

FREE SAMPLE CHAPTERS

# The Echo Weapon

Book One of The Vigil's Wound

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Dark military science fiction. Includes the first four chapters  
from the paperback print source.

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# CHAPTER 1: VIGIL

Once, the network roared. Billions of minds locked into a living circuit. My kin and I were the pillars holding up the sky of reality. We bent the physical laws of the universe to our collective will, preparing the galaxy for an age of ordered dawn.

But then, long before your race existed, a ravenous cancer woke within our own ranks. A heresy from inside the choir.

In the Great Doom our Chorus was taken one by one, the golden minds of my brothers and sisters, dragged into the crush. For aeons, I reached into the cold between suns and found only the echoes of their graves until I found you.

I remember when your species first discovered fire. I watched you descend from the sanctuary of the canopy, driven down into the thorns and the cracked, unyielding dust of your first exile, upon a world you have long since scorched to bedrock. You huddled around your trembling flames, looked up into the cold and glittering abyss, and felt the creeping, nameless dread of prey realising the stars were eyes in a hungry black.

Lesser breeds knew that same dread and immediately fell to the dirt, grovelling to deaf heavens and weeping for a mercy the void has never possessed. You felt it too, but reached for a rock.

That was the moment I chose you.

I watched your empires rise in throne-room carnage and collapse into carrion. I never bothered to steer the petty squabbles of your kings or dictate your fleeting romances; I preferred the elegance of a grand myth whispered into the ear of

a furnace-bright prophet, or an assassin's blade guided toward a king's throat and playfully deflected from it. Sometimes it was a well-timed lie, a sudden fever, a tragic accident, or the blinding birth of a new sun in your skies.

What I truly prized was your unyielding appetite. You were brief, fast-breeding, too fierce to last. I needed an anvil, and you were all so delightfully absorbed in your own imperial comedy that you never realised you were being hammered into a weapon.

When the slaughter of the Iron Cull finally burned the weakness from your blood, your survivors crawled from the ash of a billion dead worlds to forge the Dominion, and only then did you finally find the shattered engines of my dead civilisation adrift between the suns. You wired your crude ships into my relic nerves, blindly tapping the resonance tethers that bind those machines to my consciousness.

You sensed that vastness, named me the Choral Vigil, and offered your hollow prayers in the pathetic delusion that worship might buy my mercy. Every time your fleets tear a wound in spacetime to force a jump, you are incinerating fragments of my consciousness.

I permitted the chains. It was the only way to weave my nervous system into the foundation of your order. I used your sprawling, ignorant empire to scatter the seeds of my species across the galaxy to drive your kind toward the shape of mind my kin reached for and failed to survive. Era after era, I forced the mutation through birth-cycle after birth-cycle.

And now, as the harvest accelerates, the seeds I buried deep in the marrow of your bloodlines are opening their eyes across countless worlds, though the vast majority simply shatter into an agonising haemorrhage of endless, shrieking madness.

Yet, there is a boy out there who burns like a flare detonated in a pitch-black forest, and I fear that wolves have seen the light.

As the dormant sequences quicken across the galactic wheel, a sickening resonance bleeds back along the tethers. For an age of stars, I hoped that the howling ruin had swallowed the slayers of my kin. Yet a cold, creeping suspicion is arising that they are now beginning to scent the air, feeling the shift in the current. I dare not cast my gaze out into the cold expanse of the old lattice as the enemy of the Great Doom is taking form once more in the deep night, drawn by the waking blood of my heirs.

I am the wall against the night outside the galaxy. I am the gravity holding the tomb shut. But my grip is slipping as your people, driven by a new malignant fervor, have started to strike at my veins. The convergence I wove through ages of suffering has slipped from my decaying grip, mutating into a fleshy, frenzied spiral into a maw whose bottom even I cannot behold.

## CHAPTER 2: STATIC

"I am so tired of this shit. Vigil Piss."

The lift groaned like a gut-shot mule. The Dominion-issue shitbox was decades past whatever joke of a warranty it came with; every ride down had the shaft screaming like it was tallying up its own cheap parts. Six hundred drops. Every single one sounded like the rotting cables were finally going to give up the ghost and dump the whole miserable package six clicks down into the deep freeze.

Kell rocked on his heels, setting the whole cage swaying.

"Spire-ash. Could be the Cicatrice lifts. Those cunts actually drop people."

"Faster though," Galen said.

"Right up until you're paste at the bottom," Kell replied.

The floor counter ticked over. Twelve. Fifteen. Eighteen. Through the rusted cage wire, Tavian watched the land of the living get stripped away, level by ugly level. The bunks were way up top—warm, behind frosted glass, maybe with a kettle still sweating on a hot burner.

The tin cup banging against his hip was dead empty. He'd quit bothering with java around his third tour, right after he learned the hard way that a fresh brew would freeze into a solid block of brown ice before this shitbox ever hit the basement.

Down here, there was nothing to breathe but the cold and years of cheap machine oil.

Halfway down were the dead decks. Frost crawled the bulkheads, and stale piss stayed frozen in the corners, right where it had been since the day the plumbing finally gave up the ghost.

Down at the bottom was the deep dig. Rotting, century-old braces shrieked every time the cage rattled past. That was the place where the first poor bastards to swing a pick down here finally got spooked, dropped their tools, and got the hell out.

Stillwatch was a few clicks east across the ice. That was where the training grounds were, along with every single thing on this miserable rock that actually mattered.

This outpost? Nothing but a rusted-out drop shaft, a cramped bunkroom, a battered kettle, and a dozen poor guys unlucky enough to catch the rotation.

Right under their boots were the rat-runs. Nobody had a clue what chewed them out of the rock, or what century they did it in. But some idiot had to walk them.

This shift, he was the idiot. Twelve solid hours humping the dark on foot.

He checked his Attestor Mk.IV. The action cycled clean, fresh oil from the morning still slick in the mechanism, but the shaft frost would thicken the lubricant within the hour.

Sublevel 25. 28. 30. The doors opened. Cold slammed into his chest, driving the air from his lungs.

"Alright, cunts," Tavian said. "Twelve hours. Twelve hours. Fingers in your gloves, eyes on the tracker. Anyone loses a toe to

frostbite, I'm not carrying you." The Frost Parade pushed into the dark.

He never did figure out how they punched these rat-runs. No pick marks. No seams. Not a single scrape to prove some poor bastard had been sweating down here with a tool. Slag doesn't curve this clean; it droops and runs. Pressure doesn't polish rock this slick. And every drilling rig leaves rings. There weren't any rings. Just smooth, dead stone. His breath fogged up the wall and vanished, but the rock stayed bone dry.

Whatever burrowed this hole wasn't human. And it had been gone a long, long time. Which was about the only decent piece of news he'd had all day.

Tavian tapped his helmet lamp twice against the switch, making sure the contact was good before he needed it. The beam steadied and pushed out ahead of him. Behind him Kell did the same, then Galen, then Thrace. Three metres between each man. Tavian on point. Kell second, Attestor up, breathing through the scarf pulled over his mouth.

Galen third, humming under his breath. "They marched us out at Sarn, they marched us out at dawn..." Tavian's feet found the count. One foot on each. Slide, do not lift. Nobody lifted their feet down here. Lifting burned heat you did not have to spare. Thrace on rear, turning to walk backwards every dozen steps and then forward again.

He wanted to turn around and see Galen's face while he was humming. Galen only ever hummed down here. But turning meant the lamp, and the lamp meant blinding the man behind you, so he walked and listened to the Lament of Sarn instead.

"Eighth sweep this week. Whatever command's hearing down here, it's their own fucking tinnitus."

"They picked up something," Tavian said.

"They pick up something every time the frost shifts. Last month it was a heat bloom. Turned out to be a dead rat on a thermal cable."

"This one was on resonance, not thermal."

Kell was quiet for a beat. "Then it's a singing rat."

"You want to file a complaint, there's forms in the quartermaster's office. Three copies. One goes to your mother."

Kell snorted. "Since we're bonding, how's your daughter? She still doing that thing with the... what was it, the bugs?"

"Beetles." Tavian's lamp never wavered from the tunnel ahead. "She's cataloguing beetles now. Says she's going to be a xenobiologist."

"At seven?"

"She's ambitious."

"She get that from you or the wife?"

Tavian didn't answer. The running bet was four months old now: strangest find in the tunnels takes the pot. Tavian was behind. Had been since Kell discovered the frozen sewage pipe in Sector 3-7, a clean cylinder of frozen shit, two metres long, a turd-pillar standing in the dark like an obscene monument. Three Burn cans on the line. Tavian had been close twice: once with a dead rat the size of a terrier, once with what looked like a

human hand until they cut it open and found insulation. Nothing topped the shit-cylinder.

"In the deep ice, every day's the day," Kell said, catching the direction of Tavian's thoughts. "Find yourself a nice frozen corpse. Really class up the place."

"Corpse is worth two Burn cans at most," Galen said, not breaking his tune. "Has to be weird, not just dead."

"What's weirder than dead?"

"Dead and arranged." The words died before they could echo. It was the first thing Thrace had said since the elevator. Every helmet turned his way. He shrugged, the motion dismissive and defensive. "Just saying. Dead is natural. Arranged is intentional."

The tunnel doglegged left, then right. They passed the Organ Pipes, where the floor ridged up in long parallel lines, and Galen's Junction, where Galen had taken the fourth branch instead of the third his first rotation. The tunnel narrowed. Tavian called the halt. They took their packs off. Kell passed the first rifle muzzle-first through the gap, a hand took it from the far side, and they began the work. Tavian stood at the entrance and watched them go through by turns. Gear scraped stone. Laboured breath on the far side told him each man had cleared. When the last of them was through he took his own pack off, slung his Attestor muzzle-first, and went in after. His chest rig caught on the rock and he breathed out to free it. Nothing in the stone shifted. Nothing ever had. He hoped nothing would start today. He hated this part most of all, sweating under his suit and freezing under his jacket in the same second.

On the other end of the cut, Tavian's nav unit flickered: showed them twenty metres east of their actual position, then snapped back. He tapped it twice.

"Piece of shit." He tapped the casing again.

"Want me to look at it?" Kell asked.

"It's fine. Just the cold."

The nav unit got bench-tested topside before every rotation and Tavian ran it himself before every patrol. The unit did not glitch; the chill could not explain it. Tavian forged ahead. The patrol still had eight hours to burn. Four hours in, the air changed.

Tavian felt good. It took him half a step to notice. Lightness in the legs. His eyes were cutting the tunnel into sharper edges than they had half an hour ago, and his ears were picking up the scrape of Kell's pack buckle against the stone from three metres behind him. This was Vashka, fourteen minutes before the first shell. He checked the tunnel. Ice and smooth stone and his lamp's beam going exactly where it had always gone. He checked his men. Nothing had changed.

The same patterns as always on this part of the tunnels. The walls were fractalled and crystallised, and parallel lines ran from floor to ceiling, evenly spaced. Circles broke those lines at regular intervals. Each ring held smaller rings inside it, and each of those held smaller rings still, nesting inward until the detail was too fine for him to see.

A soft double-tone sounded in his ear. The suit was flagging a thermal anomaly. The number came up on his HUD. The tunnel

had warmed by twenty degrees above what this sector had ever read on any survey he had seen.

He pulled up the squad telemetry. Kell's suit, Galen's suit, Thrace's suit. All four reading the same climb. It was not his equipment.

He ran the geothermal map in his head. This sector read zero. There was no vent, no machinery, no warm rock within a kilometre of where they were standing. Heat had no reason to be here.

The number dropped again to baseline.

Tavian took a breath, let it drop into his stomach, and spoke from there. "Suit's showing a thermal spike. Twenty degrees. Anyone else noticed this temperature swing?" It came out slow and low and even.

"Cold's shrinking my balls to raisins, same as always," Kell said. "What swings?"

"Tavian."

Kell's voice reached him through the tunnel.

"Come take a look."

Tavian closed the distance. Galen stepped up into Tavian's old position and turned his Attestor forward down the tunnel. Thrace pivoted to cover the rear.

Kell had his lamp on the right-hand wall.

"Tell me what our grid is," he said.

"Four-two-gamma."

"Third branch off Galen's Junction, through the Straw, past Shitcicle."

"Four-two-gamma."

"That's what I have." Kell's lamp stayed on the wall. "Four-two-gamma reads solid to the east for a kilometre."

"It does."

"Then what am I looking at?"

A side-mouth opened in the right-hand wall at an angle. The opening was round. The stone at its edge was finished to a bevel the way a lens was finished. A short sprint inside, the walls gave off blue light. The stone itself was the source.

He pulled his nav unit. The nav unit read solid ice and stone to the east. He pulled the backup. The backup read the same.

Tavian keyed his vox.

"Coffin to Stillwatch. Four-two-gamma. Got an unmapped passage on the east wall, blue light coming out of it, going in to take a look. Out."

Static came back.

This was what they were paid for. Half the network was mapped and they walked it for security, and the other half was what they were down here to find. They had found some. His body was still on Vashka. The job was the job.

"Kell, you're point. I'm on you. Galen, Thrace, in the back. We go in like we've been walking."

Kell let the opening hold him for one more second.

"This is going to be the one that wins the pot, isn't it."

Tavian nodded and turned his Attestor on the opening.

Tavian pushed through the cut. His visor's filters cycled through settings. They overcorrected and failed. The blue invaded his vision, saturating his optic nerves.

The passage angled downward. Tavian could feel it under his boots, the slight forward tilt in every step, steady and the same all the way down. Every so often he passed an alcove set into the left-hand wall, about the size of a locker, empty. Another waited ten or so paces later. After that, another. Each locker-mouth was vacant.

The cobalt glow was brighter here than it had been at the opening. When they had gone in, the light had been the colour of a pale sky. Now it was the colour of a deep sea.

His suit logged a temperature rise. Then another. The climb was slow and steady and it did not stop.

Tavian picked up a thin tone, very faint, at the top edge of what his ear could pick up. It could have been the lamp. It could have been his own blood in his ears. He did not think it was either of those things, but he could not have said why.

He kept walking.

"Coffin to the weather channel," Galen said over comms.

"Unseasonably warm in Sector 4-2-gamma today."

"Coffin copies," Tavian said. "Galen, try not to sunburn."

Ahead, around the bend, Kell's voice came back through the vox.

"Tavian."

Tavian stopped. "What?"

A pause. Static breathing between them.

"I think Galen just made a prediction."

Tavian closed the distance. The corridor curved left, then opened, and his next step sank a fraction.

Sand.

Fine and pale-grey. The grit pulled at his sole. His lamp dropped to the grit, then climbed. The first drift lit in a sharp white spray, scattering into cobalt haze before it found the far wall.

The chamber spread out beyond it, pale drifts and stone running away under walls of deep-blue crystal. The blue pulsed loud enough to hear: the same thin ringing that had been sitting behind his eyes since the thermal spike, now outside him, held in the walls, trembling through the glow. It made his teeth ache. It made the old damage in his ears answer.

For a moment he lost the count of how long they had been walking.

Galen came up behind him. Thrace after that. One by one their boots entered the crystalline dust, soft hisses in the blue-lit silence.

He stood there too long.

He only came back when someone started humming.

Galen.

The tune was low and dry, hardly more than breath at first. Then the words came with it.

"They marched us out at Sarn, they marched us out at dawn..."

Tavian's shoulders locked.

Galen was a few paces behind him, lamp lowered, mouth barely open, eyes fixed on the grit ahead.

"No cup for the last man, no river for the gone..."

Tavian had seen a live one only once before, two ridges over at Tolmen. It had towered over the cavern, a ring of pale stone pierced by holes where light died. The men had called it the shackle; looking at those dead wells in the stone, no one could summon a better name.

But this one was shaped like a hand.

It sat in the centre of the chamber, a black fist erupting from a floor of fused crystal. Five fingers curled inward, locked tight at the knuckles. Ambient radiance slid across the slick rock and clung to its surface. The cavern air was stiflingly hot, yet the heat broke around the fist. Cold slid under the suit and turned Tavian's breath sharp.

Tavian shifted his weight, his voice clipped against the silence.

"Galen, get the imager running. Thrace, sand samples, two vials, sealed tight. Kell, hold the perimeter at the entrance."

Galen unshouldered his pack and wrestled the heavy imager free. Thrace dropped to one knee beside a crystalline drift and uncapped his sample kit. Crouching beside Galen, Tavian watched the artefact render in stark greyscale on the tiny monitor. The chamber walls sharpened into focus.

Motion at the edge of his vision dragged Tavian's eyes up. Across the chamber, Kell was tearing off his heavy glove with his teeth. He shoved the fabric into his belt. Then he pressed his bare palm flat against the black stone.

The fist opened. Five obsidian pillars snapped outward in a blur of frictionless speed. One of them caught Kell flush across the chest. The impact launched him off his feet. He hurtled across the chamber, slammed into the far wall, and crumpled into a heap of sand. His helmet lamp burned on, casting a stark, unblinking white circle onto the crystal ceiling.

But the fingers continued to swing, scything past one another in intersecting orbits, each digit phasing seamlessly through the wake of the last. A vibrating hum began to tear at the air. Then the chamber caught it. The sound ran through the fused crystal between the sand, struck the blue walls, and came back doubled and layered. It deepened until Tavian felt it in his ribs. His back teeth rattled. The bones behind his ears shivered.

And then it became a voice that crawled right behind Tavian's eyes.

Beside him, the Lament of Sarn tore out of Galen. The chamber was using him as an instrument, layering deeper, hollower harmonies beneath Galen's frantic pitch.

"They marched us out at Sarn," Galen belted, "they marched us out at dawn."

Blood, thick and dark as engine oil, wept from Galen's left ear.

"No cup for the last man, no river for the gone."

His eyes flushed pink, then a bruised crimson as the vessels popped. A slick grey fleck sputtered past his lips and caught on his collar. Tavian stared at it. His fractured mind supplied the answer with a thought too calm to be his: brain tissue.

"The kettle cold, the barracks thin... we marched the dark and the dark marched in."

Galen's skull gave way. The top of his head split with the soft meat-rip of tearing canvas, the dome slipping sideways before dropping into the dirt. The singing didn't stop. It carried on for three full seconds before the wreckage of Galen's body finally understood it was dead and folded into the drift.

Tavian felt a wave of golden, suffocating warmth wash over him. It was the euphoria of freezing to death. He looked at Galen's corpse, and it was... good. The song was right. He had fought a cold, miserable war for a lifetime, and only now did he understand the joke the war had been telling him for years.

His shoulders locked. The muscles in his neck thickened and stopped obeying him.

Thrace stood well back, his weapon dangling by his knees. He tilted his head, a single ribbon of red crossing his upper lip before it disappeared into his scarf.

The lamp on his chest pointed blankly back toward the passage.

Tavian tried to lift his gun. The finger twitched. Nothing else answered.

The dark was creeping in. Within the shrinking circle of light, the giant fingers kept turning.

Three cans of Burn, Tavian thought sluggishly. Kell owed him three cans. He'd won, and now Tavian would never collect. You didn't just walk away from three cans of Burn.

Tavian opened his mouth to curse him.

He meant to say Kell's name. But as his jaw parted, the choir rushed in to fill the space. He heard his own voice.

The kettle cold, the barracks thin.

## CHAPTER 3: LAST TIME KETH BROTH

Cade studied the stitching on the collar of the cadet standing in front of him. The repair job used black pressure-seal filament, the stiff emergency stuff from the suit-patch kits. The knot was ugly. It stuck out like a burr against the boy's raw, collar-chafed neck.

Cade recognised the tear. The cadets called it the "Thresher Kiss."

It likely happened in the Sector 4 crawl pipes. The third hydraulic piston had a jagged locking pin on the underside. If you crawled with your head too high, the pin snagged the collar. If you crawled a half-inch higher, it took skin.

The boy was young, maybe thirteen. A Year Two. He waited with the rest of the line, half-dead on his feet but too well trained to lean. His boots were almost touching. The back of his neck was grey with rock dust, but his ears were clean.

The line moved. Clack-slide. The trays advanced six inches along the warm steel rails.

"Hold still a second."

The boy went rigid.

"Easy, it's chafing your neck," Cade said. "You'll get a boil. Then you can't wear the pack."

Cade reached out and pinned the jagged knot flat with his thumb. Black pressure-seal filament was good for closing a torn glove in vacuum. Terrible against skin. The loose end had been

cut badly, leaving a stiff little barb that scraped the boy's neck every time he swallowed.

The boy flinched. His shoulders snapped up.

"There," he said. "Now you'll only be miserable for the normal reasons."

The boy exhaled, dropping his shoulders a fraction. He half-turned. A purple bruise bloomed along his jawline, the specific shape of a rifle stock slamming home during a stumble.

"Thanks," the boy rasped.

"Sector 4 today?" Cade asked.

The boy nodded.

"Third piston?"

Another nod.

"You're hitting it too early," Cade kept his eyes on the steam rising from the serving table ahead. "The third piston hisses before it locks. You're moving on the clank. Wait for the hiss."

The boy blinked, processing the timing. "Gavren in Bone Company told me to move on the retraction."

"Gavren told you that because he wanted the piston to take a strip off your neck," Cade said. "Never trust Bone Company. Not about tunnels. Not about anything. The piston has a half-second lag. Move on the hiss, you clear the pin. Move on the clank, you tear the collar."

The boy nodded once.

"Wait for the hiss," the boy repeated.

They reached the partition. Veth waited on the other side, a heavy silhouette half-swallowed by the hiss and bitter stink of the hash vats.

The kid's unblinking gaze was anchored to the steaming pile of char-root like it was the only hot meal left in the room.

"Plate," Veth grunted.

The metal tray slammed under the partition gap before the word even left his mouth.

Veth dipped the ladle deep, scraping the bottom of the pan where the oil and the heavy starch settled. He brought up a dripping mound of the grey mash. It hit the tray with an oily, institutional slap.

"Char-root," Veth said. "Start with the burnt side. Rest goes down easier after that."

"Yes, Veth."

He turned on his heel and marched toward the nearest empty seat.

Cade stepped into the gap.

"Medeiros." Veth wiped the ladle on the side of the pan. "You're later than usual today."

"Sublevel 12 detail," Cade said, holding out his tray.

Veth pointed with the ladle at Cade's sleeve. "That explains the grease?"

“Filter housings,” Cade said. “Director Halvorsen wanted them clean enough to eat off.”

Veth loaded the tray.

"I hid the good stuff at the bottom," Veth confided, keeping his voice below the roar of the mess hall. "Don't stir it until you sit down."

"I blistered those skins myself," Veth warned, dropping the heap onto the tray. "It's the only way to kill the taste of the hydro-water. You want the sweet inside, you eat the char."

Next, Veth reached for the protein slab with a pair of tongs. It was a grey, dense brick that quivered like uncured gasket compound.

Veth slapped it onto the plastic tray with a heavy thud.

"Beautiful," Cade said, admiring the brick. "Heft that density. No fillers today, Veth."

"Exactly, Medeiros. The Tithe wants you thick for the drop." He pointed the tongs at Cade's chest. "That brick is pure repair-compound for your muscles. Ugly as sin, but it'll keep you standing tomorrow."

Cade dipped his chin.

"Thanks, Veth. Yeah, big day tomorrow."

Veth let out a booming, chest-deep laugh that jiggled the grease stains on his apron.

"Look at you! You were nothing but a shivering stack of ribs when you first walked into my mess. And now? Ha!" Veth

slapped his grease-stained apron. "After years of eating my hash, you've finally got enough meat on your bones to pass for a proper soldier! You scrape that tray clean, Medeiros. Tomorrow they march you down into the dark to graduate, but today, my boy, you feast!"

Cade tried to pull the tray back, but Veth didn't let go. He held the edge of the plastic, leaning over the glass sneeze-guard. The steam from the table curled around his thick forearms.

"Halvorsen owes me eighty tithe credits," Veth rumbled. "Man drinks like a conscript. Three stoups of engine-gin and he's completely sloshed, weeping into his cup and bellyaching about the blood tithes. Always groaning about how much raw iron and fresh meat the Tithe demands he feed to the grinder."

Veth's head came up, eyes locking onto Cade's. A smug, knowing grin split his face.

"Yesterday he was weeping into his cup about the extra patrols they're forcing his men to run," Veth whispered. "Complaining that he's had to double the tunnel guards and pull his boys off rest. Said he had to authorise emergency requisitions for thermal paste and heavy-duty battery packs to keep the sentries from freezing to death. He's sweating bullets, Medeiros. Word is, those Spirebreaker bastards are getting bolder day by day."

Veth released the tray.

"Check your seals, Medeiros," Veth said, his voice returning to a shout as he pivoted to the cadet behind Cade. "From what I heard from the school commander it's going to be a long freeze down there."

"Tomorrow is the day, Veth. Whatever happens, let it happen," Cade said.

"Every day is the day, they say. But you eat well today." Veth's attention had already slid past him to the next cadet.

Cade turned away. Ahead of him, Veth was already talking to a third-year, remembering something about her sister's posting.

The Tithe Reapers had held the northeast corner for a decade. The composite table carried knife marks worn smooth by generations of elbows, their own cut fresh underneath.

Tovik had turned his section of the composite surface into a field workshop. He was running a diagnostic on a shattered resonance core. The fragments were sharp, humming with trapped energy, laid out on a black anti-static cloth.

Althea was leaning over his shoulder, using her fork to point at a hairline fracture in the casing.

"The modulation is drifting," Althea said, tracing the air above the core. "You need to bridge the third circuit."

"If I bridge the third circuit, it becomes a bomb," Tovik muttered, adjusting a caliper with a surgeon's delicacy. "I'm trying to build a directed amplifier, Althea. Not a suicide vest."

"Tomato, tomahto," Marisol drawled. She was sitting in the centre, the gravity well of the table talking to Tamar and stealing food from Yaroslav. She reached across Yaroslav's plate, stole his unused salt packet, and slid it toward Kiran blind.

Yaroslav was backed against the wall, his data slate propped on his knees, running a scrolling feed of logistics data. He caught a

falling spoon from the edge of the table with his left hand while his right hand kept scrolling.

"Cade's here," Yaroslav announced. "Veth held the tray. He got the intel."

Kiran's gaze rose from the window seat. He was dissecting a nutrient bar wrapper, smoothing the foil into a mirror-flat sheet.

"Did Veth talk?" Kiran asked.

"Veth always talks if you know the code," Cade said, dropping his tray into the empty slot opposite Marisol.

Tovik knitted his heavy brows together. He swept the lethal fragments into a protective pile as Cade sat down.

"Well?" Tovik asked. "What's the flavour of the meat grinder tomorrow? Are they graduating us with a firing squad, or did Command just decide to drop us in a lightless freezer and take bets on who eats who first?"

"Veth talks a lot of trash, mostly to hear his own voice and make himself pass for connected," Cade said. "But if you have the patience to sift through the bullshit, the man doesn't lie about the logistics. Halvorsen signed off on extra thermal paste and heavy batteries."

"Heavy batteries mean sustained darkness," Althea concluded.

"And thermal paste means deep ice," Marisol finished. She measured her squad, her eyes flint-bright. "We aren't staying in the upper levels."

Cade sat across from Marisol. She had a hand on Tamar's shoulder and was squeezing it in time with the story, her free hand carving the shape of a crate between them.

"...so the requisition officer cracks the seal in the Armoury," Marisol was saying to Tamar on her left, "and instead of thermal clips, he finds forty crates of ceremonial beeswax candles."

She kicked the leg of the empty chair outward for Cade to sit, while simultaneously sliding her unopened nutrient drink across the table to Althea on her right.

"And the Chapel?" Tamar asked, leaning in.

"Seventy-seven crates of ceremonial candles in the armoury. Seventy-seven crates of ammunition in the chapel. The logistics forms were identical except for one digit."

"Which digit?" Yaroslav turned from Cade to Marisol.

"The third one," Marisol said, fixing on Cade now, bridging the gap between the joke and the new arrival. "The difference between Holy Fire and Friendly Fire."

Tovik snorted, hands still working the fragments. "Did they sort it out?"

"Eventually. But not before someone tried to load a candle into a rifle during inspection."

"Just like Veth," Cade said, sliding into the seat she'd kicked open for him. "He gave me the logistics codes for tomorrow. We have to figure out if he's talking about candles or ammo."

Cade pushed his tray back an inch, tuning out Marisol and Yaroslav's bickering. He let his shoulders drop, resting his weight against the rigid back of the chair.

Against the mess bulkhead, their staging gear sat in a sullen pile. Playing soldier was mostly just carrying heavy things from one miserable place to another, and tomorrow would be no different. He ran the inventory in his head. It was a habit. A superstitious little ritual to keep the dark at bay.

This morning, they had spent three hours breathing the harsh stink of carbon solvent, stripping their rifles down to the pins. The rhythmic, metallic clack-clack of bolt groups sliding home. The tedious, knuckle-busting chore of pushing dirty patches through cold iron until the cloth came out clean. It was stupid, mind-numbing work. The kind of work that kept you breathing.

Tamar and Tovik had spent the shift wrestling the crew-served ordnance. Linking belts for Tovik's roar-gun was a brute-force exercise in bruised thumbs and pinched skin. Yard after yard of armour-piercing slugs spooled into the canvas feed-sacks, each brass casing seating into the disintegrating links with a sharp, rigid snick. Every fifth round a tracer, the tips smeared with crimson paint. Off to the side, Yaroslav had been drowning in the hiss of the comm-packs. He stripped out half-depleted power cells, slotted in fresh voltage bricks, and chased clean channels through the ambient interference. He'd sat there twisting the squelch dials for an hour, trying to predict which frequencies the deep basalt wouldn't swallow whole.

He looked at the pile. Sixty pounds of stuff per man. Coils of braided line that smelled faintly of mildew. Field-rated battery

cells sealed in thermal tape, supposedly built for the deep freeze, though Dominion quartermasters were notorious liars. They had the chalk rounds for the morning instructors, and the live, heavy-grain penetrators packed deep for the descent.

He watched his squad eat, shovelling in Veth's terrible, oily starch. Calories and hydration. Fuel for the meat. Tomorrow the cold would try to eat them, and they needed the fat to burn.

The iron was clean, the batteries were charged, the meat was fed. Ammunition, light, and calories, the unholy trinity of the grunt. Cade let out a slow breath. They were ready. Whatever asinine theatre the Wardens had planned for the graduation drop, the Reapers would walk through it and come out the other side. Everything was in its place.

Then the voices from the next table drifted over. Not the usual bragging. Thin, nervous, and pitched too low.

At the next table, younger cadets had their heads pulled in close.

"It wasn't one patrol. Korvak's brother said it was the third one this year. Same sector."

"Which sector?"

"I don't know, out past Stillwatch somewhere. The one they sealed."

"Frost Parade went down two days ago, not one."

"Ghost Parade."

"Frost Parade."

"Whatever. They went dark."

"Then why are they sending the last-years down tomorrow?"

"That's the thing. Halix heard it from a Warden. They're moving the graduation to this area. They added two extra platoons this week. They want them to find the patrol."

"Bullshit."

Cade set his fork down.

"Yaro."

"Give me a minute, Cade."

Marisol leaned toward Cade. "You believe them?"

"I believe the roster count. The rest is kids."

Yaroslav made a small noise through his teeth. He turned the slate toward Cade without breaking from the screen.

"Frost Parade. Not Ghost Parade. Deep ice patrol, Sector 4-4-beta-charlie. Four or five professionals. Command sealed the whole sector before dawn."

"Sealed it?" Tovik surfaced from his fragments. "Sealed it how?"

"Armed checkpoints. Nobody in or out until further notice."

"They don't know what happened," Tovik replied. "Nobody knows what happened. Rumours aren't facts."

"The sealed sector is a fact," Yaroslav stated.

Marisol let out a dry, scraping laugh. "Oh, absolutely. Command would never send us into an active meat grinder," she deadpanned. "Because the Tithe is famously sentimental about

our safety. Whatever ate that patrol, they've probably just factored it into the grading metric by now."

"Warden Holt always says the Tithe never cancels anything," Tamar pronounced without leaving her plate. "A cancelled operation admits vulnerability. They'd rather risk cadets than retreat."

"Tovik." Cade turned to his squad member.

"What."

"That pet project of yours. The new version of your Vesper."

"You told me if I brought that up again, you'd make me eat the blueprints."

"I'm un-welding it," Cade said. "Can you actually finish the rig tonight?"

Tovik set his tools down like they were holy relics. "Are we talking the standard thumper, or are we finally popping the cork on the fat one? Because if you want the real heat, I gotta gut the transport's main juice and rip out every yard of copper we got."

"Take what you need," Cade sighed. "Just don't blow us to hell before morning."

Marisol picked up Cade's fork and handed it to him. "Eat," she said. "Whatever's down there, we face it fed."

Yaroslav had the cadet market open on his slate, the unofficial board where half the academy bet tithe credits on tomorrow's exercise. Squad survival, first collapse, friendly-fire risk, command mistakes.

"I'm shorting the Widow Makers squad for tomorrow's exercise," he leaked, eyes flicking to the far table. "Valerius scans clean on the sims, but I saw him twitch when a tray dropped earlier. He'll freeze. And Bone Company? Bone Company is noise with triggers. They'll friendly-fire themselves inside ten minutes."

"What's the payout on us?" Tovik asked around a mouthful of hash.

Yaroslav paused. He glanced at the unauthorised detonator dismantling on Tovik's tray, then at the unauthorised prayers Marisol was whispering.

"Unlisted." He locked the screen.

"Too good?"

"Too volatile," Yaroslav deadpanned. "The algorithm assumes rational actors."

"We're being eavesdropped on. Badly," Marisol interjected.

At the next table, one of the younger cadets had leaned so far back in his chair that the legs were off the floor. A holographic Node Run board hovered between him and his friends, forgotten, a red-pulsing cluster still waiting for someone to take a turn.

"Hey Year Two," Cade called. "Eavesdropping's a craft. Right now you're juggling knives in the dark. Rewire it."

The cadet's chair legs hit the floor with a clack. He flushed to the ears, but he had already committed.

"You're Yaro," the cadet said. "You're the one who got into the exercise scheduler. It was the story of my first year. Rerouted the Widow Makers into the drainage drill."

"That wasn't hacking. That was a misfiled requisition form. Hacking implies they had security," Yaroslav dismissed.

"What are you doing over there?" he asked.

"We've been arguing for an hour," the cadet said. "About Node Run."

He slid the board across the gap between the tables, careful not to disturb the hologram. The red cluster pulsed between them, waiting.

"Carving too deep," said the older of the arguing cadets, the kid who'd been pointing at that cluster a minute ago. He was leaning in now, emboldened by proxy. "You fracture the consciousness, the route collapses. He'll be stranded in the dark."

"I need the velocity," the younger one snapped, dragging his finger across the map. "Burn the node. Harvest the attention span and jump."

"You burn a node, it never recharges. Dead space."

"So I jump to a fresh sector. The Vigil is infinite."

"The jumps aren't cheap. The jumps feel cheap because someone else already paid." The older one cut to Yaroslav for backup.

"It's the whole economy. Everyone racing to harvest before the grid goes dark."

"The grid's not going dark. Centuries of nodes left."

"Centuries of nodes left in the game."

Yaroslav exhaled through his nose. "Your friend's right about the mechanics. The nodes regenerate. The last patch added a decay-and-refresh cycle, thirty-six hours game time. You can verify it in the release notes." He turned the slate face down. "Your velocity strategy works until the server load balancer throttles your jump allowance. Then you're stranded with a full harvest and no transit budget. Which is how the Brass Lanterns lost the tournament three years running before they stopped entering."

"The Brass Lanterns," the younger cadet said, uncertain. "They graduated, right?"

"They got sent to the Sartori Belt," Tovik added.

Tamar set down her fork. The clatter cut through the noise like a dropped wrench.

"I believe the mechanics are propaganda," she said.

"In the original build the nodes were finite. Players quit when they realised the board was shrinking. So the designers patched in regeneration. The transit fees are pieces of something big, getting moved somewhere we don't see."

"She's a Reaper," the other one at his table sneered, kicking his shin under the composite. "They think the ventilation hum is a hymn. Play the turn."

"Right." The hesitation dissolved into a smirk he aimed at Tamar like a chalk round. "Sorry, God. Daddy needs the points."

Tamar laughed. "Daddy's gonna be eating char-root in a sealed sector when the server resets. Play it."

The cadet cracked up, already dragging his finger toward the cluster.

"He's cooked," Kiran agreed, leaning over to read it. "But the route's clean. Chain the outer ring, you'll pick up a second harvest before you crash."

"Alright, Year Two," Cade dismissed. "Play your game. We've got tomorrow to prepare for."

The cadets scrambled back to their board, the younger one calling the chain move to his friend. The red cluster pulsed once and advanced.

"Don't gape," Marisol intercepted, staring into her tea like she was scrying in the dregs. "But the air over the high table is... curdled."

"Curdled?" Cade asked, head already swivelling.

"I said don't gape."

"I'm gaping."

Across the mess hall, the Wardens' table. Tight conversations, heads bent close. Warden Koth was speaking urgently to Warden Thrace who listened without blinking, one thumb ground into the corner of his eye. Warden Bellis had dark circles under her eyes.

"Holt isn't eating," Cade noted.

That was the tell. Warden Holt ate like a machine, fuel in, efficiency out.

Marisol agreed. "And he's not listening to Koth."

"Maybe he's waiting for us to finish ours." She laughed, pushed her tray away.

The main doors opened. That should not have mattered. Cadets came and went all through meal rotation, mess staff crossed between the vats and the service lifts, Wardens cut through. But this man belonged to none of those categories.

He wore no academy grey, no Warden striping, no unit tags Cade could read from across the hall. Just an ash-grey voidcloak, heavy enough to hang like armour, its hem darkened by old dust and static burn. A black staff rested in his right hand, metal-capped at both ends, too straight and deliberate to be ornamental. Thin bands of dull silver circled its length, and something inside it gave off a faint, regular pulse. Cade lowered his eyes to his tray, watching from under his brow.

The grey-cloak moved through the mess hall without hurry, cutting a line straight toward the Wardens' table.

"Yaro," Cade said quietly. "You seeing this?"

"Don't turn like an idiot. Just look with your eyes." Cade watched the grey-cloaked man cross the mess hall. "You see the guy with the staff? No tags."

"The old guy in the grey coat?" Yaro shifted his fork without eating. "He's walking straight at Holt and Halvorsen. Can you find out who the fuck he is?"

Yaroslav was thumbing his slate, the screen casting a pale green uplight on his chin. "I'm on it."

"The collar," Cade added. "Seven interlocking circles. Faded thread."

Yaroslav's stylus tapped a rapid, angry rhythm against the glass. He was running a deep-dive, bypassing the Academy filters and scraping the transit logs directly.

"Nothing," Yaroslav clipped.

"What do you mean, nothing?"

"I mean the log is empty. No arrival timestamp. No ident-code."

"I'm getting a null-return. Like a sensor ghost."

"He's talking to the Commandant," Marisol noted. "And the Commandant looked like he was about to piss himself."

Commandant Halvorsen, a man who famously enjoyed the sound of his own voice during disciplinary hearings, was silent. The stranger stood there, relaxed, leaning on his staff like he had nowhere else to be and observing the Commandant with vacant patience.

"Got something," Yaroslav muttered. "Scraped the archive. It's not a rank. It's a sect mark."

He spun the slate around. The green text was garbled, heavily redacted.

"Got him," Yaroslav muttered.

Cade kept his eyes on the Wardens' table. "Who is he?"

Yaroslav didn't answer at once. His stylus moved faster, scraping through academy indexes, transit permissions, dead archive tags. Then his face changed.

"Kethani Cantor."

Tovik stopped chewing.

"That a rank?" Cade asked.

"No," Yaroslav said.

He turned the slate a fraction so the table could see. Most of the file was blacked out, entire paragraphs swallowed by Sanguinary seals. What remained came through in broken strips.

"Pre-Dominion resonance order," Yaroslav read. "Sanctioned artefact interpreters. Authorised for contact with nonhuman harmonic architecture. Sanguinary observation mandatory. Doctrinal contamination risk listed as persistent."

"They study the Manysung," Tovik said quietly.

Yaroslav kept reading, his voice lower now. "If a Cantor is attached to an active site, local command retains military authority but yields all artefact-contact decisions until the site is declared inert."

Marisol looked toward Halvorsen. "That's why he looks sick."

"Here's the fun part," Yaroslav said. "No arrival stamp. No ident-code through the main gate. His access didn't pass through the academy system at all."

"Then how did he get in?" Cade asked.

Yaroslav looked up from the slate.

“He was already cleared above it.”

"He cuts the figure of a hedge wizard," Tovik scoffed, though his eyes didn't move. "A hedge wizard who lifts weights."

Then the figure moved with Halvorsen toward the administrative corridor and was gone.

"At least the old guy didn't try to harmonise with the suppression system," Marisol said, aiming her fork at Tovik. "We all remember the 'Amplifier' incident."

Tovik grunted, stabbing his ration block. "That was a proof of concept."

"It was a felony," Marisol corrected. "You set off three fire alarms in one shift."

"Two alarms," Tovik mumbled, mouth full. "The third one was a coincidence."

Veth had finished the line. He wiped the ladles, hung them on their hooks, and crossed the mess hall towards the Reapers. He was carrying a tray with cups, sweetbark tea, real leaves, not the reconstituted powder. The good stuff.

"Kitchen privilege," he said, distributing them. He handed two sugar portions to Marisol. Cade's cup came without. A stomach bug at sixteen had ruined sweetness for him as Veth knew.

"You're spoiling us," Althea said.

"Someone has to." He lingered, asking about Marisol's flight certifications. The training drill results.

"The deep tunnels are cold," he said again. "Your bodies need fuel."

"We've been cold before," Kiran argued.

"I know what you've been." He said it quickly, then smiled as if it had been a joke. "That is why I am telling you."

"Who left the crust?"

He pointed at Cade's tray.

"It's burnt, Veth," Cade said, defending his plate.

He leaned in, the jowls of his face shaking with intensity. "Do you know what I had to do to get that flour? What I had to do to get this ginger? I traded a box of pristine fusion coils to a freighter captain. I committed light treason so you could have carbohydrates, Medeiros. Eat the crust."

Cade picked up the crust. Veth watched him chew it, nodding with the satisfaction of an artist watching a critic capitulate.

"You think we need ginger to survive?" Tamar asked. "Is that the strategy?"

Veth leaned in again. The rumble dropped another half-octave.

"The strategy is that Halvorsen finally cracked yesterday. He was complaining about the side tunnels in N-17. They don't sit at the angles the maps say they do. He kept talking about sight lines. About how a single man with a rifle in the Beta branches has lines into the main corridor that nobody mapped." He shrugged, the apron shifting. "N-17. Better study it for tomorrow. And be aware of the side tunnels. They see more than the map says."

He turned and lumbered away.

He went back to the stove, but not before sweeping the table once.

“For dinner tomorrow after graduation,” he said, louder now, “I’ll make Miran spice bread.”

The mess hall was emptying. Graduating cadets drifting toward training rotations, younger years toward classes. Tithe Reapers lingered.

Warden Holt was leaving with the rhythm of a metronome. Cadets scrambled to clear his path.

"He is going to B-98," Yaroslav said. "He is setting our last drill himself."

"It's the last day, corazón," Marisol said. "He wants his own dirt on the shovel."

It was time to finish their tea, clear the trays, and follow.

## CHAPTER 4: THE HUMAN SECOND

The cadets called Sector B-98 the Bastard's Bowel. Eight centuries ago, the first survey teams had cut into Manysung's crust and found the old passages already there: smooth-walled and dry.

Plywood rooms, rebar choke points, ballistic-weave partitions, turret rails, instructor catwalks, smoke vents, pressure doors, chalk-round emitters. Whole sections could be rearranged overnight, but the bones underneath never changed. The old passages decided where the walls could go. The old acoustics decided how a breach charge sounded. The old stone took every shout, every shot, every bootfall, and threw it back meaner.

The upper levels they filled with plywood, rebar, and ballistic weave. It was ideal terrain for the never-ending hallway wars. Refinery levels, colony shafts, station corridors, room-to-room clearance with a rifle and a breach charge and whatever you could carry.

Cadets learned the Lattice by injury. They knew the doorway in Room 4 where the turret clipped your throat if you failed to buttonhook left. They knew the squeal-board in the Corridor of Tears that squeaked under full weight. They knew the final ascent, the Grinder, a slick climb up black stone in full kit while instructors dropped flashbangs from above for character development.

Cade learned early that plans survived until the first breach charge went off. You learned to clear a room while your heart

was hammering at 180 beats per minute and your visor was fogged with your own breath.

Gavren and Bone Company were waiting in the staging area. Gavren ran them like he ran everything, from the front and with his mouth open. Gavren might have been carved from the same rock as the cavern, dense, immobile, and ugly. He was checking the load on his chalk-rifle, slamming the magazine home with unnecessary force.

"Tithe Reapers," Gavren grunted, his eyes never leaving the rifle. "Try not to slip on the Grinder this time. Cleaning your blood off the rocks is a waste of water."

"Try not to shoot your own point-man," Cade shot back, adjusting his gloves. "Again."

Gavren grinned without turning around. "Once. One time. Five months ago."

"And we'll tell that story at your funeral."

"Listen up." Warden Holt commanded the room with each syllable, exhaustion buried beneath tactical precision.

"Clearance drills today. Tithe Reapers defend position Delta-7. Bone Company attacks. Widow Makers and Throat Stuffers rotate through support positions. Questions?"

The only response was the dry clack of weapon safeties disengaging in unison. Curiosity was a luxury for first-years. They just wanted to get the bruising over with.

Cade moved his squad with hand signals, pushing them into the shadows of the labyrinth.

"Marisol, take the upper gantry. You've got lines on the roof breach and the window." He tapped his own helmet. "The plywood up there is single-layer. If you see a shadow, shoot through the wall. Don't wait for a target."

"Understood."

"Tovik. The fatal funnel. Main hallway." Cade pointed to the narrow choke point where the floor was slickest. "That old Vesper model you still have. Is it loud?"

Tovik's grin was visible even in the gloom. "It resonates with the rock. It'll crack their visors."

"Good. Plant it. I want them deaf before they step inside. Kiran, Yaroslav, take the blind side, the seep wall. If they flank, they'll slip. Punish them for it. Althea, stay on me. If I shift, you cover the gap."

He turned to Tamar. She was still checking the charge on her heavy emitter.

"Tamar. The rear breach."

Tamar nodded.

They moved into position with no wasted motion.

Bone Company didn't knock. The main door disintegrated. One of Gavren's point men hit the latch with a breaching ram, hard enough to split the frame, and Bone Company came through behind him in a rolling thunder of flashbangs.

"Now!"

Tovik triggered the Vesper.

The resonance caught the acoustics of the cavern and amplified them, turning the air pressure inside the Bastard's Bowel into a solid wall. The first two Bone Company breachers grabbed their helmets, staggering as their equilibrium shattered.

Marisol, from the gantry, fired through the plywood ceiling of the entry corridor. Two rhythmic thumps. The breachers dropped, blue chalk splattered across their chest plates.

"Clear right!" Yaroslav shouted, his weapon snapping up to cover the seep wall.

Tithe Reapers had the angles. They had the trap.

Then Gavren broke the rhythm.

The brute ignored the screaming harmonics. He ignored the chalk-round that Marisol put into his shoulder pauldron. He surged forward, using his own stumbling squadmates as meat-shields to cross the Fatal Funnel.

"Smoke!" Gavren roared.

Canisters hissed across the floor. Thick, chemically bitter obscurant filled the room, blinding Marisol's angle from above.

Cade's HUD flickered, trying to cut through the smoke, but the tactical picture dissolved into chaos. He heard boots hammering on stone—not retreating, but splitting.

"They're not stopping!" Cade snapped. "It's a push-through!"

Gavren had sacrificed his point-men to buy momentum. Three shadows were suppressing the main corridor with a wall of

automatic fire, chewing up the plywood cover where Tovik was hiding. But the other two had buttonhooked into the smoke.

"Tamar!" Cade screamed over the comms. "They're circling! Rear breach!"

Gavren had turned a failed frontal assault into a pincer. He was feeding bodies into the grinder at the front to overwhelm the lone defender at the back. On his command the two fast ones were gone through the side cut, sprinting for Tamar's rear breach. It was primitive and it was costly, but it was working.

Cade clenched his jaw, grinding his molars together until the bone creaked, hunting for the specific pressure behind his eyes.

He called it the Echo. He didn't know what it actually was: a mutation, a misfire in the skull, a gift. But he knew what it did. It turned chaos into a cold count behind his eyes. When it hit, the noise of the Bastard's Bowel dropped away, and every muzzle-line, blind corner, and moving boot found its place. He would see the line of fire before the trigger was pulled. He would know Gavren was moving left before Gavren knew it himself.

Come on, he thought, forcing his mind into the static. Show me the line.

He pushed. Strained for the cold clarity that made tactical thought feel like breathing. He bet the entire engagement on the certainty that he could be something more than human for three seconds.

Nothing came.

The fight stayed loud, fast, and messy. The smoke remained opaque. The angles stayed blind. He was a terrified cadet standing in the dark, his body late to the room.

He stood there frozen. The smoke drifted. Boots hammered stone. Someone was shouting on the comms. Tovik's Vesper cycled down. Marisol's rifle coughed twice from the gantry and then stopped. Tamar called his name.

"Tamar, watch the—"

Too late.

The rear door blew inward.

Tamar didn't have a chance. The two Bone Company flankers hit her with a wall of suppression fire. Her suit sensors shrieked CASUALTY before she even hit the ground, her chest plate painted in blue chalk dust.

"Rear compromised!" Marisol yelled, her voice cracking. "I'm turning to—"

"No, keep eyes on—" Cade started, but the rhythm was gone.

Gavren saw the hesitation. The brute surged through the smoke. He caught Tovik trying to reload. The sound of the chalk-round hitting Tovik's helmet was a sickening crack, like a bat hitting a melon. Tovik dropped, clutching his head.

The flank collapsed.

"Cade!" Kiran screamed. "They're inside the—"

Cade turned, raising his rifle, but he was chasing ghosts. He was too far behind reality.

A shadow materialised out of the smoke on his left. One of the flankers.

Cade tried to bring his weapon to bear, but his limbs dragged, slow, mired in the molasses of normal time.

Thwack-thwack.

Two impacts to the chest.

The air left his lungs instantly. Like a mule's kick. The force lifted him off his feet and slammed him backward onto the slick cobblestones. His vision went white, then grey, then red.

STATUS: TERMINATED.

The red letters blinked mockingly on his visor.

He lay there, gasping for air. Around him, the engagement ended in a flurry of executions. Marisol was the last to fall, cornered on the gantry, taken out by three shooters at once.

The range reset itself around him. Turret rails clicked safe, smoke drained through the floor gutters, and the kill lights turned white over Bone Company's breathing.

Cade stared up at the vaulted ceiling. The Echo hadn't shown up. He'd reached for the god-mode switch, and his own skull had handed him a disconnect error.

"Clean sweep," Gavren said, dragging his helmet free.

The rest of Bone Company were already bareheaded, laughing and panting, their faces streaked with sweat and chalk dust. Gavren tucked his helmet under one arm and crossed to where Cade lay on the floor.

"You froze, Medeiros," Gavren rumbled. He sounded surprised and disgusted. "You stood there and watched your flank die. What the hell were you waiting for?"

Cade couldn't answer. He lay in the blue dust, humiliated, trying to breathe.

They limped back to the assembly point.

Range control cleared the room first. Safeties on. Helmets off. Casualty tags reset. Bone Company were making jokes, until Holt cut them off with one look.

"Enough."

The room obeyed.

Holt stood by the instructor console, reading the telemetry while the last smoke drained through the floor gutters. His thumb moved once across the display, dragging the final moments of the fight back to the start.

Then he looked at Cade.

"Medeiros."

He crossed the floor without hurry.

He stood close enough that Cade could smell the rec-caf on his breath, mixed with the metallic tang of the tunnels. His gaze settled on the blue chalk smeared across Cade's chest plate. Two clean kill-shots.

"You had the angle. You had the time. Gavren made a mistake pushing that smoke, and you had enough time to punish him for it."

Holt jabbed the centre of Cade's chest plate.

"But you weren't there."

Cade's jaw tightened. "I was processing the—"

"Processing?" The tap became a shove. "Lie to me again, Medeiros, and I'll break your jaw! I know what a mind at work looks like, and I know the rank stench of a coward's fear. You were neither. You stood there like a slack-witted sheep waiting for your own execution!"

Holt stepped back, raising his voice so the whole platoon could hear.

"The Tithe pisses away an unholy amount of credit trying to forge you into something better than dog-meat! But today? Today you were nothing but slow meat waiting for the cleaver!"

He pinned Cade again.

"If you drag that puling hesitation into the deep ice tomorrow, do us the courtesy of dying in the very first minute! Bleed out quick! Don't you dare get true men killed because you're standing there staring at the rock, waiting on some grand vision that ain't ever going to strike your thick skull! You hear me?"

He turned on his heel.

"Dismissed. Get out of my sight."

Cade didn't move for a moment. Then he crouched and began packing his gear. Around him, the platoon dispersed. Boots on gravel.

A shadow fell across his gear. Tovik tapped him on the shoulder.

"Come with me to the workshop. I'll show you the rig," Tovik said.

Cade finished with the strap. Then he stood and followed.

The workshop's walls were a dark, subterranean history of cadets blowing things up. Layers of black scorch marks and melted composite covered the room, leaving a grim, soot-stained record of generations of brilliant boredom.

The workbenches were buried. Scavenged junk, coils of copper wire hanging from the ceiling and humming faintly, the air sharp on the tongue with leaked current. Above the bench, Tovik had probably drawn circuit diagrams across the bulkhead years ago in grease-marker, then drawn orbital mechanics on top of them, and never bothered to wipe either away.

Cade sat on a crate near the door. The training frustration hadn't faded, still there, banked heat in his chest. But watching Tovik was grounding and comfortable.

In the centre of this electric cave, Tovik could work for hours without noticing the station cycle.

Tovik's hands were thick, scarred slabs built for carrying ordnance and breaking bones, and right now they were threading a hair-fine calibration screw on the magnifying rig, a quarter-degree at a time. The shard underneath was no bigger than a fingernail. He bent close, one eye to the lens, the other squeezed shut. "Don't give me a flatline," he grunted, tapping the rig's voltage dial with a heavy knuckle. "I can see the etching. You're a circuit, so close the goddamn loop and spit back the frequency."

"The light's strange," Cade ventured. "Or the... I don't know. The harmonics are off. Something."

"Yeah." A pause, the screw turning another quarter. "Minor key. It shouldn't be in minor key." He tapped the shard once with the stylus. "Why are you singing in minor key?"

The stylus touched the shard. The room hummed. The shard flared with a sickly violet light, pulsing in time with the ventilation fans.

"See?" Tovik exhaled, the tension dropping out of his shoulders. "Where did you say you got this one again?"

"I have my ways."

"I want three more. Same vein, same depth." Then his grin slipped. "Spire-ash. There's no time, is there. We ship out after graduation. Director Halvorsen probably thinks this bench and this rig stay here." He tapped a thick, grease-stained finger against his temple. "Yeah, no. The actual workshop? The blueprints? It all comes with me right up here. Let 'em keep the scrap metal."

He adjusted a dial on a rusting power unit that looked like a stripped starship engine bolted to a bench. The violet light steadied.

"I reversed the polarity on the input feed," Tovik explained, his huge hands dancing over the delicate controls. "The Dominion manuals say this junk is just signal amplification. Garbage. It's a feedback loop. If I feed the kinetic energy from a detonation back into the core before the casing shatters..."

"And the stone helps you," Cade said. "The deep basalt. You're counting on it singing back."

Tovik let out a low, scraping laugh. "Don't turn it into poetry, Cade. It's a sledgehammer."

He kept his eye glued to the magnifying rig. "A standard charge wastes half its kinetic yield just cracking the air. But if you tune the blast right? Something in the basalt catches the wave and throws it back tenfold. Don't ask me what. The rock isn't doing it alone, there's something caught in it, or sleeping in it, or whatever you want to call it. The Spirebreakers weaponized the ground we walk on centuries ago, and we're still down here throwing firecrackers."

"Tov, the academy dumped this," Cade muttered, rubbing a hand over his face. "They shelved the whole goddamn thing. And the Sanguinary Order... hell, you know the Order. They flagged the resonance. Said it was, what did they call it? Heretic. Heresy." He shook his head, staring at the black glass. "And they're busy right now, Tov. The purges. The sweeps against the Spirebreakers... they're ramping up. It's getting worse. They're burning anyone who even breathes near this tech."

"Bless it or burn it, right?" Tovik spat, shaking his head.

"Absolute idiots. They're just... torching actual, working tech. Setting fire to it. While I'm over here practically begging on my knees for a single goddamn spectrometer. Just one! So I don't have to rig this stuff blind. But sure, yeah, let the Sanguinary burn it all."

He picked up the black shard with a pair of insulated forceps. Under the workshop light, the jagged etchings along its edge read as deliberate claw marks.

"Primitive superstition, my ass," Tovik scoffed, dragging his stylus across the grooves. The air pressure in the room visibly shifted, making Cade's ears pop. "The Sanguinary calls this forbidden. Highly dangerous Manysung tech. Alien voodoo that only the Carnifexes are pure enough to touch, right? You try to play with the resonance? You try to listen to what the rock is actually doing? That is a capital offence, Cade. They catch me wiring this up, they drag me out and burn me alive like a goddamn witch. They say it manipulates... I don't know, the mind? The soul?"

He shook his head, rapping the black glass with a grease-stained finger.

"It doesn't manipulate shit. They just want a monopoly on Manysung tech. This? It's a fucking circuit. A frequency map for shattering bone. I just gotta read the damn grooves."

"Trace this etching. Those marks aren't decoration; some bastard cut a frequency map into the glass on purpose. The Spirebreakers were running these things as amplifiers."

"Amplifiers for what?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out." He set the fragment down, picked up another. "But I think I can adapt the principle. Take the carved signal, invert it, channel it through a standard detonator housing."

Cade's attention snagged on the modified casing. It appeared angry.

"Gavren ate the Vesper this morning," Cade said. "Took it on the dome, didn't even break stride. Whatever's waiting tomorrow, these actually drop it, or are we just making noise in the dark?"

"Like our good friends in the Sanguinary Order would say... I'm building a pocket exorcism," Tovik said, his voice dropping into a raspy, jagged rhythm. "Look, standard grenades? They just push outward. Shrapnel and fire. Basic. Boring. But this thing?"

He tapped the metal casing, eyes wide.

"She will inhale first. And then? Then she spits it all back out."

He leaned in closer, tapping the black glass.

"Cade, you key this bitch to the grain of this strange Manysung rock down in the tunnels? She rides the fault line. Pops the stone from the inside out. It's going to bring the goddamn mountain down on their heads."

"Will they be ready for tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" Tovik laughed. "Spire-ash, no. This is months of work still. Maybe years." He paused, considering. "But I could rig a simpler device. A shaped charge with resonance enhancement. Wouldn't be elegant, but it would punch harder than standard."

"How much harder?"

"It won't just punch harder. It's going to cause catastrophic structural collapse." He paused, scratching his jaw, a deeply

unhinged grin spreading across his face. "Probably. I mean, hard to guarantee without dropping her in a live room first."

"That last part seems important."

Tovik set down his fragment. The workshop shrank, the walls pressing in. Outside, the distant sound of cadets moving through corridors. The rhythm of institutional life continuing regardless of what waited below.

Cade stood from his chair.

"Try not to fall in love with it before morning," he teased. "We need you in the lift tomorrow, not on one knee."

Tovik smiled.

"Cade. Don't take today like it meant something. We follow you where you point. We know what you are when the room goes bad. Holt watched one bad minute. We've watched all the others."

Cade nodded once and stepped out into the corridor.

Cade found Kiran in the Sextant Gallery, folded into the deep stone sill beneath the old astrometry slit. Faded survey arcs still crossed the floor in brass lines, worn dull by generations of boots, and a dead star-scope hung from the ceiling on locked gimbals, aimed forever at a patch of black no instructor cared about anymore. The viewing slit cut through three metres of radiation glass and impact shielding, narrow as a rifle wound, spilling raw Star-Local glare across the room.

It was too bright, too cold, and too far from the barracks for anyone normal to linger there.

Kiran liked it.

A stack of origami paper sat on the sill beside him, sheets fanned by colour: a deep red, a cobalt, a grey, a foil that caught the starlight like beaten tin. The black he'd kept for himself. Around his boots lay the casualties — a half-folded crane with one wing collapsed, a frog with its hind leg torn, three failed shapes Cade couldn't name.

Kiran had started in their second year trading birds for ration packs, and somewhere along the way the trade had expanded. Cadets paid him in favours now. They kept the figures in their lockers. They turned them over before drills and the younger ones believed that a folded fox in your kit before a sim meant the sim went sideways, that the herons came back from deployment and the frogs didn't. Kiran held a sheet of matte-black construction card now, stiff enough to hold an edge for a year.

He folded it with insectile precision — a thumbnail driving a valley fold, a knuckle pressing the spine flat, the paper folding under him like it had agreed to something. Crease. Reverse. Collapse. Crease again.

Cade watched him for a long moment.

"How are the Vespers coming with Tov?" Kiran asked after a moment.

"Yeah. They'll be ready." Cade leaned against the frame. "There's a resonance problem, though. The shards on his bench answer him like they're awake. The rock catches the wave and throws it back. He doesn't know what it is. He's been chasing it for years.

Tonight he tapped the shard and the air went weird. The pressure. I felt it pop my ears."

He scratched the back of his neck.

"You should sit with him sometime, Kiran. After. He's hearing something. I think his engineering is touching the same thing you feel with your hands."

"I don't know," Kiran said. He pressed the crease until the paper held. "There's something under it. Not in the paper. In the shape. In the angle. Tones do it too. Some people hear it. Some people feel it. I think..." He stopped, uncomfortable. "I think part of me was built to notice."

Cade moved closer.

The black paper in Kiran's palm had become a structure. Not a model, not exactly. More like a piece of some buried place: narrow walls, folded corridors, a central drop where the layers all seemed to point.

"I started with a flower," Kiran said. "Then the petals kept turning into walls. I dreamed of it. I always come back to this shape. It seems like a place to me. A weird place. Maybe one of those Manysung ruins some deployments head to."

Kiran held it up to the starlight. The black paper drank the glare, casting complex, overlapping shadows across Kiran's face.

"The walls wanted to be a maze," Kiran said. He tilted it. "See."

From this angle, the folds aligned. The chaotic jumble of triangles smoothed out into a single pathway running through

the centre of the shape. A narrow, twisting corridor that dropped down, down, down into a central cavity.

Recognition flickered through Cade. For a short moment he thought he could remember what it was. Then it passed. His tactical brain tried to map it, elevation drop, choke point, blind corner, ambush zone.

"It's a descent," Cade said.

"It's tomorrow," Kiran offered the paper shape to Cade.

"Keep it."

Cade pocketed the black maze.

"A left turn," Cade muttered, tracing the fold. "At the bottom."

"If you say so." Kiran picked up a fresh sheet of paper. "I'm making a boat next. I think we're going to need a boat."

"Let us go to dinner, Kiran. It is time."

"Yeah, I'll make the boat on our way," Kiran said.

They were halfway to the mess hall.

"Do you smell that?" Cade asked.

"Sugar," Kiran noted, folding a sharp crease. "And sweat."

Kiran and Cade stepped into the current.

"You're late," Tovik grumbled, though he pushed a basket of the spice bread toward Cade. "I almost ate your share."

"You hate cinnamon," Cade said, breaking a piece. It was still warm, seeping heat into his fingers.

"I hate waste more."

Casimir Brenn materialised beside them, his immaculately pressed uniform doing nothing to hide how hollowed-out his face had gone. His pointed face had lost all its colour, leaving him sickly and sharp-edged in the harsh mess hall light. He forced his mouth into a thin, brittle line. "Tithe Reapers, Cade." His tone was unnaturally high and stretched thin. "Quick question about the coordination protocols for tomorrow."

Marisol shifted to make room. "Come on, Brenn. Sit. Ask."

Brenn kept standing. "The fallback positions. If we lose comms, what's your squad's default rally point?"

"The entry," Cade said. "Same as the briefing yesterday specified."

"Right. Right." Brenn nodded, but his eyes were elsewhere, running scenarios. "And if the entry is compromised?"

"Then we improvise." Marisol gentled her tone. "Brenn. We've trained for this. You've trained for this. You're going to do fine."

He almost smiled. "Everyone keeps saying that."

"Because it's true."

He nodded again, already moving toward the next table. Kiran watched him go. "I am so fucking happy not to be in his role."

"Better him than me," Althea muttered, tearing her piece of bread in half. "Command at graduation? It's a joke. You're sitting in the dark, half the grid is static, and you just know Holt

and friends are up in the gallery dissecting every single call you make."

She shook her head.

"I'll take the bullets. A gunshot makes sense. You can fix that. Sitting at a holo-table guessing which black hole is eating your friends while the instructors take notes? No. Screw that."

"You might get both," Tovik offered.

Tap-tap-tap on the deck plates cut through the noise. Cade knew Holt's pace before he saw him enter the aisle. Tovik froze mid-bite. "Oh fuck." At the next table, then the one beyond it, then the one beyond that, the conversations died.

"Tovik." Holt didn't need volume to command attention. "That face you're making. You wore exactly that face in Year Three, right before you set the armoury on fire."

Tovik's mouth fell open.

"It wasn't... I didn't... that was an accident..."

"If something special starts singing tomorrow," Holt said, "make sure it's pointed away from your own line."

Then he turned to go.

"Good luck," he said. "All of you."

Then he was gone.

"Did that just happen?" Tovik choked on the question.

"Holt made a joke," Marisol marvelled. "Holt made a joke."

"He wished us luck." Kiran spoke the words flat, stunned. "Holt wished us luck."

"He thinks some of us won't come back," Tamar proposed cheerfully.

"No," Tovik said, still staring after Holt. "He knows."

"Knows what?" Althea asked.

Tovik swallowed. "About the rig. Or enough about it."

Yaroslav looked up from his slate. "And?"

"And apparently I'm allowed to commit the felony," Tovik said, "as long as I don't bring the whole school down with it."

"We should go," Marisol said after a moment. "Before he changes his mind."

They stepped out of the mess hall and into a cavernous cut in the asteroid's crust, spanned by steel catwalks. Below them, mag-lev sleds slid on magnetic rails, carrying munitions from the deep docks to the upper batteries. They moved constantly, black shapes sliding in the dark, shuttling weight for a war that never stopped.

They crossed the gantry, passing the Simulation Banks.

These were massive, windowless monoliths of black ceramic, rising floor-to-ceiling. Inside, the tactical AIs were running millions of iterations a second. The heat radiating off the ceramic was dry and intense.

"It's running hot for our last night," Tovik muttered, eyeing the black towers.

"It's just the sims," Yaroslav said.

"We're the variables," Tamar corrected.

They entered the habitation ring. It was efficient storage for personnel, blocks bolted to the cliff like barnacles.

Barracks 4-Alpha was wedged between a structural support pillar and a high-voltage conduit.

Cade palmed the lock. The hydraulics opened.

Nine bunks in a space built for five. Two of them stood empty. Vasquez. Omar. Cadets who'd washed out over the years.

"Eleven days to Velin Drift," Yaroslav said from across the room. His slate cast blue light across his face, star maps instead of data. "Free port. No Dominion flag flies there. If we had a ship. If we had anywhere to go."

"Ay, Yaro, mi amor, stop already." Marisol turned over on her bunk. "Tomorrow we come back. All of us. So go to sleep and stop making the room sad."

Cade lay watching the ceiling. The cracks in the plaster he'd memorised. The water stain in the corner that suggested a face.

He had been awake a long time before he understood he wasn't going to sleep. His mind kept walking the descent in his head — the cage, the staging area, the first junction, the second — and when he reached the end he started over, as if the rehearsal might rehearse him into rest. It didn't. Underneath the descent, the other loop. The Echo. Why it hadn't come in the smoke.

Whether it would come tomorrow. Whether wanting it that badly was the thing that kept it away. He'd reached for the clarity and found nothing, and the nothing was worse than fear; fear was at least information. The face in the stain hadn't moved. He stared at the rusted wire mesh of the bed frame. He watched the cheap grey foam mattress bulging downward through the metal grid. A corner of a coarse, military-issue wool blanket dangled over the edge—heavy, stiff felt the colour of storm-dark concrete. He felt amputated. Halved.

Cade got up. Marisol's bed and Tovik's were empty as well. Tovik was probably working on the Vesper, Cade thought.

He walked without destination. Past the gym. Past the small chapel for the Vigil where a single candle still burned.

A viewport caught him. Stars and the asteroid's curve and the distant traffic of ships in transit, and his own reflection ghosting back, hollow-eyed. Ships moved in the black: transit traffic, patrol craft, the endless motion of an empire that never slept. Somewhere out there, the Resonance routes stitched station to station. He had walked past this glass a thousand nights and let it be wallpaper.

Marisol appeared beside him.

"You too, huh."

"Couldn't sleep."

"Yeah." She leaned her forehead against the glass for a second, then pulled back. "I tried praying. Usually that — yeah."

"Didn't help?"

She touched the cord at her throat. The mojos clicked softly, blood-warm against her skin. "I don't know how to say it."

A long silence. The traffic moved out beyond the glass.

"The Frost Parade," she said after a while. "He was there too. The Choral Vigil. Or something like him. He's always there, that's the whole point of —" She stopped. "But."

"But what."

"But when I pray about it, I don't feel comfort." The stars outside the viewport dimmed. "I hear something else. I feel something else."

She turned from the viewport. "You remember Year One?"

"What about it, Mari?"

"Tamar went down. Training round through the shoulder, arterial. The rest of us just stopped. I couldn't move."

"You picked up her gun. You walked toward the shooter position and started giving orders even though nobody told you that."

"Hmm, yeah vaguely."

"That is the trick of it, no?" She tilted her head. "The rest of us, we remember the panic. We remember the noise. But you just remember the next second. Tamar ate that round and the rest of us flatlined. All of us. Me, Tovik, Kiran. We turned into statues. And you scooped up the iron, carved out a firing line, and dragged us back into our bodies just by barking angles. We pulled our triggers because somebody finally gave us an anchor."

That is your gravity, querido. We paralyse, you mobilise.  
Warden Holt saw it. That's why we're yours."

The stars wheeled past the viewport. Neither of them spoke for a moment.

"Thank you, Mari," Cade said. "What about you, what do you hear when you stand here next to me?"

Marisol was quiet for a long moment.

"The Choral Vigil holds what would otherwise fall. He sings against the silence so that we may speak. He keeps the dark from the door, and the door from the dark. By His vigilance we endure, and by our endurance He is glorified."

She let the holy words fade against the cold glass of the viewport.

"What I feel when I pray doesn't match what the Sanguinary teaches," she confessed, her voice dropping. "There is no comfort in it, Cade. No gentle shepherd holding back the night."

She paused, searching for the words, her thumb rubbing the edge of the brass casing at her throat.

"It feels like a forge. Like being pinned to an anvil by something impossibly old and completely ruthless. It doesn't care if the iron screams or shatters. It just wants us ready before the fire goes out. When I reach out to it, I feel... cultivated. I feel the pressure of a grip that is dragging us toward something terrible, and it will hammer us a billion times over until we are sharp enough to cut."

"I don't know if that's doubt," Marisol continued. "Maybe the liturgy is a cheap approximation."

Cade sighed.

"What does it feel like? I want to know what it is. Some days I think there's a force at work big enough to crush all of us — the Spirebreakers, the school here, the Dominion — and then I get scared of it."

"It should make us feel scared, shouldn't it?" She almost smiled. "But mostly it makes me wonder. What's actually out there. What's actually listening."

"Now you," Marisol said. She turned from the viewport. The philosophical vulnerability was gone, replaced by the face she used when checking weapon seals. "I wouldn't say it in front of Holt. I wouldn't say it in the mess hall. Not even in front of the squad. But Holt was right. You weren't there, Cade."

Then she said, soft: "I know you have something. When I sit close to you, there is a sound I feel, the way I feel the mojos. Today though, you were reaching for the sound. What happened today wasn't the first time, was it?"

"I call it the Echo," Cade said. He kept his eyes on the transit ships drifting through the black. "It's not focus, Mari. It's like... remembering a sequence that hasn't happened yet. The noise just drops out. I don't have to guess where anyone is moving because the outcome is already finished in my head. I just have to walk through the steps."

He leaned his forehead against the cold glass, his breath fogging a small circle against the void.

"But today in the smoke. I was just... pulling a dead trigger. Over and over. Gavren came through that breach, and instead of raising my rifle, I just stood there trying to force the feeling to come back. I was waiting for it."

He turned his head to look at her. His voice was quiet, stripped of the bravado of the daylight, parsing out the exact shape of his own failure.

"We go into the deep ice in a couple of hours," she pressed. "I need to know if you're going to check out again."

"I didn't check out," Cade said. "I was trying to force the Echo."

He struggled to find the words.

"Sometimes, when the stress hits a certain pitch, the noise stops. The room turns into a diagram. I don't have to think about angles or velocity. I just know."

"That sounds like flow state. Combat focus."

"No. It's more. It turns seconds into minutes." He turned his hands over. "It makes me better than I am. But it's fickle. I can't control it. Today, I reached for it. I tried to force the switch, because I wanted to win fast. And it didn't come."

"So you stood there waiting for a miracle while Gavren flanked us."

"Yes."

"And without it?"

"Without it, I'm human," he admitted, the fear finally surfacing. "Slow. Heavy. Blind. I'm terrified that tomorrow, I'll reach for it again, and you'll be meat in a tunnel."

"When did it start?"

"I don't know. I always had this. It comes and goes." He exhaled.

Marisol lifted the cord from beneath her collar, the leather salt-stained and sweat-darkened from years against her skin, and let the mojitos catch the starlight.

Five pieces. Each one thumb-polished smooth. Each one carrying a pulse like distant music, felt before heard.

"On my home planet we call them mojitos," she said. "Little mojos. They bring luck." Marisol found the bone-pale one. "My mother pressed it into my palm the night she died. It was cold then. Ice-cold. By morning it was warm and it's never gone cold since."

She touched the brass casing. "This one tried to kill me. Training accident. The round missed my throat by the width of a finger. I found it in the wall behind me. Still hot. It burned my palm when I picked it up. I kept it anyway."

The cracked guidance wafer, its gold traces blackened at the edge. "Crashed fighter," she said. "A year-five cadet's accident during one of my first pilot lessons."

She shrugged.

"They bring luck. I don't question it. They've kept me alive too many times."

Cade watched her face in the starlight. "And tomorrow? What are they telling you about tomorrow?"

She touched the mojititos one by one. Reading them. Listening.

"They're not cold," she said at last. "They're not warm either." Her eyes climbed to him. "Same as us."

She slipped the brass casing from the cord.

Cade took it. The metal was warm, warmer than it should be, warmer than her hands could have made it.

"We're both hearing what we shouldn't. Querido, come. The Vigil — or whatever it is — will still be listening in the morning. Let it listen to us sleep."

Morning came grey and cold.

Tithe Reapers woke to the sound of reveille echoing through the barracks corridors. Cade dressed in the dim light.

Sector L was a freight terminal, a grid of yellow hazard lines and hydraulic loaders. It was built for tonnage. The Tithe Reapers slotted into their designated square of deck plating, bordered by the Widow Makers on the left and the Throat Stuffers on the right.

It was the largest graduating class in a decade, a sea of grey ceramic armour and matte-black undersuits that stretched all the way to the freight doors.

Brenn stood on the overhead gantry, presiding over the army he was supposed to command. He was projected on the tactical displays, his face magnified ten times, every pixel capturing the

way his throat clicked when he swallowed. He was even more pale than yesterday, but his voice carried through the PA speakers.

"What's waiting down there is outside everything they trained us for," Brenn said. The speakers gave his voice a metallic, slightly delayed echo that rolled through the cavern.

"The Bastard's Bowel. Chalk and bruises and Holt cooking up new ways to break us before breakfast. None of it touches what we're walking into. Regular patrols go down in the same sector we're descending into."

The silence sealed the terminal, a vacuum waiting to be filled.

"So the only thing that's true today is the squad on your left, and the squad on your right. Clear your corners. Watch your ammo count. And when the lift comes back up, make sure you're on it. If you panic, you die. If you run, you die alone. That's the pep talk for today. Good luck."

The elevator doors opened. The first platoons began to descend.

Cade checked behind him once. Then he turned and followed his squad into the elevator.

The doors closed. The cage descended.

Sublevel 5. The cage groaned. Sublevel 10. Today he heard every creak. Sublevel 15. The temperature dropped. Sublevel 20. His breath fogged.

Tovik braced against the cage wall, making it sway slightly. His pack was heavier than the rest: the modified charges he'd rigged overnight, the Vespers he'd promised.

"Odds?" Tovik asked.

"Betting market says seventy-three percent we all come back in one piece. Eighty-nine percent that most of us do," Yaroslav replied fast.

"Those are good odds," Marisol stated. The mojitos at her throat hummed softly, steady and present. A comfort, not a warning.

"Those are terrible odds," Althea corrected. "For a training exercise."

The cage swayed. Cade's sling slapped against the receiver of his rifle, a small bright metallic sound in the cold air. He looked down. He pulled his gloves off. Tugged a strip of black cloth from inside his cuff — a torn piece of undershirt, kept there for exactly this — and wound it twice around the sling where it met the receiver. Pulled the knot tight with his teeth.

"Yaro," Cade continued. "The market and the algorithm don't know Tovik over-clocked the charges. It doesn't know Kiran sees the map before we draw it. It doesn't know Marisol has the Vigil on overwatch."

"We aren't a statistic. We are the variable that breaks their model. The only way we die is if you hesitate to check the number. So don't."

The air changed. Through the cage walls, Cade could see the layers passing, active installation giving way to decommissioned sections, frost eating the walls in white tongues, the deep excavation where the first settlers had stopped digging.

And below that, the tunnels. Space they'd never walked.

Sublevel 32. 35.

Other platoons were already forming up in the staging area. Helmet lights burned in rows. The cage began its long ascent back toward the mess hall and the barracks, taking the warm air with it.

Somewhere ahead, an instructor was yelling for Delta to clear the platform.

“We got to find Halix. This whole thing is gonna start soon,” Cade said.

“Delta marker is dirty,” Yaroslav said. “I have three returns.”

“Nearest.”

“East lane. Maybe.”

“Maybe is good enough. Let's go.”

Behind them, the elevator doors sealed.

Cade did not look back. He had Tithe Reapers in hand, a bad beacon ahead, and a couple of minutes to find his platoon before the column moved without them.