.”

“No,” Vireya corrected softly. “They did. I simply gave them a reason to fear him.”

The others shared glances — wary, impressed, afraid.

“What now?” Rho asked.

Vireya looked up, eyes hard.

“Now... we show the galaxy what truth looks like.”

#### Concordia – Chancellor’s Private Audience Chamber

The Chancellor of the Galactic Concord was a man of age and caution — someone who had survived a thousand fires by learning when to bend with the wind. But as Vireya stood before him in the gold-lit hush of his private hall, even he seemed uneasy.

He paced slowly behind his desk, hands clasped behind his back.

“This will not happen again,” Vireya said, arms crossed. “Mar will not storm your chambers a second time.”

“No,” the Chancellor replied, voice tight, “because if it does, the Concord will demand he be exiled. Publicly.”

She didn’t blink.

“You won’t exile him.”

“Try me.”

“You’re afraid of what comes after,” she said calmly. “You exile Mar, and the Spartans pull their legions from your borders. You exile Mar, and half your military strength collapses overnight. And if you think the Dominion won’t notice...”

She let the silence finish her sentence.

The Chancellor stopped pacing. Slowly, he turned to face her.

“You always were good at pushing without pressing. I wonder who taught you that.”

“Maybe it came naturally,” she said with a small smile. “Or maybe it came from spending five years watching leaders choose inaction while the galaxy burned.”

At that, his aides exchanged tense glances.

One of them leaned in, whispering just a little too loudly: “None of this will help her run for office. The people may admire strength, but they fear instability.”

Vireya smiled coolly.

“Then let them fear me. The right amount of fear is how you keep peace... Chancellor.”

The old man narrowed his eyes. “Your time is coming, Vireya. But it hasn’t come yet.”

“No,” she agreed. “But your term ends soon.”

A beat.

A flicker of tension.

Then she turned on her heel and walked toward the doors, robes flowing like shadow and flame.

“Control your Spartan,” he called after her.

She didn’t turn back.

“I’d rather channel him.”

The doors hissed shut behind her.

## Chapter 20 – A Cage of Light

Point of View: Sereya

There were days when the Academy felt like a palace.

This wasn’t one of them.

Sereya moved from her dorm to the hall to the training floor and back again — like clockwork, like a shadow, like a prisoner wearing a crown.

Since the attempt on her mother’s life, her routine had tightened into something suffocating. No unsupervised outings. No social hours. No detours through the gardens. No visits to the kennels — where her companion, a massive obsidian-furred hound named Branok, waited behind reinforced gates.

Kaen didn’t trust the creature. Said it was too wild. Said it watched people like prey.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“And yet,” she’d muttered under her breath one morning, “you’re the one following me around like a stalker.”

Kaen never laughed. He barely spoke anymore.

He was a shadow attached to her every movement — one that reported directly to her father.

She sat in the back row of her Advanced Aetherion Control lecture, eyes glazed, fingers tracing patterns along the inside of her sleeve.

The instructor’s voice echoed through the room, something about harmonic balance and gravitational bending.

She didn’t care.

She could’ve done this lesson two years ago.

What she couldn’t do was sit with Nira anymore during break.

Or swap war simulations with Talis.

Or even tolerate Daryn’s hopeless flirting.

It was all gone. Because now she was more than just a gifted cadet.

She was a target.

And everyone knew it.

After lessons, Kaen walked behind her — silent, watchful, armed.

“You don’t have to pretend I’ll run,” she snapped once.

“I’m not pretending,” he said. “I’m preparing.”

“For what?”

He didn’t answer.

She stared through the fence of the kennels later that night. Branok’s golden eyes watched her from the shadows. He didn’t bark. Didn’t move. Just waited.

“He still remembers me,” she said softly.

“He remembers commands,” Kaen muttered behind her.

“You’ll never understand him.”



“He’s not here to be understood. He’s a contingency.”

“So am I,” she whispered.

Kaen didn’t reply.

But she saw the smallest flicker of something cross his face.

Regret, maybe.

Or pity.

The walls of the Academy never changed.

Every corridor, every training hall, every lecture chamber was polished, pristine, and sterile. And Sereya was starting to realize that no matter how tall the spires reached into the sky... they were still walls.

Sometimes she woke from dreams of flying.

Not starships. Not slipstream travel.

Flying.

Wind in her face. Branok racing at her side. Her father’s laugh echoing behind them. Her mother’s voice humming a song she didn’t remember learning.

And then she’d wake up in her dorm, with Kaen outside her door and a dozen unread messages flashing on her console — messages from friends she couldn’t reply to, invitations she couldn’t accept.

That afternoon, she stood before a mirrored panel in the meditation hall — not meditating, just watching herself.

Her features had grown sharper. She looked older than twelve.

Her violet eyes, once soft like her mother’s, now reflected a steelier edge.

And the Aetherion within her... it was changing too.

She could feel it shifting in her bones. Not like a tool or a flame to be wielded — but like something alive.

Something ancient.

She’d stopped telling the instructors about the dreams.

About the whispers.

About the sword.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

She pressed her forehead to the cool glass.

“I’m not just my mother’s daughter,” she whispered. “I’m not just his either.”

She didn’t know who she was yet.

But she knew she was becoming something else.

And part of her was afraid.

Not of being taken...

But of what she might do if someone tried.

Behind her, Kaen’s voice was low. For once, not commanding.

“You’ll get through this.”

She turned to face him, surprised.

“You think so?”

Kaen nodded. “You’re stronger than you know. And more important than you understand.”

She held his gaze. “And what if I break anyway?”

A pause.

Then, quietly:

“Then I’ll be the one standing between you and the pieces.”

The dormroom door hissed shut behind her.

Sereya stood before the mirror, hands resting on the delicate folds of shimmering fabric — midnight-silver, starlit and daring, with shoulders bare and the hem cut scandalously high for a senator’s daughter.

And a Spartan’s.

“They’d have a heart attack,” she muttered, picturing the twin looks of horror that would bloom on both her parents’ faces.

Her mother would raise a brow and call it “politically irresponsible.”

Her father would draw his sword.

“Which is why,” she added, grinning at her reflection, “they don’t get to know.”

She'd ordered it weeks ago through one of Nira's back channels, delivered via a disguised box marked Aetherion Theory Texts – Volume 4.

It fit perfectly.

And it made her feel like herself.

Not Sereya the Legacy. Not Sereya the Target. Just a girl. Twelve years old. Smarter than her age. Tired of being afraid.

Kaen was waiting when she stepped into the corridor.

He froze mid-scroll of his wrist comm, staring.

"You're not serious."

"Do I look serious?"

"That dress violates half the security protocols in your father's field manual."

"Good," she said, spinning once. "Because I'm going to the mid-rotation gala. And if I'm going to be locked in a tower the rest of my life, I'm at least dancing tonight."

Kaen pinched the bridge of his nose.

"You're twelve."

"And technically a Princess of Sparta. Which means you answer to me."

"No. I answer to your father, and if he sees me standing next to you in that—"

"He won't," she said, stepping in, eyes pleading now. "Please, Kaen. Just one night. One dance. I promise I'll behave. You can stand beside me the whole time and glower at everyone. You're very good at that."

Silence.

Then a groan.

"Fine," he muttered. "But if anyone so much as breathes too close, I'm dragging you out."

She grinned. "I knew you were soft inside."

"You'll regret saying that."

Selenar Academy – Central Atrium, Later That Night

The lights hung like frozen stars.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Music pulsed through the glass-and-gold dome. Dozens of cadets twirled in elegant uniforms and swirling dresses. Laughter, movement, flirtation. For one night, war and worry didn't exist.

Kaen stood off to the side — dressed in a formal Spartan deep-cut military coat, dark navy, silver trim, shoulders squared like a statue.

He looked like a royal bodyguard.

Because he was.

And Sereya?

She was radiant.

Even the instructors blinked as she passed.

Her friends swarmed her — gasping, cheering, dragging her into the light.

“You look amazing!” Nira gushed.

“Finally not hiding behind that boring uniform,” said Talis.

And then...

Riven appeared.

He was dressed in black, collar crisp, his smile lazy and warm.

“Didn't think you'd show.”

Sereya tilted her chin. “Didn't think you could clean up.”

He offered a hand.

“May I have this dance, Your Highness?”

Kaen made a noise that sounded very much like a suppressed growl.

Sereya smiled anyway — and stepped into the light.

The music shifted to something slower. Softer.

Sereya swayed with Riven, his hands resting gently at her waist, their steps smooth against the polished floor.

He was charming — in that irritating, almost rehearsed way. But his eyes stayed on hers longer than necessary, his grin crooked and clever.

“You dance well for someone raised by warriors,” he teased.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“You assume I didn’t teach them.”

“Remind me to request private lessons.”

She laughed despite herself. For a moment, it was easy to forget the guards, the duty, the weight she carried in every breath.

But then a hand tapped her shoulder.

Kaen.

Dressed like a royal blade come to life.

“My turn,” he said flatly, looking at Riven.

“Permission granted,” Sereya said with a smirk, taking Kaen’s hand.

To her surprise... he moved well.

No stiffness. No hesitation. His steps were sharp but fluid — trained, deliberate, and unexpectedly graceful.

“You never told me you could dance,” she said, half smiling.

“I’m trained to move.”

“You’re trained to kill, Kaen.”

“Same footwork.”

She laughed again — this time genuinely.

For a few minutes, everything felt right. Like the world might not fall apart.

But peace never lasted long.

Later – Academy Gardens

The party was in full swing when Riven found her again, slipping through the crowd like shadow.

“Come with me,” he whispered. “Just for a moment.”

“Kaen will—”

“Kaen’s not watching. Just one breath of air. Away from all this.”

She hesitated.

Then followed.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

The garden was quiet — moonlight spilling over the stone paths and silver-blossomed trees.  
The music was distant now, a memory on the breeze.

They ducked beneath an arched trellis wrapped in starlight ivy.

Riven leaned closer.

“You were incredible tonight.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“Not yet,” he murmured.

Then he kissed her.

It was sudden — warm, unsure, but not unpleasant.

She let it linger for a second.

But then—

His hand slid where it shouldn’t have.

Too fast.

Too far.

“Riven,” she said, pulling back.

He moved again, trying to catch her lips.

“Riven—stop.”

She stepped away sharply — alarm blooming in her chest.

“I said stop.”

Before he could respond—

Kaen was there.

Like thunder.

His fist slammed into Riven’s jaw, sending the boy crashing into the ivy wall.

“You’re done,” Kaen snarled.

He turned, grabbed Sereya gently but firmly by the arm, and began walking her back.

She didn’t protest.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Didn't cry.

Just walked in silence, head low, cheeks burning with something colder than shame.

Kaen didn't speak again until they reached her door.

"This was a bad idea," he said softly. "And I should've known better."

He keyed in the override.

"Get some rest, Sereya."

She nodded, eyes wide, voice small.

"Thank you."

He waited until the door closed before exhaling the breath he'd been holding.

She didn't sleep that night.

The silk dress lay crumpled in the corner, forgotten. Her datapad blinked with unread messages — worried friends, unanswered alerts, a brief and unreadable note from Riven.

But Sereya sat in the window alcove, knees hugged to her chest, Branok's collar resting in her lap. The dog wasn't there, but she still found comfort in the weight of it.

Her mind played the scene over and over.

The kiss.

The hand.

Her voice — too late, too soft.

Kaen's fist.

She should've said something sooner.

She shouldn't have gone.

But more than anything... she hated that Riven had lied about who he was.

And about who she was.

The Next Morning – Academy Disciplinary Council Hall

The room was lined with polished stone, the Concord flag behind the head table. Seven instructors sat in a curved panel — formal, sharp-eyed, and already agitated.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Kaen stood rigid to the side, his coat straight, face unreadable. His bruised knuckles were the only sign of what had happened.

Sereya stood before them, hands folded, spine stiff.

And Riven?

He sat to the left — a picture of control, his lip slightly swollen, eyes downcast. Innocent.

“Cadet Sereya,” the lead instructor said, “we are here to clarify the events of last night. Reports claim that Lieutenant Kaen assaulted Cadet Riven without provocation. Is that correct?”

“No,” she said immediately.

“We were informed you had disappeared from the ballroom without your escort.”

“I made that choice. Kaen didn’t fail his duty. I slipped away.”

One of the other instructors raised a brow.

“And did Kaen use excessive force?”

“He stopped something before it got worse,” Sereya said.

Gasps whispered from the board.

Riven raised his head.

“That’s not what happened,” he said smoothly. “We were just talking. Dancing. She kissed me. Then Kaen attacked. Brutally. I feared for my life.”

Kaen’s jaw tightened.

“He’s lying,” Sereya snapped.

“Young lady—”

“He cornered me. He wouldn’t stop. Kaen saved me. That’s the truth.”

A long, loaded silence followed.

One instructor turned to another and muttered something. Notes were scribbled. Protocols quoted.

Finally, the head instructor leaned forward.

“This matter will be reviewed by the security tribunal. In the meantime, Kaen is suspended from active escort duty. Effective immediately.”



“What?” Sereya said, eyes wide. “No—he—”

“Enough,” the lead instructor said. “This is not open to debate.”

The head instructor narrowed his eyes.

“In light of this incident, Lieutenant Kaen is hereby suspended from active escort—”

“No, I’m not,” Kaen said flatly.

The board blinked.

“Excuse me?”

Kaen took a step forward, posture like steel, voice cutting through the air like a vibroblade.

“I was appointed by Commander Mar of the Spartan High Command — Supreme Commander of the Phoenix Legion and son of King Vaeran. I do not answer to a civilian review board.”

One of the instructors scoffed.

“This is Concord territory. You don’t outrank this council.”

Kaen stared at them coldly.

“I don’t need to. Because the man who sent me does.”

He reached into his coat and pulled out a slim dataplate, flicking it onto the table. It projected a glowing seal: the personal authority crest of Mar of the House of Mar.

“This order overrides any academy discipline protocol. My duty is to protect the Princess of Sparta. That duty continues unless rescinded by her father himself.”

Sereya felt her chest swell — not with pride, but with relief.

For the first time since the attack... she felt safe again.

The instructors glanced at one another. One looked like he wanted to object, but the seal glowed like a silent warning.

“Very well,” the lead instructor muttered, defeated. “But understand this, Lieutenant: if your actions breach Concord policy again, it won’t be a debate. It will be a recall.”

“Then recall me,” Kaen said. “But until then — I protect her.”

He turned to Sereya.

“Come on, Princess.”

Sereya nodded once and followed, eyes never leaving Riven.

He watched her go, smirking faintly.

And in that smile, she saw something she hadn’t seen the night before.

Malice.

The kennels were quiet, save for the low hum of security fields and the soft rustling of straw inside the reinforced pen.

Branok sat near the back — still, silent, golden eyes watching the door.

The moment Sereya stepped through, he rose.

She ran to the bars, crouched low, and whispered, “Hey, boy.”

The creature padded forward — massive, sleek, more shadow than beast — and pressed its snout to her hand through the barrier.

Kaen stood just behind her, arms crossed, one eyebrow raised.

“He hasn’t forgotten you.”

“I didn’t think he would.”

A pause stretched between them. Sereya glanced back.

“Why didn’t you hit him harder?”

Kaen gave a rare half-smile.

“Didn’t want to kill him.”

“I wish you had.”

“I know.”

She sat down, cross-legged beside the pen.

“Why are people like that? Pretend to care. Pretend to be... good.”

Kaen didn’t answer immediately.

Then:

“Because it’s easier than being honest.”

Sereya ran a hand over Branok’s fur through the gap in the bars.

“They wanted to take you away.”

“They can try.”

He stepped forward, touched a control panel, and deactivated the containment field. The pen door slid open with a soft click.

Branok stepped out slowly — not wild, not aggressive. Just steady, like a living shadow drawn to her side.

“You’re letting him out?” she asked, startled.

Kaen nodded.

“Your father said to release him in an emergency.”

“And this is an emergency?”

Kaen looked her dead in the eye.

“It is now.”

Branok sat beside her, resting his heavy head on her lap like a guardian.

Kaen turned to face the entrance, arms folded again.

“From this moment on,” he said with a smirk, “I don’t leave your side. Neither does he.”

He tilted his head slightly, just enough for her to catch the gleam in his eye.

“Let’s see who’s stupid enough to try and take me away next.”

## Chapter 21 – Glass and Fire

### Point of View: Vireya

The Senate rotunda echoed with the hollow grace of politics — applause, declarations, the soft rustle of silks and datapads.

Vireya stood like marble beneath the high skylight, poised and composed, her smile practiced to the millimeter.

To the cameras, she was perfect: regal, unshaken, and utterly in control.

But inside?

She was boiling.

She nodded to a fellow senator, offered a pleasant word to an aide, and then turned briskly down a private corridor — heels sharp against the marble, guards falling into quiet formation behind her.

Her private chambers hissed open.

Mar was already inside, standing near the window, arms crossed, gaze on the city skyline.

He didn’t turn when she entered.

She didn't wait for him to.

"What in the nine hells were you thinking?"

Mar blinked, slowly. "You'll have to be more specific."

The door sealed shut behind her with a snap.

"Dragging senators out in chains? Interrogating Concord officials without oversight? You've turned my entire legislative platform into a bonfire!"

"I stopped an assassination attempt—"

"And then ignited a diplomatic crisis!"

Mar finally turned, jaw clenched. "You're alive."

"Because you jumped out a window like a lunatic. And now every leader in the Concord thinks I've got a Spartan warhound on a leash, ready to bite at my word!"

"Isn't that the point?"

"No!"

She paced past him, arms flailing.

"I spent five years rebuilding political goodwill! Five years building trust. Do you know how hard it is to get senators to even look past their own borders? And now they're terrified of you. Terrified of us."

Mar's eyes darkened.

"Good."

Vireya stopped cold.

"You really don't get it, do you? You're not on Aegiron anymore, Mar. This isn't a battlefield. And I am not your commanding officer."

He stepped toward her.

"No. You're my wife. And they tried to kill you."

"So what?" she snapped. "I'm supposed to burn the galaxy down in return?"

Silence.

Breathing hard, she turned from him, bracing herself against the desk.

"I must keep this together. For our daughter. For Sparta. For the Concord. And you..."

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She shook her head.

“You’re supposed to be helping me. Not tearing apart everything I’ve built because you’re still trying to fight ghosts.”

Mar’s voice, low and wounded: “So now I’m the problem.”

She spun on him again.

“You’re not the problem, Mar. You’re the storm I begged the stars to protect me from.”

That hit harder than she intended.

Even she felt it.

Vireya didn’t let up.

She moved toward him again, voice sharper now—not the fire of politics, but the crack of a mother’s fear.

“And what about Sereya, Mar? What’s going on with her? I haven’t heard a word from the Academy in days.”

Mar’s jaw tightened. “She’s protected.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Kaen has everything under control.”

Vireya narrowed her eyes. “Kaen?”

“Yes.”

“Kaen—your chosen guardian? The boy barely out of his own training armour?”

Mar folded his arms again, steady now, unmoved.

“He’s not a boy. He’s one of the most capable Spartans of his generation.”

“He’s a child.”

“He’s more than that.”

“He’s still young, Mar. Too young to be entrusted with our daughter’s life.”

“He’s the only one I trust to do the job.”

The room buzzed with silence for a moment.

Vireya stared at him, searching his face. “Why?”

Mar exhaled slowly, as if finally willing to pull back a curtain he rarely touched.

“Because Kaen lied to the Academy to enlist. Said he was sixteen when he was twelve. Faked his biometrics. Got accepted. Joined Phoenix Squadron.”

She blinked, stunned.

“Twelve?”

“He wanted to fight beside his older brother. He didn’t survive training—he excelled in it.”

“And you knew this?”

“I found out during Harvest. I kept his secret.”

“Why?”

Mar looked at her with rare softness.

“Because he reminds me of me. And because he’s never failed me. He’ll never fail her.”

Vireya stepped back, arms crossed, expression tight.

“She’s a child, Mar. She doesn’t need a soldier. She needs her father.”

“And she has him.”

“No. She has a man who’s still living in the ruins of Aegiron and Harvest—who doesn’t know how to raise a daughter without turning her life into a war zone.”

That one cut deep.  
But Mar didn't flinch.  
"I gave her the one thing I couldn't give myself: someone who will always be by her side."  
Vireya held his gaze a beat longer, then turned away, voice low.  
"Then gods help her if that's what she needed."  
Before Mar could argue further, a soft chime echoed through the chamber.  
The door hissed open, and Doctor Liraen Vos stepped in, flanked by two security officers who immediately stepped aside to let her through.  
She carried no bag. Just a sealed tablet.  
Mar turned with a scowl. "Why are you here?"  
Vireya didn't answer. She straightened, smoothing her robe — the anger in her voice now replaced with the cool detachment of political instinct.  
"I asked her to come."  
"Why?"  
Doctor Vos glanced between them.  
"It's a personal matter, Commander Mar."  
He stepped forward. "If it's about Sereya—"   
"It's not about Sereya," Vireya snapped.  
Silence fell again.  
Doctor Vos approached her discreetly, tablet angled so Mar couldn't see. Vireya read the results — once, then twice.  
Her throat tightened.  
She closed the tablet with a soft click and handed it back.  
Then she turned back to Mar, eyes unreadable.  
"You need to leave Concord."  
He blinked. "What?"  
"Go find the mercenaries. Track down who paid them. Get to the source."  
"You said I cloud things—now you want me playing inquisitor?"  
"I want you out of the city," she said coldly. "Before you tear down everything I've worked for. And before you push me into breaking something I can't fix."  
"Vireya..."  
"You're a wrecking blade, Mar. You don't belong in halls like this. Go where you're meant to be. Hunt something."  
He studied her face. "What aren't you telling me?"  
"You'll find out when I'm ready."  
He waited, jaw tight — but she gave nothing away.  
Finally, he turned to the doctor.  
"Is she alright?"  
Vos offered the most diplomatic lie she could: "She's strong."  
Mar held Vireya's gaze one last time.  
"I'll go. But don't shut me out."  
"Don't give me a reason to."  
And with that, he left.  
As the doors sealed behind him, Vireya exhaled — slowly, shakily — and pressed a hand gently to her abdomen.  
"Ancients help me... not now."  
But something deep within her already knew

The doors closed.

And the silence that followed was heavy.

Vireya stood in the center of her chamber, still as glass. Her fingers gripped the edge of the council table, knuckles white, breath shallow.

She didn't cry.

Not right away.

She never cried in front of others.

But now, alone in the dimmed quiet of the chamber, her mask slipped.

Her shoulders shook.

A tear slid down one cheek — then another.

"This is all I need," she whispered to no one. "Another secret. Another storm."

She sank slowly into the chair behind her, staring blankly at the marble floor as memories swirled unbidden in her mind.

Sereya, three years old, running barefoot through the gardens of the Citadel, trailing a stream of starlilies behind her. Her laughter echoing like chimes in sunlight.

Lucan, crouched beside her, hands outstretched, pretending to be a monstrous beast. Sereya squealing in delight as he gave chase, scooping her up with a roar and spinning her through the air.

"You're too soft with her," Vireya had teased him once.

"That's because she deserves softness," he'd replied, "and Mar won't get the chance to give it to her."

The words hit her now like a spear to the heart.

She buried her face in her hands, trying to push the images away.

Lucan's smile. His steadiness. The way Sereya had always clung to him, never understanding the sorrow behind his eyes.

He had become what Mar never could.

And Vireya had let him.

"I failed you," she whispered to the ghosts. "Both of you."

She took a long, steadying breath and stood.

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Her hands trembled as she reached for the control panel and brought up her calendar.

A Senate session loomed on the horizon.

She would need to move carefully — now more than ever. Her enemies were watching. Mar's rampage had drawn blood. And if she didn't act swiftly... it would all fall apart.

But if he found the mercenaries...

If he traced the attack back to the right hands...

It could change everything.

It had to.

She straightened her spine.

And wiped the tears away.

Vireya stood by the window, hands clasped behind her back, when the door opened for the second time that hour.

Her aide stepped in, brow furrowed.

"Apologies again, Senator. I know you asked not to be disturbed..."

"And yet here you are."

"There's a delegate from the Outer Banking Consortium. Says he represents a private alliance of financiers from the Concord's Mid-Outer sectors. He asked for a private audience, citing urgent alignment on your infrastructure proposal."

Vireya raised an eyebrow.

"We've been trying to get them to return our calls for two months."

"Exactly, Senator. That's why I thought you might want to hear him out."

She hesitated, then gave a curt nod.

"Send him in. No security. Just him."

The aide bowed and exited.

Moments later, the doors parted again — and in stepped a man of tall, graceful bearing.

His hair was dark with a silver streak, tied back in a tight knot. His coat was navy trimmed in grey, immaculate and tailored, with the insignia of the Consortium pinned just above his heart. His expression was composed, confident, and unreadable.

“Senator Vireya,” he said smoothly, bowing his head. “An honour.”

“Mister...?”

“Varek. Senior intermediary for the Solandran Investment Group.”

“Unfamiliar.”

“We specialize in discretionary portfolios. Long-term positioning. We don’t make noise.”

He smiled. It was the kind of smile trained in boardrooms.

“But we do listen. And we’ve been listening to you.”

She gestured to the seat. “Then let’s talk.”

They sat opposite one another, a low table of polished glass between them.

Varek placed a small black device atop it — a standard privacy scrambler. The cone of silence shimmered faintly.

“We’ve taken great interest in your infrastructure proposals,” he began. “And in your larger ambitions to realign Concord spending away from military bloat and toward sustainable, civilian-led development.”

“Those ambitions are difficult to realize when half the budget vanishes into fleet upkeep,” Vireya replied. “And when fear-mongering voices drown out every plan for peace.”

“Fear is currency, Senator. But so is stability. And I suspect you’ve begun to see which pays better.”

She leaned forward slightly, measuring him. “You’re not the first banker to show interest in my work. What makes you different?”

“I’m not here to offer loans,” he said, smiling faintly. “I’m here to listen. And to understand who you’re really building for.”

“The Concord.”

“No,” he said, tapping the glass once. “You’re building for after the Concord.”

Her eyes flickered.

“Bold of you to say.”

“Careful. Not bold,” he said. “There’s a difference.”



He didn't push. Didn't offer figures or terms. Just watched her — absorbing every word, every pause, every subtle twitch of caution.

She began to speak of trade lanes, reconstruction bonds, outer world unrest.

He nodded along. Reassuring. Charming.

Never once letting the mask slip.

And beneath it all, she had no idea.

No sense.

No feeling through the Aetherion.

Just a polite stranger with quiet power, who promised nothing... and took everything.

## Chapter 22 – The Weight of Shadows

Point of View: Kaen

The Academy's walls had never felt this thin.

Kaen stood at the outer edge of the training field, arms crossed, eyes scanning the perimeter — not just for movement, but for intent. For anything off. Anything wrong.

The attack on Vireya had changed everything.

He hadn't said it aloud — not to Sereya, not to the instructors, not even to himself. But the air around the Academy had shifted. More patrols. More drones. More excuses to monitor.

But none of it felt like enough.

He didn't trust the security grid. Didn't trust the instructors. Didn't even trust the Council's promises.

He trusted Mar.

And Mar wasn't here.

Sereya's laughter caught his attention.

She was across the field with a few classmates, seated on the grass, pretending to enjoy the sunshine between afternoon simulations. She wore her usual scowl of pretend-annoyance — the one she used to hide when she was happy.

She'd been quieter lately.

But not broken.

Not like some kids get after a scare.

She was built like him — forged in high heat, stubborn down to the marrow. But Kaen knew the signs. Knew what long shadows could do to someone when they thought no one saw.

And he saw her.

Every day.

His hand drifted to the hilt of his sidearm. Just to feel it.

Just to remind himself he was ready.

Then he felt it.

A twinge.

Not in his body — but in the air.

A hum. Barely perceptible. Like something moving too smoothly behind the veil.

He turned — quickly — scanning the upper towers.

Nothing.

Yet.

That night, he reviewed the security reports again. Access logs. Visitor manifests. Communications sweeps.

All clean.

Too clean.

He leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowing.

“Someone’s testing the walls.”

Kaen didn’t sleep much.

He never had.

But ever since the attack on Senator Vireya — ever since he'd seen the princess's window explode and Commander Mar's blood on Concord marble — he had learned to operate on even less.

The night didn't belong to rest anymore.

It belonged to vigilance.

He stood again by the window of the upper watchtower that overlooked the Academy's central gardens — his unofficial perch. The place where he watched the rhythm of her life unfold.

Sereya Mar-Vireya.

Twelve years old.

Exceptionally clever.

Trained in four forms of Concord diplomacy, three disciplines of Aetherion shaping, and every classical Spartan military formation permitted to non-enlisted cadets.

She looked more like her mother — same cheekbones, same fire in the eyes — but she walked like Mar. Shoulders just a little too squared for her size. Chin high when she was annoyed. She carried herself like someone born into legacy, not burdened by it.

And yet...

There were moments when Kaen saw something different in her.

Not Vireya's diplomacy.

Not Mar's battle-scarred discipline.

But something older.

Something that made his spine itch.

He didn't tell anyone. Not even Mar.

Not yet.

He tapped open the holopad secured to his wrist and began cycling through profiles.

Nira Thessin — half-Talvani. Smart. Loyal. Scores well in science and logic tracks. No family ties to military. Background check: Cleared.

Talis Morn — troublemaker. Rich family. Minor Concord noble house. Loves attention, thinks too highly of his jokes. Monitored but non-hostile.

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Instructor Pellán — teaches planetary ethics. Former Concord peacekeeper. Discharged after a border incident. Close surveillance requested.

Instructor Zhael — language specialist. History of Dominion interaction during cultural diplomacy missions. All clear, but flagged for subtle interrogation patterns during exams.

Kaen had tested every one of them himself.

Watched their eyes when they spoke.

Tracked who they called. What they ordered at lunch. How they responded to Sereya's opinions, posture, success.

He had root access to every training log, every Academy feed, every sensor node that ran in the background of the prestigious halls.

And still — still — he didn't feel like it was enough.

Because something was coming.

And every instinct he had — every echo of Spartan training and battlefield gut — told him that this place wasn't secure.

That the wolf was already inside the gate.

The moonlight filtered through the Academy skylights, silvering the stone floors with silence. Kaen stood in his corner of the upper common room, arms folded, eyes half-lidded in thought. Beneath the tension and endless protocols, this was the only moment of peace he allowed himself — the liminal hours between curfews and wake-up calls.

Then he heard the softest sound.

Not an alarm.

Not a security trip.

Just paws.

Branok.

The massive war-beast padded silently into the room, fur gleaming like molten onyx, his yellow eyes meeting Kaen's with a knowing stare.

He moved aside.

Behind the creature came Sereya — barefoot, wrapped in a long academy training coat, eyes tired but determined.

"Couldn't sleep?" Kaen asked.

She shook her head.

"Didn't want to."

He studied her a moment. Then nodded toward the chair across from him.

She didn't take it.

"I want you to teach me."

Kaen's brow furrowed. "Teach you what?"

"All of it," she said. "Every technique. Every move. Every rule of defence you know."

She stepped forward, chin high.

"You said my father gave me what he didn't have — someone to always protect me. But I think he was wrong."

“You don’t trust me?”

“I do. With my life.” She hesitated, then added: “But I want to protect myself, too. I don’t want to be helpless if something happens again. I want to be ready.”

Kaen’s mouth was a hard line. But in his eyes, something shifted.

Pride. And sorrow. And something close to fear.

He glanced down at Branok, now lying across the stone like a living fortress, head curled near Sereya’s feet.

“It won’t be easy,” he said.

“Nothing is.”

“You’ll bleed.”

“So long as I don’t die.”

He let out a soft breath through his nose.

“Training starts at sunrise.”

She smiled, just faintly.

“I’ll be there.”

And for the first time in weeks, Kaen allowed himself a small nod of approval.

This girl — daughter of Sparta and starlight — wasn’t going to wait for destiny to shape her. She would meet it head-on.

The training yard was still shaded when they began — the morning sun barely kissing the eastern tower.

Kaen stood barefoot in the sand, arms folded, while Sereya stretched out beside him. Branok lay curled just outside the circle, one yellow eye half-open, always watching.

“You don’t win by being faster,” Kaen said, circling her. “You win by being smarter. Controlled. Focused.”

“What if I am faster?” she smirked.

“Then you don’t need me.”

“I still want to learn how to kick your ass.”

He gave her a sidelong glance. “Charming.”

Their hands met — light at first — then stronger as they fell into the rhythm of basic close-quarter drills.

Sereya learned fast.

She was rough in places — too eager, too aggressive — but she adjusted quickly. When Kaen blocked, she pivoted. When he pushed, she resisted with leverage.

She even managed to trip him once.

“That was a fluke,” he muttered, standing.

“That’s what old people always say.”

He narrowed his eyes, but there was a flicker of amusement behind them.

For the first time in weeks, they both breathed.

The air between them was light, alive — not with duty, but something that felt dangerously close to joy.

Then the moment cracked.

Footsteps on the path.

Kaen's body tensed immediately, hand dropping toward his hip.

Riven approached the edge of the yard, hands raised in mock surrender, dressed in his standard academy uniform, expression... sheepish.

"Relax," he said. "I'm unarmed."

"Unfortunately," Kaen muttered.

Sereya stepped back, her breath still quick from sparring.

"What do you want?"

Riven looked between them, awkward.

"I came to apologise. Really. What I did was... messed up. I wasn't trying to hurt you. I just—"

Kaen stepped forward sharply.

"You had your chance. She doesn't need your regret. She needs distance."

"Kaen," Sereya said quietly.

Kaen stopped, but didn't retreat.

"I know you hate me," Riven said, eyes on Kaen, then shifting back to her. "Maybe I deserve that. But... I didn't come to fight. I just wanted to say I was sorry. And if there's ever a way to earn your trust again... I'll find it."

Sereya didn't speak for a moment.

Then gave a single nod.

"Thanks. But don't wait around for me to make it easy."

Riven swallowed and backed away, offering no clever retort. Just silence.

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As he left, Kaen stepped beside her again.

“He’s dangerous.”

“So am I,” she said, without looking at him.

Kaen didn’t smile.

But something in his gaze said: good.

## Chapter 23 – The Flame That Does Not Die

### Point of View: Mar

The stars outside the command deck of the Phoenix burned cold and distant — an ocean of black threaded with fire. But inside the great ship, the hum of power was warm, constant, alive.

Mar stood at the center of the bridge, one gauntlet resting on the edge of the holotable as the crew worked silently around him. Holo-displays flickered with data streams, orbital scans, threat reports. No alarms. No alerts.

Just calm.

The quiet before something inevitable.

His ship — his warship — moved like a predator beneath the skin of the stars.

The Phoenix was unlike any vessel in the Spartan fleet. Sleek. Deadly. Built with Concord schematics, yes — but hardened by Spartan fire. Over four years of planning, testing, refining. He had personally overseen every corridor, every weapon mount, every inch of the reinforced hull. He had bled for its birth.

And now... it was his sword.

“All systems stable, Commander,” came the voice of his XO, Captain Theron. “Slipstream drives holding optimal charge. Patrol routes synced.”

“Maintain course,” Mar replied. “And keep our drift low. I want a clean trail.”

He looked out the viewport again.

They were deep in the frontier now — trailing faint rumors, fragments of black-market chatter, whispers of mercenary jump-signatures matching those from the Concord assassination attempt.

Vireya had given him a mission.

And he was going to complete it — not just for her, but to prove something to himself. That he could still protect what mattered.

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He tapped a control node on the holotable, bringing up Sereya's image.

Twelve years old now. Fierce like her mother. Stubborn like... well, like both.

He hadn't seen her in weeks.

The ache gnawed at him.

"Soon," he murmured. "Once this is done."

The holo-call came through coded and blinking with Senatorial clearance.

Only one person used that signature.

Mar accepted it, and the holoprojector flared to life — casting Vireya's image in soft blue light, arms folded, expression unimpressed.

"Good to see you alive," she said dryly.

"I aim to please," he replied, straight-faced.

"Then you're failing."

He raised an eyebrow. "Is this about the mercenaries?"

"No. This is about your daughter."

That made him pause.

Vireya stepped closer to the camera. Her tone was sharp, but her eyes carried a spark of restrained amusement.

"There was an... incident. At the Academy. With Kaen."

"Is Sereya hurt?"

"No. She's fine. But Kaen broke a boy's nose."

"Good."

"Mar."

"What? He had it coming."

"Yes," she admitted, smirking now. "But unfortunately, the Academy council disagrees. They've requested a meeting with a parent."

Mar blinked. "You mean you?"

"No, they mean you."

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“Why?”

“Because you’re the one who assigned Kaen as her personal shadow. You’re the one who trained him. You’re the one who gave her a warhound for a pet.”

She paused.

“And—according to the council—you’re the one setting a ‘worrying martial precedent for a minor in peacetime schooling.’ Their words, not mine.”

Mar exhaled slowly. “This is ridiculous.”

“It’s justice,” Vireya said sweetly. “And punishment.”

“Punishment?”

“For leaving me to smooth over a political firestorm while you went gallivanting off into the stars.”

“I was hunting assassins.”

“And now you’re handling parent-teacher diplomacy. Consider it... a real battlefield.”

Mar grunted. “When’s the meeting?”

“Tomorrow. Concordia. I’ll make sure they have caf ready. And someone to restrain you if you try to stab the dean.”

The call ended with her smile lingering like a challenge.

Mar stood in silence for a long moment.

Then turned to his second-in-command.

“Captain Theron.”

“Yes, Commander?”

“Plot a course for Concordia.”

“Urgent recon?”

“No. Parenting.”

Mar stood at the Phoenix’s navigation console, arms folded, lips curled in a half-smirk.

“How close can we get before planetary security throws a fit?”

Captain Theron gave him a long, weary look. “Sir, the Concord’s orbital guidelines require us to maintain a minimum approach corridor of—”

“I didn’t ask about guidelines. I asked what we could do.”

Theron hesitated, then tapped a few keys.

“We can drop slipstream within 110 kilometers of the upper atmosphere. It would cause a... rather dramatic entry.”

Mar nodded, satisfied.

“Perfect. Wake the skies. Let them know Sparta’s here.”

Theron rubbed his temple. “Sir, is this really necessary?”

“Absolutely.”

The Phoenix exited slipstream like a god’s hammer.

A blinding flash of silver tore across the sky above Concordia’s capital — followed by a thunderclap that rolled through the heavens like a war cry.

The upper towers of the Academy shook.

Windows rattled.

Several instructors screamed.

The main courtyard erupted in startled chaos as students ducked, gawked, or froze in awe.

Sereya, sitting under the arc of the central tree reading, simply grinned.

“Took him long enough.”

Inside the Academy's reception hall, the Dean was halfway through composing an angry diplomatic complaint when the doors opened with a hydraulic hiss.

Mar stepped inside, full Spartan armour minus the helmet, cloak swept back, expression stone-set and utterly unapologetic.

“I’m here for the parent-teacher conference.”

The receptionist, still trembling from the reentry quake, just nodded and pointed down the hall.

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The council chamber was as sterile as a hospital and twice as smug. High marble walls. Transparent light panels. Twelve seated instructors and directors around a curved obsidian table, datapads in hand, each one radiating the restrained contempt of academia in the presence of something they couldn't control.

Like a Spartan.

Mar stood at the centre of the room, arms folded, gaze sweeping slowly across each face.

Unimpressed. Unbothered.

The doors opened again.

Sereya stepped inside, wearing her formal cadet attire, shoulders squared with practiced composure. Kaen followed — clean-cut in his black Spartan dress uniform, jaw tight. Behind them trailed Riven, awkwardly keeping his head low and hands behind his back.

“Commander Mar,” began the Dean, a frail man with a voice like recycled air, “we appreciate your attendance. Though we had not anticipated your... method of arrival.”

“You’re welcome,” Mar replied. “Thought you could use a wake-up call.”

“That’s... not precisely the message we wished to deliver.”

Another council member leaned forward, brows furrowed. “We’re here to address a violent altercation on Academy grounds. While the student in question has declined to press formal charges, this behavior is unacceptable. Especially from a designated guardian.”

Kaen tensed. Mar didn’t blink.

“Kaen acted as he was trained to — decisively and without hesitation. Had the boy continued his behaviour, we’d be speaking about worse than bruises.”

“Commander,” the Dean said with forced patience, “you could assign another guardian. A Concord-trained elite perhaps. One with less... martial instincts.”

“Or,” Mar said casually, “I could deploy two full Phoenix squads to guard the Academy. Rotate them weekly. Make a proper garrison of the place.”

Gasps.

One of the women dropped her datapad.

“You’re not taking this seriously.”

“No,” Mar said, “I’m taking her safety seriously.”

He pointed at Sereya.

“That’s my daughter. I don’t care about your rules. I care that she makes it to her next birthday.”

The room fell silent.

And then Sereya, to her credit, stepped forward.

“With respect, Councilmembers,” she said calmly, “I believe this situation can be resolved without escalation.”

Mar raised an eyebrow.

“Oh no,” he muttered, “she’s doing the thing.”

“Kaen acted out of duty,” Sereya continued, voice composed, “but I also understand the Academy’s concern. Perhaps Kaen could undergo a periodic review. Training with your security instructors. A compromise. That way the council maintains oversight, and I retain my protector.”

The council exchanged glances.

One of them nodded slowly.

“That... would be acceptable.”

Mar looked down at her, pride tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“That’s your mother talking.”

“You’re welcome.”

Sereya led him through the Academy's quiet corridors, past startled cadets and instructors who gave Mar a very wide berth. He didn't speak much. Just walked beside her, long cloak trailing behind, imposing as ever.

But the moment they reached her room, everything shifted.

The door slid open — and Ashfang, the massive onyx warhound, let out a thunderous bark and leapt forward.

Mar turned slightly—only to be tackled backward by two hundred pounds of muscle, fur, and tail-wagging fury.

“Ashfang—DOWN—” Sereya called, but she was already laughing.

Mar, pinned to the floor, looked up at the beast now licking his face like a cub greeting its littermate.

“Traitor,” he muttered. But his hand found the hound's neck and scratched behind one armoured ear.

Ashfang let out a pleased growl and rolled off with a heavy thump, flopping beside Mar's boot like a satisfied guard.

Sereya watched with a grin. “He remembers you.”

“Of course he does. I picked him out of the litter.”

Mar stood, brushing himself off, only to freeze when his eyes caught something hanging on the far wall — shimmering midnight-blue silk, sequined trim, and entirely too little fabric.

“...What is that?”

“My dress.”

“For what, a night raid?”

“The party.”

“You're twelve.”

“It's diplomatic. Cultural exchange. Academy tradition.”

“It's a scandal waiting to happen.”

“I already wore it. And Kaen didn't kill anyone.”

Mar's eyes narrowed. “I'm telling your mother.”

“She already knows.”

“Then I'm telling her again.”

Sereya chuckled and sat down cross-legged on the floor, Ashfang immediately curling around her like a living fortress.

Mar remained standing — but the stern line on his face had softened.

For a while, they talked. About training. About Kaen. About the way the teachers still whispered when they thought Sereya wasn't listening.

And then, as the conversation shifted toward the recent attack on Vireya, Mar's gaze grew distant.

“They covered their tracks well. Mercenaries with clean slates. Equipment from a dozen systems. No trail to follow.”

“So follow the one place they would go,” Sereya said, thoughtful. “Where no one asks questions. Where false IDs are cheap and morality is optional.”

Mar raised an eyebrow. “And where would that be?”

“You ever been to Nadiron?”

The name made his mouth tighten.

A shadow world. Outer rim. Lawless. Rotten to its core. Run by syndicates and smugglers.

The kind of place where even Spartans tread carefully.

“No,” he said. “But I think it's time.”

## Chapter 24 – Steel Wrapped in Silk

Point of View: Vireya

The late-day light poured in through the crystalline arches of her private study, casting soft golden lines across the marble floor. Outside, Concordia's towers shimmered in the afternoon haze — tall, perfect, and ever-watchful.

Inside, Senator Vireya sat at her desk, surrounded by datapads, political briefings, and half-finished reports. Her stylus hovered over a trade agreement she had rewritten four times. No phrasing was quite right.

Not for this audience.

Not for this moment.

She leaned back in her chair and let out a breath through her nose — a quiet exhale, controlled and tired.

The room was warm. Silent. Too still.

It was the only place in the galaxy where she allowed herself to pause. A sanctuary of glass and stone and soft light. And yet even here, the weight of the Senate — of Mar, of Sereya, of Lucan — pressed against her ribs like armor that no longer fit.

A holo-document blinked in her peripheral vision.

Outer Systems Reconstruction Proposal: Revised Budget

Another.

Senate Vote Status: Defence Oversight Committee — 4 seats contested

Another.

Anonymous Report — Possible vote-buying activity (unverified)

And still more.

Because the galaxy never slowed down — not for pain, not for progress, and certainly not for a single woman with too many ghosts.

---

She sipped from a small silver cup of virellian tea — bitter, grounding — and skimmed her next diplomatic communique.

“Senator Vireya, we humbly request a reassessment of the embargo against—”

She deleted it before it finished.

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Her hand hovered over the stylus again, but her thoughts drifted instead to Sereya — and to Mar.

The incident at the Academy still burned behind her eyes. Kaen's actions. The council's disapproval. The dress.

He was furious. I could see it even through the holo.  
And yet... he showed up. As a father.

That mattered.

More than she could admit.

And now he was off again — chasing ghosts in the dark.

"You'd rather hunt shadows than sit still," she muttered aloud. "Just like always."

A soft knock broke her thoughts.

"Enter," she called.

Her aide stepped in, datapad in hand. "Senator, there's a new briefing request from the Defense Bloc... and a message flagged high priority from the Chancellor's office. They want a direct reply by tonight."

Vireya nodded, gathering her composure again like slipping on silk gloves.

"Very well," she said. "Let's get to work."

The Chancellor's message was short and filled with diplomatic venom.

Senator Vireya,  
The recent escalation of Spartan fleet presence in Concord space — particularly following Commander Mar's "theatrical" Academy arrival — has caused considerable unrest among coreworld representatives. As Chancellor, I must request assurance that Sparta remains in compliance with Concord military protocols. We would prefer to avoid formal review...  
For now.  
— Chancellor Elvren Varros

Vireya read it twice.

She didn't grimace.

Didn't sigh.

She simply closed the message and turned to her aide.

"Prepare my reply."

"Of course, Senator. Shall I keep it polite?"

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“No,” she said. “Keep it measured. Let them read between the lines.”

---

Later that evening, she stood at the center of a marble-columned Senate chamber — smaller than the main hall, but far more dangerous. This was where deals were made before the votes ever took place.

Around her sat six of the most influential senators in the galaxy. Four allies. Two... not so much.

“We all know the Republic needs restructuring,” Vireya said, voice calm but confident. “The people are restless. The war has stalled. And if we don’t shift resources toward economic renewal, the cracks will become chasms.”

“And you propose... what?” Senator Caldes said, swirling a crystal glass in his hand. “Cutting funding to border fleets? Trimming patrols while the Dominion breathes down our necks?”

“I propose redirecting funding — not abandoning defence, but investing in the future those forces are supposed to protect. Roads. Trade lanes. Jobs. Security without suppression.”

A pause. Some nods.

One skeptical gaze.

“And your... companion,” Senator Ryla said, smiling thinly. “Will he support these reforms? Or simply arrest anyone who speaks against them?”

That drew a few nervous chuckles.

Vireya returned the smile with ice.

“Commander Mar doesn’t concern himself with Senate theatrics. He concerns himself with protecting his daughter. His people. And, frankly, the Republic’s spine.”

She let the silence hang.

“And yes, he supports me. Fully.”

That wasn’t entirely true.

But perception shaped power — and right now, the Concord needed to believe she held Mar’s leash.

Or that she could unclip it whenever she pleased.

---

Back in her office later, she sank into her chair and reviewed the results of the informal vote.

Close. Very close.

But winnable.

We're almost there.

Then she reached for the small crystal pendant on her desk — a gift from Sereya when she was six. Just a smooth, glowing shard from Virellien, bound in silver wire.

She held it between her fingers.

"We're going to change this galaxy," she whispered. "And no one — not the Chancellor, not the Dominion, not even Mar — is going to stop me."

The soft hum of her study's entrance chime startled her from thought.

Vireya glanced up, expecting her aide or perhaps a courier from the Senate floor.

Instead, the doors parted to reveal a figure she hadn't seen in over a year.

Tall. Imposing. Robed in layered silks woven with starlight threads and crested with the emblem of House Elyra.

Her father.

High King Elan of Virellien.

"Father," she said slowly, standing. "I wasn't told you were coming to Concordia."

He stepped forward, his presence casting gravity in the room — dignified, ancient, and utterly unyielding. His silvered hair shimmered beneath the soft interior lighting, and his pale-blue eyes, ringed faintly with violet, carried the sharpness of judgement honed over centuries.

"I did not come for pleasantries," he said. "The Chancellor summoned me."

"For what reason?"

"To discuss you."

Her jaw tightened.

"My political efforts are perfectly within the bounds of Concord law."

"Your alignment is not."

He began to circle the room slowly, inspecting it — her space, her life, her world.

"You speak of reform, peace, and unity. You invoke ancient oaths. And yet you share your bed with a man of war. A Spartan."

"Mar is—"

"A weapon," Elan said, not unkindly — but with iron certainty. "Your mother once warned you. That fire burns too brightly, and Spartan fire... devours."

Vireya swallowed her retort.

"He is not what you think."

"He is exactly what I think. You loved him when you were a child. I accepted it then. But now, you let him raise your daughter in the image of Sparta."

"He didn't raise her alone."

"No. But your loyalty shifted. And that concerns me."

He paused near the window, looking out at the Concord skyline.

"Vireya... you are not Spartan. You are of Virellien — a people of balance, reason, light. Our history is one of preservation, not conquest. The path you walk is not one we carved."

"Then perhaps," she said quietly, "it's time to carve a new one."

Elan turned, surprised by the defiance in her tone.

"You truly believe that blood and blade can build peace?"



“No,” she said. “But I believe he can.”

“Even after what he did?”

Vireya went still.

The pain flickered across her face — quickly suppressed.

“He’s not perfect. But he loves her. And he will protect her until the stars go out.”

Elan studied her in silence. His disappointment wasn’t loud — but it was deep.

“You’ve changed, my daughter. The Vireya I knew... wouldn’t have accepted such chaos into her soul.”

“Maybe she learned that order alone doesn’t win wars. Or save galaxies.”

Another pause.

Then, softly:

“You are still welcome in Virellien. Always. But I will not give my blessing to this path. And I will not intervene if the Concord decides... to break you.”

He turned toward the door.

“Send for me when you remember who you are.”

And then he was gone.

Leaving Vireya in the quiet once more — surrounded by datapads, silence, and a choice that seemed to echo louder every day.

The door hissed shut behind her father, but his presence lingered — like a chill on warm skin, or a shadow where light once stood.

Vireya sat back down slowly, her fingers trembling around the rim of her untouched tea.

She tried to breathe.

Tried to focus.

But the edges of her mind betrayed her — slipping from the present, unmooring her from the storm of politics, and carrying her backward through time...

To a different room.

To a different night.

---

The lights were dim that evening on Virellien’s second moon, a quiet outpost reserved for scholars and peacekeepers. No crowds. No titles. Just stars above, and a canopy of woven crystal blossoms lit by bioluminescent vines.

She wore no crown then.

Only a soft violet dress — handmade, sleeveless, with a belt of silver thread tied around her waist by Mar himself.

He stood awkward in ceremonial Spartan robes — black with crimson trim, the traditional blade of oath held across both palms.

“You’re trembling,” she whispered to him.

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“I’m not,” he lied. Then smirked. “Okay. Maybe a little.”

The officiant — an old priestess from the edge of the Aetherion faith, neither Spartan nor Virellian — spoke the words, ancient and binding.

And there, beneath that garden of stars, they were married.

Just fifteen.

Just children.

But with hearts that pulsed like twin suns.

---

That night, they made love for the first time.

It was not clumsy.

It was not awkward.

It was sacred.

His hands, rough from training, held her like something priceless. Her breath, normally precise and measured, broke in soft, helpless gasps.

They had sworn not to tell anyone.

Not even Lucan.

Not even her mother.

Just for them. A memory no war could touch.

---

And then came the tree.

Just weeks later.

That old tree at the edge of the Academy.

The place where he told her he had to go. That he couldn’t stand by and let Sparta bleed while he stayed safe in ivory towers.

“I’ll be back,” he had said, cupping her face.

“You better be.”

“I swear on the Sunbrand... and on our vows.”

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He left with a kiss.

And she never told him she was late.

That her cycle had broken.

That her body had already begun to change.

---

Back in her study, the memory faded like morning fog, and Vireya pressed a hand to her chest — feeling the pain rise quietly behind her breastbone.

“You came back,” she whispered. “But nothing was ever the same.”

And now?

Now they stood on the edge of something new.

Something just as dangerous.

But maybe... maybe still worth saving.

Chapter 25 – The Vow of One

Point of View: Kaen

The first time Kaen saw her, she looked too small to carry a name so heavy.

Sereya Vireya Mar.

Seven years old. Wrapped in a lavender travel cloak that swallowed her thin shoulders. Hair too neat, eyes too wide — clinging to a soft animal plush, the last gift from her mother before departure.

She stood at the edge of the Spartan drop shuttle’s ramp, blinking at the towering figure waiting to escort her to the Academy.

Kaen. Sixteen then. Silent. Stoic. Already hardened by war-games and rite-of-passage combat drills most soldiers twice his age had never survived.

She looked at him like one might look at a shadow.

“Are you my... guard?” she asked softly.

He nodded once.

“I’m Kaen. Lieutenant, Spartan Vanguard. Your father assigned me to watch over you.”

“But... why are you so scary?”

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He didn't answer.

Didn't know how.

He had fought Zenthari saboteurs. Led squad simulations through freezing tundra and orbital firestorms. But this — a girl half his height, scared and unsure — this unnerved him more than anything.

She clutched her plush tighter.

He almost said something.

Didn't.

But later, when she fell asleep on the long flight to the Academy, her head rested against his side. She didn't flinch when he adjusted the blanket. Didn't stir when he whispered her name to test if she'd wake.

That was the beginning.

The moment the mission became something more.

Now she was twelve.

And the quiet, shy girl who once clung to her mother's cloak had become a firestorm in motion.

Kaen watched her from the upper gallery of the training courtyard, where she moved through a solo kata — Aetherion-enhanced, precise, and far too aggressive for someone her age.

He didn't interrupt.

He never did when she was like this. It was how she processed.

Control through motion.

Just like her father.

Branok, the warhound, lay beside him, head on paws, watching her too. The beast let out a soft huff every time she missed a step — more annoyed than worried.

"I know," Kaen muttered to the dog. "Too wide on the counter-turn. She's getting sloppy when she's frustrated."

She had been training harder since the hearing.

Since Riven.

Since the lies.

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Her bruises had faded, but not the edge in her eyes. She rarely smiled now. Not unless it was to bite back at authority or to pretend she didn't care.

But Kaen knew better.

He always did.

He had read her full psychological reports. Knew the Aetherion surge levels she displayed weren't normal. Not even for a prodigy. He reviewed her social circles, her dreams — the way she touched the medallion her father gave her when she thought no one was watching.

And every night, when she finally collapsed into bed, Branok curled at her side and Kaen took the seat just outside her room, he reminded himself:

She is not a mission.

She is a promise.

---

He saw the flicker in the shadows before Sereya did.

Movement.

Reflex took over.

Kaen was on the ground floor in seconds, boots silent, hand resting near his sidearm — not drawn, not yet. He stepped into the garden's archway as Sereya whirled around, catching her breath.

Riven stood across from her, again.

This time, not smug. Just... lost.

"I didn't come to fight," he said.

Kaen said nothing.

"Or to talk, really. I just wanted to see her."

Kaen's voice was low, steady. "You lost that right."

Sereya stepped between them, arms crossed.

"It's okay. I'm not scared of him."

Kaen looked at her — not as a soldier, but as someone who had watched her grow.

"You should be. Not because of what he is. But because you deserve better than someone who crossed your boundary and lied about it."

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Riven lowered his gaze. “I didn’t lie. I just...”

Kaen stepped forward.

“Leave.”

This time, Riven obeyed.

Sereya let out a long breath as the boy disappeared into the shadows again.

“He’s not the enemy,” she murmured.

“No,” Kaen said. “But he’s a distraction. And that’s enough.”

She didn’t argue.

Just turned and walked back toward the main hall — Branok pacing quietly at her side.

Kaen followed, eyes scanning the rooftops, the gates, the stars beyond.

Because one day, the real enemy would come.

And when they did, he swore by the blood of Sparta, they would not take her.

They walked in silence for most of the way back.

Until they were far enough from the courtyard.

Until the shadows grew deep enough for Sereya’s frustration to rise to the surface like steam under pressure.

“You didn’t have to shut him down like that,” she said, voice low but sharp.

Kaen didn’t answer.

“You think I can’t handle Riven? That I’m too weak to speak for myself?”

Still nothing.

That silence always made her angrier.

“You’re not my father, Kaen.”

That made him stop.

She turned to face him, arms crossed over her chest, fire in her eyes.

“I know who I am. I know what I’ve trained for. You don’t have to guard me like I’m some delicate flower that’ll wilt the second someone says something I don’t like.”

Kaen kept his voice calm. Controlled. Spartan.

“It’s not about what you can handle. It’s about what you shouldn’t have to.”

She blinked.

That gave her pause — but not enough to soften her stance.

“You still don’t get it,” she muttered, turning away.

“You’re angry because you think I’m keeping you from living,” he said. “But what you don’t see is I’m the only reason you can.”

She stopped again. Breathing harder now.

“There’s a party,” she said suddenly.

“What?”

“By the lake. Some of the older students are going. No teachers. No guards. Just music, lights, and fun. And I want to go.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Of course not,” she snapped. “You never say yes to anything. Ever.”

“Because it’s not safe.”

“It’s not war. It’s a party.”

Kaen took a step forward, lowering his voice to a low, firm tone.

“The last time I left your side, Sereya, someone tried to abduct your mother. You’re a primary target for half the political factions in this galaxy. You think a party at a lake is worth risking that?”

She looked away, jaw clenched.

“You just want to control everything.”

“No,” he said. “I want to protect the one thing in this galaxy that matters.”

That silenced her again — but the hurt didn’t fade from her face.

And Kaen hated himself for it.

“One day,” she said quietly, “you’re going to push so hard I stop listening.”

And with that, she turned and walked ahead into the dormitory shadows, Branok trotting dutifully behind her.

Kaen didn’t follow right away.

He just stood in the corridor, fists clenched, letting the silence settle around him like the armor he never truly took off.

It had been two days since their last argument.

Two days of silence over meals, short acknowledgments in lessons, and no eye contact during morning drills. Even Branok had picked up on the tension, hovering between them like a shadow caught in the middle of a storm.

Kaen held the line.

He had to.

Today was the day of the so-called “lake party.” Unauthorized. Unsanctioned. A perfect target for a security breach.

And a complete nightmare for anyone tasked with protecting a high-profile child of two powerful political families.

“You’re not going,” he had told her that morning.

“You’ve made that abundantly clear,” she replied coldly, not looking up from her datapad.

Kaen hadn’t backed down. He’d posted external sensors. Confirmed Branok remained in her room. Double-checked the door lock’s integrity.

By evening, things were quiet.

Suspiciously so.

Just after dusk, Kaen made his way toward her room, a ration tray in hand — not as a peace offering, but out of duty.

The door hissed open.

Empty.

His eyes swept the room in a heartbeat — the window slightly ajar, the sheets rumpled, and one piece of evidence that made his stomach twist:

The security lock had been disabled manually... with Aetherion precision.

Branok's harness was missing.

His face hardened.

"Damn it, Sereya," he hissed.

He stormed to the edge of the balcony and looked down — faint footsteps led along the ivy-stone wall beneath the Academy's edge.

"She used the Force to escape through a third-story window—!"

Kaen grabbed his comm, considered calling for backup—

Paused.

Then snapped the comm shut.

"Mar's going to kill me."

"No. First, he'll appoint someone to protect me... from her."

He turned, rage barely contained, cloak billowing behind him.

Branok gone.

Girl missing.

Reckless Force leap into the night.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he muttered under his breath.

"You're not a normal girl anymore."

He didn't bother with subtlety.

Kaen sprinted through the halls, armor light but fast, wind tearing at the corners of his jacket as he passed startled students and flickering hallway lights.



The lake was at the edge of the Academy's outer gardens. Quiet, secluded, beautiful — and utterly exposed.

A perfect place for laughter.

And an even better place for something to go horribly wrong.

"I swear," he growled, vaulting down the last staircase, "if anything happens to her—"

## Chapter 26 – Shadows Burn Brightest

Point of View: Mar

The stench hit him first.

Even through the sealed airlock of the shuttle's ramp, Nadiron reeked of oil, rot, and too many bodies packed too tightly together.

Mar stepped onto the docking platform, boots landing with a metallic clang. Around him, the sky was the color of rust and acid, lit by blinking neon and the slow, toxic churn of smog-heavy clouds.

This was the underworld's heart — a festering artery of crime, secrets, and syndicates.

And it pulsed like a wound that never healed.

Behind him, a squad of Phoenix Legion soldiers fanned out, all in casual armor. Just enough to blend in. Just enough to remind anyone watching: don't be stupid.

A half-naked woman leaned over the rusted railing, her hair dyed silver and eyes artificially glowing.

"Hey, tall and armored," she purred. "You looking for a good time or a quick death?"

"Neither," Mar said without slowing. "But thanks for offering both."

She let out a low laugh, tossing her hair. "Oh, a Spartan with a sense of humor. Haven't seen one of those since the last guy tried to gut a Pitlord in a brothel."

One of Mar's men, a grizzled sergeant named Tavo, grunted behind him.

"Sir, did she just threaten and flirt with you in the same breath?"

"That's how you know it's Nadiron," Mar said.

Another street vendor waved a glowing meat stick.

"Meat's only half-synthetic today! Two creds!"

"Half of what?" Tavo asked.

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The vendor shrugged. “You don’t want to know!”

They pushed through layers of chaos — junk traders, spice peddlers, broken droids, beggars with chromed-out limbs, and street musicians playing instruments made from old gun parts.

But Mar didn’t come for color.

He came for information.

Specifically, a man named Neros Val — a club owner, fixer, and dealer of secrets with too many fingers in too many syndicate vaults. If anyone could trace the mercenaries who attacked Vireya... it was him.

They reached the district’s inner wall — a towering slab of reinforced alloy scarred with gang markings and old plasma burns. Behind it: The Dagger’s Edge, a nightclub carved into the husk of a crashed destroyer.

Lights pulsed from its underside like a heartbeat. The music — loud, low, dangerous — bled out onto the streets like a war drum wrapped in silk.

Two bouncers stepped forward.

One opened his mouth.

Then saw the sigil on Mar’s chestplate.

And stepped back without a word.

“That’s what I thought,” Tavo muttered.

Mar strode through the door, into a wall of noise, smoke, and sin.

Inside The Dagger’s Edge, the air was thick with synthetic smoke and the bass thump of pulse-beats. Strobing lights lit chrome walls, where dancers moved like shadows and predators watched from darkened booths.

Mar moved with purpose through the chaos, his men flanking him loosely — enough space to act, enough to warn.

They were met by a thin, sharply dressed man with green cybernetic eyes and golden teeth.

“Commander Mar,” he said smoothly. “Neros is expecting you.”

“Nice to feel wanted for once,” Mar said.

“Oh, you’re wanted, sir. Just not in the usual way.”

Neros Val waited on a velvet-draped throne at the far end of a private mezzanine, overlooking the floor like a king surveying a pit of chaos.

He was tall, dark-skinned, dressed in expensive synth-silk robes, with fingers full of data rings and eyes replaced by blue lenses that flickered constantly with incoming feeds.

“Spartan royalty,” he said with a toothy smile. “You don’t look nearly as dead as the news reports suggested.”

“I get that a lot,” Mar replied. “Usually right before someone draws a weapon.”

Neros laughed, leaning back.

“So what brings a living legend to my door? You after spice? Blackmail files? Maybe a rare bottle of pre-collapse Virellian wine for that lovely senator you keep breaking planets for?”

“Information,” Mar said. “The attack on Concordia. I know mercenaries were involved. Clean teams. Someone paid to cover the trail. You’re going to tell me who.”

Neros tilted his head, amused.

“You Spartans always come in with fire and threats. But knowledge, Commander... knowledge has a price.”

Mar opened his mouth to reply, but just then a woman in black velvet stepped into the booth and leaned close to Neros, whispering into his ear.

The information broker’s expression shifted subtly.

Not fear.

But interest.

He leaned forward again, folding his hands.

“It seems you’re popular tonight, Commander. Word has reached the higher syndicate circles. They know you’re here.”

Mar raised a brow. “Should I be worried?”

“No,” Neros said with a grin. “You should be flattered.”

He reached for a silver case and opened it — revealing a holographic invitation seal bearing half a dozen sigils from major crime families.

“You’ve been extended a formal invitation. A gathering of the families. Private. Off-world. Exclusive.”

“Sounds like a trap.”

“Everything here is a trap.”

Mar grinned, leaning back in his chair.

“Then it’s rude to decline. Tell them I’ll be there.”

Tavos groaned behind him.

“Sir...”

“Relax,” Mar said, standing. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

The ship that carried him to the Syndicate gathering wasn’t one of war.

It was luxury.

A gift, of sorts — or a warning wrapped in silk.

Mar stood in the viewing lounge, dressed in midnight-black formalwear cut from Spartan officer cloth, modified with sleek underarmor. No insignia. No weapons visible. Just tailored lines, a high collar, and a suit designed to say:

I’m not here to kill you... unless I must.

His hair was swept back. His scar more pronounced under the ambient lighting. He hadn’t dressed like this in years.

“If Vireya saw me now,” he muttered, adjusting the collar, “she’d scold me for stepping into a nest of vipers wearing a tuxedo.”

Tavos, sitting nearby in a more subtle outfit, snorted. “She’d lock you in a closet and give the Syndicate your funeral date.”

“True,” Mar said, smirking. “But she’d still ask if I made a good impression.”

The ship touched down on a floating ring platform orbiting one of Nadiron’s shattered moons — a Syndicate retreat carved from obsidian and glass, suspended in the void.

Music drifted across the air. A stringed instrument and synth-tones — soft, decadent, menacing.

The ballroom shimmered.

And Mar entered.

---

He hadn’t taken three steps before the crowd noticed him.

Heads turned.

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Whispers rippled.

And then came the flirtation — the true first weapon of the criminal elite.

A woman in shimmering red brushed his arm. “Commander Mar. They said you were handsome, but I assumed it was propaganda.”

A man in silver and gold leaned in close. “Sparta produces soldiers. I didn’t realize it produced artifacts.”

Mar offered a polite smile. “Careful. Artifacts bite.”

More voices joined.

“Is it true you killed the Emperor’s brother with your bare hands?”

“I hear the Sunbrand sings when you wield it.”

“I wonder... do Spartans take oaths in battle or in bed?”

He maneuvered through the crowd with practiced indifference — acknowledging none, observing all. Every hand that touched him was measured. Every gaze catalogued.

They weren’t seducing him.

They were sizing him.

He found Neros near the central bar, draped in new silks, enjoying a glowing drink.

“You weren’t lying,” Mar said. “They do love me.”

“They love what they think you are,” Neros replied. “That’s the dangerous part.”

“Why invite me here?”

“Because chaos is coming. And the Syndicate wants to know which way your blade will turn.”

Mar took a drink from the bar without asking. Stared at the crowd. Felt the tension just under the silk and perfume and laughter.

“Then let’s find out.”

Mar moved like a panther among wolves — every step confident, every glance calculated. He drifted from conversation to conversation, brushing shoulders with pirates, smugglers, assassins draped in pearls, and slavers wrapped in political titles. Some whispered offers, others veiled threats.

But all of it felt... off.

Like a performance waiting for its climax.

At the center of the grand chamber, a floating platform began to descend. The lights dimmed. Conversations hushed.

The Syndicate Heads had arrived.

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Seven of them. Each representing a faction so vast it could topple star systems with a single trade agreement — or assassinate a Chancellor for the right price.

They sat in gilded chairs like royalty. One rose — a wiry woman with silver dreadlocks and sharp eyes that glittered with implanted lenses.

“Commander Mar of Sparta,” she said, her voice magnified without aid. “Your reputation precedes you.”

Mar gave the barest bow.

“Let’s skip the flattery.”

“Very well,” she said. “You were invited not for your charm... but for your threat.”

“That makes two of us.”

She smiled — but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“There’s something you should know. Something the Syndicate has been sitting on for weeks now. You were not the first to seek answers about the Concord attack.”

A murmur rippled across the chamber.

“A Dominion intelligence officer came to us first. They attempted to bribe three of our houses. Offered credits, tech, even safe harbor. All for silence.”

Mar’s jaw tightened. “Why tell me now?”

“Because some of us believe war is bad for business.”

“And the rest?”

“They’re watching... to see if you’re worth betting on.”

Before Mar could reply, another figure emerged from the edge of the chamber.

He moved like a ghost in tailored black armor. His face was covered at first by a hood — but as he approached the central dais, he pulled it back.

Lucan.

His older brother.

Alive.

Wearing the sigil of no house, but carrying the weight of betrayal like a second skin.

Mar froze.

Lucan’s eyes met his.

No hostility.

No welcome.

Just... conflict.

“You’re not the only one chasing ghosts, little brother,” Lucan said softly. “And we don’t have time for old wounds.”

Mar’s voice was gravel.

“You working with them now?”

“No,” Lucan said. “I’m hunting them. Same as you.”

He stepped into the light.

“The officer who made the bribe attempt was killed two days after leaving this station.

Silenced. And before you ask — no, it wasn’t me.”

Mar didn’t move.

Didn’t blink.

The room around them seemed to fade into nothing.

Just two brothers.

Two swords on opposite ends of the same battlefield.

“You’ve been gone five years,” Mar said, voice low.

“I never stopped looking.”

“For what?”

Lucan looked toward the Syndicate heads. Then back at Mar.

“The truth. About who ordered the attack. And who really wanted Vireya dead.”

The chamber buzzed faintly, the audience murmuring like predators smelling blood but unsure whose it would be.

Mar didn't blink. He held Lucan's gaze across the polished obsidian floor.

And then — just slightly — he tilted his head.

"You remember the trick with mother's crystal cabinet?"

Lucan's brow twitched.

"You took the key. I played dumb."

"You tripped the alarm," Mar added.

"And blamed the dog."

They both smirked — faint, but real.

It was an old code. A game they'd played a dozen times. One would cause chaos, the other would uncover what needed to be found. Cops and robbers. Diversion and infiltration. Just like when they were boys, stealing pastries from the palace kitchen or sneaking into forbidden parts of the archives.

Lucan folded his arms. "So what's the play this time, little brother?"

Mar stepped forward, voice just loud enough for Lucan to hear.

"You distract. I dive."

"That simple?"

"Always was."

Lucan turned slightly toward the Syndicate heads, adopting a looser stance, flashing a charming smile he hadn't used in years.

"You want war averted?" he said to them all. "Then maybe you should stop betting on the galaxy's worst secrets staying buried."

One of the heads leaned forward. "Are you suggesting you dig them up?"

"No," Lucan said, eyes flicking to Mar. "I'm suggesting you won't like what happens when he does."

The crowd murmured again — this time, with nervous laughter.

Mar used the moment. Slipped away from the center, through a side corridor flanked with data consoles and guarded by low-level Syndicate techs.

He had his target now.

Someone had tried to bribe the Syndicate — and then had them killed. That meant there were records, somewhere. Logs. Surveillance. Names.

Lucan had opened the stage.

Mar would finish the act.

Just like old times.

Mar reached the door of the archive vault — a reinforced chamber lined with data cores, likely housing decades of Syndicate secrets.

He placed his hand over the access panel.

Beep. Denied.

Then came the metallic clang of magnetic locks snapping into place.

"Of course," he muttered.

A soft chime echoed overhead, followed by a smooth, amused voice piped through the vault corridor.

"Commander Mar," said the silver-dreaded woman from before, her voice rich with amusement. "We appreciate your enthusiasm, but Syndicate records don't come freely — not even to living legends."

Mar's jaw flexed. "Then what does it cost?"

There was a pause.

Then: "Entertainment."

Behind him, footsteps.

Lucan appeared, flanked by two guards who made no effort to intervene.

"They want a show," Lucan said flatly.

"What kind of show?"

"Brother against brother."

"You're joking."

From the upper gallery above them, the seven Syndicate heads watched behind glass and shimmering energy fields. One pressed a key, and holograms of the chamber lit up with odds, bets, and audience predictions.

"Not to the death, of course," the woman called down. "Unless you choose to make it so."

"This is a joke," Mar growled.

Lucan shrugged off his cloak. "We need the data. You want answers. I want answers. They want blood."

He rolled his shoulders.

"So let's give them a little show."

Mar hesitated.

Not because he feared losing.

But because this felt like a step backward — two sons of Sparta, reduced to sport for syndicate filth.

Lucan stepped into the ring. "Scared?"

"Of breaking you in front of strangers?" Mar smirked. "I'm just trying to remember which of your ribs breaks easiest."

Cheers erupted from the crowd.

A bell chimed.

And Mar stepped forward

The room fell into a hush as the two Spartan brothers stepped into the dueling circle — its floor polished obsidian, the audience above watching like vultures circling royalty turned prey.

The Syndicate heads didn't just want blood.

They wanted drama.

And they were about to get it.

A chime echoed across the chamber.

Then the bell rang.

Round one.

Lucan struck first — fast and brutal. A left hook, a shoulder-check, a sweeping kick. Mar took the hit, rolled through, and countered with a vicious elbow to Lucan's sternum. The force knocked his brother back two steps.

"Still holding a grudge?" Mar growled.

Lucan spat blood. "You walked back into our lives like nothing happened. Like you could just take her back. Take everything back."



Mar's eyes narrowed. "I didn't come to take anything."

Lucan swung again. Mar blocked. Their fists met like colliding meteors.

"You think I wanted any of this?" Mar shouted.

Another punch — Lucan ducked. "You never think at all! You left. Then came back and acted like you still had a place."

"You knew why I stayed behind," Mar barked, throwing a brutal knee to Lucan's ribs. "You knew what Aegiron became."

"And you didn't tell me," Lucan snarled, recovering. "You didn't tell me about Avalon, about the visions, or what you'd done to her—"

They collided again. Punches turned into grapples. Elbows cracked. A headbutt stunned Mar, blood streaming from his brow. Lucan's shoulder armor splintered under a hammer-fist.

They broke apart — panting, furious.

"You think I wanted to raise your child?" Lucan's voice cracked. "You think I wanted to lie to her, to Vireya? Pretend I wasn't dying every time she said your name?"

Mar flinched.

Lucan pressed forward. "And what hurts most—what burns—is that she still looks at you like you're a god. After everything."

Mar clenched his fists.

"I never asked you to do any of it."

"No," Lucan snapped. "You never ask me anything. Not about Sereya. Not about what we lost. And not about our mother."

That struck deep.

Mar stumbled back — not physically, but inside.

"You should've told me the truth," Lucan said quietly. "I know now. The way you avoid her name. The way the Aetherion twists when you speak of that day."

Mar's voice dropped, raw. "I was just a child."

"You were the only one there."

Silence.

The crowd above held its breath.

“She died because of me,” Mar admitted. “I couldn’t control the Aetherion. I tried to save her... but I killed her.”

Lucan’s fury trembled at the edge of silence.

“And you let me hate everyone else... for years.”

Mar staggered. “Because I hated myself.”

Their final clash was less technique, more emotion.

Punches driven by regret.

Chokes powered by guilt.

They fell to the ground, a tangle of blood, broken ribs, and silent screams. No victor. Just truth.

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Above them, the silver-dreaded Syndicate matron clapped slowly.

“Now that... was worth the price of admission.”

She tossed a data tablet into the dueling ring.

“Here. As promised. Everything we know about the mercenaries, their payments, their handlers.”

Lucan crawled toward it, hand shaking.

He tapped the screen.

Mar leaned over.

Both men stared.

Transaction Logs.

Secure Channels.

Black Ops Funding.

The source wasn't Dominion.

It wasn't the Concord.

It wasn't even Vaeran, their father.

“All the funding,” Mar whispered, “is coming from Sparta.”

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Lucan's face went pale.

"Someone in our own house wanted Vireya dead."

## Chapter 27 – Fractures of Power

Point of View: Vireya

The Senate Hall of Concordia shimmered in warm morning light, beams of filtered sun streaming through the crystalline dome. Voices echoed beneath its vaulted ceiling — debate, diplomacy, dissent.

At the center of it all stood Vireya.

Cloaked in dark blue formal robes stitched with subtle silver embroidery, she was calm, focused, and in control.

"If we do not act now," she said firmly, "then we doom this Republic to rot from within. The people suffer while we bicker. The war stalls while corruption grows. We were meant to be more than caretakers of power — we were meant to be its stewards."

A brief murmur of agreement passed through her coalition bloc. Even her quietest allies nodded. It had been a strong session. Well-measured. Well-delivered.

Then came the voice from across the chamber.

"Senator Vireya," called a tall man in red-trimmed Concord robes — Senator Aurex Dallan, from the trade oversight committee. Slippery. Always smiling. Never trustworthy.

"I request three minutes of the chamber's time to raise a matter of... transparency."

Vireya nodded diplomatically. "The floor recognizes Senator Dallan."

He moved slowly, a datapad in hand, theatrically loaded with purpose.

"I bring to the floor a matter concerning the actions of a certain Spartan... one Commander Mar of the House of Mar... and his elder brother Lucan."

Whispers erupted instantly.

Vireya's heart thudded once — hard.

"Proceed carefully," she warned.

Dallan smiled. "Of course."

He activated the display crystal.

And the chamber darkened.

The center platform glowed.

And then: a recording.

Of Mar and Lucan, fists flying, locked in a brutal brawl beneath a Syndicate dome. No context. No explanation. Just Spartan against Spartan, blood and fury on full display.

The Senate erupted.

Outrage. Panic. Cheers from some. Gasps from others.

One senator demanded to know if Mar had defected.

Another shouted about “unchecked Spartan aggression.”

Another still muttered something about “Savages in suits.”

Vireya stood frozen.

A million calculations raced through her mind.

Who recorded this? Who leaked it? Why now?

And more importantly...

How much did they see?

Aurex bowed.

“Thank you, esteemed colleagues. I believe transparency is vital — particularly when certain... individuals hold the ear of this chamber while engaging in backroom brawls with known fugitives.”

His eyes found hers.

“No offense, Senator Vireya.”

She inhaled once. Deep.

Then exhaled fire.

“None taken,” she said coldly. “But I would tread carefully, Senator. You’ve confused brotherhood with betrayal. And you’ve mistaken a private matter for public leverage.”

The chamber buzzed again.

But Vireya was already storming out.

Her hands clenched. Her pulse racing.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Mar. What in the stars have you done?

The doors to her office slammed open so hard the aides outside flinched.

Vireya stormed inside like a solar flare, her robe billowing in her wake, fury in every step. The door hissed shut behind her.

“Secure channel,” she barked. “Phoenix. Flagship. Command deck — now.”

The holotable in the center of her chamber flickered to life. Military encryption kicked in. A rotating Spartan sigil spiraled as it sought the signal.

Her foot tapped.

Her fists shook.

And then—

“Phoenix actual responding,” came the voice of a comms officer. “Verifying caller ID—”

“I don’t care about protocol,” she snapped. “Patch me through to Mar. Now.”

There was a pause.

Then the line changed.

Static cleared.

And the private study aboard the Phoenix appeared.

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Mar sat in a deep-backed chair, half-dressed, covered in bruises and ice packs. A gauze band was wrapped around his ribs, and a faint cut over his brow was still drying.

Lucan sat nearby, his knuckles swollen and shirt unbuttoned, one eye already starting to blacken.

They looked like two war-weary champions from an arena. Because they were.

“Oh,” Vireya said coldly. “Good. You’re both still alive. That makes this so much easier.”

Mar didn’t even flinch. “Vireya, I can explain—”

“No,” she barked. “You can listen.”

She stepped into the camera frame fully, hands on the table, eyes aflame.

“Do you know what I just watched? Do you know what every senator in the Concord just saw? A brawl. In a criminal syndicate den. Between a prince of Sparta and a man exiled in disgrace!”

Lucan winced.

“You weren’t exiled,” Mar muttered.

“Now is not the time,” she snapped.

She turned her fury back on the screen.

“This wasn’t just reckless. It was a gift — to everyone who wants to bring me down. To the Dominion. To the Concord elite. To Aurex Dallan.”

“Who?” Lucan asked.

“The snake who broadcast your little performance live.”

Mar sighed, rubbing his temple. “The room was shielded. How—?”

“Someone leaked it. And now the halls of power are baying for your blood.”

She leaned forward.

“So I suggest you both tell me everything. Now. Before I burn down half the galaxy to fix your idiocy.”

Mar tapped a bruised finger to the console beside him.

A file transferred to the holotable on Vireya’s end.

Transaction records. Encrypted channels. Fund transfers routed through a shell company embedded deep within the Spartan economy. Not from the government. Not from Vaeran. But from Sparta itself.

“There,” Mar said flatly. “Cleaned it up myself. The payment for the attack didn’t come from the Dominion. It didn’t come from the Concord. It came from home.”

Lucan leaned forward, face still tight with pain. “Someone on Sparta wanted you silenced, Vireya. Not Mar. You. And they used our own bloodline’s legacy to pay for it.”

Vireya stared at the data.

Then she laughed.

Not with humor — but with sheer frustration.

“You two are unbelievable.”

“Vireya—” Mar began.

“No. You listen. Do you hear yourselves? Do you hear what you’re saying?”

She paced like a caged hawk, hair trailing behind her, her voice low and sharp as a blade.

“You pick a fight in the most corrupt place in the galaxy. You bare your secrets like children in a sandbox. And now you want to drag this insanity back to Sparta? Are you deluded, or just desperate?”

“This is real,” Mar said. “And you know it.”

“No,” she shot back. “What I know is that you’re both emotionally compromised, bruised half to death, and about to set the galaxy on fire chasing shadows!”

Lucan muttered, "At least we're doing something."  
That earned him a glare sharp enough to kill.  
"So what's your grand plan?" she demanded. "March into the Spartan council chamber? Demand answers with bruises and conspiracies?"  
Mar's voice was steady now. "We're going to Sparta. To find the source. And to end it."  
Vireya froze.  
Then stepped in close to the holotable.  
"No, you're not."  
"Vireya—"  
"Stay on that ship. Do not step foot on Spartan soil until I arrive."  
She turned to her aide just outside the door.  
"Get the Valkyris ready for departure. I'm going to Sparta."  
"Right away, Senator."  
Vireya turned back to the holotable.  
Her eyes burned with fury and fire and fear all at once.  
"You want to chase ghosts? Fine. But not without me. Because if this really is Sparta's doing... then the storm is just beginning."

## Chapter 28 – Ghosts of the Throne

Point of View: Lucan

Lucan stood alone in the observation deck aboard the Phoenix, the glow of the nearby star bathing his scarred face in pale gold.

Sparta hung ahead — distant still, but growing larger by the hour. Its silhouette cut a harsh shape against the void. Familiar. Unforgiving.

Like a wound that never quite closed.

His ribs still ached from the fight.

So did his pride.

You walked back into our lives like nothing happened.

He'd said it in anger. But it was true.

And now they were going back — not to reconcile, but to tear open whatever was festering beneath the surface of their bloodline. Someone on Sparta had tried to kill Vireya.

Someone wearing their name.

Lucan wasn't sure which haunted him more: the betrayal... or the possibility that he already knew who it was.

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He leaned on the edge of the bulkhead railing, watching the stars drift past.

Five years.

That's how long he'd been gone.

Five years since he'd walked out of Sparta's gates under a cloud of disgrace and secrets, driven by guilt, obsession, and the image of a woman he couldn't stop loving.

And now here he was — returning under escort, wounded from a brawl with his own brother, dragging behind him a truth that could shatter the throne.

"Some homecoming," he muttered.

The door behind him hissed open.

Mar.

Still bandaged. Still stubborn.

Lucan didn't turn.

"She's going to kill us," Lucan said flatly.

"Vireya?" Mar asked. "Or Grandmother?"

"Both."

A long silence passed between them.

Then Lucan spoke again, softer.

"Do you ever wonder if we're just playing parts someone else wrote for us?"

Mar shrugged. "I think the galaxy's been trying to write our story for years."

"And we just keep setting the page on fire."

Lucan finally turned.

He looked at his younger brother — tired, battered, unbowed.

"Let's finish this."

Mar nodded. "Together."

They stood in silence as the ship cut through space, drawing closer to Sparta's orbit.

And the secrets waiting beneath its throne.

The Phoenix descended over Sparta's capital like a silent blade.  
No trumpets. No fanfare.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft



Just tension.

It hung over the ancient city like a stormcloud — the knowledge that something had happened, and something worse was coming. The streets were quiet. The palace guards doubled.

And within the towering obsidian halls of the Citadel, the ghosts of House Mar waited.

Mar and Lucan stepped off the shuttle side by side — bruised, weary, clad in black Spartan armor that still bore dust from the underworld.

Neither spoke.

They didn't need to.

The path to the palace was lined with elite guards who barely breathed as they passed. The great doors opened at their approach, revealing a long corridor flanked by fire-lit columns and the emblems of ancient kings.

At the end: a private chamber. Lit by a single floating sun-crystal. Quiet as a tomb.

Inside stood Vireya, her arms folded tight, her face a cold mask of controlled fury.

Beside her: Solenne, the great-grandmother — tall, statuesque, eyes sharp as the blade she once wielded in battle.

And seated on the high-backed chair with the sigil of the House of Mar was Vaeran, the King — their father.

None of them rose.

Not even when the door shut behind the two brothers with a thud.

"You look like you've crawled out of a warzone," Solenne said flatly.

"We did," Lucan muttered.

"And then you broadcast it to the entire galaxy," Vireya snapped.

"That wasn't our intention," Mar said calmly.

"Oh, I'm sure it wasn't." She took a sharp step forward, cloak flaring behind her. "But it happened. And now my political alliances are in chaos, the Senate is foaming at the mouth, and half the Concord thinks I'm harboring two violent lunatics who solve foreign policy with their fists."

Lucan winced.

Mar didn't flinch.

"We uncovered something," he said. "Something real. Something dangerous."

"Oh, I know what you uncovered," Solenne said. "The question is — what are you going to do with it?"

Vaeran finally stood.

"Speak," he commanded. "Both of you."

Mar and Lucan glanced at each other.

Then Lucan took a step forward.

"The attempt on Vireya's life didn't come from the Dominion," he said. "Or the Concord. We traced the money. The Syndicate confirmed it. The funds came from Sparta."

That hung in the air like a drawn sword.

Vaeran's face darkened. Solenne's eyes narrowed.

But it was Vireya who stepped forward — her voice low, but sharp.

"You want me to believe someone from this palace paid for my death?"

"Not the palace," Mar said carefully. "But somewhere in the Spartan command network. A back channel. Hidden. Old."

Solenne's voice was like stone breaking.

"Someone with enough power to bypass the king. Enough influence to hide from the Aetherion."

"A traitor," Vaeran said, voice grave.

"A coward," Lucan spat.

“A threat,” Vireya finished.  
For a moment, no one spoke.  
Then Solenne stepped into the light.  
“Then we do what Spartans have always done. We find the threat. And we end it.”  
But before Solenne could turn to organize war, Vaeran raised a hand.  
Silence fell.  
His gaze settled on Lucan — steady, unreadable.  
“Before anything,” Vaeran said, voice cool as glacial stone, “we address the son who vanished.”  
Lucan stiffened.  
“We address the heir who left Sparta without word, abandoned his house, and returned with the enemy’s daughter as his wife.”  
Vireya’s eyes shifted to Lucan, guarded.  
Solenne turned slightly, studying him now not as a returned warrior, but as a possible liability.  
“Say your piece,” Vaeran said.  
Lucan exhaled through his nose — not defiant, not ashamed. Just tired.  
“I didn’t leave Sparta because I was weak,” he said. “I left because I couldn’t carry what I saw anymore. The corruption. The half-truths. The death of our mother... and the lies around it.”  
That struck a nerve.  
Even Vaeran blinked.  
Lucan continued, voice tighter now.  
“You all let me believe it was you, Father. That your coldness killed her. That your orders doomed her. And I carried that — until I learned the truth.”  
His eyes flicked to Mar.  
“He was a child. He didn’t mean to. But he lied to me for years. You lied to me.”  
Mar didn’t answer. He didn’t have to.  
“I raised your daughter, Mar,” Lucan said, voice hoarse. “I stood by Vireya when she thought she was alone. And yes—Kaelira and I... we were something born in grief. But it wasn’t betrayal. Not at first. Not until I realized I couldn’t come home without tearing everything apart.”  
Vireya’s mouth parted, silent.  
Lucan looked at her.  
“I never meant to replace him. Or you. I just... needed someone to need me.”  
Solenne stepped forward slowly. “And do you regret what you’ve done?”  
Lucan looked down.  
Then nodded.  
“Every day.”  
The silence that followed wasn’t tense.  
It was heavy.  
Finally, Vaeran turned to Mar.  
“Do you trust him?”  
Mar didn’t answer right away.  
But then, quietly: “I trust why he left.”  
Solenne turned back to Lucan.  
“Then earn your place again. Sparta doesn’t need perfect sons. It needs truthful ones.”  
Lucan bowed his head.  
For the first time in five years... he felt home

Later that evening, the fire in the Citadel's private chamber had burned low. The strategists had left. The guards posted at the doors stood in silence. Only Lucan and Vireya remained inside, seated opposite each other in the long reading alcove, lit by hanging starcrystals.

Mar was notably absent.

"He said he was hungry," Vireya muttered, rubbing her temples. "So he's off to get a burger. In the middle of a national crisis."

Lucan raised an eyebrow. "He always did have a talent for tactical appetite."

A faint smile touched her lips. It faded quickly.

Lucan shifted in his chair, suddenly uncertain. "You look tired."

"I am tired," she replied.

"Still look beautiful, though," he said quietly. "Even if something's clearly gnawing at you."

Vireya glanced away.

He took that as permission to continue.

"Kaelira and I... we're expecting," Lucan said.

That brought her gaze back sharply.

"Two months in," he added, managing a small smile. "It's strange. I never saw myself as a father. Then again, I said the same about being your protector."

She exhaled slowly. "Lucan..."

"I'm not asking for forgiveness. I just... wanted you to know. About the child. About me."

Vireya looked down at her hands.

"Sereya is twelve now. She's stubborn. Brilliant. Beautiful. Just like you."

"And terrifying, I bet," he said with a grin.

"She could rule the galaxy if we let her."

A beat passed between them — warm and old and bruised.

Then the chamber doors hissed open.

Mar strolled in, holding a steaming burger wrapped in synth-foil, already halfway through his second bite.

"Sorry," he said with a full mouth. "Treason makes me hungry."

Vireya blinked at him, deadpan.

"You left a high-level strategy meeting to get a burger."

"Technically, I staggered out. Very heroic."

Lucan smirked.

Mar took another bite, then paused mid-chew as he looked at Vireya. "You okay?"

"It's just the pressure," she said dryly, standing. "The weight of holding the Concord together... and the strain of being harassed by my two least favorite Spartan princes."

Lucan chuckled. Mar looked wounded. "Least favorite?"

"It's a rotating title."

They both grinned.

Vireya didn't.

Not fully.

Because it wasn't just the pressure.

And it wasn't just the assassination attempt.

It was something else.

Something growing inside her — unseen, unspoken.

And for now, she would carry that weight alone.

The warmth in the chamber dimmed as the doors opened once more.

No announcement.

No ceremony.

Just the quiet click of boots on stone.

Solenne entered like a shadow wrapped in memory — draped in a deep crimson cloak, silver hair braided down her back, eyes sharper than any blade the Spartans ever forged.

Mar and Lucan straightened almost instinctively.

Vireya did not turn — but she knew.

Solenne's presence had that weight.

That gravity.

"I was wondering when you'd slink back in," Solenne said, voice like the rustle of ancient paper, "after parading your bruises and embarrassing our name."

Mar sighed. "I'm only halfway through my burger."

"And halfway into trouble," she replied, approaching the hearth.

She studied each of them for a moment, then looked directly at Vireya — not unkindly.

"You carry too much. Again."

Vireya's lips twitched. "Someone has to."

Solenne stepped beside her, resting a hand gently on the younger woman's shoulder.

"The galaxy doesn't need more shoulders. It needs foundations. And it needs truth."

Her eyes flicked to both grandsons.

"We cannot rebuild anything if the cracks beneath us are left to rot."

"We're working on it," Lucan murmured.

"You'd better. Because something is coming. And when it does, the name Mar must mean something again — not fear, not scandal, not betrayal."

She turned back to Vireya, softly now.

"And as for you... stop trying to protect everyone from your truth. Even Spartans cannot fight what they pretend does not exist."

Vireya swallowed, throat tight.

Solenne's hand lingered for just a moment longer.

Then she turned and walked away, her final words drifting behind her like prophecy:

"Prepare yourselves. All of you. Because fate has a cruel sense of timing... and none of us will walk untouched."

The door closed behind her.

Silence again.

And for once — none of them had anything left to say.

## Chapter 29 – The Quiet Before the Storm

### Point of View: Sereya

Sereya stood at the window, arms folded tightly, her jaw clenched like she was trying to bite back the galaxy.

"It's just a party, Kaen."

She didn't even look at him. Didn't need to. His reflection in the glass was enough — standing with arms crossed, taller than her by nearly two heads, armored like he was expecting an invasion at any second.

"A party with lax security, too many blind corners, and a reputation for spiked beverages," he replied. "No."

"I'm not a prisoner."

“You are a target, Princess.”

The word burned.

She turned, face flushed with frustration. “You’ve followed me for five years. Watched every step I’ve taken. You know me. You know I’m careful.”

“I know you mean well,” Kaen said evenly. “But meaning doesn’t stop a blade. Or a sniper. Or poison.”

She looked away again, blinking hard.

“So that’s it?” she whispered. “No friends. No dancing. Just you, and locked doors, and another night of silence.”

Kaen didn’t answer.

That was answer enough.

She left without another word.

Stormed into her room.

Shut the door with a forceful hiss.

And leaned against it, heart pounding.

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Her fingers trembled as she reached into her wardrobe.

Underneath a pile of dull academy-issued uniforms, she pulled out a small black bag — one she’d hidden weeks ago.

Inside: a soft, shimmering dress in midnight silver. Sleek. Elegant. Bold.

Her mother would hate it. Her father would detain her.

She smiled.

Then she turned to her bed.

Her dog — the massive black creature with gold-tipped ears and eyes like ancient stone — raised its head.

“Time for a walk,” she whispered.

It thumped its tail once.

She crouched by the far window, resting a hand against the glass.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“You’re going to help me jump,” she said.

The dog tilted its head.

“Yes. With the Force. Just like we practiced.”

She opened the window.

The wind rushed in — cool and full of stars.

And with one last glance at the door... she leapt.

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She landed in the grass outside the academy wall with a soft roll.

The dog landed beside her a second later, silent as a shadow.

Together, they crept down the hill, the lights of the lake party glowing warm in the distance — laughter, music, and firelight drifting up into the night air.

Sereya’s heart beat faster with every step.

For once, she thought, just once... let me be a girl. Not a prophecy.

The lake shimmered like liquid starlight, rippling beneath hanging lanterns that swayed from tree branches.

Laughter danced on the wind. Music echoed across the water. A soft drumbeat pulsed through the grass.

For once, no one stared at her like she was a senator’s daughter or a Spartan princess. Her dress — elegant, starlit, and nothing like the uniforms she wore by day — cloaked her in mystery.

“You came,” someone said behind her.

Sereya turned.

Riven stood at the edge of the tree line, half in shadow. He wore a crisp black tunic, collar open, smile soft.

There was no smugness tonight. No swagger.

Just something hesitant. Almost apologetic.

She raised an eyebrow. “Took you long enough.”

“Wasn’t sure I should. After everything.”

“I wasn’t sure I should either,” she said. “But I needed this.”

A pause passed.

Then he stepped forward slowly, gaze flicking to the massive black dog sitting by her side.

The creature growled once — low and protective.

“He still doesn’t like me.”

“Smart creature,” she said dryly. “But I told him not to bite unless you say something stupid.”

“So... no talking, then,” Riven grinned.

That earned him a reluctant smile.

“Can we talk?” he asked. “Really talk?”

Sereya hesitated, then nodded.

They walked along the edge of the lake, the music softening behind them. She could hear the rustling of the trees, the gentle lapping of water.

"I shouldn't have pushed," Riven said. "At the garden. I—I crossed a line. And I know that. I just... I've never met anyone like you before. And I got stupid."

"You did," she said. "But I've seen worse."

He looked at her, hope flickering.

"I'm not asking to start over. Just... to walk beside you again. For a while."

She didn't answer right away.

Then she reached for his hand.

Just a touch.

Not commitment. Not forgiveness. Just... a moment.

"Just a walk," she said softly.

He nodded, breathing lighter.

Behind them, the dog followed — silent, watchful, never more than a step away.

And for a few precious minutes beneath the stars, Sereya was just a girl.

The walk had been quiet since they left the edge of the party.

Sereya's heart still fluttered uneasily, but Riven's hand was warm in hers. He hadn't pushed, hadn't leaned in, hadn't said anything suggestive since the apology.

Still, something sat wrong in her chest.

"You said you wanted to talk," she murmured.

"I did. But... I also wanted to show you something. It's not far."

"Show me what?"

"An old place," Riven said, glancing back at her with a grin too boyish to fear. "Abandoned structure past the cliffs — Academy built around it. History left it behind."

The dog gave a soft growl.

Sereya hesitated.

"I don't know."

"Hey," he said gently. "You've got him with you. You think I'm going to do something stupid with a ten-stone hellbeast standing guard?"

She cracked a small smile, despite herself.

"Just a look," he said. "Then we go back. I swear."

She nodded. Slowly.

"Okay. But I'm holding you to that."

The structure was ancient.

Half-submerged in wild vines and overgrown stone, it stood just beyond the ridge — a dome of black obsidian and rusted bronze. Symbols etched into the outer wall glimmered with residual Aetherion, flickering faintly in the moonlight.

“This place isn’t in any history records,” Riven said as he opened the creaking door. “I found it by accident last month. No security. No monitors. Like someone wanted it forgotten.”

They stepped inside.

The interior smelled of dust and stone and something... older.

The walls were lined with hollow statues. Spartan. But not quite.

“This is weird,” Sereya said.

“I thought so too.”

Her dog growled again — louder.

It stepped forward—

And then collapsed, hard.

Sereya gasped and spun — too late.

The doors slammed shut behind them.

From the shadows around the chamber, soldiers emerged, weapons drawn, armor matte black and rimmed in crimson. Ten. Fifteen. More.

And between two of them —

“Kaen!”

He was barely conscious, bloodied, armor cracked, one arm limp at his side. Dragged in like a trophy, but still breathing. Still alive.

“He almost made it to the party,” said a voice behind her.

Riven.

But the softness in his voice was gone.

When she turned, his eyes were cold.

“He took down seven of my men before they got him. Just like a Spartan. Just like him.”

“What—what is this?” she stammered. “Who are you?”

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft



Riven stepped closer, calm and cruel.

“My name isn’t Riven.”

He looked her dead in the eyes.

“My father was slain at the Battle of Harvest. By a boy who didn’t know what kind of storm he was unleashing.”

The dog whimpered, stunned but still alive.

Sereya’s throat went dry.

“Your father... was the Dominion’s Prince?”

Riven smiled.

“And now, his son has you.”

## Chapter 30 – Shackled Flame

Point of View: Kaen

Darkness came in pulses.

Bright lights. Pain. Screams. Then black.

The last thing Kaen remembered clearly was the sound of Sereya’s scream. Then metal boots. Then the wet snap of his shoulder dislocating as they struck him again. He'd taken seven of them down.

Not enough.

Never enough.

---

He stirred.

Fluorescent light.

A rumble — no, an engine. A ship. Low-humming, cold.

He was strapped to a med-bed, hands bound with magnetic cuffs, his chest covered in crude bandaging. Two Dominion medics stood nearby, speaking in hushed tones in a language he didn’t recognize.

He tried to lift his head.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

A stun baton jabbed his ribs.

He blacked out again.

---

Next: stone beneath him.

Cold. Damp.

He awoke in a cell.

A single grated light above. The walls were dark alloy, curved slightly — underground or beneath something immense. The air smelled like rust and oil.

His armor was gone. So were his boots. He was shirtless, bruised, ribs wrapped tight, and every muscle screamed.

But he was alive.

Sereya.

The name slammed into his chest harder than any blow.

He tried to sit up — groaned.

Chains held his wrists to the wall behind him, loose enough to move, tight enough to remind him who was in control.

A door across the cell slid open.

A figure entered. Black robes. Crimson markings.

No face visible beneath the hood.

“Welcome to the Dominion, Spartan,” the voice said — smooth, genderless, terrifyingly calm. “We’ve heard much about your kind.”

Kaen’s lip split as he smiled, blood trailing down his chin.

“Then you already know what happens when you touch what’s mine.”

Steel hands yanked Kaen upright, chains clanking as they forced him forward.

Every step was pain. His left knee buckled. His ribs throbbed. But he stayed on his feet.

Spartans did not crawl.

They marched him through long, echoing halls — walls adorned with crimson banners, the mark of the Dominion etched deep into the black stone. The floor beneath him shimmered with sigils he didn't recognize, powered faintly by Aetherion.

At last, the doors opened.

And the world inside slammed the breath from his lungs.

---

A grand chamber — all glass and dark marble. Draped in gold-threaded banners. At the far end, standing calmly beneath a mirrored ceiling, was Sereya.

Alive.

Unharmed.

She stood beside a long table, dressed in a formal tunic, her dog sitting loyally at her side. Her face was pale. Her eyes locked on him the moment he entered.

“Kaen!”

She took a step forward, but guards blocked her path.

From the opposite end, Riven strolled forward — or rather, the boy formerly known as Riven.

Gone was the school uniform and the charming smile. He wore now a high-collared black coat embroidered with silver flames, and a thin circlet rested against his brow.

His voice was smooth, aged beyond his supposed years.

“I suppose we should stop pretending,” he said. “My real name is Aerin Vel-Kareth. I’m seventeen. Third son of the Dominion. First heir in line since the Battle of Harvest.”

Kaen glared. “That name... should’ve died on that battlefield.”

Aerin chuckled. “It nearly did. Along with my father.”

He turned, sweeping a hand toward Sereya.

“But fate’s strange, isn’t it? The girl of prophecy, child of the lost Spartan prince... promised by blood and power.”

Kaen growled. “She’s twelve.”

“Exactly,” Aerin said, his smile wicked. “Just the right age to begin a proper courtship. In time, she’ll come to appreciate the gesture.”

Sereya’s voice rang out. “You’re insane. I would never—”

“No?” Aerin stepped closer to her, just within her dog’s reach. The beast snarled. He didn’t flinch. “Then maybe I should reconsider the gift I had planned for your ceremony.”

He snapped his fingers.

Two guards stepped aside.

Kaen’s chains were unlocked.

The moment they fell—

—he launched.

Broken ribs. Shattered knee. Didn’t matter.

He drove forward like a bolt of rage, roaring as he tackled Aerin to the ground, his hands clawing for his throat.

“YOU WILL NOT TOUCH HER!”

But he didn’t get the chance.

The guards surged. Dozens. Batons. Bolts. Force fields.

Kaen was ripped off, beaten to the ground, blood pouring from his mouth.

Aerin stood, brushing off his coat, voice calm.

“Still so valiant. Still so reckless. She’ll mourn you one day, Kaen. But not yet.”

He turned to Sereya.

“We’ll keep him alive. And the dog. Consider it my wedding present.”

Kaen coughed, lifting his head weakly.

“Touch her... and I will kill you.”

Aerin knelt beside him, voice low.

“Then you’d better survive, Spartan.

Aerin stood over Kaen, boots planted firm, arms crossed as if the throne already belonged to him.

“You Spartans are always the same. So full of pride. So easy to break.”

Kaen’s lip curled, blood trailing down his chin. “You talk a lot for someone who needs an army to guard him.”

Aerin leaned down, lips nearly touching Kaen’s ear.

“You’ll scream, Spartan. Maybe not today. But soon.”

The room’s atmosphere shifted.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

The tension snapped.  
The great doors opened with a resonant clang.  
And the entire room went silent.  
Aerin straightened, his smug expression faltering as Kaelira strode in, robed in deep crimson, her platinum hair braided in royal coils, her boots striking the floor with each step like drumbeats of authority.  
The Dominion guards moved aside without needing a command.  
She didn't spare Aerin a glance at first. Her violet eyes landed on Sereya, assessing her from head to toe.  
"Unharmd?" she asked.  
Sereya nodded warily.  
"Good."  
Then Kaelira turned, slowly, to Aerin.  
And now she looked at him.  
Cold. Disdainful.  
"You imbecile," she said flatly. "Is this your grand plan? A twisted child-marriage fantasy played out like a political farce in front of hostages?"  
Aerin blinked. "You weren't invited."  
"Because I command respect," she snapped. "You command shame."  
He stepped forward. "I don't answer to you, Kaelira."  
"No," she said, "but the guards do."  
She raised a hand — and immediately, half the soldiers in the room snapped to attention, awaiting her orders.  
Kaen's eyes widened. Even through blood and haze, he saw the shift in posture.  
They fear her.  
"Escort the girl to my private quarters," Kaelira ordered. "Double her security. No one enters without my clearance."  
A pair of elite guards moved to flank Sereya.  
"And the Spartan," Kaelira continued, turning back to Kaen. "Treat his wounds. Provide him food. I want him alive and conscious. He's earned more than chains."  
"You can't do that!" Aerin barked. "He tried to kill me!"  
"And you tried to marry a child," she snapped. "Which of you should be in chains?"  
He stepped closer, defiant.  
"My father—"  
"Would thrash you for this," she cut in coldly. "If he were here."  
He narrowed his eyes. "Where is he?"  
Kaelira's expression didn't change.  
"No idea."  
She turned on her heel.  
"Now get out of my sight before I send for him."  
Aerin stood frozen, lips twitching with fury, but he didn't argue.  
Kaelira stepped to Kaen's side as medics moved in.  
She crouched beside him briefly.  
"We're not allies," she said softly. "But we're not enemies today."  
Kaen, bruised and bleeding, gave a faint nod.  
"Today... I'll take it."

## Chapter 31 – The Echo of Silence

Point of View: Vireya

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

The message came in the dead of night.

Not with a scream. Not with a warning.

But with a soft chime from her datapad, blinking silently beside her on the nightstand.

Vireya stirred in bed, Mar's arm still draped across her waist, his breathing slow and steady. For one fragile moment, everything was still.

Then she saw the sender.

Her aide. High-priority clearance.

She sat up, tension coiling through her chest.

The message was only four words.

"Sereya is missing. Confirmed."

Her breath left her.

Not in a gasp.

But in a collapse.

Like gravity itself had failed.

"No," she whispered.

Mar stirred, blinking. "Vireya...?"

She stood, wrapping the silk sheet around her, hands trembling.

She didn't speak.

Didn't have to.

Because Mar saw the message, too.

And she didn't remember getting dressed.

Didn't remember pulling on the formal black coat that trailed behind her like smoke.

All she knew was the sound of her boots echoing through the palace corridor — sharp, furious, unforgiving.

Guards stepped aside as she passed.

Advisors tried to call her name.

She ignored them all.

Sereya. My daughter. My light.

She reached Lucan's war chamber in under three minutes. The doors opened before she could slam them.

He was inside already — awake, fully armored, pacing.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“You heard,” he said.  
“I felt it,” she snapped. “How long?”  
Lucan looked down.  
“A couple of hours. The Academy locked it down first, then Phoenix Command scrambled. Mar’s already—”  
“Why didn’t you come get me!?”  
“Because I didn’t want you to burn the palace down before we had intel.”  
Her fists trembled at her sides.  
Lucan stepped closer, voice lower.  
“We tracked the last sensor ping from the Academy perimeter. It was a ghost signal. Elite infiltration. Someone used a false identity.”  
Vireya’s eyes narrowed. “Riven.”  
Lucan nodded.  
“He’s not who we thought he was. Dominion. Bloodline tied to Harvest. Probably the son of the one Mar... killed.”  
“She trusted him.”  
“He planned that.”  
She turned away, chest heaving.  
Lucan’s voice softened.  
“We’ll get her back.”  
“You’re damn right we will.”  
She turned back, fire lighting her eyes.  
“Because I’m going to make the Senate bleed for letting this happen on Concord soil. And then I’m going to find every name that let it happen.”  
Lucan didn’t flinch.  
“I’m with you.”  
“Good,” she whispered. “Because if we don’t move now... we’ll lose her forever.”

d everything in him went silent.

Vireya turned toward the strategy board, eyes scanning every known Dominion outpost, every potential jump corridor, every blacked-out system.  
Her voice was cold fire.  
“We mobilize now. If the Phoenix is fueled, we can be in their space in under six hours.”  
Lucan didn’t move.  
“Mar’s already preparing.”  
“Of course he is.”  
“With full assault protocols.”  
She looked at him sharply.  
“Good. Let them feel what it’s like to steal a Spartan heir.”  
Lucan stepped in front of her, blocking the controls.  
“Or we try something else first.”  
She raised an eyebrow. “You want to talk?”  
“I want to buy us time,” he said. “Let me take you with me. Back into the Dominion. I know the corridors. The etiquette. I know her.”  
Vireya’s face hardened. “Kaelira.”  
“She didn’t know about this. I swear it.”  
“How can you be sure?”  
Lucan hesitated.  
“Because she was furious when I found out. And... because she’s carrying my child.”

Vireya's breath caught.

For a moment — pain.

Old wounds.

"Lucan, if you're asking me to put my daughter's fate in the hands of your secret wife—"

"I'm asking you to let me try. With you at my side."

He stepped closer, voice soft but firm.

"You want blood. Mar wants war. But if we go in now, guns blazing, we may never find Sereya alive. You know how the Dominion works. She's a bargaining piece — not a prisoner. Yet."

Vireya's eyes flickered with emotion, her body trembling from the weight of it all.

"We don't have time to waste."

"Which is why I'm saying let me take you to her," Lucan said. "You're the only person in the galaxy the Dominion might listen to."

A long silence stretched between them.

Then she nodded once, sharply.

"One chance, Lucan. One. And if this fails—"

"Then we burn them together."

The Silver Requiem shimmered under the starlight as it powered up in the launch bay — its sleek hull humming with anticipation. It was one of Vireya's personal diplomatic cruisers, fast, elegant, armed only defensively, and built for negotiation, not war.

Vireya paced near the forward hatch, her arms folded tightly, her expression a steel mask of control.

Lucan stood by the pilot's station, reviewing the falsified clearance codes and diplomatic credentials.

"Coordinates are locked," the pilot confirmed. "We'll skim the border of the Concord buffer zone, then transition into Dominion space via the eastern corridor."

"Keep to the trade spine until the last possible second," Lucan said. "They'll expect that."

"Understood, Commander."

Vireya exhaled slowly. "This is madness."

"It's the only way," Lucan replied. "If Mar knew—"

"He'd follow us in a warship," she finished. "And escalate everything before we got a single word in."

She turned to him. "So we lie."

Lucan didn't flinch. "Just long enough to win."

The ship groaned as power surged through the engines.

They were thirty seconds from takeoff.

Then—

THUD.

A deep clang echoed through the hull — like something heavy striking the outer plating.

Vireya's eyes narrowed.

"What was that?"

The pilot's hands danced across the control console. "No impact warnings. No breach. All systems are green."

"Hull scan?"

"Negative anomalies. Could've been atmospheric recoil. It happens during cold-start launches."

Lucan leaned closer to the viewport. "I don't like unexplained."

"We're already committed," the pilot warned. "Engaging lift."

The ship rumbled, ascended — and launched into the sky.



From below, shadows rippled across the tarmac — and something clung beneath the starboard wing, hidden just out of sensor range.

Watching. Waiting.

Vireya poured a measure of amber liquid into two small glasses and handed one to Lucan. The bridge had gone quiet, their diplomatic codes accepted as they passed through the outermost beacon gate of Dominion territory.

No resistance yet. But the calm was deceptive.

“I still don’t trust this,” she said.

“Neither do I,” Lucan replied, nursing his drink. “But the family council has factions. Not all of them want war. Kaelira has leverage with at least three of them.”

“And her father?”

Lucan exhaled slowly.

“He’s a ghost in the palace. No one’s seen him directly in over a year. There are whispers. Illness. Power struggles. Or something worse.”

Vireya frowned. “You think Kaelira’s buying time to consolidate power?”

“I think Kaelira is buying time to keep me — and Sereya — alive.”

Vireya sat on the bench beside him, her voice softening.

“You trust her more than you trust your own blood?”

Lucan didn’t answer right away.

Then, “No. I trust her with a different part of myself. One I can’t afford to show here.”

She looked at him for a long moment.

Then smiled. Just slightly.

“That’s the most honest thing you’ve said in five years.”

Lucan chuckled. “Don’t tell Mar.”

“I won’t.”

They sat in quiet for a moment — staring out at the stars streaking past.

Neither noticed the subtle shift in the shadows behind Vireya’s personal quarters.

Neither heard the soft exhale of breath from the closet door.

The Dominion capital rose like a dark crown over a world of stone and storm.

Towering spires of obsidian clawed at the sky, lit from within by veins of burning crimson energy. Their flagship shuttle, Silver Requiem, descended through the upper atmosphere under escort, flanked by two Dominion vessels whose design was skeletal, predatory — beautiful in the way a blade was beautiful before it split you open.

Vireya stood beside Lucan at the observation deck, her hands clasped behind her back, her diplomatic robes falling in silver-blue waves. She did not fidget. She did not blink. But her heart burned.

Sereya is here.

And they would leave with her, one way or another.

“They’re guiding us to the central citadel,” Lucan said, studying the flight pattern. “Landing pad three. That’s Kaelira’s private port.”

“Then she wants us separated from the main procession,” Vireya said. “Less eyes. Less accountability.”

“And more control.”

Vireya nodded. “She’s smart. I’ll give her that.”

Lucan gave her a sidelong glance. “You’re sure about this?”

“No.”

She looked down at the hard glass beneath her boots.

“But I know how this game works. If we walk in hesitant, we lose. If we walk in like conquerors, we’re liars. So we walk in like diplomats with teeth.”

The Silver Requiem touched down with a quiet hiss of landing gear meeting alloy.

No fanfare. No escorts waiting. Just two robed attendants — pale, masked, silent — standing by a high archway that led deeper into the citadel.

Lucan touched her shoulder gently.

“Ready?”

Vireya stepped forward.

“Let’s go see the woman who married my brother behind my back.”

---

They moved through the dimly lit corridors, accompanied only by the masked attendants. The deeper they went, the more Vireya felt the pressure in the air — like static, like tension, like watching eyes just beyond the veil.

She didn’t flinch.

When the doors to the audience chamber opened, Kaelira stood waiting.

Not on a throne. Not behind guards.

Just standing alone beneath a black Aetherion banner, her hands folded calmly.

“You came,” she said softly. “Good.”

Lucan’s eyes softened just a hair.

“Where is she?”

Kaelira glanced at Vireya.

“Your daughter is safe. In my private wing. Guarded. No one may enter but me.”

“And the boy?” Vireya asked.

“He will be punished,” Kaelira said. “He acted without authority.”

“And yet you haven’t given him to us.”

Kaelira met her eyes. “Because there is something larger at play here. Something neither of you fully understand.”

“Then make us understand,” Vireya said coldly. “Before this becomes a war.”

Kaelira took a slow breath.

“We’ll speak. But not here.”

She turned.

“There are walls listening. And someone... already here... who shouldn't be.”

Vireya’s brow twitched slightly.

Lucan tensed.

Kaelira’s eyes flicked toward the hall — then back again.

“Come. Time is short.”

Kaelira walked in silence, robes trailing behind her like a serpent’s tail. The halls twisted downward — away from the ceremonial chambers, deeper into the hidden arteries of the palace.

Vireya walked beside her, Lucan a pace behind.

The walls were alive with Aetherion — not vibrant, not wild, but contained, as if the Dominion had bent the force of creation into cold obedience. Even the torches shimmered with it, casting no shadows.

“Where are you taking us?” Vireya asked.

“Somewhere safe.”

“Safe?” Lucan muttered. “We’re in the heart of enemy territory.”

Kaelira glanced over her shoulder. “This is my territory.”

They reached a sealed archway guarded by two towering sentries clad in obsidian plate.

Kaelira raised a hand. No words. Just presence.

The doors parted.

Beyond them: a circular chamber bathed in soft white light. No windows. Just silence.

Kaelira stepped inside and waited.

“This room is shielded,” she said. “No surveillance. No echoes. Speak freely — but carefully.”

Vireya folded her arms, stepping in slowly. Lucan followed, but his eyes never left Kaelira.

“You said something larger was happening,” Vireya said. “Start talking.”

Kaelira studied her — not unkindly, but with caution. With weight.

“The boy who kidnapped your daughter,” she said, “is the son of the man your Mar killed at Harvest.”

“We know that,” Vireya replied.

“Do you?” Kaelira’s voice sharpened. “Do you know who he really was?”

Vireya said nothing.

Kaelira continued.

“The brother Mar fought and nearly killed wasn’t just a prince. He was the heir. A soulbound Aetherion weapon forged in secret to unite the old bloodlines. He was meant to inherit everything. But when Mar defeated him, the balance shattered.”

She walked slowly around the room.

“Aerin — the boy you knew as Riven — is what’s left of that plan. Raised in shadows.

Trained to avenge a legacy lost.”

“So why kidnap my daughter?” Vireya asked.

“Because Aerin believes that by wedding the child of Sparta and the last Ancient, he reclaims that legacy.”

Lucan growled. “He’ll die before that ever happens.”

“He may. But not before the entire Dominion burns.”

Vireya stepped forward.

“Then stop him. You’re his aunt.”

“I already have,” Kaelira said. “She’s with me now. I’ve ordered her protection. He won’t get near her again.”

Lucan’s voice was low. “Why?”

Kaelira turned to face him fully.

“Because I’m pregnant with your child, Lucan. And I want that child born in a galaxy that isn’t about to collapse.”

Silence fell like a sword between them.

Vireya’s breath hitched.

“We need her back,” she said finally.

Kaelira nodded. “You’ll have her. But not through war. If your ships jump into Dominion space, it will unite every House against you — and against her.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Vireya asked.

Kaelira looked at them both.

“We fake a negotiation. A ceremonial meeting. A political marriage proposal. We use the old ways to stage a withdrawal.”

“And Aerin?” Lucan asked.

“He’ll think he’s won. Until we pull the veil away.”

Kaelira moved closer, her voice barely above a whisper.

“But there’s something else... Something that worries me.”

“What is it?” Vireya asked.

Kaelira’s eyes narrowed.

“I think your daughter isn’t just a political prize. I think... she’s beginning to awaken.”

## Chapter 32 – The Spark Beneath

### Point of View: Sereya

The room was dim, but warm.

Silk curtains moved in the soft breeze from the vent shafts, and golden light filtered through the crystal skylight high above. This chamber wasn’t a cell. It wasn’t even a guest room. It felt like... a sanctuary.

But Sereya knew better.

A gilded cage was still a cage.

Kaen lay on the couch across from her, half-covered in bandages, one arm bound in a sling. He was healing — fast, like all Spartans did — but the bruises still colored his face, and the edge of exhaustion clung to his every movement.

Her dog — still nameless, though she'd secretly started calling him Storm — was curled at Kaen's feet. Loyal. Watchful. Protective.

Sereya sat cross-legged on the floor, hands pressed together, eyes closed.

She had been trying to meditate.

To push away the thoughts that swirled through her — visions, fragments, dreams of battles she'd never lived, of worlds she'd never seen.

Harvest. Fire. Screams. A sword of light burning through the sky.

Kaen stirred.

"You didn't sleep."

Sereya opened her eyes. "Did you?"

"Enough to pretend I did."

She offered a tired smile.

Just then, a soft tone echoed from the panel by the door.

Kaelira's voice came through.

"Sereya. Kaen. Please prepare yourselves. We have a meeting shortly. A public one. You'll be expected to support your guardian. Your words will matter."

Kaen let out a low grunt. "Great. More politics."

Sereya stood slowly. "I don't care about their games."

"You might have to," Kaen said, sitting up with effort. "Today, your voice might be the only shield I have left."

She walked over and helped him stand, gently adjusting his sling.

"Then I'll make them listen."

His eyes met hers. Not as a soldier. Not as a ward.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

But as something more.

“You’re becoming someone dangerous, you know.”

Sereya raised an eyebrow. “Good.”

The corridor outside Kaelira’s quarters felt colder than the room they left behind. The polished stone gleamed underfoot, the light tinted red by the Dominion’s ever-present Aetherion currents running through the walls.

Sereya walked beside Kaen, flanked by four Dominion guards clad in ceremonial armor. One walked ahead, another behind — a box of steel and silence around them.

It wasn’t fear she felt.

It was tension. Coiling. Alive. As if the palace itself were holding its breath.

She glanced at Kaen.

His face was calm, composed — but she could see the strain beneath it. His injuries weren’t fully healed. He moved with pain behind every step.

He shouldn’t be here, she thought. But he is. For me.

As they approached the next corridor, another pair of guards joined the procession.

One of them towered over the others — his armor darker, bulkier. Something about his gait, his presence, even the shape of his jaw under the mask—

I know him, she thought suddenly. From... somewhere.

Her brow furrowed, but before she could linger, the great doors ahead of them began to open.

A tall Dominion herald raised his voice.

“Presenting the daughter of Sparta and Virellien. The girl of two worlds. Sereya of House Mar... and her sworn guardian, Lieutenant Kaen.”

The room beyond unfolded in regal splendor.

Dozens of robed figures stood in a semicircle before a massive obsidian throne. Banners of crimson and violet hung above. Torches burned with controlled Aetherion flames, casting the space in shifting light.

The Dominion High Court.

At the center — Kaelira, her presence unmistakable, her posture unreadable.

To the right, cloaked and silent, stood Lucan.

And beside him...

Sereya’s breath caught.

Vireya.

Her mother stood in ceremonial robes of pale gold and Concord blue, her chin high, her eyes unreadable — but locked straight on her daughter.

Kaen stiffened beside her.

“You knew they were here?” he whispered.

Sereya shook her head. “No.”

Vireya did not smile.

She did not nod.

But Sereya saw it — the storm behind her mother’s eyes.

The fire.

And across the chamber... that tall guard still stood, silent as a shadow.

Watching.

Waiting.

Sereya stepped forward, Kaen at her side, as the center of the court opened before them. She expected interrogation. Demands. A public trial of her guardian’s actions.

Instead, the herald’s voice rang out again — loud, clear, and impossibly still:

“This gathering has been called not for judgment, but for proposal.”

Kaen frowned.

Sereya blinked. “Proposal?”

A ripple of surprise and tension moved through the court.

Kaelira stepped forward from the dais, her expression carefully composed.

“Members of the Dominion Court, and representatives of the Concord... today we offer a path forward. A path not of conquest, but of union.”

Sereya’s heart began to pound.

Lucan’s face was unreadable.

Vireya’s was anything but.

Kaelira gestured to a robed figure in the crowd — and slowly, Aerin stepped forward.

No longer in school uniform. Now dressed in ceremonial black and crimson. A proud smirk rested on his face, but beneath it — a flicker of something darker.

“Aerin Vel-Kareth, son of the fallen prince, offers his hand in marriage to Sereya Mar — daughter of Sparta and Virellien — to bring an end to the hostilities between our peoples.”

Gasps echoed through the chamber.

Even Kaen’s knees buckled slightly before he steadied himself.

Sereya went cold.

“What...?” she whispered.

Kaelira’s voice remained calm, authoritative.

“This union, if accepted, would create a bloodline of unparalleled power. It would tie our galaxies together. A bridge of peace. A symbol of unity.”

Sereya took a step back. “This wasn’t... I wasn’t told about this.”

Kaelira nodded gently. “No. Because we wanted your answer without coercion. But understand — this is bigger than all of us.”

Vireya stepped forward, voice sharp.

“She’s twelve. What you’re proposing is political madness.”

Aerin smirked. “We can wait until she comes of age, if that satisfies the Senate’s comfort.”

Kaen moved to stand between Sereya and Aerin, but the guards didn’t react.

“You don’t get to own her,” he growled.

Aerin tilted his head. “Why not? It’s only what your kind has done to her already.”

Sereya’s fingers curled into fists. Her voice shook — but not from fear.

“You think I’ll ever say yes to this?”

Aerin’s smirk faded. Just a little.

Kaelira raised a hand.

“This is not a demand. It’s a negotiation. You will be given time. Consider what peace is worth — to you, to your people. Then we’ll talk again.”

Sereya didn’t speak.

She just turned.

And walked from the chamber — with Kaen at her side, silent and furious, the dog trailing behind like a shadow with teeth.

The heavy doors shut behind them, muffling the voices of the Dominion Court. Sereya stood with her back against the wall, chest rising and falling in sharp bursts.

Kaen leaned against a column nearby, nursing his ribs.

They said nothing for a long moment.

“They planned that,” she finally whispered. “All of it.”

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Kaen's jaw tightened. "They always plan everything."

"Do you think..." she looked up at him, voice unsteady, "If I said yes... really said it... could I stop the war?"

Kaen was quiet.

Sereya took a step closer.

"Would that be a bad thing, Kaen?"

He didn't answer right away.

His eyes searched hers, not as a soldier, not as a guardian — but as someone who saw the weight she carried.

Finally, he exhaled.

"No," he said. "War is hell. If you can stop it — really stop it — maybe that's the best thing anyone could do."

Sereya looked down, nodded once — then squared her shoulders.

"Then I'll do it."

A sharp intake of breath came from the side corridor.

Vireya.

She stood in the doorway, Lucan beside her, both stunned.

"Sereya..." Vireya stepped forward. "You don't have to do this. You're a child—"

"I'm not a child," Sereya snapped, turning to her mother. "You raised me to think. To act. To stand for what's right. If this ends the war—"

"They'll twist you," Vireya warned. "Use you. Control you—"

"And if I refuse?" Sereya asked. "Then how many more people die?"

Lucan placed a hand on Vireya's shoulder. "Let her speak."

Kaen looked at Sereya with new respect — the beginnings of something deeper forming in the silence between them.

Sereya turned to the guards.

"Escort me back to the court."



Moments Later — Dominion Court Chamber

The grand doors opened again.

Sereya strode back in, flanked by Kaen and Lucan. Vireya followed, slow and hesitant.

The court turned, murmuring in surprise.

Kaelira straightened. “You’ve returned.”

Sereya stepped into the center.

“I accept the proposal — when I come of age. If it will bring peace, I’ll do it.”

Aerin smirked.

“Then let’s not wait. We can begin the formal binding—”

“No,” Sereya interrupted. “Not yet. I said when I come of age. Not before. And I decide the terms.”

The court stirred again.

Kaelira nodded. “It will be arranged. We’ll begin discussions with the Concord immediately.”

Then she turned to the court.

“Does anyone object to this union?”

Silence.

Even Vireya stood frozen — her mouth pressed into a thin line.

Then—

A voice.

Calm. Deep. Wrathful.

“I object.”

The court turned.

A Dominion guard near the entrance slowly stepped forward. Confused murmurs rippled through the chamber.

Aerin laughed.

“You? A guard?”

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The figure reached up... and removed his helmet.

Gasps.

Lucan stiffened.

Vireya's breath caught.

Sereya's eyes widened.

"Father..."

Mar.

His face was scarred. His eyes were lit with fury — and something else: pain.

He stepped into the light, standing tall, wrapped in dark armor marked by ash and battle.

He pointed straight at Aerin.

"Touch my daughter," he said coldly, "and I will burn this palace to the ground."

The chamber fell into stunned silence

Chapter 33 – The Lion in the Shadows

Point of View: Mar

The shuttle had barely cooled when Mar slipped beneath it.

He didn't wait for clearance. He didn't ask for permission. He simply moved — silent, swift, Spartan.

The landing struts of Silver Requiem were cramped, but he'd fit himself into tighter places in tighter armor. With his magnetic boots locked in, breath steady, and body still, he waited.

He felt every hum of the ship as it lifted off.

He counted every second of the ascent.

And when they crossed into Dominion space, he opened the underside maintenance hatch and slipped into the crawlspaces — silent, invisible, breathing in the recycled air of betrayal.

They hadn't told him.

Not Vireya. Not Lucan.

They'd left without him.

Hours passed. Hidden behind the false panel of Vireya's wardrobe, Mar listened as she and Lucan discussed plans, doubts, fears — and worst of all, hope that he wouldn't find out.

He barely breathed.

He learned of Kaelira's invitation. Of the Dominion's apparent attempt at diplomacy.

A wedding, he thought bitterly. A proposal in exchange for peace.

His jaw clenched.

They talked of him like a complication. A risk. A shadow from a more dangerous time.

"You still think I'm a weapon," he muttered under his breath. "Even now."

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When they arrived at the Dominion capital, Mar waited until the guards were preoccupied, then slipped from the ship. One silent step at a time, he moved through the docking bay — ducking behind equipment, shadows, machinery.

At the perimeter, a lone Dominion guard broke from formation to relieve himself in the shadows behind a hangar wall.

He didn't return.

Moments later, a new guard took his place — taller than most, armor sealed, helmet low.

Mar.

He stalked the palace like a ghost, moving through the courtyards and inner halls. No one questioned him. The Dominion didn't expect Spartans here. Not without banners. Not without fire.

He found her — Sereya — just briefly. From afar. Alive. Safe. Strong.

His heart broke and rebuilt itself in the same breath.

She was his.

And then he heard it.

The court.

The proposal.

Her voice, calm but uncertain, accepting.

His daughter — being offered like a prize to the son of the man he thought he'd killed.

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Mar moved to the back of the chamber, every step deliberate, fists clenched at his sides. His eyes burned through the visor.

He watched Kaelira. Watched Aerin gloat.

Watched Sereya stand proud — too proud for someone so young.

And when the moment came, Kaelira's voice rang out:

“Does anyone object?”

Silence.

Until his voice cut through it like a blade.

“I object.”

Every head turned.

Mar removed the helmet.

Gasps.

Sereya's lips parted. Vireya froze. Lucan's eyes widened.

He stepped forward, cold and unyielding.

“Touch my daughter,” he said to Aerin, “and I will burn this palace to the ground.”

Silence, for a heartbeat.

Then the court erupted.

Shouts. Scraping chairs. Gasps and outcries. Half the Dominion nobles surged backward, the other half stepped forward as if to defend their honor — or challenge him.

Kaelira raised a hand sharply, her voice cutting through the noise like a whip.

“Stand. Down.”

Her command froze the chamber.

Even the guards hesitated — caught between duty and disbelief.

Aerin's smirk twisted into a sneer.

“You must be joking.”

Mar stepped further into the light, ignoring the weapons subtly shifting in his direction.

“You think this is a game. That you can take my daughter and dress it up as peace.”

He looked directly at Kaelira.

“This court knew. You let them parade her around like a prize to be auctioned. Did you think I wouldn't come?”

Kaelira's jaw tightened, but her tone remained measured.

“You were not invited. And you are violating an active diplomatic summit.”

“She is my blood,” Mar snarled. “I don't need an invitation.”

Guards moved. Slowly. Cautiously.

Lucan stepped forward, placing himself between his brother and the Dominion ranks. “Stop. All of you.”

He looked at Mar — eyes wide, stunned, but steady.

“You shouldn’t have come.”

“I didn’t want to,” Mar said. “But I saw the reports. The footage. And I knew where this would lead.”

Aerin stepped forward now, confidence returning like a bad scent.

“So what’s your plan, Spartan? You came alone. You’re in our seat of power. What are you going to do?”

Mar tilted his head.

“Whatever I must.”

That simple statement sent another ripple through the court.

Kaelira stepped down from her platform. Her expression had shifted — no longer calculated, but almost... intrigued.

“You risked war for her.”

“I’d risk everything for her.”

Vireya stepped in then, placing a hand on Mar’s chest. Not to hold him back — but to ground him.

“She’s safe. You’re here now. Let’s not turn this into a bloodbath.”

Mar’s breathing slowed. His eyes found Sereya’s.

She stood still. Calm. But her hands trembled at her sides.

He nodded to her, then turned his gaze back to Kaelira.

“This... ends now. No binding agreements. No marriage negotiations. She’s twelve.”

Kaelira exhaled through her nose.

“The court will convene privately. You’ve made your stance clear.”

“Good,” Mar said. “Make sure they remember it.”

The guards didn’t move.

But they didn’t stop him either.

Mar stepped forward once more — and without a word, reached over his shoulder.

With a flick of his gauntlet, the Sunbrand ignited.

A brilliant arc of gold and white fire burst to life — humming with the voice of ages, casting long shadows across the court walls. The Dominion guards instantly drew weapons, but none dared make the first move.

The chamber held its breath.

“My daughter,” Mar said, voice hard as iron, “is leaving with me.”

Sereya gasped.

“No—”

He turned, eyes locking onto hers. “This isn’t up for debate.”

“You don’t understand!” she shouted. “This marriage could end the war!”

Mar’s voice cracked like thunder. “Peace built on slavery isn’t peace!”

Aerin took a step forward, but Kaelira raised a hand to stop him.

“You’re being foolish,” Lucan said, moving closer to Mar. “You’re burning the only bridge we have.”

“Then let it burn,” Mar said. “We’ll build a better one — with stone, not blood.”

Lucan’s voice lowered, pleading. “Mar... she’s trying to help. We all are. If you take her now—”

“I’m not letting the Dominion chain her future,” Mar growled. “You forget what they are.”

He turned toward the court — the guards, the nobles, Kaelira and her hollow throne.

“You wear civility like a mask, but I remember Aegiron. I remember Harvest. Don’t talk to me of peace.”

His voice turned to Vireya now.

“You should’ve told me.”

“Would you have listened?” she said softly.  
He didn’t answer.  
Sereya stepped forward, fists clenched. Her voice cracked.  
“You’re not being fair.”  
“I’m being your father.”  
“And I’m not your soldier!”  
The words hit like a punch. The fire of the Sunbrand dimmed slightly in his grip.  
For a moment, no one spoke.  
Kaelira’s voice was quiet.  
“You can’t protect her from the galaxy, Mar.”  
“I can damn well try.”  
The blade hummed brighter again.  
“She leaves with me. Or no one leaves at all.”  
The Sunbrand still burned in Mar’s hand — its light casting the shadows of a thousand ancestors across the court walls.  
But Sereya didn’t flinch.  
She stood tall. Voice steady. Tears brimming, but unshed.  
“Father... stop.”  
Mar turned to her, but said nothing.  
“You’re scaring them,” she said, voice rising. “You’re scaring me.”  
“Good,” Mar replied coldly. “Let them know what fear feels like.”  
“This isn’t the way,” she said. “You can’t tear everything apart just to protect me.”  
“I will, if I have to,” he growled. “I let Aegiron fall. I let Vireya be targeted. I’m not letting them take you too.”  
He turned, nodding sharply to Kaen.  
“Take her back to the ship. Now.”  
Kaen stepped forward instinctively, his injured arm still bound, but his stance steady. His eyes flicked from Mar to Sereya.  
She turned to him — and for a brief second, looked like a child again.  
But her voice was steel.  
“Kaen.”  
He hesitated.  
“Protect me.”  
His brow furrowed. “I am.”  
“No. Protect me from him.”  
The words sliced through the air.  
The court fell to silence.  
Even Mar stood frozen.  
Kaen’s fists clenched.  
“He is your father...”  
“And you are my guardian.”  
Kaen turned to Mar.  
Their eyes locked.  
For a moment, neither moved.  
Mar’s expression hardened. But there, beneath the fury, was something deeper.  
Something broken.  
He gave a single nod. Small. Almost invisible.  
Kaen stepped back beside Sereya — and bowed his head.  
“As she commands... I obey.”  
Mar reached the threshold of the grand chamber, his boots echoing against polished stone.

The Sunbrand had vanished from his grip, but its heat still clung to the room. Eyes followed him — Dominion nobles, guards, court ministers, and even the high banners above seemed to bend toward the storm walking away.

“Vaeran Mar, son of Sparta and fury — don’t you dare take another step!”

The voice cracked through the court like thunder.

Mar stopped dead.

The silence was total.

He turned.

Vireya stood at the center of the chamber, her voice full of command, of grief, of fire. Not a senator now. Not a diplomat.

A mother. A partner. A woman who had endured too much for too long.

“You don’t walk away,” she said. “Not this time. Not from me. Not from her.”

Mar’s jaw tightened. “I’m not walking away. I’m pulling her out of this madness.”

“No. You’re tearing apart the only chance we have to fix it.”

He advanced a step, bitter. “You really believe they want peace?”

“I believe someone has to try!”

“You’ve seen what they did—what they always do. Aegiron. Harvest. You think dressing up a treaty in gold and ceremony will erase that?”

“No,” she snapped. “But vengeance won’t either.”

He laughed. Bitter. Hollow. “You sound like your mother.”

Vireya’s face twisted with fury.

“And you sound like your grandfather before the blade took him. So angry he couldn’t see what he was fighting for anymore.”

Mar turned away again, jaw clenched, trying to bury the rising tide of pain behind his eyes.

“I’m done arguing—”

“I’m pregnant.”

The words struck him like a punch to the chest.

He stopped.

Everyone stopped.

Vireya’s voice dropped — not softer, but sharper.

“That’s right. I’m carrying your child.”

She stepped closer.

“And unless you grow up, and stop trying to solve every wound with a blade, you will not see this one.”

The weight of it sank into him — heavier than armor, deeper than fear.

Mar turned, staring at her with all the rage, all the confusion, and all the love he didn’t know what to do with.

“You kept it from me.”

“I was going to tell you when it mattered. When it would make you listen.”

“You think threatening me with our child will change anything?”

“No,” she said. “But maybe reminding you what it means to love someone will.”

Mar didn’t speak.

He couldn’t.

The court stood stunned — not by the politics, not by the Sunbrand — but by the war between two people who had once changed the galaxy together.

Sereya was crying silently in the background, Kaen standing beside her like a silent pillar.

Lucan just closed his eyes and rubbed his temple.

Finally, Mar turned to Vireya — his voice low, hollowed out.

“What do you want me to do?”

She stepped forward.

“Stay. Help us build something new. Don’t destroy it before it’s begun.”

## Chapter 34 – The Weight of Silence

Point of View: Sereya

Three weeks.

That’s how long it had been since she left the Dominion — since she stood before a throne of enemies and nearly gave herself to peace.

Since her father stood in the flames of the court and swore to burn it all down for her.

Since her mother shattered the room with four impossible words.

“I’m pregnant with his.”

And now, back on Concord, everything felt... muted.

Even the sky seemed duller, its colors washed in the pale glow of politics.

Sereya sat behind the marble pillars of the Concord Senate gallery, surrounded by aides, guards, and whispers. The chamber floor below was alive with debate — words flung like spears, masked in velvet diplomacy.

“We cannot condone a binding arrangement with a former enemy—”

“The proposal is not a surrender. It’s a strategy—”

“She’s twelve, for stars’ sake!”

“And also the most powerful political bridge the Concord has ever had.”

The shouting went on.

Sereya said nothing.

Kaen stood just behind her, silent as ever. The dog—her massive guardian-beast—lay curled at her feet, ears flicking at every spike in volume.

She wasn’t sure what she hated more: the way they talked about her like a symbol, or the way no one asked what she wanted anymore.

Her mother hadn’t said much, not publicly. Vireya had simply returned, attended meetings, and kept her expression carved in marble. The pregnancy was still a private matter — for now.

Her father had vanished the moment they landed. She hadn’t seen him since.

That, somehow, stung more than anything.

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“—it would set a dangerous precedent for the Concord to endorse political marriages with a regime responsible for war crimes—”

“—and yet, if we don’t act, the cycle continues! Have you all forgotten Aegiron? Harvest? How many more battles must we fight to protect your pride?”

“—the child was coerced—”

“—the child was braver than any of you!”

The Senate hall was boiling over.

To Sereya, it all sounded the same.

Her hands curled into fists on the carved wooden railing of the viewing gallery, her nails digging small crescents into the polished grain. Her throat was tight. Her temples throbbed.

“I want to go home,” she whispered.

Kaen looked at her, blinking once.

“Home?”

She nodded.

“Now.”

For a long moment, he said nothing.

Then he gave a small nod.

“We’ll leave through the private corridor.”

---

An hour later — The Apartment in Concordia’s Inner Spire

The silence of home was deafening.

She threw herself onto the couch, curled up with the dog beside her. Kaen lingered near the kitchen, his armor half-removed, unsure whether to stand guard or retreat.

The door opened.

Vireya entered, shoulders tight with tension, a data-slate tucked under her arm. She froze as she saw them — Sereya’s tear-streaked face, Kaen’s careful watch.

“You left the gallery,” she said softly.

“It wasn’t helping.”

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Vireya sighed and crossed the room, brushing Sereya's hair gently behind her ear before sitting beside her.

"They don't know what they want yet," she murmured. "But they'll listen. Eventually."

Sereya turned her head, voice small.

"Is the baby going to be a boy or a girl?"

Vireya smiled faintly. "I don't know yet."

A pause.

"Where's Father?"

The air in the room shifted.

Kaen looked down.

Vireya tensed.

"Kaen?" Sereya said, sitting up now. "Where is he?"

Kaen hesitated. The dog looked between them all, sensing something wrong.

"Kaen."

He finally looked her in the eye. "No one's seen him since we returned from Dominion space."

Silence.

Sereya stood up. Her voice cracked.

"He just left? Again?"

Vireya reached for her, but Sereya pulled away and hurried to her room. The door slid shut behind her — not a slam, but somehow louder than one.

Kaen exhaled, long and slow.

Vireya leaned forward, burying her face in her hands.

"I should have known he'd run."

Kaen said nothing.

He didn't have to.

They both felt it — the cold, hollow absence that Mar always left behind.

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The stars outside Sereya's window were blurred by the tears in her eyes.  
She lay curled beneath the covers, the dog resting at the foot of the bed like a silent sentinel.  
Her room was dark, still, empty—just like the spaces in her heart that used to be filled with her father's stories, his strength, his warmth.  
She didn't hear the door open.  
Didn't hear the footsteps at first.  
But then—  
“Sereya?”  
A voice. Slurred. Cracked.  
She sat up sharply.  
There he was.  
Mar.  
Stumbling slightly, his cloak half-wrapped around his shoulders, hair a mess, eyes rimmed red.  
“I... I didn't leave,” he mumbled. “Not really. I just... I couldn't... I'm no good at this.”  
Sereya stared, unsure whether to be afraid, angry, or relieved.  
He swayed, trying to focus. “I love you, starling. Always did. Even before I knew. I can't... I won't let them have you. I tried to stay away. Thought it was better.”  
He slumped down to one knee beside her bed.  
“I can fight armies. I can stop fleets. But I don't know how to be a father...”  
Tears ran down his cheeks.  
The dog stirred, ears twitching, but didn't move. As if it sensed something sacred in the moment.  
The door opened again.  
Vireya.  
She stopped cold in the doorway, taking in the scene — Mar, broken and drunk on grief and guilt, Sereya frozen with confusion, pain, and love.  
She moved to Mar and dropped to her knees beside him.  
“You idiot,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around him. “You absolute fool.”  
He wept against her shoulder.  
“I thought I'd lost everything... again.”  
Vireya kissed his forehead. “You didn't. You just keep trying to.”  
Kaen appeared in the doorway behind them, face carved in stone.  
“Is she alright?” he asked quietly.  
Sereya nodded.  
“Yeah,” she whispered. “She's alright.”  
For now.

## Chapter 35 – The Long Night

### Point of View: Vireya

The first light of dawn stretched across the skyline of Concordia, turning the tall towers to glass and fire.

Inside their private quarters, the world remained still.

Mar lay asleep, his head resting against her shoulder, his arms loose around her waist as if afraid to let go even in sleep. His breathing was steady now. Softer. Like the storm inside him had finally, if only briefly, passed.

Vireya had not slept.

She simply watched him.

He hadn't spoken much at first — just drunken rambles and half-choked apologies. But as the night deepened, his words became clearer, more vulnerable. He told her of dreams he couldn't forget. Of Aegiron. Of Harvest. Of the weight he carried every time he looked at their daughter.

He told her that being a soldier was easy.

But being a father? That was war of another kind.

And still — beneath all the pain and pride and anger — he wanted to try.

He wanted to be better.

That was more than she ever thought she'd get from him.

She gently shifted a loose strand of hair from his face.

"You always carry everything like it's your fault," she whispered. "But you don't have to carry it alone."

His grip on her tightened slightly, even in sleep.

She rested her chin atop his head, closing her eyes just for a moment.

We'll figure this out, she thought. We must.

Mar stirred.

The tension in his shoulders shifted first, followed by a slow breath and the twitch of a scarred brow.

He blinked, squinting against the soft light of morning spilling through the tall windows.

"Still here," he mumbled.

"I considered throwing you out the airlock," Vireya murmured, brushing her fingers through his hair. "But the weight on your soul might've torn a hole in the ship."

He chuckled, but it faded quickly.

"I made a mess, didn't I?"

"You made a scene," she said, sitting upright as he rolled off her and stretched, groaning.

"That's putting it mildly," he muttered, rubbing his face. "What did Sereya say?"

"Nothing. She was too shocked. She curled up with the dog and went to sleep. Kaen hasn't left the hallway."

Mar leaned forward, elbows on knees, and stared at the floor.

"I don't know how to fix this."

"We start by not making it worse."

"I threatened a foreign court with a soulblade."

"And cried on your daughter's bedroom floor," she added gently.

He looked up at her, eyes tired but honest.

"I don't want to be the weapon they made me."

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Vireya smiled sadly.

“Then stop swinging every time your heart aches.”

A silence settled between them — not uncomfortable, but fragile.

“So,” she said, straightening her tunic. “What do we do next?”

“We go to Sparta,” Mar said after a pause. “Find the source of the money that paid for your assassination attempt. Expose whoever inside is trying to start another war.”

Vireya nodded.

“And after that?”

He reached for her hand.

“I come home. For good this time.”

She didn’t smile.

She just leaned forward and kissed him softly on the forehead.

“Then go. And come back.”

The door hissed open.

“Well,” Sereya said, arms folded and a sly smile on her lips, “at least you’re not naked this time.”

Mar looked up, eyes narrowing with mock offense.

“Leave and come back in thirty seconds. I can fix that.”

Sereya laughed — a real laugh, for the first time in weeks — as she crossed her arms tighter to stop from folding over.

Vireya sighed and shot Mar a scolding glare.

“Seriously?”

He shrugged, smirking. “She started it.”

Sereya walked over and leaned against the edge of the bedframe, still grinning.

“I was going to ask if you were okay. But now I’m worried you’ve suffered a brain injury.”

“That’s just my personality,” Mar said.

“Oh, Ancients help us,” Vireya muttered, rubbing her temples.

They all chuckled — awkwardly, but genuinely — and for a moment, the air in the room felt lighter. Not fixed. Not healed. But lighter.

Mar looked at his daughter.

“Come here.”

She stepped forward, and he pulled her into a hug — one arm tight around her, the other gently resting on her head. She didn’t resist.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said softly.

“You better not,” she whispered. “Next time, I’m locking the door.”

“Rude,” he said.

“Effective.”

They both smiled, and Vireya sat beside them, resting her hand on Mar’s shoulder.

And for the first time in a long time, they were all in the same room — together, bruised, stubborn, broken in places... but together.

The sunlight had warmed the floor by the time breakfast was forgotten and quiet replaced the chaos of the last few days.

Sereya lay on the couch with the dog curled at her feet, flipping through a datapad she wasn’t really reading. Her father was sitting nearby, cross-legged on the floor, disassembling a tactical knife and putting it back together with meditative focus.

Vireya stood at the kitchen counter, slicing fruit with a precision that only came from having fought in a dozen political arenas and still making time for home.

“So...” Mar said without looking up. “What’s the punishment?”

“For what?” Vireya asked, not turning around.

“Sneaking aboard your ship. Nearly ruining galactic diplomacy. Scaring my daughter half to death. Giving the Concord Chancellor a mild stroke...”

“I’m still deciding,” she said. “But I’m open to suggestions.”

“Grounding?” Sereya offered.

“He’d enjoy that too much,” Vireya replied.

“Washing the dog?” Mar said.

“We like the dog,” both women said in unison.

They paused.

Then all three laughed — and in that laughter was something rare: peace.

It didn’t last long, of course.

Nothing ever did.

But for now, it was enough.

Mar leaned back and looked at them both.

“Whatever happens next,” he said quietly, “I’m staying until the end.”

Vireya gave him a long look — not doubt, not scorn.

Just knowing.

“Then the end better be worth it.”

The hall smelled of polished stone, filtered air, and stale ambition.

Vireya stepped into the Senate chamber like a gladiator returning to the arena. No applause.

Just datapads, whispers, and the persistent murmur of galactic fatigue.

She hadn’t even taken off her overcoat before aides were handing her files, reports, and lists of demands long enough to stretch from Sparta to the Outer Colonies.

“Welcome back, Senator,” muttered Chancellor Erech Solas, his voice clipped. “Hope your domestic chaos has calmed.”

“Hope your spineless neutrality has too,” she muttered back, just as sharp.

The man flinched, but said nothing more.

She walked to her seat, ignoring the stares. If her presence had been controversial before, now it was pure volatility. The consort of a Spartan war hero, mother of a girl once nearly married to a Dominion heir, and now — secretly, silently — pregnant again with a second child tied to the same storm.

And yet, here she was. Again.

Holding the line.

“Let’s begin,” she said, taking the floor.

The first few hours were a familiar symphony of demands:

- The Kelari Delegation wanted guaranteed ownership of the Ashan Belt mining sector, citing ancient mineral rites.
- The Highborn of Verenthos insisted on reparations for Dominion attacks, as if the Concord itself had spilled the blood.
- The Sildari States demanded a demilitarized corridor between their colonies and Dominion space — enforced, no less, by Spartan fleets they didn’t trust.
- And the Banking Guilds — always them — pushed for war debt restructuring, promising support in exchange for influence.

“You don’t negotiate peace,” Vireya muttered between clenched teeth during a brief recess, “you extort it.”

Her aide handed her another datapad. “This is nothing compared to what’s coming if the Dominion demands access to the Concord Council.”

Vireya rubbed her forehead.

Mar was gone — back to Sparta, back to swords and shadows and his endless chase for traitors.

She missed him already.

Not because she needed protection.

But because the moment she was alone in the arena again, she remembered what it felt like to be surrounded by wolves.

The doors closed behind her with a sharp hiss.

This wasn't a Senate session now — this was something else. The air in the private council chamber was cooler, denser, and far more dangerous.

Present were five high-ranking senators, two chancellery aides, and an envoy from the Concord Intelligence Bureau. Each held a face like stone and a voice like silk.

"We've received preliminary notes from the Dominion," one of the aides began. "They're not asking for land. Not officially."

"That's not a good thing," Vireya said flatly.

"No," the Intelligence envoy agreed. "It means they're waiting for us to offer it."

"Or for someone to slip and make a deal they can weaponize," she added.

Silence followed.

"And what of the incident with your daughter?" asked Senator Dromir of the Crelan Sector, his voice cold. "What guarantee do we have that the Dominion wasn't behind it?"

"You want me to guarantee the absence of a plot?" Vireya snapped. "You're in the wrong line of work."

He flinched — just enough to satisfy her.

She stood and placed both hands on the table, voice calm but razor-edged.

"The Dominion will test us. Push our limits. Smile while drawing lines in invisible ink. But if we cower, if we start slicing our own territory and principles to appease them, we will not build peace — we will only delay another war."

"Then what do you propose?" one asked quietly.

Vireya met each of their gazes in turn.

"We hold. We prepare. We listen. And above all — we stop pretending this isn't going to get worse before it gets better."

The room remained silent.

Until finally, the Chancellor's senior aide nodded slowly.

"We'll keep you in the loop, Senator. But understand this — not everyone on this council believes you can speak for the Concord while sleeping in Sparta's shadow."

Vireya smiled.

"Then they haven't been paying attention."

Vireya returned to her private office in the eastern wing of the Concordia Spire, flanked by a single guard and her aide, Kilar.

She was tired. Her body ached with the strain of diplomacy, of secrets, of waiting.

"You have a scheduled visitor," Kilar said as he checked the datapad. "A financier. Claims he represents an independent investment house interested in backing your infrastructure proposal. No record of previous meetings."

Vireya blinked.

"Name?"

"Aurel Tenvar."

Not familiar.

But political money didn't wait for introductions — and if someone wanted to invest in roads and cities rather than weapons, she was listening.

"Let him in."

Kilar nodded, and moments later, a tall, broad-shouldered man entered the office. He wore the robes of a Concord trade envoy — flowing, understated, expensive. His face was clean-shaven, his eyes sharp but oddly warm.

He bowed, the gesture practiced and precise.

“Senator Vireya. It is an honor.”

She didn’t return the smile.

“You’re here to discuss investment?”

“I’m here,” he said smoothly, “to offer support. True support. Political, financial — and strategic.”

He moved closer, but respectfully. His presence filled the room in a way she couldn’t place — as if gravity bent subtly around him.

“I represent an alliance of interests. Citizens who believe in peace, in rebuilding — in a galaxy not ruled by fear or Spartan weapons.”

“Funny,” she said dryly, “I seem to recall Spartan weapons saving half the Concord from Dominion incursions.”

“And nearly dragging it into a civil war,” he countered, just as calmly.

A beat of silence.

Then he softened.

“I’m not here to argue. I’ve watched your efforts. You’re different, Senator. You don’t posture. You build. The galaxy needs more of that. I can help.”

Vireya narrowed her eyes. Something was... off. The cadence of his words. The way he spoke as if he’d been watching for longer than politics allowed.

Still, he hadn’t slipped. Not once.

“What exactly are you offering?” she asked.

“Funds. Security contacts. Political leverage.” He smiled. “Whatever you need to shift the balance in your favor.”

“And what do you want in return?”

The man tilted his head slightly, and for a moment, the warmth in his expression vanished — like a curtain drawn back just an inch too far.

“Only for peace to succeed.”

Her instincts buzzed. This man was powerful. Trained. Hidden. He played the role too well. But she nodded.

“I’ll consider your offer, Mister Tenvar.”

“That’s all I ask.”

He turned to leave, then paused at the doorway.

“Do give my regards to your daughter.”

Vireya’s stomach dropped.

“You never mentioned her.”

He looked back over his shoulder.

“Didn’t I?”

And then he was gone.

## Chapter 36 – Blood in the Stone

### Mar POV

The stars stretched around the Phoenix, each one a blade on the edge of his thoughts.

Mar stood at the bridge, hands clasped behind his back, the weight of the command mantle heavy across his shoulders. He wore no helmet, no armor beyond the black-gold half-cloak of the Phoenix Legion, the sigil of the House of Mar stitched in crimson across his chest.



The warship hummed with restrained fury beneath his boots — four years of engineering, half a fleet's worth of weaponry, and a command crew loyal enough to die with a word. But none of that mattered now.

Not if someone had dared to target her.

He stared through the reinforced viewport as the slipstream corridor stabilized ahead — streaks of light folding like silk into a path through space. Behind him, the bridge crew moved with silence and precision, trained by his hand. But every sound was distant. Every breath — a countdown.

“ETA to Sparta?” he asked.

“One hour, forty-two minutes,” his navigator replied. “No pursuit. No Dominion signals in range.”

Mar nodded.

Of course there weren't.

This wasn't Dominion work. Not directly. This was someone closer. Someone who knew when she'd be alone. Someone who wanted her silenced, but not just for politics. No — this was personal.

And whoever it was had made the worst mistake of their life.

He turned from the viewport and crossed to his command console, opening the encrypted data streams Vireya had forwarded from Concordia. Senate logs. Security footage. A financial trace of weapon shipments rerouted from black-market caches. He skimmed them all in silence.

There. A name.

A trail of credits moving through shell corporations — one registered to a business front on Sparta.

The coordinates were old. Falsified.

But the signature?

Spartan.

The betrayal was internal.

“Helm,” he said, voice low. “Update course. We're not heading to the palace.”

“Sir?”

“W The Phoenix never broke orbit.

Mar left the ship aboard a cloaked Ember-class dropcraft, the kind used for deep recon and black ops insertions. It was silent, sleek, and unmarked — no House of Mar crest, no Phoenix Legion paint, nothing to give away its origin.

Just like him.

He wore a civilian cloak now, hood drawn low, the deep charcoal fabric disguising his height and the unmistakable weight of his Spartan frame. The Sunbrand — far too distinct, far too loud — remained on the ship, locked behind six layers of biometric encryption.

He hated leaving it behind.

It was like walking without a heartbeat.

But this wasn't a mission of force. Not yet.

This was a hunt.

The shuttle touched down just beyond the outer districts of Sparta's capital, nestled into the cliffs beneath the city's ancient walls. He stepped out into the shadows of old stone — the kind that remembered blood, and whispered it back to those who listened.

The alley smelled of metal, wet dust, and ash trees blooming out of season. Somewhere nearby, a street vendor called out to no one. Old songs played faintly from a radio in a market window. The planet was alive — unaware.

He moved like a shadow down the forgotten paths, passing rusted conduits, sensor towers disguised as light poles. Even now, he knew the undercurrent of Sparta better than most. He'd memorized every backstreet, every tunnel, every outpost the Senate didn't list on public maps.

His destination was a small flat nestled above a defunct fusion battery hub. The building was older than the Republic itself. He climbed the stairwell slowly, deliberately.

He knocked once.

Twice.

Pause.

Then again.

The door hissed open. A woman in a wrinkled utility uniform peered out.

Sharp brown eyes. Greying hair tied back in a tight knot. She looked tired — but not weak.

"You're taller than I remember," she said dryly.

"You've shrunk," he replied.

She stepped aside to let him in.

Intelligence Commander Sabryn Telos — once the most feared eyes in the Spartan shadow network. Officially retired. Unofficially watching everything that mattered.

"I assume this isn't a social call?" she asked, pouring a steaming mug of something that smelled like scorched herbs and black tea.

"Someone tried to kill my wife," Mar said.

She raised a brow. "That narrows it down to... half the galaxy."

"They were Spartan."

That made her pause.

"You're sure?"

He passed her the datapad.

"A funding trail. Black channel routes. Weapon caches. It all ends here — on Sparta. And someone in the House of Lords signed off the movement."

She stared at the data for a long time, then whistled low.

"Well. That's bold."

"I want names."

"You'll get them," she said. "But this... won't be simple. These kinds of players? They don't leave fingerprints. They leave corpses."

Mar's voice dropped.

“Then we’ll dig through both.”

we’re going hunting.”

The room wasn’t much. A single terminal, an outdated holotable, and half a dozen locked crates that hummed with forbidden tech. But Telos knew how to make the most of shadows. She moved like the past hadn’t caught up to her yet — hands steady, mind sharper than ever. Mar leaned over the terminal beside her, his hood thrown back now that they were safe inside. The cloak was draped on a chair, revealing the underlayer of his off-duty field gear. Nothing regal. Nothing that screamed ‘Prince.’ Only a man on a mission.

“You sure the data trail ends here?” she asked, scanning the code strings.

“No,” Mar replied. “But I’m sure someone made it look like it ends here. That’s the trick.

Whoever this is, they buried the trail under six layers of ghost shell companies — one registered to a fishing colony that sank three decades ago.”

“Classic misdirection,” Telos muttered. “They built the lie backwards.”

“And expected no one would follow it forward.”

He tapped the side of the console, fingers drumming in a rhythm only someone trained would recognize — a tactical cadence meant to sync multiple overlays. The map shifted. Red lines. Ghost pings. Intercepted communications. Patterns began to form — faint, but real.

“This here,” Mar said, pointing to a seemingly dead node. “It reroutes through three old syndicate channels, then lands in the hands of a tech guild based in the outer hills. Not military. Not official.”

“And not being watched,” Telos said with a grim smile.

They worked for hours. Side by side. A prince and a spymaster. Sifting through the garbage of the Republic’s shadow networks.

Twice, Mar had to bypass encrypted firewalls set by ancient Concord watchdogs. Telos let him. She watched how he worked — calm, methodical, dangerous. There was a reason they feared the Phoenix Legion. And its commander.

“You’ve grown,” she said eventually. “Not just taller.”

“Aegiron will do that to you.”

“No. That city made you sharper. And heavier.”

“You mean older.”

“I mean dangerous.”

Mar found it then.

A file hidden within a shell transmission — disguised as junk data.

Not military.

Senatorial.

Encrypted with a very specific seal.

He stared at it.

“This shouldn’t exist,” he muttered.

“What is it?”

“Private correspondence between a sitting Concord senator and a shell operative on Sparta.

Dated six months before the attempt on Vireya.”

Telos moved beside him.

“Who’s the senator?”

Mar’s jaw tightened.

“I don’t know yet. But this seal... it’s old. Personal. A family crest — altered.”

Telos narrowed her eyes.

“You’re telling me a noble house sold the information that nearly got your wife killed?”

“Worse,” Mar said. “They tried to make it look like Dominion work. To push us into a war we’re not ready for.”

The silence that followed was heavy.

Then Telos stood and walked to the far wall, unlocking a hidden panel.

“If you’re going after them,” she said, revealing a slender case and tossing it toward him, “you’ll want to take this.”

Mar caught it. Opened it.

A dagger.

Old. Spartan-forged. Not as famous as the Sunbrand, but every inch as lethal in the right hands.

“For close work,” she said. “Quiet justice.”

He sheathed it without a word.

“We keep digging,” he said. “We find the name. And then...”

“Then you do what the House of Mar does best.”

Hours passed.

The deeper they dug, the more the conspiracy unraveled — not in clear lines, but in half-forgotten fragments. Hidden packets buried in scrubbed financial logs. Transmissions marked as “failed bursts” that only Telos’s decrypted sniffers could even detect. And behind it all, an echo — a pattern that didn’t belong.

It started with a symbol.

A geometric seal embedded inside the metadata of a forged personnel manifest. Simple, subtle — six interlocking rings surrounding a single flame.

Telos froze when it loaded.

“That’s not a military insignia,” she whispered.

Mar leaned closer. “What is it?”

Telos didn’t answer. Not at first. She pulled up another file — a deep archive, accessible only through old Concord security clearances that hadn’t been used in over two centuries.

There, in a forgotten corner of the net, it appeared again.

The symbol.

Six rings and a flame.

Underneath:

“Council of Flame — Provisional Oversight Authority.”

“They were a secret concord faction,” she said. “Operated unofficially. Formed during the early days of the Republic. Their mission was to ‘preserve order by any means necessary.’”

“Authoritarians,” Mar muttered.

“Worse. Idealists with power and no checks. They infiltrated senates, military boards, even Ancient enclaves. They believed the Concord couldn’t survive without manipulation.”

“What happened to them?”

“Publicly? Disbanded. Shamed. Outlawed by the Fifth Charter Reform.” She paused. “But no one ever found the last six members.”

Mar’s eyes darkened.

“They went underground.”

“It would explain everything. The redirection of funds. The Concord’s refusal to act during the Aegiron crisis. The attempt on Vireya.”

“They want war,” Mar said, the realization cold and sharp. “They want chaos. To rebuild the Concord theirway.”

Telos turned slowly to face him.

“And if they’re still active... they’ll be watching you.”

Mar stood in silence, the flame icon still hovering above the holotable.

He felt the Aetherion stir — a ripple, not of danger... but recognition.

The fire inside him met the flame in that symbol like a warning.

Or a challenge.

“Then let them watch,” he said. “Because I’m done reacting.”

He pulled the dagger from his belt, slammed it into the console beside the icon.

“It’s time we start hunting them.”

Night blanketed the capital like a shroud.

Mar moved through the city like smoke — a shadow among shadows, drifting through locked doors and forgotten tunnels carved beneath the palace centuries ago. Few even remembered they existed.

But he had lived here.

He knew every blind spot. Every step that creaked. Every hidden latch carved into the stone.

And now, like a ghost returning to his grave, he crept through the bowels of his childhood home.

He emerged beneath the western wing of the royal estate — the ancestral quarter where only bloodlines slept. The halls were dimly lit, guarded by only old marble and tradition. He walked without sound, the weight of discovery pressing against his spine like a second blade. At last, he reached her chamber.

The door creaked open.

Soft light spilled across the floor. His great-grandmother lay curled beneath thin silk sheets, white hair fanned like snow over the pillow, her breath calm and slow.

Mar stepped inside.

The moment his boot touched the rug, her eyes snapped open.

“If you were an assassin,” she murmured, “you’d be dead already.”

“If I were an assassin,” Mar said, lowering his hood, “you’d still be asleep.”

She sat up slowly, blinking away dreams, peering through the shadows. Then — a soft chuckle.

“Gods above. You still sneak through the palace like you’re eight.”

“It worked then,” he said. “It works now.”

“I see the tact hasn’t changed either.”

She reached for a velvet robe, wrapping it around her thin frame. Despite her age, there was still fire in her — the same sharpness that once steered Sparta through the fallout of four rebellions and two Concord crises. The same eyes that had stared down kings and senators alike.

“What is it, Mar?”

He stepped forward and set the holopad on her table. The symbol hovered there — six rings and a flame.

She went still.

Her breath caught for just a moment.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t find that.”

“You knew.”

“I suspected,” she said, eyes narrowing. “But no proof. Nothing that could be used.”

“What is it?”

She hesitated. Then looked him dead in the eyes.

“A mistake. Made centuries ago. By men who believed they could save the galaxy by breaking it first.”

Mar frowned.

“The Council of Flame.”

She nodded slowly.

“I was young — still training for court. I heard whispers. My father... your great-grandfather... he warned me. Said they were everywhere. That if I ever found them, I must burn the trail, not follow it.”

“Why?”

“Because they do not stop. They do not forgive. And if they learn you’re coming, they’ll burn your future to protect their past.”

Mar stepped closer, voice low.

“Someone tried to kill Vireya.”

Her gaze hardened.

“Then you already understand.”

He nodded.

“Do you know who’s behind it?”

“No names. Only one truth.”

She stood and walked to her ancient bookshelf, pulling free a leather-bound tome. From within it, a page — old, frail, but preserved in crystal.

She passed it to him.

A seal — not digital. Wax, melted over parchment. The same flame ringed in six.

And beneath it...

A name.

A Spartan name.

He looked at her.

“You’ve had this for decades?”

“I prayed it would never mean anything.”

He read the name again.

And something inside him cracked.

“They’re inside the palace.”

“Then you’d better find out how deep they’ve buried themselves.”

She laid a hand on his arm.

“Be careful, Mar. This fire isn’t like the Sunbrand. It doesn’t forge heroes.”

“What does it do?”

“It devours them.”

## Chapter 37 – The Weight of Silence

### Kaen POV

Concordia never truly slept.

The capital planet of the Galactic Concord buzzed with endless motion — from the golden spires of the Senate district to the low hum of patrol ships slicing between orbital rings. But within the high garden balconies of the royal residence, silence held its own kind of command.

Kaen stood at attention just outside the archway to Sereya’s quarters, eyes fixed on nothing. A pair of guards passed by, barely glancing at him. They didn’t need to. Everyone on Concord knew who he was now — the Spartan lieutenant who single-handedly took down Dominion soldiers to protect the daughter of Vireya and Mar.

And yet...

It didn't feel like a victory.

He could still hear Aerin's voice — mocking him. See Sereya's terrified face in that Dominion chamber. Feel the broken bones in his ribs, barely healed under the crisp uniform he now wore.

He'd failed.

He hadn't stopped it. He hadn't prevented it.

The only reason she wasn't still trapped in some gilded cage was because Kaelira — of all people — had intervened.

He hated the thought.

"You're brooding again," came Sereya's voice from behind.

He didn't turn immediately. She walked past him into the open sunlight of the garden terrace, wearing a loose white robe over training gear, her hair tied back into a braid laced with a royal blue thread.

He followed silently.

The dog — her beast — padded along beside her, massive and loyal, resting its muzzle against her leg as she sat on the edge of the fountain. Kaen remained standing, arms crossed, scanning the skyline.

"The Senate's still debating the peace terms," she said. "Mother's been in chambers for hours. I don't think they even noticed we're gone."

"Good," he said.

"Do you ever stop guarding me?"

"No."

"Even when I'm sleeping?"

A pause.

"Especially when you're sleeping."

She smirked slightly.

"You're worse than my mother."

"Your mother didn't nearly die twice in one month."

That silenced her.

For a long moment, the only sound was the soft trickle of water in the fountain.

Then she said, quietly:

“You think I’m weak.”

“No.”

“Then why won’t you train me properly?”

He finally turned.

“Because if I do,” he said, “you’ll stop relying on me. And if something ever happens to you, I won’t forgive myself.”

She stood, stepping toward him, anger rising in her eyes.

“I’m not a child.”

“You’re twelve, Sereya.”

“And I’m the daughter of two of the most powerful people in the galaxy. You think the Dominion cares how old I am? You think the Concord will?”

He didn’t answer.

She stepped closer.

“You said you’d protect me. So do it. Make me stronger. Teach me. Because if you don’t... the next time, I will be weak.”

Kaen looked down at her — and saw not a child, but the future. Her mother’s fire. Her father’s will. The weight of a destiny too large for her shoulders — and yet, she carried it anyway.

He gave a short nod.

“Tomorrow. Sunrise. Full drills.”

Her smirk returned.

“That’s more like it.”

She turned back toward the garden, the dog trailing behind. Kaen watched her go, a knot of emotion coiling in his chest — pride, fear, something deeper he didn’t dare name.

He whispered it under his breath, so softly no one could hear.

“I won’t fail you again.”



The garden terrace had been cleared by dawn.  
Stone benches pushed aside. Fountains deactivated. Protective shields engaged. It was no longer a place of serenity, but a Spartan training yard reborn — right in the heart of Concordia.

Kaen stood in the center, shirt off, breath slow and centered. His stance wide, grounded, calculating. Across from him, Sereya adjusted the thin wraps on her knuckles, her brow furrowed in focus.

The dog lay off to the side, tail twitching with anticipation like it could sense the intensity in the air.

“First stance,” Kaen barked.

Sereya moved — fast, clean — settling into her guard.

“Second.”

She shifted again, the way he’d taught her. Fluid, sharp.

“Strike.”

She lunged — a sharp jab toward his ribs.

He parried easily and tapped her wrist.

“Too slow.”

She reset, gritting her teeth.

“Again.”

She struck again — quicker this time.

Kaen blocked, stepped in, and slapped her wrist away.

“Too wide.”

“I’m trying!”

“Trying gets you killed.”

She came at him harder now. Kaen matched every strike, correcting with sharp nudges and firm redirections. Sweat beaded on her forehead. Her breath came faster. But she didn’t stop. She wanted to prove herself.

To him. To the galaxy. To herself.

“Again,” he snapped.

She stepped in. Feinted left. Thrusted right.

Kaen countered on instinct — pivoted and struck her shoulder hard with an open palm.

Sereya stumbled.

Pain flashed across her face.

And her eyes blazed.

“That was too hard,” she hissed.

“You hesitated,” he growled back. “The enemy won’t wait for you to fix your form.”

“Then don’t hold back.”

“You’re not ready.”

“I was born ready!”

She launched at him — full speed now, raw fury and precision in every motion. Kaen moved to counter — but she shifted mid-strike, dropped low, swept his leg from under him—  
—and slammed him flat on his back.

For a moment, silence.

Then—

“OHHHHHH!”

A chorus of cheers erupted from the edge of the terrace.

Several members of the Phoenix Squadron’s escort detail — off-duty Spartans watching from the balcony above — burst into laughter, some banging fists on the railings.

“She floored him!”

“Did you see that sweep?!”

Kaen blinked up at the sky, momentarily stunned. Sereya stood over him, breathing hard, a smug smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

“Told you I was ready.”

Kaen stared at her, then grunted as he sat up.

“Lucky shot.”

“Don’t lie. You trained me well.”

He paused. Gave the faintest nod.

“Training’s not over.”

“Good,” she said, turning toward the crowd. “Because I’m just getting started.”

As the soldiers continued to cheer, Kaen rose to his feet, hiding the quiet smile that betrayed his pride.

She was growing up fast.

Maybe too fast.

But right now — she was still his to protect.

And she was finally strong enough to help protect herself.

The sun dipped low behind Concordia’s glass spires, casting long golden shadows over the terrace. What began as a training session had become something else entirely — laughter echoing off marble walls, footwork turning into dance, and serious sparring traded for playful jabs and improvised challenges.

Sereya ducked a half-hearted swing and leapt onto the garden bench.

“You’re slowing down, Lieutenant,” she teased, twirling her practice staff.

Kaen grunted. “I’m pacing myself. Wouldn’t want to humiliate a child twice in one day.”

“You mean three times,” she grinned, pointing to the spot he’d hit earlier with a light bruise.

He smirked and lunged again — she dodged, laughing, then slipped as the dog jumped between them, barking wildly and wagging its tail as if to join in.

Sereya went tumbling onto the soft grass, her braid splayed behind her and her arms out in surrender.

“Okay! Okay! You win!”

Kaen stood over her, panting lightly. He extended a hand.

“That’s the first smart thing you’ve said today.”

She took it, still laughing as he helped her up.

It was a moment.

Not warrior and charge.

Not soldier and princess.

Just two young Spartans sharing the quiet joy of earned trust, of shared burdens slowly lightened.

Then—

“That’s enough.”

They both turned to see Vireya standing at the archway, arms crossed, still in her formal robes, a single brow raised in that way that meant you’ve had your fun, now listen to me.

“The stars are up, you two look like walking bruises, and dinner’s been waiting for an hour.”

Sereya’s stomach growled audibly.

“Oops.”

Kaen shifted, straightening his stance and trying — failing — to look like he hadn’t just spent the last hour sword-fencing with a twelve-year-old barefoot in the royal gardens.

Vireya sighed and smiled gently, a softness in her eyes that neither of them could miss.

“Come on. Before the dog eats your share.”

Sereya looked at Kaen, then back at her mother.

“Can Kaen join us?”

“Of course,” Vireya said, already turning away. “But if he puts his feet on my table again, he’s back to eating with the guards.”

Kaen chuckled.

“Understood, Senator.”

As they walked toward the palace together — girl, protector, and mother — the lights of Concordia glittered above, and for the first time in what felt like weeks...

...Kaen allowed himself to feel like things might just be okay.

If only for tonight.

The palace halls were quiet again. Moonlight spilled through the arched skylights, painting silver streaks across the floor as Kaen stepped from Sereya’s room and gently closed the door behind him.

She had barely made it to her bed before collapsing in a tangle of braids, bruises, and laughter. The dog had curled up beside her, its great bulk now snoring softly at the foot of the bed.

Kaen stood there a moment, letting the silence settle.

Then—

“She’s never slept that soundly after a day like this.”

Kaen turned.

Vireya stood nearby, arms folded, the same tired grace she carried in the Senate somehow even more pronounced in the dim hallway light. She looked at him for a long moment — not like a senator, or a mother sizing up a soldier.

But like a woman trying to read someone’s soul.

“She’s strong,” Kaen said quietly. “She learns fast. Pushes herself harder than any cadet I’ve trained.”

“She always has,” Vireya replied. “Even when she was little. But... something’s changed.”

Kaen nodded, unsure if he was meant to agree or deny it.

They walked together through the corridor until they reached the private balcony overlooking the city lights of Concordia. There, beneath the stars, Vireya leaned on the railing and motioned for him to speak.

“Tell me something,” she said. “Something about you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Before the Academy. Before Phoenix. Before all... this.”

Kaen hesitated.

No one ever asked about him.

“I was born in the highlands of Sparta,” he said. “Small village. Harsh winters. My father ran drills for the planetary guard. My mother made weapons — blades, mostly. Not for ceremony. For survival.”

“And your name?”

“Kaen. No House. No lineage. Just Kaen.”

Vireya studied him.

“You lied about your age to join the Phoenix Legion, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I was twelve. Told them I was fifteen. They didn’t believe me until I outshot three of their instructors in the same trial.”

She laughed softly, shaking her head.

“You Spartans and your ridiculous drive.”

“It got me here.”

“Yes. It did.”

She turned toward him now, her voice softer.

“You know, she adores you.”

Kaen lowered his gaze.

“She’s my charge. It’s my duty—”

“It’s more than duty, Kaen.”

He looked up.

Vireya’s eyes were sharp — not accusing, but knowing. Ancient and gentle, all at once.

“I know that look. I remember it. That’s how I used to look at Mar when we were young.

Before politics. Before war. Just... awe. Trust. A little bit of danger.”

Kaen’s breath caught.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

She held up a hand.

“No. Don’t apologize. You haven’t done anything wrong. You’ve protected her. You’ve guided her. You’ve given her someone to believe in.”

She looked back out toward the stars.

“That’s what scares me the most.”

They stood in silence for a long while.

Finally, Kaen said:

“If she ever asks... for more... I’ll refuse. No matter what it costs me.”

Vireya turned back to him. Her expression unreadable.

Then, quietly—

“Don’t promise that.”

Kaen blinked.

“What?”

“You don’t know who she’ll become. Or who you’ll be, years from now. Just... protect her.

Love her in the way that keeps her strong.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder.

“That’s all any mother can ask.”

Kaen nodded once, his voice low.

“I will.”

And under the stars of Concordia, with the city silent beneath them and the past too heavy to carry alone, the protector and the mother stood side by side — both knowing that the greatest wars were not fought with blades, but with choices.

## Chapter 38 – Shadows Beneath the Throne

### Vireya POV

The knock came just before the third hour.

Soft. Controlled.

Not the knock of a servant or messenger — this was the knock of someone who did not wait to be invited.

Vireya was already up, seated in her robe at the edge of the small hearth in her study. She hadn’t slept. Not really. Kaen sat across from her, alert despite the hour. He rose without a word and moved to the door.

The moment it opened, Vireya’s breath caught.

Mar.

His cloak was dusted with ash. His eyes — bloodshot, rimmed with sleepless fury. He didn't say a word at first, only stepped in, shutting the door behind him.

Kaen stiffened at the look in his commander's eyes. Whatever Mar had uncovered, it was more than politics. More than revenge.

"You're supposed to be recovering," Vireya said, rising slowly.

"I found them," Mar replied, voice like gravel. "The ones responsible. Not just for the attack on you... but something deeper. Older."

He stepped forward and tossed a projection disc onto the table. A flickering blue image burst to life — a symbol, ancient and angular. A fractured eye woven through with thorns.

Vireya frowned. Kaen narrowed his eyes.

"What is that?" she asked.

"An emblem," Mar said. "From before the modern Concord. Before even Sparta's integration. A hidden faction that once tried to control the Republic from within — in secret. They were purged centuries ago. Or so we were told."

"What's their name?"

Mar hesitated.

"They called themselves the Veilborn."

The room grew colder, even though the fire still crackled softly.

"The credits used to fund your attackers," Mar continued. "They were funneled through shell corporations. Dead ends. But Telos and I traced the source. Every path led back to Sparta. Not the royal family — someone beneath us. Someone within the deep administration."

"A remnant," Vireya said, barely above a whisper.

"Worse. A resurgence."

Kaen stepped forward.

"You're certain?"

"They wear masks now. Symbols hidden in architecture, digital static in broadcast feeds. This wasn't an assassination attempt, Vireya. It was a message."

"Then what do they want?"

Mar finally met her eyes. His were cold. Focused.

"They want the galaxy to forget peace was ever possible."

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A beat of silence passed. Vireya glanced at Kaen, then back to Mar.

“Then we remind them.”

Mar’s eyes stayed locked on the flickering emblem hovering over the table — the twisted sigil of the Veilborn. It cast pale light across his weathered face, sharpening the lines carved there by war, loss, and guilt.

“I don’t know who to trust anymore,” he muttered. “Not in Sparta. Not in the Concord. This group... they’ve hidden in the shadows for centuries. They could be anywhere. In the Senate. The military. Even here.”

Vireya stepped closer, voice firm.

“And since when has that ever stopped you?”

Mar looked up, startled.

“You’ve never let fear rule you,” she said, softer now. “Not when you took on an entire Dominion battalion on Harvest. Not when you raised Avalon from Aegiron’s ashes. You’ve always stood up to bullies, Mar. Even when it cost you everything.”

He gave a sheepish glance, like a scolded child caught in the wrong.

“That was different.”

“No, it wasn’t,” she said, stepping forward and touching his arm. “This is just another fight. One you were born to win.”

A long silence passed between them.

Then she turned to Kaen.

“Kaen, could you stand outside? Give us a moment?”

Kaen gave a crisp nod, though his eyes lingered on Vireya for just a second longer than usual — protective, wary. Then he left the room, the door hissing softly behind him.

Vireya turned back to Mar. Her voice, though still strong, now carried a tremble of something more personal.

“I want the wedding called off.”

Mar blinked.

“What?”

“The deal. The peace treaty. The proposal between Sereya and Aerin. I want it ended.”

“Vireya, you saw the Council. You saw the negotiations. If we pull back now, everything we’ve worked for—”

“—will unravel, yes. I know.”

“Then why?”

She looked at him — really looked at him — and for a moment, she wasn’t the senator, or the Ancient’s daughter, or the mother of Sparta’s heir.

She was just Vireya. The girl he fell in love with under starlight and soft wind.

“Because she deserves more than duty,” she said. “She deserves love. Choice. The same thing we fought for.”

Mar paced, frustrated.

“You think I don’t want that for her? You think this is easy for me?”

“I know it isn’t,” she said. “But she’s twelve, Mar. We’re pushing her down a path she never chose. And if we go through with this... we’re doing exactly what the Veilborn want. Trading freedom for fear. Building peace on chains.”

Mar sighed, rubbing a hand down his face.

“So what’s your plan then?”

“We find another way,” Vireya said. “Lucan’s proven he can walk the Dominion halls. He knows their systems. Their secrets. If we can pull him in — really pull him in — we can outmaneuver this threat without giving up our daughter.”

Mar looked at her for a long moment.

Then he whispered:

“She’ll hate us.”

“Then let her hate us for saving her, not selling her.”

He gave a bitter smile.

“You always were the smart one.”

“And you always needed reminding.”

They stood there, quiet, as the symbol flickered behind them — a whisper of war, of destiny, of shadows still moving in the dark.

But in this moment, they were just two parents.

Trying to do what was right.

They lay beneath the soft starlight pouring in through the high windows of her quarters, the weight of ancient decisions pressing gently between them.

Mar rested on one elbow, gazing at the ceiling, while Vireya sat curled with a datapad against her knees, reviewing last-minute briefs — but neither of them was truly reading. Words passed between them in murmurs, long pauses stretching into quiet understanding.

They spoke of war. Of love. Of sacrifice.

Of Sereya.

And as the hours slipped past, something unspoken became solid — a united front.

They would go to the Senate.

Together.

Morning came with ceremony.

The Senate Hall of Concordia was a cathedral of glass and gold, banners of a thousand worlds fluttering against the skylights. Senators took their places on spiraling terraces, murmurs cascading like a tide through the amphitheater.

But the murmuring stopped as Vireya entered the chamber... with Mar at her side.

Straight-backed. Stoic. Every bit the warrior prince of Sparta.

A few senators straightened uncomfortably. Others whispered behind hands. Some glared openly — reminders of battles past, blood debts unpaid. But a great many sat up straighter, intrigued by the display.

They hadn’t seen Mar like this before.

Not as a warlord. But as a father.

The Speaker called the session to order, but Vireya didn’t wait for permission.

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She stepped forward, eyes blazing with conviction.

“Honored Senators,” she began, “I rise not just as a diplomat of Virellien or a voice for peace, but as a mother. As a woman who has bled for this Concord — who has sacrificed, negotiated, and trusted that we might build something better than what came before.”

Silence.

She let it linger.

“And now I am told — we must trade our daughters for treaties. That the cost of harmony is childhood.”

A ripple moved through the chamber.

“I will not sell my daughter like cattle,” she said, voice rising. “I will not turn her into a symbol of compromise because this chamber lacks the courage to find another way.”

Some senators shifted uncomfortably.

Others nodded.

Mar stood behind her, hands clasped, expression unreadable — but his presence alone spoke volumes.

“If this is the Concord’s foundation,” Vireya continued, “then everything we’ve built is a lie. If we are willing to sell one child for peace, then we were never worthy of peace at all.”

Gasps.

Then — a heartbeat of silence.

“But I believe we are better than that. And I say to the Dominion: if you want peace, you can have it — not as conquerors, not as slavers, not on the backs of children... but as equals. Partners. Survivors.”

A slow swell of applause.

It grew.

Senators on every level began to rise.

“We do not need to sacrifice our hope to save our future,” Vireya shouted over the rising roar. “We are the Concord. And we will not bow.”

The hall erupted.

Cheering. Applause. Fists raised.

Mar leaned closer and whispered just loud enough for her to hear:

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“Remind me never to argue with you in public.”

Vireya didn't look at him.

But she smiled.

## Chapter 39 – Ghosts of Honor

Lucan POV

The stars streaked past the viewport in long, golden threads — a tapestry of light bent by slipstream travel. Somewhere beyond that blur, the world he once called home awaited.

Concordia.

Lucan stood in the warroom of the Dominion cruiser Vael'tur, arms folded behind his back, spine stiff with practiced discipline. The hum of the engines beneath his boots was familiar now. Too familiar.

Behind him, the delegation murmured in low tones — aides, dignitaries, Dominion observers. None of them spoke to him. None of them trusted him.

Not entirely.

And that was fine. Trust was something earned slowly.

The peace talks had almost failed before they even began. But when the Dominion received a copy of Vireya's Senate address, everything changed.

No one expected her to cancel the wedding.

No one expected her to fight back.

And Lucan — sitting in silence on a balcony deep within the Dominion capital, a drink in hand and too many regrets at his feet — had felt something shift inside him.

She remembered who she was.

And more importantly... she remembered who Sereya is.

The girl was twelve.

Twelve — and already caught in the gravity of two great civilizations, each demanding something from her. He had once believed the marriage was the only path to peace. A strategic sacrifice.

But watching the footage — seeing Sereya's face, the tears behind her defiant voice, the way Mar had stood in front of the court with the Sunbrand ignited — something inside him broke.

“It should never have come to this,” he muttered.

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A soft tone behind him announced another status update.

They were approaching Concordian space.

Lucan exhaled, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

This wasn't going to be easy. The Concord still viewed him as a traitor. Sparta even more so. His father likely wouldn't meet his eyes, and the Senate would have questions he wasn't ready to answer.

But Vireya would be there.

And Sereya...

He thought of her smile. Her laughter as a child. The way she'd held his hand once, asking if he could teach her to ride a hoverbike "just like Uncle Mar."

That name still stung.

He'd spent so long convincing himself that Mar was a fool, reckless, naïve. But watching him defend Sereya — their Sereya — before the Dominion Court?

Lucan had seen the boy he'd raised.

The man he'd become.

A soft knock came at the door. Kaelira stepped in, robes trailing like liquid shadow behind her.

"We'll be at Concordia within the hour," she said. "Are you ready?"

Lucan didn't answer right away.

"No," he said finally. "But I'm going anyway."

She stepped closer, her voice gentler than usual.

"You did the right thing, Lucan."

He nodded, still staring out at the slipstream.

"Let's hope the galaxy agrees."

The cruiser dropped out of slipstream with a deep, resonant pulse, space unfolding into clarity. Before them, Concordia shimmered like a living jewel — silver-white clouds curling around glistening oceans, orbital stations gleaming like distant lanterns.

Lucan stood at the viewing platform, arms behind his back as the delegation moved to prepare for landing. Kaelira stood nearby, eyes sharp but calm.

The Dominion ship sent its clearance codes. There was a tense delay before Concord control responded, granting approach under full diplomatic escort.

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Lucan's jaw tensed.

"Told you they'd still hate me," he muttered.

Kaelira offered a smirk. "They hate all of us. You've just earned a little extra."

He exhaled sharply through his nose — not quite a laugh.

"Fair."

The ship cut through Concordia's upper atmosphere with silent precision, its thrusters adjusting for glide. Escort craft flanked them — sleek, Concordian interceptors painted in the dark blue and gold of the Senate Guard.

As the landing gears locked in, Lucan rolled his shoulders and adjusted his uniform. Not his old Spartan armor — that would've been too provocative — but something styled with clean Dominion lines and neutral tones. He had made sure there were no rank insignias, no weapons.

He came to speak. Not to fight.

The ramp hissed open.

Warm air swept in, heavy with the scent of green courtyards and polished stone. The Senate receiving hall lay ahead — a wide platform flanked by Concord banners and a host of guards.

At the center of it all stood Vireya, flanked by Concord diplomats and her senior aides.

She wore a deep crimson robe trimmed with silver, her presence calm and commanding. But her eyes were fixed on him.

Lucan stepped down slowly.

The murmurs began immediately — whispers among the guards, flickers of recognition in the aides' eyes. No one raised weapons. But no one smiled either.

He stopped a few paces from her.

"Senator Vireya," he said formally, bowing his head.

"Prince Lucan," she replied, tone careful. "Welcome home."

There was weight in those words. Home.

His throat tightened, but he kept his face composed.

"You called for peace," she continued. "Now prove it."

Lucan straightened.

"That's why I'm here. Let's end this. Before someone else pays the price."

She looked past him — at Kaelira, at the Dominion delegation descending behind him. Then back to him. Her eyes searched his, and for a moment, Lucan saw not a senator, not a warrior...

...but Vireya. The same girl who once trusted him with everything.

"We'll see."

The receiving hall gave way to a private council chamber within the Concord Spire, shielded from public eyes but surrounded by silent tension. The air was thick with old wounds and unspoken accusations.

The delegates assembled — Concord senators, Dominion envoys, and select neutral observers. Vireya stood at the front of the room, addressing the chamber with practiced grace.

Lucan sat to her left, Kaelira to her right.

Across from them sat figures who had once branded Lucan a traitor. The senator from Velross Prime narrowed his eyes at him. A diplomat from Etris glared openly. Only a few looked at him with cautious curiosity — hope, perhaps, that this wasn't a trap.

Vireya opened the session with measured words.

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“Let it be recorded that on this day, both parties — the Galactic Concord and the Zenthari Dominion — have agreed to resume peace talks. The proposed marriage alliance has been rejected. In its place, a new path is being forged.”

There were immediate murmurs. A senator from Osara stood.

“Forged by who? A Spartan prince who defected and a Dominion princess with no loyalty to this chamber?”

Lucan stood before Vireya could reply.

“Forged by those who have bled enough to know war solves nothing,” he said clearly. “I left Sparta not to betray it — but to find the truth. The truth behind my mother’s death. The corruption in this chamber. And now, I return with a simple message: we need peace.”

Another senator scoffed.

“Easy to say now, when your Dominion hosts are listening.”

Kaelira leaned forward, voice silken and sharp.

“Let me assure you — the Dominion does not listen. We demand. And yet here we are... sitting. Talking. Because one man made us reconsider.”

Lucan glanced at her.

She was playing her role well.

Perhaps too well.

Vireya remained silent for a beat before speaking again.

“Senators, we are not here to rehash old wars. We’re here because the future depends on trust. On transparency. And on ending the cycles that have kept our people in chains for decades.”

She paused.

“There is more to be said. And more evidence to be shared. But that will come in time. Today is about setting the tone. And the tone is: no more blood.”

Lucan watched the senators react — some nodding, some skeptical, some glaring.

But none objected.

And that was enough for now.

Later, as the delegation exited the chamber, Lucan fell into step beside Vireya. She walked in silence for a few moments before finally glancing his way.

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“You handled yourself well.”

“I’ve learned from the best,” he said, smirking faintly.

“You mean me?”

“I meant my mother,” he replied, then added after a pause, “but you’ll do.”

That earned him a sideways look and the hint of a smile.

“Let’s see if we survive tomorrow,” she said. “Then you can flatter me.”

Lucan nodded, his expression hardening as he gazed out a high window over Concordia’s skyline.

“Let’s make sure there is a tomorrow.”

The rest of the day passed in a haze of closed-door discussions, diplomatic positioning, and long-overdue reckonings. Lucan spoke sparingly, observing more than contributing, his eyes always returning to the subtle fault lines between the factions—Senators at each other’s throats over reparations, Dominion envoys nursing long-held grudges, and opportunists trying to reshape the Concord in their image.

By late evening, the delegation was moved to secure guest quarters within the Concord Spire. Lucan found himself staring out over the skyline from his private balcony, the city glowing like a sea of stars beneath the dusk.

Kaelira joined him silently, holding two glasses of dark Concordian wine. She handed him one, leaning against the railing.

“You’re brooding again,” she said softly.

“I’m always brooding,” he muttered, sipping the wine. “You married me anyway.”

She gave a small laugh. “I married a man who could rebuild empires. Who could make peace with his past.”

Lucan stared into the glass. “I don’t know if I can.”

Kaelira turned, her voice growing quiet.

“Do you remember what you told me the night we left Sparta? You said we weren’t running — we were regrouping. That everything we did would mean something one day.”

Lucan didn’t answer.

She took a slow breath. “Well... maybe this is the day.”

He looked at her — truly looked — for the first time since the session ended. In her eyes was a flicker of hope, despite all they had endured. Despite what they might yet face.

“Do you think they’ll listen?” he asked.

“Vireya? Yes. The others?” She hesitated. “That depends on what we’re willing to give.”

Lucan turned his gaze back to the city, the wine in his hand forgotten.

“I’ve given everything,” he whispered. “I just hope it was enough.”

Kaelira touched his hand gently.

“For Sereya’s sake, it has to be.”

Chapter 40 – Sereya POV

The Lull Between Storms

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

It had been a strange few days.

Not bad — just strange.

The Senate kept meeting, kept talking, kept arguing. From what Sereya had gathered through whispers, quick updates from her mother, and Kaen's short, clipped explanations... nothing was going smoothly. The peace talks were balanced on the edge of a blade, and no one knew which way they'd fall.

But for Sereya, the days had been... different.

Good, even.

She had spent more time with her father in the past week than in all the years before combined.

And it felt real.

They went to the old Concordian holoplex, where Mar insisted on letting her choose the movie — a dazzling over-the-top sci-fi fantasy that made Kaen roll his eyes and Mar groan dramatically through the first thirty minutes.

But he'd smiled the entire time.

Later, they'd played in the V-Rift Arena, a virtual shooting game with motion tracking and simulated weaponry. Sereya and Kaen had teamed up, naturally — and destroyed Mar.

When Kaen landed the final headshot on Mar's avatar, her father had thrown his hands up and shouted, "I'm a sword guy!"

Kaen, ever deadpan, had replied, "Then maybe stop joining gunfights."

Sereya had laughed so hard she nearly fell off the platform. Her father sulked all the way back to the plaza — calling them traitors and cheaters, claiming he was lured into a trap by his own daughter.

He'd been smiling, though. Even when he grumbled.

Even when she called him a sore loser.

That night, when he kissed her forehead and told her he was proud of her, something in her chest tightened in a way she didn't quite understand.

Now, Sereya sat in the small rooftop garden of the Concord guest estate, her dog curled beside her like a massive pillow made of muscle and loyalty. The breeze was warm, the sky painted in fading orange and soft violet.

She stared up at the clouds and thought of nothing in particular — just enjoying the quiet.

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Kaen stood a few paces away, watching the perimeter like always. His posture was relaxed, but she knew him well enough to spot the tension in his shoulders.

“You know you can sit, right?” she said without looking at him.

“Guards don’t sit,” he replied automatically.

“Yeah, well...” she patted the grass next to her, “this one does. Just for five minutes.”

Kaen hesitated, then sighed and sat — not close, not far.

Her dog gave a low huff of approval and rested its head on Kaen’s boot.

Sereya smiled faintly.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Kaen raised an eyebrow. “For what?”

“For everything. You’ve been stuck watching me for years. And I’ve not always made it easy.”

“Understatement,” he muttered, lips twitching.

She nudged him with her elbow. “But still... thank you.”

There was a long pause before Kaen answered, voice quieter than usual.

“I wasn’t stuck, Sereya. I volunteered.”

She looked at him.

His eyes didn’t meet hers.

The air between them felt suddenly heavier, fuller — like the moment before a storm.

And for once, Sereya didn’t rush to fill the silence.

She just let it sit.

Warm. Complicated. Real.

The quiet rooftop moment faded into memory as the sun dipped below the skyline.

By morning, the entire capital was a machine of polished marble and protocol — every walkway cleaned, every flowerbed arranged, every security drone on high alert.

Today was the Unity Celebration — the first official gathering of both Dominion and Concord dignitaries outside of negotiations.

And Sereya had to be there.

Not just as a daughter.

Not just as a student of the Academy.

But as a symbol.

Twelve years old. The living link between two worlds.

She stood in front of the tall mirror in her room, fidgeting in the ceremonial dress her mother had chosen for her.

It was elegant — shimmering deep blue silk with gold trim that caught the light, a subtle callback to the House of Mar. Her dark hair had been pulled back and adorned with a thin circlet of white crystal and a matching pendant at her throat.

Sereya didn't hate it.

But she also felt like she was pretending to be someone else.

A senator's daughter. A princess of Sparta. A future peacemaker.

What if she messed up?

"You look like your mother," came a voice from behind.

She turned to see her father, standing in the doorway, wearing formal Spartan armor — black and silver, without a helmet.

He smiled. "Which is a compliment. Obviously."

She crossed her arms. "I feel like a statue."

Mar stepped into the room. "All the best statues are secretly warriors. It's just no one sees them until they move."

Sereya cracked a smile.

Kaen appeared a moment later, dressed in ceremonial Spartan dress blues, every strap precise, every detail perfect. He gave her a once-over, nodded approvingly, then muttered:

"Still not as good as the puppy armor."

Sereya giggled, her nerves easing for the first time all morning.



An hour later, she descended the grand stairs of the Concord Spire's northern terrace — flanked by her parents and Kaen, the dog padding behind them like a silent sentinel.

The gardens had been transformed into a vision of diplomatic beauty — lights strung through trees, music from a live orchestra drifting gently through the warm air. Dozens of officials and envoys mingled, banners of both empires flying together for the first time in decades.

And all eyes turned as she entered.

A hush fell.

Sereya raised her chin.

Straightened her shoulders.

And stepped forward.

The garden glittered under the evening lights.

Soft music played from a tiered marble stage where a Concordian quartet performed with strings and synth-flutes, weaving old harmonies of peace and renewal. Lanterns floated in the air like gentle fireflies, and holographic banners of both the Spartan sigil and the Dominion crest shimmered side by side.

It should've felt awkward.

It didn't.

Everywhere Sereya looked, people were smiling. Dominion officers sharing drinks with Concord engineers. Senators and nobles trading jokes, not jabs. Children from diplomatic families playing along the fountain paths.

It didn't feel like politics.

It felt like hope.

And for the first time in a long while... Sereya allowed herself to believe

She had barely finished greeting yet another senator who called her "brilliant and poised for her age" when she felt a large hand on her shoulder.

"Dance with your old man?" Mar asked, offering a hand.

Sereya blinked. "Wait, you know how to dance?"

He scoffed. "Of course I know how to dance. I just choose not to."

She rolled her eyes. "That's not how that works."

"C'mon, before your mother sends me another political partner with wandering hands."

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Laughing, she took his hand.

They walked to the edge of the central dance floor — a smooth, polished circle surrounded by trees aglow with golden biolights. Others cleared space, watching with bemusement as the Spartan war hero awkwardly bowed and began leading the tiniest steps of an old formal waltz.

He wasn't bad.

But he wasn't great either.

"Okay, you're absolutely making this up as you go," she whispered.

"Not true. I learned this from your great grandmother. Once. Under duress."

They laughed — real, loud, unguarded.

Mar twirled her, and though his armour clanked slightly as he turned, no one could deny the bond between them.

The music faded, and another partner stepped in.

"My turn," Kaen said quietly.

She blinked in surprise.

He offered his hand, formal and steady.

"Only if you're not going to step on my feet," she teased.

Kaen didn't rise to the bait. "If I do, you're allowed to stab me."

She smirked.

They danced — slower, more focused. Kaen moved well, surprisingly graceful despite his rigid stance. Sereya was aware of how close they were, how his hand barely pressed her back.

She looked up at him once, but he didn't meet her gaze.

Still, she felt something strange.

Something warm.

Something new.

Then came the third.

Lucan.

He bowed gallantly, and Sereya laughed as she gave him her hand.

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“Let me guess,” she said. “Also under duress?”

“I’ll have you know I once won a dance-off on a Dominion cruiser.”

“Now I know you’re lying.”

They spun across the floor, her dog barking once from the side as if in approval.

“You’re growing up too fast,” Lucan said softly.

Sereya looked up at him.

“I don’t feel grown up.”

“Good. Stay that way as long as you can.”

By the time the final song played, she’d danced with three of the most important men in her life — each different, each flawed, each trying in their own way to protect her.

And in that moment — surrounded by laughter, by light, by unity — Sereya almost forgot the danger, the shadows, the pressure waiting beyond this garden.

She didn’t know how long the peace would last.

But she knew she’d remember this night forever

The night was winding down.

Laughter still floated through the air, but the orchestra had softened, and the guests had begun to break into smaller groups, deep in conversation. The lights above flickered gently, like fading stars.

Sereya wandered back toward her parents, still flushed from dancing. Her heart was light — for once, she didn’t feel the weight of titles or politics or prophecy.

She spotted her mother deep in conversation with the banker again — the same silver-tongued man who had been sniffing around her mother’s office for weeks now. He was elegant, sharp-eyed, and always smiling too much.

Her father stood beside them, arms crossed, jaw clenched.

He looked like a punished child forced to sit through a long lecture.

Sereya grinned.

“Father,” she called as she approached, “I believe you owe me another dance.”

Mar perked up instantly. “Ah. Salvation.”

He stepped toward her — grateful, amused — but before they could take each other’s hands, Lucan and Kaelira appeared from across the crowd.

Their expressions shifted the moment they locked eyes with the banker.

Lucan froze.

Kaelira’s lips parted in a silent breath, her hand instinctively moving toward her side.

The banker — still smiling — turned toward them.

“Well,” he said with a slow, oily grace. “I guess the gig is up.”

His eyes glinted.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

“Daughter... why don’t you introduce me?”

Kaelira hesitated. The entire garden seemed to grow colder.

Sereya blinked, confused. “Daughter?”

“Everyone,” Kaelira said quietly, eyes on the man, “allow me to introduce you to—”

She never finished.

Mar lunged.

No hesitation. No words. Just pure instinct.

The Sunbrand wasn’t on him — but it didn’t matter. He moved like a storm unleashed.

But before he even reached the man, a blast of unseen power hit him full-force, launching him back through the air like a ragdoll.

Sereya screamed.

Mar crashed into the marble tiles with a thunderous crack — armour sparking, cloak torn.

The music stopped.

The garden fell silent.

And the man, the so-called banker, the Emperor of the Dominion, stepped forward — still smiling.

Here is the opening to Chapter 41 – AWAKENING

Kaelira POV:

She had dreamed of peace.

Fought for it. Argued. Debated. Risked everything.

Now, she stood in the shattered glow of a dream undone.

The banker — no longer pretending — stood at the heart of the chaos. Her father. Emperor Malgus Vel-Kareth. Unmasked. Unleashed.

The illusion burned away like smoke on solar winds.

Kaelira’s heart pounded in her chest, not from fear — but from betrayal.

She hadn’t seen him in months. Hadn’t heard his voice since he sent her to observe, to negotiate. He hadn’t spoken of war.

He hadn’t needed to.

Because this was never about peace.

This was a trap.

“Secure the senators,” Malgus commanded, his voice laced with that terrible calm that preceded storms. “Do not kill them... yet.”

His elite guard — the Aierlin, forged from shadows and sharpened in silence — moved as one. Fast. Deadly. Efficient.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

The garden transformed into a battlefield in seconds. Concord guards raised weapons, panicked guests screamed, and the orchestrated notes of diplomacy collapsed beneath the roar of betrayal.

Kaelira stood frozen.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Across the chaos, she saw them:

Lucan — already drawing his blade.

Kaen — pulling Sereya behind him, eyes fierce and unyielding.

Guards rushed toward them.

Kaen moved like lightning.

One.

Two.

Three Dominion soldiers fell, their armour cleaved and groaning.

Lucan stood beside him, covering the retreat as Kaen and Sereya vanished into the corner of the room.

Kaelira's breath caught in her throat.

Then she turned—

And saw Vireya collapse beside Mar, who lay stunned and broken, half-conscious from the Emperor's blast. She wrapped her arms around him, shielding his body with her own.

All around them, everything was unraveling.

Kaelira stood frozen.

Not from fear.

From betrayal.

From the realization that everything she had worked toward — every argument, every moment spent trying to convince the Dominion elite that peace was possible — had been nothing.

Her father's voice echoed across the shattered calm like a verdict:

"Now dies the Concord. Now dies its liberty."

She didn't move.

Couldn't move.

Malgus hadn't even looked at her.

His attention had shifted to Vireya— who was cradling Mar, shielding him from the chaos, blood streaked down her temple.

"You," the Emperor snarled, stepping forward.

"You poisoned my daughter with your false hope. You polluted the bloodline with weakness." vireya didn't flinch.

Even now — even dazed and trembling — she met his eyes with defiance.  
“You’re afraid,” she spat.  
“Afraid that peace might actually work.”  
“Afraid of change.”  
Malgus raised his hand.  
Kaelira’s lips parted in silent protest, but her voice was lost in the maelstrom.  
Then—  
The Emperor’s fist clenched.  
And Vireya body lifted into the air.  
She gasped — legs kicking, hands clawing at her throat as the invisible grip crushed down like a vice.  
Kaelira finally took a step.  
“Father, stop—!”  
He didn’t listen.  
Didn’t even hear her.  
vireya vision blurred as her body hung in mid-air, armor creaking under pressure, the Aetherion inside her sparking faintly in defense.  
Kaelira looked at Lucan — saw the panic in his face as he fought through another wave of guards.  
And then her father spoke again, eyes like burning stone.  
“Let her watch her world die.”

Kaelira could barely breathe.

Everything was happening so fast — a blur of betrayal and bloodshed. But one thing snapped her focus.

Vireya, struggling in the air, her life slowly being crushed away by the man who once called himself her ally.

“FATHER, STOP!” Kaelira screamed.

But Malgus did not stop.

And then—

A flash of movement.

Lucan.

Blade drawn, cloak tattered, his face a mask of fury and desperation. He barreled forward, roaring with the kind of rage only love could awaken.

“LET HER GO!”

Kaelira turned, mouth open to warn him, but the words caught in her throat.

Malgus flicked his hand.

Lucan was hurled across the garden, slamming into a stone pillar with a sickening crunch. Dust burst around him as he collapsed to the ground, motionless.

“NO—!” Kaelira screamed.

And then she watched.

Watched as Malgus — calm, cruel, absolute — looked up at the woman who had defied him until her last breath.

With a final squeeze, a single, hollow snap echoed through the air.

Vireya body went limp.

He released her.

She fell like a broken star, crumpling beside Mar’s slumped form.

Kaelira’s knees gave out.

She couldn’t speak. Couldn’t move.

The garden had become a nightmare.

And now the Emperor turned toward the last piece of defiance that remained.

Sereya.

The girl was sobbing in the far corner, her small hands shaking, her body pressed against the base of the ceremonial dais. Her dog stood in front of her, growling low and feral, ready to die protecting her.

Malgus walked toward her.

Step by step.

Like a shadow over a dying flame.

“You’re the reason,” he whispered. “The final weakness. The last broken link.”

And then Kaen was there.

Bleeding. Broken. But not beaten.

He stumbled between Malgus and Sereya, sword raised.

“You’ll never touch her.”

Malgus paused.

Kaelira could see it — the flicker of surprise in her father’s eyes. The recognition of the young Spartan’s defiance.

And then—

They clashed.

Kaen moved like fire. Unleashing every ounce of skill, speed, and strength he had. His blade danced in desperate fury, striking sparks from Malgus’s armour.

For a moment — just a moment — it looked like he could hold him back.

Then came the counter.

A sharp twist.

A dagger of dark Aetherion.

Kaen cried out as it plunged into his side. Malgus twisted it deeper, then let the Spartan crumple to the ground.

Bleeding. Still.

Dying.

Kaelira staggered forward.

“Stop it—please!”

But her father was already walking again.

Toward Sereya, who sobbed now not from fear — but from helpless rage.

He loomed over her.

Lifted his hand.

And then—

“MAR!” Lucan’s voice cracked through the chaos. “HELP HER!”

Kaelira turned.

And her heart shattered.

There — just behind the fallen form of Vireya— was Mar.

On his knees.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft



Crumpled. Silent.

Coddling his wife's body in his arms, whispering to her through blood and tears, as if he could still bring her back.

“He’s gone...” Kaelira whispered.

“He’s not going to stop it.”

Sereya screamed.

It wasn’t the cry of a child anymore.

It was something older. Deeper. A sound born of loss, terror, and the betrayal of every star in the sky.

Malgus gripped her arm and began to lift her, cold fingers wrapped around her wrist like a chain forged in shadow.

And then—

The air shifted.

Kaelira felt it in her bones.

Every heartbeat. Every breath. Every spark of Aetherion in the room froze.

The wind stopped.

The light dimmed.

And the shadows trembled.

Kaelira turned—

Mar was rising.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

Still cradling Vireya broken body in one arm, he placed her down with reverence, pressing his forehead to hers once, lips brushing her brow in silent goodbye.

Then he stood.

And when he opened his eyes—

They were glowing red.

Not blood red.

But something deeper.

Rage incarnate.

“Oh stars...” Kaelira whispered. “He’s awakened.”

It wasn’t just rage.

It was primal.

Aetherion twisted around him like a storm — the very air shivering under his presence. The pillars cracked. The walls pulsed. The sky seemed to hold its breath.

If gods existed, they were afraid.

If legends had voices, they were screaming.

And then—

He screamed.

A sound like the end of worlds.

Glass shattered.

Marble split.

Every soldier in the chamber fell to their knees, hands clamped over their ears, blood leaking from their eyes.

Even Malgus froze — turning slowly to face the source of the sound.

And Mar was already moving.

Like lightning given form.

He crashed into Malgus with the force of a starship, slamming him across the throne dais.

The Dominion Emperor twisted midair, crashing through a wall of the inner sanctum, debris exploding outward.

Mar didn’t stop.

He charged.

Sereya fell to the floor, gasping, and Kaen — bleeding out — crawled to her, dragging her behind cover.

Kaelira could barely track the movement.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Fists collided like thunderclaps. Shockwaves rippled through the chamber, knocking statues from their pedestals and sending shards of crystal ceiling raining down.

Malgus struck with precise, devastating blows — years of Dominion martial training.

But Mar fought like wrath. Like something ancient and unbound. Like the ghost of a war the stars themselves had tried to forget.

And in Kaelira's stunned silence, all she could think was:

This isn't a prince.

This is a god of war.

The battle raged.

Flesh struck flesh.

Steel cracked.

Blood flew.

Each impact between Mar and Malgus was cataclysmic — stone turned to powder, air ignited into heat, and the heavens themselves seemed to tremble with every blow. Neither yielded. Neither slowed. Titans locked in a dance of ruin.

Kaelira shielded her face as rubble and fury tore through the chamber.

And then—

She felt it.

A new ripple in the Aetherion.

Not from Mar.

Not from Malgus.

But from behind her.

She turned.

And her heart stopped.

Sereya was on her knees.

Kaen's broken body lay across her lap — still, lifeless, pale.

Her hands were pressed to his wounds.

But she was not crying.

She was glowing.

“No...” Kaelira breathed. “She’s—she’s Awakening.”

A scream tore from Sereya’s chest. Not of pain — but of will.

And then the light came.

Blinding. Brilliant. Divine.

A column of Aetherion, pure and unfiltered, erupted from Sereya's body, shooting into the air like a star born from flesh. It flooded the chamber, golden and white, sweeping across shattered stone and broken warriors.

Mar and Malgus both staggered.

For the first time in all her life, Kaelira saw fear in her father’s eyes.

“What—what is this?” he rasped.

And then he turned and vanished in a ripple of shadow and flame.

Fled.

Fled.

Not because of Mar.

But because of her.

Because of Sereya.

Kaelira fell to her knees.

The light pulsed again — not with destruction, but with restoration.

Kaelira felt it — warm and soft and alive.

The dead began to breathe.

The injured stirred.

The Concord soldiers, fallen moments ago, gasped for air, clutching at fresh, unbroken skin. Across the garden, Vireya chest rose — her lips parting with a shaky breath.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Kaen's eyes fluttered open.

His wounds, gone.

He sat up, blinking — only to catch Sereya's limp form as she collapsed into him.

"Sereya?" he whispered, cradling her.

She didn't answer.

She slept.

But her pulse was strong.

Kaelira looked across the battlefield — no longer a battlefield, but a rebirth.

Silence fell.

The storm was over.

And in that silence... hope was reborn.

## Chapter 42 – Stillness

Three days had passed.

And still, Sereya had not woken.

The great towers of Sparta stood tall against the pale morning sky, silent sentinels guarding a world bruised by chaos but not broken. The city moved quietly — not with mourning, but with reverence.

Inside the royal wing, beyond polished corridors and guarded halls, Sereya lay beneath the soft sheets of her bed. Her breathing was steady. Peaceful.

Beside her, curled at the foot of the bed like a loyal shadow, the great beast — her dog — didn't stir. Its dark eyes watched the door, never leaving it, even in sleep.

And at her side sat Kaen.

Awake.

Unmoving.

Still in uniform, still carrying the bruises and bandages of that day. He hadn't left her once — not even to eat.

He'd lost her once before. He would not lose her again.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Vireya stood in the doorway.

She hadn't stepped inside yet.

Her hand rested on the frame, her posture composed, but her heart pulled in two directions — mother, ruler, warrior, lover. She had never known such stillness could feel so loud.

She watched Kaen reach out and gently brush a strand of hair from Sereya's brow. There was no romantic tenderness to it. Just devotion. Like a knight tending his queen before battle.

"She's strong," Vireya said softly.

Kaen didn't look at her.

He nodded once.

"I know."

Vireya stepped into the room. The light was dim — the curtains drawn to keep the day from pressing too hard on the sleeping child. She stopped at the foot of the bed and watched them both.

"You never left her side," she said.

"Never will."

She smiled — a sad, tired smile.

"You're too young to say things like that."

"So is she."

That silenced her.

Because it was true.

Sereya was twelve.

Twelve, and already she had saved lives, ended wars, carried the power of Ancients.

And nearly died for it.

Vireya sat down on the edge of the bed, one hand resting gently atop her daughter's. The pulse there was calm. Strong.

"She'll wake," Kaen said, softer now.

"I know," Vireya replied. "I just don't know what kind of world she'll wake to."

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

They sat in silence a while longer.

“The Senate’s in uproar,” Vireya finally said. “Some still want war. Others want peace. Some want to put her on a throne.”

“She just wants to ride her dog and eat sweets.”

Vireya chuckled despite herself.

“She takes after her father,” she said.

Then her face darkened.

“Where is he?”

Kaen looked toward the window.

“Out there. Mourning in his own way.”

“He shouldn’t be alone.”

“he’s changed.”

That answer puzzled her, but she didn’t ask more.

Not yet.

She leaned down and pressed her lips to Sereya’s temple.

“Come back soon, little star,” she whispered.

“The galaxy still needs you.”

There was a knock at the door.

Vireya straightened, wiping at the corner of her eye with a practiced grace.

The guard pushed the door open.

“Your Highness. They’re here.”

She nodded.

Into the quiet room stepped two figures — once enemies, now exiles.

Lucan Mar, still wearing the black and silver armour of a Spartan commander, though dulled and scratched from time and war. His face was leaner, his eyes wearier — but when he looked at his niece, something softened in him.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

Beside him walked Kaelira, her Dominion regalia replaced with neutral robes of the Concord, her long braid wrapped in silver threading. She was no longer a weapon of the Emperor. She was something else now. Something free.

Both paused as they entered.

They looked at Sereya, at the sleeping girl and the dog curled protectively at her side. They looked at Kaen, still upright, still silent.

“How is she?” Lucan asked.

“Stronger than any of us,” Kaen murmured.

Kaelira stepped closer, her expression unreadable. She studied the girl she had once helped capture — the girl who could have been a pawn, but had become something far more dangerous.

A symbol.

A legend.

A child.

“I thought she was gone,” Kaelira whispered. “And I thought he had broken everything.”

“He tried,” Vireya said.

“But he failed.”

A soft breath stirred the air.

A flicker beneath closed eyelids.

Kaen leaned forward.

Vireya held her breath.

Then—

Sereya’s eyes opened.

They blinked, unfocused for a moment, before slowly recognizing the room, the faces, the life around her.

She gasped.

“Mother?”



Vireya was already leaning in, hands on her daughter's cheeks.

"I'm here, my love. I'm here."

"Kaen?" Sereya croaked.

He smiled — for the first time in days — and gave a shallow bow.

"Took a few beatings, but I'm still your shadow."

She reached for him. He took her hand.

Then she looked at the others in the room.

Her uncle.

Kaelira.

And she began to cry — not in pain, not in fear.

But in relief.

"I thought... I thought you were all dead..."

"Not today, little star," Lucan said gently.

"And not for a long, long time," Vireya promised, brushing back her daughter's hair.

And in that moment — for the first time in weeks — a fragile kind of peace settled over them.

The war wasn't over.

The veilborn still plotted in the shadows.

But here, now, in this room, surrounded by those who had lived, fought, and returned — there. Two days had passed since Sereya woke.

The pain had not left the galaxy. The scars of Concordia's betrayal still lingered. But for now, Sparta stood — unbroken, united, and watching.

Inside the Great Hall of the Citadel, beneath banners that stretched back thousands of years, the throne room of Sparta was full to bursting.

Senators. Soldiers. Foreign dignitaries. Even members of the Concord Council.

All stood in silence.

All waited.

At the centre of the room, flanked by silver-armoured guards of the Phoenix Legion, walked a boy — tall for his age, Armor sharp but worn from battle, cloak trailing behind him like the shadow of his reputation.

Kaen.

At his side, hand in his, walked Sereya — no longer a frightened girl, but not yet a woman. The light still shone in her, barely restrained, just beneath the surface. But she walked tall.

Proud.

Together, they approached the dais.

Upon it sat the King of Sparta, Vaeran Mar, aged but unbowed, the Sun Throne gleaming behind him like a forge.

To his right stood Vireya's father, robed in white — the representative of Virellien.

And beside him—

Mar.

He had changed.

His hair was longer, streaked with grey. His beard unkempt. His eyes — sharp, predatory, almost feral. He wore no crown, only the Sunbrand across his back and shadows beneath his brow.

He did not smile.

He did not move.

But Sereya felt his gaze like a heat pressed against her skin.

Her father was home... but not all the way.

The King stood.

The crowd quieted.

“Kaen of Sparta,” Vaeran's voice boomed across the stone hall. “Son of no House. Chosen of the Legion. Guardian of the flame.”

The old warrior's eyes locked on him, hard and proud.

“For your bravery. For your loyalty. For facing the Emperor of the Dominion when no others dared, we bestow upon you the Star of Aegis, the highest honour of our blood.”

A captain stepped forward and placed the medal on Kaen’s chest.

“You will carry the name Kaen Mar-Aegis, for it is your shield, and your legacy now.”

Gasps echoed.

A new House had just been born — forged not by blood, but by deed.

Kaen bowed deeply.

“For Sparta,” he said quietly.

Then turned, looking briefly to Sereya.

She was crying again.

And smiling.

Mar did not speak.

He turned and left without a word.

And Vireya, seeing it, felt a chill run through her.

Something inside her husband had broken that night.

And though his body had returned from the war...

His soul had not.

Epilogue – The Last Flame

Far beyond the stars of the Concord.

Past the edge of mapped space.

Beneath the cold light of a dying star... stood a temple.

Not a temple of worship, nor of war — but of memory.

The Last Outpost.

The place the Ancients had fled to after their war ended — long before Sparta was born, long before the first flame.

No ships came here.

No transmissions reached it.

Even the Aetherion bent softly around it, as if in reverence.

Inside its crystalline halls, the walls pulsed with echoes of time. Ancient minds, older than history, stirred beneath flowing white robes and ageless eyes.

And they had felt it.

Every one of them.

Jackson Grieve Aetherion Awakening Draft

The chamber was silent... until one voice broke it.  
Elyra.  
Daughter of the original Ascendants.  
Mother of Vireya.  
Grandmother of Sereya.  
She stood at the center of a spiral chamber, the crystal beneath her feet glowing gold.  
“It has begun,” she whispered.  
The Council of Ancients turned their gaze upon her — emotionless, patient, eternal.  
“The Flame and the Light,” said another. “Two echoes born of opposite truth. And both awakened.”  
“Mar,” another said. “The Phoenix reborn.”  
“And Sereya... the Dawnstar.”  
They all stood now.  
Some in fear.  
Some in awe.  
One in sorrow.  
“If we felt it,” Elyra said softly, “so too did the Dark Beyond. Even now, the old hunger stirs again. The veil will thin.”  
“We swore to never interfere again,” another reminded her.  
Elyra turned toward the high window — gazing into the void.  
“We may not have a choice.”  
“Prepare the Archives. Ready the Watchers. The time of silence has ended.”  
And in the farthest reaches of the cosmos... a shadow curled back into motion.