

The Shaedon Resurgence

Book 2

The Zar'aranos Deception

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Chapter 1 – Incursion

Deep within the Xarani Desert, an ancient temple had been hidden by the sands of time. It was uncovered when a drop ship deliberately crashed into it four years ago. The revelation of the temple had been one of the greatest finds in all of Xoron history, but despite its discovery, the Xoron people had not been able to fully appreciate their find. The core of the planet, Netherrea, had been destabilized by an ancient enemy: the Shaedon. Following the cataclysm, the entire planet had been evacuated. Presently, the Inter-galactic Alliance has pulled most of its resources in an attempt to stabilize the core. The Alliance's top scientists and elementalists have been working together for the past years, utilizing the restorative powers of the Scarowyn, a bipedal plant-like life form with a great bond to the element of Earth. Simultaneously, scientists have been monitoring the planet's seismic activity.

The relief effort was a monumental undertaking, but at long last, it seemed their hard work was bearing fruit.

The early afternoon sun seared the Xarani Desert as it reached its zenith. "How are you holding up, Grummus?" Ráz Numera asked with his deep, dark voice. He was a Xoron Windmaster with dark, purple skin. His eyes were a golden white with no visible pupil and his hair was white as snow. He wore the attire of his order, which consisted of a large, single piece of cloth that, when folded correctly, formed a perfect robe.

"To be honest, I could use a bit of rest soon. Channelling all of this magicka has been quite taxing," Grummus replied. Dark circles under his eyes betrayed his exhaustion. He stood slightly over two metres tall, but had a slender body. His eyes were a bright green and his skin a leathery brown. He wore a simple straw hat, which covered the thick, blond hair that stuck out from underneath it. Furthermore, he wore dungarees and a simple linen shirt, both covered with dirt.

“Why don’t you take five, then?” Rüz said, knowing Grummus had been channelling magicka into the heavily polluted underground lake for hours. He patted Grummus on the back and switched positions with the young Scarowyn.

“Do you think we’ll ever stabilize the planet core? It’s been ages since we started this,” Grummus asked, his shoulders slumped and his lips pursed.

Rüz looked straight at him and shrugged. “I honestly have no idea, but doing nothing is not exactly an option, is it?”

Grummus nodded at Rüz, still unsure if that was the answer he had wanted to hear.

“If we wouldn’t at least try to get this lake decontaminated, we might as well give up. Besides, the rest of the teams seem to be doing a good job on keeping the planet stable.”

“I suppose. I just wish there wasn’t so much pressure on us. It’s only been a few years since my graduation – I never really expected I’d be doing something this monumental at this point in my career,” Grummus replied, still unsure why the Scarowyn Elders had chosen him for this specific task.

“You should be glad. Most people will never get a chance like this in their lifetime,” Rüz stated as he retrieved a green, glowing orb from within his robes. He let the orb rest in the palm of his right hand and folded his left over it. Within moments, a stream of green magicka poured into the lake from the orb.

“Thanks for taking my place, Rüz,” Grummus said as he turned away from Rüz towards the team’s encampment, not far from the shore of the lake.

“No problem, I’ll take care of this for the next few hours,” Rüz shouted after Grummus as he continued to focus on channelling magicka into the lake.

They had discovered this underground lake themselves shortly after the temple had been revealed. It was the location where they had fought and eventually overcome Langruff the Purger, a Shaedon monstrosity that had merged with Rüz’ former colleague Langruff. Once the fight was

over, it became clear that if the lake wouldn't be stabilized, the magicka in it could rip apart the entire cave system and the temple. The lake formed a conduit for a large number of elemental ley lines. The creators of the temple, the enigmatic Luminars, had built it on this location with the purpose of harnessing the power of these ley lines. As time had passed, however, the pipe systems guiding the elemental energy flows had eroded and as a result, the lake had become polluted with heavy quantities of pure magicka. Rüz, Grummus and several others had been working hard on stabilizing the lake, infusing it with magicka of different elements to even out the balance in the lake. At last, the lake had been largely neutralized, while dozens of engineers worked hard and with great success on repairing the elaborate systems created by the Luminars millennia ago.

As he walked towards the encampment, Grummus took a piece of cloth from the front pocket of his dungarees and wiped his brow with it. He was greeted by a couple of engineers who were going over some design plans sprawled across a portable holodesk. They were having a heated discussion on how to proceed with the repairs, Grummus overheard as he passed them, but he was too tired to listen to what exactly they were talking about. Instead, he kept walking on, further from the lake and the encampment until he reached a large green oak which, for some strange reason, flourished in the cave. He put his right hand on the trunk, gazed up and noticed that its leaves were rustling. A melancholy smile appeared on his face.

"It's good to see you're doing well ..." he said to the tree, then removed his hand. He sat down on the ground, resting his back against the tree. From his position, he looked straight at the encampment and the lake. Channelling magicka into the lake for the past few hours had drained him of all his energy; it was time to regenerate. Grummus removed his boots and looked at his feet, which resembled tangled roots. He leaned back a bit further and closed his eyes. His feet untangled; the roots dug into the ground as he fell into a deep, well-deserved sleep.

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“Duck!” a Xoron marine shouted at a nearby Scarowyn Earthmaster, but his warning came a second too late. As the word left his mouth and his eyes widened in shock, the Scarowyn’s chest burst into flames from the incoming laser salvo. By the time he had reached the smouldering body, he knew it was already too late to do anything. The Earthmaster lay flat on his back, his body contorted in agony.

A few minutes earlier, everything had been perfectly calm, until his comrades had spotted a group of five strangers approaching in the distance. By the time they were within combat range, they had started firing, catching most of the people on site by surprise. Gywen had little time to identify the strangers, but one thing he did notice was they all had exactly the same face. Only one of them stood out; his eyes were completely black. From what Gywen could tell, this was the squad leader, but he had only been able to catch a glimpse before taking cover from the incoming fire. The entire encampment had been reduced to nothing but rubble in a matter of seconds; after that, the firing had ceased. Gywen decided to take a peek around the corner, to check if the assailants were gone. He had not spotted any other survivors, but he found it hard to believe the enemy strike team would leave him alive after such a precision attack. He carefully pushed himself against the heavy crates he had used as cover and cocked his head around the corner. The enemy was moving away from the site. Gywen reached for his binoculars and studied them for as long as they remained within visual range. They did not seem to speak and their facial expressions hadn’t changed at all, he noticed. They kept marching into the distance, in the direction of the ancient Luminar tower. Gywen reached for his communicator and attempted to contact the troops near the tower, to warn them for the incoming enemies. He opened a hailing frequency.

“This is Private Andros reporting to all nearby outposts. We’ve just been attacked by a strike team of five unidentified enemies. They are headed north from my position, two five zero by three five one! I repeat, possible incoming, heading north from coordinates two five zero by three five one! Andros out.”

Gywen's jaw dropped as he watched the communicator display. Immediately after his broadcast, it lit up with dozens of other broadcasts, most of which were close by, but some came from remote locations. Whatever was going on, there was definitely more than just one strike team at work and most of the distress calls stopped after a few minutes. He made another round of the outpost, but couldn't spot any survivors other than himself. He had only been stationed here for about two weeks. Years of rigorous training hadn't prepared him for anything like this. Even his more experienced peers hadn't seen the attack coming; he wondered if it had been sheer luck he had survived. The enemy sure hadn't bothered to check if they had killed everyone, but he was fairly sure they'd succeeded in whatever their goal was.

The communicator display blinked with a red light. It was a call to all military personnel to evacuate to emergency coordinates nearby. Gywen grabbed his gear and headed out, into the black, volcanic wilderness beyond the encampment. He stopped to look back at what was left from it. He passed several other outposts nearby; black smoke billowed from most of them.

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"Status report!" Admiral Xer'xis shouted at one of his nearby bridge officers. He was wearing the new military uniform, which was crimson with white shoulder pads and the Xoron Fleet emblem displayed on the left side of the chest. His only decorations were those of his rank of Admiral. Although he had received many more over the past few years for exemplary service, he never found it necessary to wear them on duty. His hair was black and trimmed, his skin was remarkably dark for a Xoron – close to anthracite. His eyes were entirely red, with no visible iris or pupil, yet the look in them was determined.

"We've got reports pouring in from several outposts, Admiral. It seems most of them started broadcasting distress signals, only to go silent a few minutes later," one of his most trusted officers, Charl, replied. Charl had served with him since well before the evacuation of Netherea. Ever since the fall of the planet, he had been promoted to

Commander and was now serving as Xer'xis' right hand, making sure the Admiral was always well informed.

"Damn it! How come we never saw this coming? I want to know how they got past our blockade!" Xer'xis demanded, balling his hands into fists.

"I've already got a few engineers working on that, sir. They're trying to pinpoint the enemy ship's location. It's bound to be somewhere in orbit," Charl replied, hoping that the fact that they were working on finding them would improve the Admiral's mood slightly.

"Well, I guess Sha'hasra has kept true to her word," Xer'xis muttered to himself as he read the reports on the display on the Admiral's seat. This had to be the retaliation the Shaedon ambassador Sha'hasra had promised four years ago if they would not leave Netherea. He rested his face in the palm of his right hand, pondering what his next move would be. They had already ordered all troops at remote outposts back to the rendezvous points. He had sent in extra protection to ensure their safe return to the fleet. The larger bases would have to hold out for the moment, but he feared even the most well-armed military base wouldn't be safe in case of an attack. Reports had been vague, but it seemed most outposts were hit by only a small group of enemies. They possessed immense fire power, though, and all of them were focused close to the old Luminar tower and the Xarani Desert. It didn't take Xer'xis long to put two and two together. The Shaedon had shown their interest in these locations before and it didn't surprise him that they would try and gain control of them.

"Charl! Get me in contact with Commander Raggard, I have a mission for him," Xer'xis commanded. Charl turned his head around and nodded at Xer'xis.

"Of course, sir, right on it!" he shouted as he ran towards a nearby comm station. Xer'xis got up from his chair and headed to the back of the bridge, where the entrance to his personal office was.

"If anyone needs me, I'll be in my office. Don't disturb me, unless it's a code red emergency," Xer'xis stated, his jaw clenched. Most of the bridge crew simply saluted him as he strode out of the bridge, making sure not to get in his way.

Xer'xis moved towards his desk and sat down. For a few moments, he just stared out of the window of his office. The *Harbinger's Resolve* had been in orbit around Netherea for well over three years now and whenever Xer'xis had looked down to the planet from his window, he'd wondered if they'd ever be able to live on their home world again. Now that these strike teams had managed to slip past their blockade so easily, he wondered how long it would be before they would have to evacuate again. He couldn't shake the feeling that the Shaedon had managed to get their hands on technology far more advanced than their own. He almost felt as if they were a tribe of savages, using spears to defend themselves against a foe that could snuff out their lives with the pull of a trigger. He shook his head; this was not how it was going to go down – not on his watch. He activated his desk computer and within seconds, several holo displays gave him an overview of the current situation. The fleet was covering all sides of Netherea and several patrols had been sent out to sweep the area for cloaked ships, but they had not detected any so far. He continued to watch the fleet's movement for a while, until he was disturbed by an incoming call. With a simple flick of his finger, he took it. The white mask of High Councillor Máraxi Wihara of the Ninth Circle appeared on the holo display. Her burning red eyes pierced his.

"High Councillor," Xer'xis said, giving her a nod.

"Admiral," she replied with contempt in her voice.

"How are things? Enjoying your new ship?" Xer'xis asked, knowing well that Máraxi was not one for pleasantries. Shortly after she was released from custody, Máraxi had been given a full pardon by the Alliance. Xer'xis had tried to mend their broken relationship by giving her a ship of her own. Although she had appreciated the gesture, his accusation of treason had not improved her opinion of him, and although they ultimately wanted Netherea restored, they were further apart from one another than ever.

"The ship is adequate. How you are handling the current situation on the surface is not," Máraxi stated coldly.

“So, I suppose you knew about those enemy strike teams before they started decimating outposts?” Xer’xis said, his voice raised slightly. He found he had a hard time remaining cool around the Councillor.

“No, I’ll admit that I was as shocked as you were. I was merely wondering if you had more intel. If so, I need it.”

“I’m sending you what I have right now,” Xer’xis said, establishing a connection between the *Harbinger’s Resolve’s* central computer core and that of Máraxi’s ship, the *Storm Crow*.

“I have not been able to contact Ráz and that Earthmaster he has been working with in the old temple. Have you had any contact with that base?” Máraxi asked, her voice wavering just enough for Xer’xis to notice.

“I was just about to send a team their way. So far we haven’t been able to contact them.”

“I assume I don’t need to tell you how important it is that we keep control of the temple?” Máraxi asked.

“I know, but when Sha’hasra promised they would come back for us, I hadn’t expected it to be like this. I feel like we’re already ten steps behind, just like we were before ...”

“Then they have already won,” Máraxi stated. Her sarcasm did little to improve his confidence. He shook his head at her in response.

“As it appears, they do not seem to rely on numbers, but rather on technological superiority. This could work to our advantage – if we learn how to disable them, that is,” Xer’xis said, revealing some of what he’d deduced so far from all of the incoming reports.

“According to one report, a private close to the old Luminar tower saw only a squad of five enemies. They decimated the entire outpost within a few minutes and left immediately. He was the only survivor. I’ve seen several other reports of people surviving these onslaughts – they all share one vital detail.”

“Which is?” Máraxi asked impatiently.

“They never left any Scarowyn survivors. I’ve gone over all of the casualty lists that have been pouring in so far. It seems like they are purposely targeting them.”

"If what you are saying is true, then our plan to stabilize the core is at risk!"

"Yes, and they know we are relying on the Scarowyn to help us. We can't do it without their expertise," Xer'xis said, averting his gaze to look through the window.

"So, what is our next step?" Máraxi asked, unsure how to proceed.

"Regroup and make sure we get the Scarowyn to safety somehow," Xer'xis replied. He knew this was exactly what the Shaedon would want them to do, but he couldn't think of a better plan.

"We would be playing right into their hands," Máraxi said.

"I don't see any other option, do you?" Xer'xis shrugged at the image of Máraxi.

"No, not until we know exactly what we're up against in terms of numbers and firepower, I suppose," Máraxi replied.

"Wait, have you been in contact with Jessi lately?" Xer'xis asked. He knew it couldn't take long before *they* would. Sha'hasra had chosen her as her vessel and now, the girl served as their only means of communication with the Shaedon.

"No, I have not seen that woman since I was released from custody. Why do you ask?"

"Something tells me we will be hearing from Sha'hasra soon."

Máraxi was silent for a moment before she replied.

"You may be right."

"Listen, we'll stay in touch. For now, I'll be focusing on getting the troops on the surface to safety. It's the best course of action, we will never win this if we stay as divided across the surface as we are now."

"Agreed. Wihara out," Máraxi stated, closing off the comm channel. Her image dissipated and after a few seconds, Xer'xis was looking at the holographic image of the fleet and Netherea again.

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"Grummus, wake up!" Ráz shouted at the sleeping Earthmaster. It had taken him a good minute to snap Grummus out of his deep sleep, but

finally, he was slowly opening his eyes. His roots retracted from the earth and shaped themselves back into something that resembled feet.

“What’s going on?” Grummus asked. He grabbed his hat from the ground and put it on. It wasn’t until then that he noticed the rest of the guards standing around him.

“We’ve just received intel about enemies headed down here.”

“What? But there’s an entire company in the base up top – how did they manage to get past them?”

“I honestly have no idea, but we need to dig in. I’m sure it won’t be long before they’re on top of us.”

“Wait. If they’ve taken out the entire base up top, how exactly is digging in going to help?” Grummus asked with worry in his voice.

“What else would you suggest we do?” Rüz asked. He saw no other options but to wait and prepare to defend themselves.

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t sound like the best idea,” Grummus replied. As if struck by a sudden stroke of inspiration, he snapped his fingers.

“Wait! They’ll probably be aiming for our encampment, right?” Grummus asked.

Rüz looked at him with a frown on his face. “Yes, of course they will.”

“Then what if we create some sort of ambush?”

“What did you have in mind?” Rüz asked, wondering just how the young Scarowyn wanted to go about that.

“Well, what if we would just meld with the surrounding rocks?” he said, winking at Rüz.

A smile appeared on the Windmaster’s face. He had been working with Grummus for a few years now and he had often found the young Scarowyn to be full of little surprises. Although he was a bit naive, he would often come up with clever – even brilliant – solutions in tough situations.

“And I suppose you would be able to assist us with this blending?”

Grummus stood there, nodding with a grin on his face.

“Let’s not waste any time, then. Time to find ourselves a good spot for an ambush,” Rüz suggested, turning back towards the encampment

from the oak tree. The rest of the guards trailed after him, as did Grummus.

“How long will this spell last?” one of the guards asked Grummus, whose lower body had disappeared into a boulder.

“Well, it should last about an hour. I suggest you try moving your fingers once in a while to check how much effort it takes. When the rock starts to hamper your movement, well, that would be a good time to step out into the open, I’d say.”

“You’ve done this before?” Rüz asked while looking for a good position for himself.

“Sure, this is something pretty basic we learn during our training,” Grummus replied, but Rüz detected the lie almost immediately. He wanted to reply, but Grummus shook his head as a warning not to. Rüz simply nodded at him; it was better not to unsettle the guards and the rest of the personnel. They were already under enough stress with the threat of an assault.

“All right – everyone, look for a good place to hide, but make sure you can still see. We need to catch the enemy by surprise!” Rüz shouted before fading into a nearby rock wall. There had only been five guards stationed down in the cave, along with a team of three engineers, Rüz and Grummus. Everyone had taken up weapons and the engineers had set a few makeshift traps at each of the three entrances to the encampment.

It had been silent for at least fifteen minutes in the cave. After what seemed an eternity, Grummus finally saw searchlights coming from the far side, near the entrance. He was surprised when only a group of five individuals stepped into the area. The first thing he noticed was that they all looked alike, almost as if they were clones. The one in the middle stood out, being the only one with eyes as black as night. The others had bright, blue eyes. He immediately understood the one in the middle must be possessed by a Shaedon, but the others didn’t seem to be bothered by that fact at all. The possessed one ordered the rest to start searching the encampment, after which they all moved forward, cover-

ing each other as they did, pointing their rifles in different directions in search of targets. Grummus exhaled, trying not to make a sound. He looked to the other side, where Rüz had taken up his position. Rüz shook his head at him with a frown on his face. He cocked his head towards the leader of the enemy squad while keeping his gaze fixed on the young Earthmaster. Grummus answered with a nod, hoping Rüz was gesturing him to target the leader first when they would spring their trap. As the squad got closer to him, Grummus got a better view of them. He finally noticed the squad was made up entirely of artificial life forms. Their skin was pale and dull and their eyes lifeless. The four that were not possessed had finished sweeping the encampment and were headed back towards the leader.

“There’s no one here, Mistress,” one of them said to the leader. An angry, frustrated look twisted the possessed android’s face.

“Impossible! That Windmaster is supposed to be down here with an entire team!” the leader said, her voice strangely distorted. It sounded almost like two separate voices speaking at the same time, one female and one male.

“Perhaps they were warned of our approach? How do you wish to proceed?”

“Search these damned caves and that lake too, but be careful, it’s heavily polluted. Our skin may be resistant, but this magicka could alter anything. Spread out and report anything you find immediately!” the leader commanded.

“As you wish, Mistress,” the android replied, signalling his comrades to spread out and search.

Rüz had signalled everyone to remain in position and wait. He wanted to hear the conversation so he could confirm his suspicions. They were looking for him and these androids were capable of massive amounts of destruction, given the fact that they had successfully made their way through the base on the surface. The time to spring their trap was nearing and he wanted to attack the leader android first, knowing it was possessed by a Shaedon. The others had spread out by now; there was enough distance between them to give Rüz and his team at least twenty

seconds to deal with the possessed android. He waited for it to move further into the encampment, then signalled for his team to cover the exits. Grummus quietly moved out of the rock wall and drew magicka from a green orb he was holding in his left hand. He let the stream of magical energy flow towards the ground where the android leader was standing. Roots shot up from the ground, entangling its feet and quickly covering most of its legs and lower torso. At the same time, Rüz slid out of his hiding place and cast a spell to silence the android by creating an air void around its head. He moved closer carefully, keeping his right hand aimed at the android, in case it would resist. More roots had sprung up from the ground and grabbed the android's arms, immobilizing it entirely. Rüz saw the android shouting for help in vain. The void bubble did its work splendidly.

"If I dissolve the bubble, will you shout for help?" Rüz asked, knowing the android probably would. It looked at Rüz with its blackened eyes and shook its head.

"Make sure you don't or I'll let the bubble implode instead. Do we have an agreement?"

The android nodded. Rüz lowered his hand and snapped his fingers, removing the void bubble from around the android's head.

"You are a fool if you believe you can get out of this alive," it hissed, struggling against the roots that held it in place.

"Who are you?" Rüz asked, keeping an eye on the exits of the encampment.

"My name is Shi'fisso and you will soon be dead," it threatened through clenched teeth.

"Is that so? You are at a disadvantage at the moment. The rest of your team is spread out, searching for my people. We should probably destroy you and your team. Maybe we could salvage the bodies to download your data."

"You'd have to destroy us first," Shi'fisso said, unimpressed by the threat. An energy weapon fitted into the palm of the android's right hand had been charging and released a tremendous amount of energy, burning the roots that restrained the arm. Rüz immediately recast the void bubble and increased its size. As soon as it enveloped the android's

body, he brought his hands together and the void imploded, crushing the android entirely, leaving nothing but a pile of debris clattering to the ground.

Grummus ran up to Rüz. “Was that really necessary?” he asked, looking at Rüz questioningly with his bright green eyes. Rüz just shrugged at him.

“It’s not a person we’re dealing with here – that was just a machine. From the looks of it, they possess quite a bit of built-in weaponry. We should spot the others and take them out ASAP. I don’t think we can handle four of these at the same time.”

Grummus nodded, realizing Rüz had a point. He had hoped this could have been resolved some other way, but he had a feeling negotiating with the androids had been off the table from the start.

From the corner of his eye, Grummus saw an android charging at him. He could barely dodge the rushing android and fell to the ground, extending his hands to soften the blow. Rüz had not seen the attack coming and stood frozen in shock for a moment, processing what had just happened.

Just as the android started to charge up one of his weapons, Rüz shouted at the rest of the team to open fire on it. The guards and engineers stepped out of their hiding spots and fired salvos of lasers at the android; some of them hit, but most were deflected by its energy shield. It didn’t matter – the diversion had bought Rüz and Grummus some time to ready their spells. Rüz looked the android in the eyes and noticed the same black coloration as before. It didn’t take him long to realize Shi’fisso had switched bodies. The guards and engineers had disabled its left arm, but Shi’fisso didn’t seem to be bothered at all. Instead, she charged towards Rüz, but when she was supposed to crash into him, he had already disappeared. He had launched himself several metres into the air, landing softly a few metres away.

“No matter how many of these polydrones you destroy, I will just keep coming back for you,” Shi’fisso said while dodging the next salvo of incoming fire. One of the engineers noticed she had made the fatal mistake of stepping on one of the traps; he quickly activated it, frying the polydrone with an electrical current and causing it to overload.

Rüz looked back at the engineer who had sprung the trap. "Nice job!" he shouted.

"Thank you, sir," the engineer replied.

"That leaves us just three of these bastards to deal with," Rüz said, scanning his surroundings warily. He and Grummus both whirled around when they heard several explosions on the east side of the encampment. Two guards and an engineer flew through the air as they were hit by the force of the explosion.

"Fall back!" Rüz ordered the other guards and engineers. The polydrones had regrouped and the three of them were marching through the debris caused by the explosion, their weapons pointed in several directions. They all charged their arm cannons and fired in different directions, reducing most of the encampment to rubble. Rüz, Grummus and the rest of the team were running towards the exit of the cave.

"What do we do?" one of the engineers asked, panting heavily.

"We don't stand a chance against three of them. We have to get away, quick," Rüz said, drawing energy from his wind orb.

"We have to block their path somehow," Grummus shouted at Rüz, looking back to check where exactly their assailants were. They were hot on their tail and gaining distance fast. It wouldn't be long before they came within firing distance and as they were currently in the open, Grummus didn't find their chances of survival very appealing.

"I know. We'll have to get out of this open area first, into the narrow corridor," Rüz replied as he stopped running for a moment. He had gathered enough magicka from the orb and used it to create a gust of wind in their backs to help them outrun their pursuers for just a little while. It was barely enough; the polydrones fired at the fleeing group. Now they were at the corridor. Grummus ran to the back of the group, towards Rüz.

"We have to collapse this corridor! It's the only way!"

Rüz nodded at him, looking at the ceiling of the cave corridor.

"Quick, everyone, focus fire on the ceiling," he ordered the guards and engineers. They all fired their lasers at the same spot on the ceiling, which became superheated. Meanwhile, Grummus had woven a wall of roots that blocked the path for the polydrones who were giving chase. It

wouldn't withstand their fire for long, but it would at least slow them down. Ráz lifted his hands towards the ceiling and created another void bubble. After making it as big as possible, he unleashed another crushing implosion, causing the ceiling to collapse at the weakened point, blocking off the entire corridor with piles of boulders and rock.

"Phew, that was close ..." Grummus said, audibly exhausted from keeping the barrier up. Ráz took a few moments to catch his breath too as they made their way out of the caves with the rest of the group.

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The purple-skinned face of a young Xoron woman, possessed by the enigmatic Sha'hasra, appeared on all intergalactic broadcasting channels. Her eyes seemed to be bottomless pits of darkness, her hair was an almost angelic silver, which made her blackened eyes only that much more unsettling.

"Citizens of the Intergalactic Alliance, four years ago we told you to leave Netherea alone. Despite our warning, you banded together in an attempt to save the planet. Today, it is with great pleasure that I can announce our return to Netherea. We have retaken the planet and advise any remaining Alliance citizens to leave. You will be given twenty-four hours to do so. We have already dispatched most of your military presence on the surface. From now on, Netherea is off limits to anyone from the Alliance. The planet is now officially property of the Shaedon Armada."

She paused for a moment, then continued speaking with that same eerie, double voice.

"During our short absence, we have not been sitting idly by. Truly, the loss of Langruff the Purger was a minor setback, but also a calculated risk. We spent our time strengthening our bonds with the Zar'aranos Empire and creating of an army of polydrones, androids far superior to any life form we could possess. We demonstrated their firepower during our insurgence of Netherea. As you can see, we have come prepared. Leave Netherea alone, or the death toll on the Alliance will be inconceivable. You have been warned. Sha'hasra out,"

After her last words were spoken, the screen went black and showed the emblem of the Shaedon Armada; a trinity of black discs interconnected by a series of curved lines, which got thinner the closer they got to the centre.

“No surprises there,” Xer’xis said, his gaze scanning the other people in the room. With him were Rüz, Grummus, Private Andros and a handful of guards and engineers who had all just boarded the ship after evacuating from the planet’s surface.

“The biggest mystery still remains: how did they manage to reach the surface?” Rüz asked. He knew they were still searching for cloaked ships around Netherea.

“It doesn’t matter how they did it. What matters is how we can even attempt to fight back,” Xer’xis growled, slamming his fists into his desk. Rüz frowned at the captain; he had never seen him lose his temper, but he had to admit the situation was extremely infuriating. During the past four years, they had only barely managed to stabilize the planet’s core and now, within just one day, the Shaedon had reclaimed the planet.

“How many were lost, Captain?” Grummus asked carefully, hoping not to further agitate him.

“Way too many, mostly Scarowyn ... I’m so sorry, Grummus. There were nearly a hundred thousand stationed all over the planet. I haven’t had the chance to add up all of the reports, but we’re lucky if a quarter of the people stationed down there survived,” Xer’xis replied, putting a hand on the young Earthmaster’s right shoulder. Everyone in the captain’s office stood in silence for a moment, waiting for someone to speak again.

“So, what do we do now?” Rüz asked, looking through the window at Netherea.

“I was hoping you’d have an idea, Rüz,” Xer’xis admitted. He was usually a man of ideas, but he was not too stubborn to admit that even he was clueless about what they could do against the combined threat of a Zar’aranos attack and the Shaedon getting back to their plan to destroy Netherea.

“I’m afraid not, but I know someone who might.”