

Please note: This is not the entire book, it's just an excerpt so you can see the quality of writing:

Chapter 1: The Signal Beneath Veyra

No one spoke during descent.

Inside the troop bay, the only sounds were the low turbine hum of the lander, the metallic rattle of unsecured buckles, and the occasional hiss of recycled air through combat helmets resting on armored knees. Red jump lights washed the compartment in a blood-colored glow, turning faces into hard planes and eye sockets into shadows.

Commander Kael Arden sat strapped near the forward bulkhead, elbows on his knees, gloved hands locked together. Across from him, Lyra Venn had her rifle laid across her lap in exact alignment with the seams of the deck plating, as if even gravity should obey her sense of order. Beside the rear hatch, Dax Solren leaned back with the false ease of a man who met danger the way other people met weather: by squinting at it and walking forward anyway.

Between them, a holo-projector floated above a magnetic table, flickering with the image of Veyra.

The planet looked wrong.

Its surface was a mass of scorched continents and mineral deserts, split by canyons black as open veins. One hemisphere burned in permanent dusk beneath the phenomenon the empire had named the Black Sun: a collapsed stellar body shrouded in violent corona, an impossible dark sphere wreathed in fire. Even in projection, it hurt to look at. It hung over Veyra like an eye that had forgotten how to blink.

Kael studied the rotating image without really seeing it. He had memorized the mission brief six hours ago, reviewed the tactical maps twice, and spent the last forty minutes trying not to think about the final line appended to the deployment order.

Priority retrieval: signal source intact.

Sunborn assets essential.

Sunborn assets.

Not soldiers. Not officers. Not citizens.

Assets.

"You're doing the thing again," Dax said.

Kael glanced up. "What thing?"

"The jaw." Dax tapped his own chin. "You get that look like you're trying to bite through steel."

Lyra did not look away from her rifle. "That's because command always lies when they use words like priority."

Dax grinned. "See? That's why I like her. She says the cheerful part out loud."

Kael let out a breath that almost became a laugh. Almost. "You read the signal analysis?"

"I read enough," Lyra said. "Dead world. No registered population for two hundred years. No surviving infrastructure. Then suddenly a transmission starts broadcasting from the surface in pre-Imperial mathematical code with military encryption wrapped around it. That is not a rescue mission. That is bait."

Dax shrugged. "Or treasure."

Lyra lifted her eyes to him. "Those are often the same thing right before people die."

"Comforting."

Kael reached out and killed the projection with a swipe. The troop bay darkened a shade. He could feel the slight shift in the lander's attitude thrusters as they entered lower atmosphere.

"Whatever it is," he said, "we go in, confirm source, secure perimeter, extract the data core if there is one, and leave before orbit turns ugly."

Dax raised an eyebrow. "You really believe orbit won't be ugly already?"

Kael did not answer. They all knew the truth.

Above them, hidden by the hull and cloud layers, the carrier *Judgment of Dawn* held station with the rest of the Seventh Expeditionary Group. Somewhere beyond it, on the edge of sensor range, enemy raider signatures moved like sharks outside floodlights. The war had spread to every frontier worth starving over. Veyra sat on no active trade route, held no known fuel reserves, and possessed no living population. Which meant if the empire had sent a black-tier strike team this far off-map, the signal mattered more than a thousand ordinary battle reports.

Or someone wanted them to think it did.

The intercom crackled. "Final approach in three minutes," said the pilot. "Atmospheric disturbance rising. Brace for hard contact."

Dax sat forward. "There we go."

Kael clipped his helmet into place. The interior display lit across his vision: heart rate, ammunition count, environmental seals, squad vitals. Three green markers pulsed in the lower corner. ARDEN. VENN. SOLREN.

His team.

Not by choice at first. The Sunborn Initiative chose everything for them: training cohorts, sleep cycles, weapons specialization, psychological stress loads. It took children from war zones, orphan stations, famine camps, and occupation sectors, then remade them into officers before they had ever learned what ordinary childhood looked like. By eighteen, most Sunborn either led troops or were dead.

Kael had stopped asking which outcome the program preferred.

“Commander,” Lyra said.

He looked at her.

For a moment she said nothing. Her face behind the visor was pale and steady, sharp-featured and unreadable. But he knew her well enough to catch the signal in the silence.

Something’s off.

He nodded once. I know.

Dax locked his heavy rifle to its chest mount and slapped the side of his helmet. “Try not to get eaten by ancient ghosts before I get the hatch open.”

“Ancient ghosts don’t concern me,” Lyra said. “It’s contemporary idiots.”

The lander bucked so hard the compartment lights cut out for a second.

Then the hull began to scream.

Atmosphere tore around them in a shriek of heat and friction. Warning glyphs flashed across Kael’s visor. Turbulence. External temperature critical. Sensor interference. Gravitic distortion. He felt the deck vibrate through his boots as if the whole craft were passing through the jaws of something enormous.

The pilot cursed over comms. “I’ve lost clean telemetry. Surface beacon’s shifting.”

“Shifting?” Kael snapped.

“Signal origin just moved twelve kilometers east.”

“That’s impossible,” said Lyra.

“Tell the planet.”

The bay tilted sharply. Restraints bit into Kael’s shoulders. On the holo repeater above the hatch, an external camera feed flickered to life through sheets of static.

He saw fire first.

Not fire on the ground. Fire in the sky.

The Black Sun filled half the horizon, a vast dark disk haloed in incandescent fury. Solar arcs rose around it in looping towers, turning the upper atmosphere to molten gold and deep orange. Beneath that terrible light stretched the deserts of Veyra—mountain ridges like broken teeth, dry basins glowing with latent heat, storm fronts of ash rolling across the plains.

And in the center of it all, rising from a crater the size of a nation, stood a city.

No one breathed.

Its spires were impossibly tall, black metal and stone fused into jagged geometry that stabbed at the burning sky. Tier upon tier of walls encircled a central citadel, each ring crowded with towers, bridges, antennae, and structures too vast to name. Even through interference, Kael could see lights moving in its depths—cold lines of blue and white waking in sequence across avenues and ramps.

A dead city.

Powered.

Dax let out a low whistle. "Treasure," he said quietly.

Lyra leaned toward the feed. "No. Invitation."

The pilot's voice rose. "We're taking a new vector. Nearest stable landing site is ridge line west of target structure. Sixty seconds."

Kael felt something tighten in his chest, something older than fear and harder to name. Not awe. Not exactly. Recognition hovered at the edge of thought, impossible and irrational. He had never been to Veyra. He had never seen that city. Yet the sight of its central spire sent a strange pulse through him, as if some hidden part of his body had just heard its own name spoken aloud.

The mission brief surfaced in memory.

Recovered signal contains repeating triad marker. Marker matches degraded genomic key architecture found only in classified Sunborn files.

He had read that line three times.

Then command had redacted the rest.

The lander hit a crosscurrent and dropped twenty meters in a jolt that snapped everyone against restraints.

"Impact in ten!" shouted the pilot.

Kael's training took over. "Weapons live on exit. Standard wedge formation. Lyra high watch, Dax anchor left. We move to ridge cover, sweep the perimeter, then assess route to city. Nobody breaks line unless I say."

Acknowledgments flashed across squad-net.

The red light above the hatch turned green.

With a final bone-deep slam, the lander struck ground.

Dust and static exploded across the camera feed. The compartment rocked once, twice, then steadied. For one heartbeat there was silence.

Then the rear hatch blew open and the heat came in like a living thing.

Veyra smelled of scorched iron and stone baked for centuries. Kael stepped out into a world of red-gold light and knife-edged shadows. The ridge beneath their boots was a slope of volcanic rock overlooking a plain of cracked glass and drifting ash. Far off, the city towered from the crater basin, its upper spires vanishing into the glare.

Overhead, the Black Sun burned behind its corona.

Kael swept the horizon. "Report."

"Left clear," Dax said, dropping to one knee behind a rock shelf and bringing his rifle up.

"Right clear," said Lyra from a higher ledge, scope already extending. "No movement. No thermal signatures except us and the lander."

The pilot leaned from the cockpit hatch. "We stay hot for five minutes. After that, command wants us airborne and in holding pattern."

Kael turned. "Negative. You stay grounded until I say."

The pilot hesitated. "Commander, those weren't my orders."

Kael stepped closer, close enough for the man to see the command insignia on his chest and maybe something in his face as well. "Your orders just changed."

A beat.

Then the pilot nodded. "Understood."

Kael moved to the lip of the ridge and looked down toward the plain.

At first he saw only distance, shimmer, and dust.

Then the ground moved.

A line of black shapes rose from beneath the ash in a synchronized wave, like blades being drawn from burial sand. They were too low and fast for vehicles, too angular for any living creature. Six-legged constructs unfolded from hidden pits and accelerated over the plain, their bodies built from overlapping metal plates and segmented limbs that punched sparks from the rock. At their front, narrow heads glowed with the same cold blue light as the city.

Automated guardians.

Still active after two centuries.

Lyra's voice came sharp over comms. "Contact. Twelve—no, sixteen hostiles. Bearing zero-eight-seven. Fast."

Dax swore cheerfully. "Now we're talking."

Kael dropped behind cover as the first pulse-bolt slammed into the ridge above him and turned stone into vapor.

"Engage!" he shouted.

The world fractured into recoil, heat, and light.

Lyra fired first. Her rifle cracked once, almost delicate against the thunder of the planet, and the lead construct lost its head in a burst of blue-white fragments. Dax rose into full view with impossible nerve and opened up with his heavy repeater, filling the slope below with a storm of kinetic rounds that punched craters through armor plating and sent two machines tumbling into each other in sparks.

Kael leaned from behind basalt cover and picked controlled shots, three-round bursts into joints and optic cores. One construct lunged over a shattered outcrop, moving with insect speed. He tracked it, fired, missed high, fired again, caught its forward leg. It crashed, rolled, and came up still moving.

Too durable.

“Target the undercarriage,” Lyra said. “The plating’s layered.”

Another bolt screamed past Kael’s shoulder and hammered the lander hull.

The pilot yelled, “Commander, we need lift now!”

“Hold!”

Dax bellowed as one of the machines leapt the lower ridge and came within ten meters. He met it with a burst so heavy the construct’s chest split open, spraying arcs of blue energy across the rocks. But two more were already climbing over it.

Kael’s display flashed a warning.

Unknown signal detected.

Not on squad-net. Not from the lander. Not from orbit.

A new channel opened directly across his visor, overriding local command protocols with ease that should have been impossible.

For a moment the screen filled with static and geometric symbols, cascading too fast to parse. Then they resolved into a single line of text in ancient trade script.

WELCOME HOME.

Kael froze.

One heartbeat. Two.

A construct surged over the ridge toward him, all hooked limbs and bright corelight.

Lyra shot it through the side, but not before it clipped Kael hard enough to spin him to the ground. Pain cracked through his shoulder plate. His rifle skidded away over black stone.

“Kael!” Dax shouted.

The machine pivoted, damaged but not dead, and drove toward him on four remaining limbs. Up close it was worse—its surface etched with patterns like writing, its core pulsing in rhythms that felt almost biological. Kael reached for the sidearm at his thigh, rolled onto one knee, and jammed the barrel into the gap Lyra had opened in its shell.

The construct stopped.

Not disabled. Stopped.

Its glowing head lowered.

Then, in a voice transmitted directly into his helmet, cold and toneless and ancient, it said:

“Confirmed. Sun-child.”

Kael stared.

The machine made no move to strike.

All across the plain below, the charging constructs halted in perfect unison.

Dax’s repeater thundered once more, then cut off as he realized the targets were no longer advancing.

Lyra did not lower her rifle. “Why did they stop?”

Kael rose slowly, sidearm still aimed at the construct in front of him. On the ridge, the wind carried ash in long copper-gray ribbons. In the crater basin, lights spread through the city in widening circles, district after district waking from the dead.

And from somewhere deep within that impossible place, something answered the signal that had called them here.

A sound rolled across the desert.

Not mechanical. Not natural.

A vast, resonant tone, like the opening note of a hymn sung by something older than empire.

On Kael’s visor, the ancient text changed.

ACCESS GRANTED.

Behind him, the lander’s comms erupted with panicked voices from orbit.

“Ground team, respond immediately,” barked fleet control. “Multiple energy spikes detected across the basin. Repeat, the entire structure is activating. You are ordered to withdraw at once.”

Kael looked at the silent machine before him.

At the city.

At the Black Sun burning over all of it.

Then he heard a second voice in his helmet, quieter than the first and infinitely more disturbing, because it sounded almost human.

“Do not let them take the gate.”

The channel cut.

For the first time in years, Commander Kael Arden had no idea which order he was supposed to obey.

And somewhere in the waking city beneath the blackened star, something had already decided that he belonged to it.

Chapter 2: The Gate of Ash

Fleet control was still shouting in his ear when the first tower collapsed.

Not the central citadel. Something smaller, farther out along the city's western ring. A spire of black metal cracked at the midpoint and folded inward in eerie silence, disintegrating into a plume of sparks and dust. A heartbeat later, a pulse of blue light raced through the crater floor in branching lines, illuminating roads, walls, and buried structures beneath the sand as if the planet itself had a nervous system.

"Kael," Lyra said, voice tight. "Decision. Now."

He blinked, pulled back into the moment. The machine in front of him remained bowed, waiting. Every other construct on the plain held position like statues. Fleet control continued demanding extraction. Somewhere above the atmosphere, the empire was afraid.

That scared him more than the machines.

"Pilot," Kael said. "Prep for emergency lift but stay on the ground."

The reply came instantly. "That is a direct violation—"

"I know what it is."

He cut the channel before the pilot could finish.

Dax climbed the ridge toward him, weapon raised, helmet tilted from Kael to the halted construct and back again. "Tell me you saw that too."

"I saw it," Lyra said.

"That thing called him Sun-child," Dax said. "I'm not saying I hate it, but I do need an explanation before the creepy robot cult adopts our commander."

Kael kept his sidearm on the construct. "I don't have one."

That was true in the narrowest sense. But the words had reached into a locked room inside him, a place filled with fragments: medical scans he was never allowed to keep, instructors who stopped talking when cadets entered, the sealed records attached to every Sunborn file. He had spent half his life suspecting the program was built on lies. Hearing an ancient machine confirm it should have felt like vindication.

Instead it felt like standing on the edge of something enormous and hungry.

He stepped back from the construct.

Immediately, it rose to full height.

Lyra's rifle snapped up a fraction higher. Dax shifted left, ready to cut it apart.

The machine did not attack. It simply turned its head toward the city, as if awaiting a command Kael did not know how to give.

On the tactical display, new markers bloomed along the basin rim.

Ships.

Not Imperial signatures.

Dax saw them at the same time. "Contacts incoming from the east. Low atmosphere."

Lyra swore under her breath. "Raiders?"

Kael checked the IFF. Not raiders. Worse. No fleet registry, no corporate tag, no diplomatic cloak. Black-flag hulls running silent and fast.

Scavengers.

War fed on empires, but scavengers fed on wars. Where the great powers cracked worlds open, these crews came burrowing after relics, weapons, fuel cells, prisoners, anything with value. If Veyra had lit up on long-range scans, every predator within three sectors would come running.

Fleet control broke through again. "Ground team, unidentified descent craft entering combat space. Withdraw immediately. I repeat—withdraw."

Kael looked from the incoming ships to the city.

The unknown voice echoed in his mind.

Do not let them take the gate.

He hated that he was considering obeying it.

"Commander?" Lyra said.

This was the moment. Extraction or descent. Orders or instinct.

He made the choice before he could talk himself out of it.

"We move to the city."

Dax barked a laugh. "Knew you were going to say that."

Lyra lowered her rifle only enough to move. "Then we do it fast. Once scavengers land, every route gets worse."

Kael nodded toward the construct. "Can you understand me?"

Its head tilted. "Authorized genetic variance detected. Query accepted."

That answered almost nothing. "Path to signal source."

The machine turned, extending one segmented limb toward the basin. As it did, the sand below rippled. A line of hidden pylons emerged from the plain, lighting in sequence to form a glowing route straight to the outer wall of the city.

Dax stared. "All right. That's useful in a deeply unsettling way."

Kael opened a squad channel to the pilot. "You lift on my mark, circle west, maintain low profile. If Imperial command orders you out-system, you ignore them until I transmit code ember-six."

Silence. Then: "Commander... that code doesn't exist."

"It does now."

Another silence.

"Understood," the pilot said.

Kael turned to the ridge. The city waited below like an open mouth.

"Move."

They descended at a hard run.

The path laid down by the machines was smoother than the surrounding terrain, made of hexagonal plates rising from beneath ash and stone. Blue-white lines pulsed under their boots, tracking their movement. On either side of the route, the dormant constructs remained motionless, but Kael could feel them watching as his squad passed.

Above, the first scavenger dropship broke through the cloud layer trailing ion fire.

Lyra checked her scope without slowing. "Three descent craft confirmed. Light assault profile. They'll hit the basin in under four minutes."

"Can fleet intercept?" Dax asked.

"Not without firing into the city."

"Would that stop them?"

"No," Kael said.

Because the empire was hesitating.

Because command didn't know what this place was.

Because if they destroyed it from orbit before understanding it, they might lose the very reason they had sent Sunborn to Veyra in the first place.

So everyone would delay. Everyone would posture. Everyone would try to grab the knife by the handle.

And meanwhile the blade would keep falling.

The heat grew harsher as they neared the crater's edge. Fine ash hissed across their armor. The city's outer wall rose from the desert in one unbroken curve, black and seamless, at least a hundred meters high. No battlements, no visible doors, only a polished surface engraved with faint concentric patterns that shimmered under the light of the Black Sun.

Then a gate appeared.

Not by opening. By realizing it had always been there.

A section of wall rippled and thinned, geometry rearranging itself until a tall archway emerged, filled with dim blue haze. The constructs halted twenty meters back, refusing to pass.

Dax stopped beside Kael. "Let me guess. Only the chosen one gets in."

"Don't start," Lyra said.

Kael stepped toward the threshold. His visor flooded with symbols, then translated text.

PRIMARY ACCESS: ARDEN DESIGNATE ACCEPTED.

AUXILIARY ACCESS: TWO COMPANIONS PERMITTED.

"Convenient," Lyra said.

"Insulting," Dax muttered.

Kael looked at the gate. Then at his team.

"We go together."

He crossed the threshold first.

Cold hit him instantly.

Not air-conditioning cold. Tomb cold. The kind that had never known sunlight.

He entered a vast corridor with walls of dark metallic stone rising into shadow. The ceiling vanished above layered support arches and suspended rails. Thin bands of white light ran along the floor and up the pillars, all newly awakened, throwing clean reflections across surfaces untouched by weather or dust. The air smelled sterile, mineral, ancient.

Lyra and Dax came through behind him. The gate sealed without sound.

For one second the three of them stood still, absorbing the size of the place.

Outside, the city had looked immense. Inside, it felt impossible.

The corridor opened onto a boulevard broad enough to land corvettes on. Stairways rose along either side toward terraces lined with statues worn smooth by time. Bridges crossed overhead between towers pierced by thousands of dark apertures. Far above, a transparent dome or energy field revealed the burning sky beyond, so the Black Sun seemed to hang directly over the city's spine.

"No decay," Lyra said softly. "No looting. No signs of habitation."

Dax turned slowly in place. "Tell me there's a map."

As if answering him, a column of light formed in the center of the boulevard. Shapes rotated inside it: district lines, transit routes, symbols layered over symbols. Then the image compressed into a single pulsing marker far below the surface.

The signal source.

Kael stepped closer. Text streamed past in a language he did not know, then rearranged itself into Imperial standard.

CATHEDRAL CORE.

GATE SYSTEM STATUS: FRACTURED.

RECLAMATION PROTOCOL: INCOMPLETE.

Lyra looked at him. "It's translating for us."

"No," Kael said quietly. "It's translating for me."

That landed harder than he meant it to.

Dax glanced between them. "All right. New rule. Nobody says anything ominous unless they also explain it."

A sound cut through the chamber—faint, metallic, rhythmic.

Footsteps.

Not theirs.

Lyra pivoted instantly, rifle up toward the nearest elevated causeway.

Figures emerged from the far end of the boulevard.

Human.

Six of them, moving in scavenger leathers patched over combat mesh, helmets mismatched, weapons military-grade but modified. They spread with practiced speed the moment they saw Kael's squad, taking cover behind a toppled obelisk and a line of broken stone benches.

So they had landed faster than expected.

One stepped into partial view and broadcast on open local comms. "Imperial team. Drop your tags and walk away. Salvage claim is ours."

Dax gave a delighted snort. "That's adorable."

Kael did a quick count. Six visible. Probably more on flanks. "We're not here to negotiate."

"Then you're here to die," said the scavenger.

She signaled, and the firefight began.

Pulse rounds streaked through the boulevard, splashing white heat across the pavement. Kael dove behind a narrow pillar as fragments sliced the air where his head had been. Lyra rolled behind a fallen statue base and fired twice in rapid succession, forcing two scavengers back. Dax braced against the obelisk's edge and answered with a punishing burst that chewed stone into clouds.

The city reacted.

At the first exchange of fire, the white floor-lines flared bright blue. Panels along the walls opened. Small hovering spheres emerged in clusters, each the size of a helmet, their surfaces ringed with rotating lenses.

Defense drones.

“Bad timing,” Dax shouted.

One of the scavengers yelled, “Everyone down!”

Too late.

The drones swept the boulevard and emitted converging beams of pale light. Wherever the beams touched weapons, those weapons sparked and died. Power cells overloaded. Rifle housings split. A scavenger on the upper terrace screamed as his modified carbine detonated in his hands and threw him backward.

Kael’s own rifle went dead.

So did Lyra’s.

Dax looked at his repeater with betrayal. “I just fixed this.”

The drones hovered, recalibrating. No longer just disarming.

Targeting.

Kael assessed in a flash. Unknown city. Automated defenses hostile to all armed entrants. Scavengers trapped too. Temporary parity.

He opened comms on broad local. “Cease fire!”

For one dangerous second, nobody did.

Then another drone dropped from the ceiling and vaporized the cover between two scavengers, showering them with molten fragments. That convinced the rest.

Silence crashed into place.

The drones continued to aim.

Kael slowly set his dead rifle on the pavement and raised both hands shoulder-high. Across the boulevard, the scavenger leader did the same, swearing the whole time. Lyra’s posture radiated fury, but she followed suit. Dax placed his repeater down with the expression of a man laying a friend in a grave.

The drones scanned them all.

Then every sphere rotated at once toward the far end of the boulevard.

A new presence was approaching.

She came alone, walking down the centerline of the city as if she owned it.

Tall, dark-haired, face bare to the heatless air, wrapped in a long ash-gray coat over flexible armor. No visible insignia. No visible fear. Something metallic was fixed at her throat, a crescent-shaped device that glowed faint blue in time with the city lights.

The scavengers went rigid.

Their leader whispered one word, almost reverent.

“Mercer.”

The woman stopped twenty meters from both groups and studied Kael first.

Not his rank. Not his weapon.

His face.

“Well,” she said, voice calm and edged like glass, “they were right.”

Kael did not move. “Who are you?”

“A person who got here first.” Her gaze shifted briefly to the dormant drones, then back to him. “Though clearly not first enough.”

She looked around the boulevard, the translation pillar, the live gate map, and finally the still-glowing text that had formed for Kael alone.

Something unreadable passed over her expression.

Then she said, “If the city opened for you, Commander, we have a much larger problem than scavengers.”

Dax frowned. “You know who he is?”

“I know what he is,” she said.

Lyra’s eyes narrowed. “Explain.”

The woman ignored her. “My name is Mara Mercer. Independent recovery specialist.” She said it like a joke no one else was meant to understand. “And unless you want this place to wake up all the way, you need to come with me right now.”

Kael glanced at the drones. They still aimed, still hovered, still waited.

“Why should I trust you?”

“You shouldn’t,” Mara said. “But in approximately three minutes, your fleet is going to panic and deploy boarding teams, the scavengers’ second wave will breach the western transit well, and the city will identify all of you as contamination.”

She looked up toward the hidden depths below the boulevard.

“And once the Cathedral Core starts defending itself properly, this entire district becomes a furnace.”

That was specific enough to sound true.

The scavenger leader shouted from cover, “She’s lying! She wants the key for herself!”

Mara didn’t even turn. “Of course I do.”

Dax blinked. “I respect the honesty.”

Kael studied her. Every instinct told him she was dangerous. Every detail of the city told him everyone here was in over their heads. He had no map, no functioning rifle, and a voice in his helmet warning him about a gate. He also had a stranger who seemed to know more than Imperial Intelligence.

Not a good set of options.

Which meant it was probably the real one.

He lowered his hands slightly. "What key?"

Mara's eyes held his.

"You," she said.

And deep beneath the city, something vast began to open.

Chapter 3: The Woman Who Knew the City

The floor moved beneath them.

Not a tremor. Not an impact.

A controlled realignment.

Across the boulevard, white-lit seams opened in the pavement and rotated inward with mechanical precision, revealing shafts of blue energy far below. The sound that followed was deep enough to feel in bone before it reached the ear—a slow, rising resonance like a machine inhaling after centuries asleep.

Mara Mercer did not flinch.

Kael decided that was either a good sign or the worst one possible.

“Choice is closing,” she said.

The scavenger leader snapped, “She’s stalling! Take the Sunborn and move!”

Two of her people lunged for their disabled rifles anyway.

The drones fired.

There was no dramatic warning, no swelling charge. Just thin lances of white light crossing the boulevard. One weapon vaporized. The other man was thrown backward hard enough to crack stone, armor smoking. He did not get up.

That ended the argument.

Mara looked at Kael. “Now.”

Kael made the call. “We move.”

Lyra shot him a sharp glance but fell into step instantly. Dax scooped up his dead repeater out of sheer loyalty and followed. The drones tracked them as they crossed the boulevard, but did not fire. That alone told Kael more than he liked.

The city was discriminating.

It wanted him alive.

Mara led them off the main avenue and through a narrow side passage between two immense support columns. Behind them, the scavengers shouted, regrouping, but none tried to pursue through the drones’ crosshairs. The passage angled downward through smooth black stone inset with thin light-strips that brightened as Kael approached. Doorways opened ahead of them before anyone touched them, then sealed behind with seamless finality.

Dax glanced back once. “I officially hate doors that decide things.”

“Get in line,” Lyra said.

Mara moved fast, never once checking a display or map. She knew the path by memory.

Kael stayed half a step behind her. "You knew my name before I gave it."

"I know the Sunborn project," she said.

"That doesn't explain anything."

"No," she said. "It explains too much."

He almost grabbed her arm then, but the passage widened into a circular chamber and the moment broke.

The room might once have been a transit hub. Concentric platforms dropped away around a central shaft descending beyond sight. Bridges connected the platforms at different levels, many still intact, some twisted or partially collapsed. Along the walls stood vertical capsules of transparent material, each large enough to hold a human body upright. Most were empty.

A few were not.

Dax slowed first. "Tell me those are statues."

They weren't.

Inside the nearest capsule floated a humanoid form in milky fluid, long dead or preserved beyond any definition of dead Kael understood. Its body was tall and narrow, its limbs slightly too long, its face almost human except for the smoothness of the brow and the branching, metallic lattice fused along the throat and collarbones. Its eyes were closed. Thin lines of dormant light ran beneath translucent skin.

Lyra approached by one measured step. "Ancient inhabitants."

Mara nodded once. "Custodians. Or priests. Or engineers. Depends which translation you trust."

"There are translations?" Kael said.

"Fragments." Her voice tightened. "Enough to know this city wasn't a colony or a fortress. It was part of a system."

Kael looked down into the shaft's blue-lit depths. "The gate."

Mara finally turned to face him fully.

Up close, the device at her throat looked less like jewelry and more like a graft—an arc of dark metal seated just beneath the skin, joined to fine scar lines that vanished under her collar. It pulsed faintly when she looked at him.

"Yes," she said. "The gate."

"Start talking."

For a moment he thought she would refuse.

Then the chamber shuddered again, and far above them came the muffled boom of distant impacts. Boarding craft. Somebody had entered the city from another vector.

Mara exhaled through her nose. "All right. Fast version. Centuries ago, long before the empire charted this sector, there was a network spread across multiple systems. Not just cities. Transit points. Energy relays. Vaults. Somebody built them around unstable stellar phenomena—collapsed stars, flare giants, magnetars. The empire found remnants, couldn't understand most of it, and buried the rest under classification layers."

"The Sunborn Initiative," Lyra said.

Mara's eyes flicked to her. "Exactly."

Dax frowned. "You're saying the empire made child soldiers because of alien ruins?"

"No," Kael said quietly.

He understood before she answered.

Mara nodded. "They made child soldiers because only certain genetic patterns interacted cleanly with recovered technology. Most test subjects died. Some adapted. Those lineages were refined, blended, replicated."

Dax's face hardened. "Replicated from who?"

Mara gestured to the capsules.

Nobody spoke.

Kael felt the chamber narrow around him.

He had known the program was cruel. He had known it took children and ground them into shape. But somewhere in the private center of himself, he had still believed there was an original version of him untouched by all that. Some ordinary human beginning before the empire's machinery got involved.

This woman was telling him that beginning might have been designed too.

Lyra, voice flat with effort, said, "How do you know?"

Mara touched the metal crescent at her throat. "Because I've been following these sites for eleven years. Because I stole data from places you've never heard of. Because I had this interface implanted after losing half a crew on a moon where the walls could read blood." She held Kael's gaze. "And because when this city woke, it pinged every fragment of old system architecture in range. Mine answered. Yours overruled it."

Dax looked at Kael. "That means command knew."

"Not all of command," Mara said. "But someone high enough."

Voss.

Kael didn't say the name aloud, but it settled in his mind with iron certainty. Archon Serath Voss. Patron of the Sunborn. Public savior of frontier sectors. Master of every smiling lie ever delivered in the language of necessity.

He had sent Kael here because the city would open.

Not because Kael was the best officer for the mission.

Because Kael was the tool.

The chamber lights shifted from white to amber.

Mara's head snapped up. "They're rerouting local defenses."

"For us?" Dax said.

"For everyone."

She crossed to a slanted control dais on the inner platform. The surface was dark until Kael stepped near it; then concentric rings of text spiraled into being beneath his hand. Symbols he did not know turned into language as he watched.

TRIAD ACCESS CONFIRMED.

DESCENT TO CATHEDRAL CORE AVAILABLE.

EXTERNAL BREACHES DETECTED.

CONTAINMENT FAILURE PROBABILITY RISING.

Lyra read over his shoulder. "Containment of what?"

The display changed.

A map of the city unfolded in layers, descending far below the visible structures into subterranean rings and vast radial chambers. At the very center sat a sphere of black light veined with gold, suspended inside a lattice of stabilizing arms.

Even the image hurt to look at.

Mara's voice dropped. "That's not the whole gate. It's the anchor."

"Anchor to what?" Dax asked.

She did not answer directly. "Every site I've found refers to crossings. Thresholds. Transit without distance. But the records fracture around one warning repeated over and over."

Kael looked at her.

Mara said it anyway.

"Do not open during stellar inversion."

He thought of the thing hanging above Veyra. The Black Sun, all dark center and burning edge.

"Tell me that's not what this is," Lyra said.

Mara's silence told them enough.

Before anyone could speak, the chamber erupted with noise.

A blast hammered the upper passage entrance, showering sparks and fragments into the shaft. A second explosion followed, closer. Someone had cut through the doors behind them.

Dax grinned without humor and lifted his dead repeater like a club. "Please tell me the city has a gift shop with working guns."

Mara stabbed a series of symbols across the dais. "No guns. Better."

From a recess beneath the control surface, three narrow devices emerged on magnetic brackets. They looked like compressed batons of black alloy with white seams along the grip.

Lyra took one first. "And these are?"

"Local field projectors," Mara said. "Very local. Very sharp."

Dax turned his over in one hand. "That is not reassuring."

"Press the thumb plate."

He did.

A blade of hard white energy snapped into existence with a hiss, extending a meter from the hilt. It wasn't plasma; it was too clean, too stable, edged with faint geometric distortions that hurt the eye.

Dax stared. "All right," he said softly. "I forgive the city a little."

Kael took the third projector. The weapon balanced perfectly, as if shaped for his hand. Of course it was.

The upper door burst inward.

Three scavengers rushed through smoke and dust, stripped to light armor, carrying ceramic blades and shock-carbines insulated against drone discharge. They stopped dead when they saw Kael's group armed.

Then they committed.

The first came straight down the stairs at Mara, fast and disciplined. She pivoted aside with almost no wasted motion and drove her shoulder into his chest, turning his momentum across the railing. He slammed into the barrier hard enough to lose grip on his carbine. She caught the weapon one-handed and rammed its shock-butt into his throat.

Lyra met the second scavenger halfway across the bridge. She had never wasted emotion in combat, and that coldness made her frightening. One step, one sidestep, one short cut. The white blade sheared through the man's weapon and laid open the chest plate beneath. He dropped before he understood he had been hit.

The third aimed for Kael.

He closed instead of retreating.

The scavenger swung a hooked ceramic knife at his neck. Kael caught the attacking wrist with his off hand, felt the impact jar up his arm, then ignited the projector between them. The white edge punched clean through armor at the ribs. The man gasped, eyes wide, and Kael shoved him back.

Behind them, more voices.

More boots.

Dax sighed, almost pleased. "There it is."

He charged the stair.

A large man in scavenger patchwork barreled through the smoke and brought down a breaching hammer. Dax took the blow on the projector hilt, sparks spraying, then headbutted the man hard enough to crack a visor. As the scavenger reeled, Dax cut low and removed both legs at the knee in one vicious arc.

The bridge became chaos.

Scavengers poured through in staggered groups, some trying to pin them from the upper landing, others dropping to lower platforms to flank. But the chamber worked against the attackers. Narrow crossings. Long drops. Sightlines full of light and shadow. Kael found himself moving by instinct that felt older than training, turning where the geometry wanted him to turn, striking where gaps opened half a second before he consciously saw them.

The city was helping him.

That terrified him.

He ducked a shock-bolt, cut through a rifle barrel, and drove his elbow into a helmet. To his left, Lyra was all angles and precision, using the bridge rails and platform edges to force enemies into single-line approaches. Dax fought like a demolition charge given a sense of humor, smashing bodies into barriers and kicking one attacker straight down into the shaft.

Mara stayed mobile, never holding ground longer than a breath. She fought dirty and efficiently, using dropped weapons, knees, elbows, rails, the environment, anything. This was not a soldier's style. It was survival stripped to competence.

Then the scavenger leader arrived.

She vaulted the ruined doorway with a cable line and landed on the upper ring above them, rifle slung, a long insulated spear in both hands. Her helmet was gone now. She was older than Kael had first thought, with silver threaded through one shaved side of her hair and a burn scar crossing her jaw.

"Mercer!" she shouted. "You always were a parasite."

Mara didn't look up. "Neral. Still scavenging other people's graves?"

Neral smiled without warmth. "Only the profitable ones."

She thrust the spear downward.

A crackling arc leapt from its tip and struck the control dais. The entire chamber dimmed. The map vanished. Alarm tones rolled through the shaft.

Mara swore. "She's overloading descent controls."

Neral yanked the spear free and threw herself down from the upper ring directly at Kael.

He barely brought the projector up in time.

Spear and blade collided in a shriek of white light. The impact drove him back two steps. Neral was stronger than she looked, using the insulated shaft like a lever to trap his weapon aside while she kicked for his knee. He twisted away, felt the strike glance off armor, then slammed the butt of his projector into her cheek.

She laughed.

Actually laughed.

“Now I see why they wanted you alive.”

Kael’s pulse sharpened. “Who?”

She twisted, locked his weapon arm with the spear haft, and hissed the answer in his face.

“Imperials. Black ships. Came to us two months ago asking about this place.”

Voss again.

Of course.

Kael broke the lock with brute force and drove forward. Neral yielded the ground deliberately, pulling him away from the dais. Good. She wanted space. He closed harder, denying it. The projector blade carved a bright line across her shoulder guard. She answered with a stunning jab from the spear’s charged end that scraped his chest plate and made every muscle in his left arm seize.

Lyra fired a captured shock-pistol from across the bridge, but Neral moved at the last instant and the bolt shattered the railing instead.

“Don’t kill her!” Mara shouted.

Dax, in the middle of throwing a scavenger off a lower platform, barked, “Very weird time for that request!”

Neral pressed Kael again, spear spinning, each strike aimed not to kill but to exhaust and control. That told him two things: she was very good, and she had orders too.

Take the Sunborn alive.

The thought steadied him.

He let her trap his projector arm a second time.

Then released the weapon.

It clattered to the floor as Neral overcommitted expecting resistance. Kael stepped inside her guard, caught the spear shaft with both hands, and drove his forehead into her nose. Bone crunched. Before she recovered, he tore the weapon free and rammed the butt into her stomach. She folded. He spun the spear awkwardly but hard and smashed her across the temple.

Neral staggered to one knee.

All around the chamber, the remaining scavengers hesitated.

Mara moved instantly, hurling a compact device at the breached doorway. It struck the frame and unfolded into a shimmering field barrier, sealing the entrance in crackling blue distortion. The scavengers still outside slammed into it and fell back cursing.

Inside, those who remained looked at Neral.

She spat blood onto the bridge. "Fall back."

One of her people shouted, "Boss—"

"Fall back!"

They obeyed. The survivors disengaged in ragged retreat, dragging their wounded toward a lower transit bridge and vanishing into the shadows below.

Silence came down hard.

Dax bent over, hands on his knees. "I don't usually say this," he said between breaths, "but I would love a briefing."

Lyra kicked a dead carbine away and looked to Mara. "Start with why she wants him alive."

Mara knelt beside the damaged dais, hands moving over its dead surface. "Because everyone with half a clue knows what a Sunborn means at a site like this." She looked up at Kael. "Not a soldier. Not to them. A credential."

Kael picked up the fallen projector and deactivated it. "You said the city opened for me. Fine. How far does that go?"

Mara's expression said she disliked the answer.

"Probably all the way down."

The shaft lights shifted again, amber fading to a deep, cathedral blue. The dead dais flickered back to life with a broken image of the lower levels.

Then a new message burned across the surface.

**PRIMARY DESCENT OVERRIDDEN.
CATHEDRAL CORE REQUESTS IMMEDIATE TRIAD PRESENCE.
DELAY INCREASES BREACH RISK.**

Below the text, the central shaft awoke.

Platforms rotated. Rails locked into place. A lift cage of black metal rose from the depths and stopped at their level with a soft chime, its doors standing open like an invitation from something that had already decided they would accept.

Dax stared at it. "You know, in every bad story ever told, this is where people should absolutely leave."

Lyra checked the charge on the captured pistol. "Can't. Too many factions above us now."

She was right. Fleet troops, scavengers, whoever else had followed the signal. The city itself. Up there was confusion and converging violence. Down here was purpose, however terrible.

Kael looked at the capsules lining the wall. At the preserved dead. At Mara's throat interface. At his team.

Then at the lift.

"We go down," he said.

Mara stood. "Once we enter the lower rings, this stops being salvage, Commander."

He met her gaze.

"It already did."

They stepped into the cage together.

The doors sealed.

And the city began carrying its children toward the gate.

Chapter 4: Descent

The lift dropped without a sound.

No cables. No visible engines. Just smooth acceleration straight into the shaft's blue-lit throat. Platform rings slid upward past the cage windows, then catwalks, then maintenance levels, then structural ribs large enough to house cities of their own. As they descended, the architecture changed.

The upper levels had looked ceremonial—broad boulevards, towers, plazas built to impress scale upon the human mind. Below that lay the machinery: nested conduits, rotating lattice arms, translucent pipelines carrying streams of liquid light, chambers where geometric engines pulsed in complete indifference to anyone watching.

Farther down still, the city became something else.

Older.

Less like construction, more like anatomy.

Dax stood close to the window, unusually quiet. "Anyone else getting the feeling we're inside something?"

"Nobody say yes," he added immediately.

Lyra ignored him. "What's triad presence?"

Mara kept her eyes on the passing structures. "Most sites reference three-part authorization. Biological, cognitive, harmonic."

"That means nothing," Dax said.

"It means," Mara replied, "someone designed these systems to require more than blood."

Kael looked at her reflection in the glass. "And you think I'm one part of it."

"I think you're the reason the city woke," she said. "The rest is what terrifies me."

A faint tone sounded inside the cage. Text appeared across the inner wall in white script.

THIRD VOICE ABSENT.

RECONCILIATION PENDING.

Lyra read it first. "Third voice?"

Dax glanced between them. "There are four of us."

The text vanished before anyone could answer.

The lift passed a broken level where one entire section of wall had collapsed inward long ago. Through the fracture Kael saw a vast external cavern beyond the city's foundations, filled with black glass formations and drifting electrical storms. For an instant, suspended in that darkness, something enormous moved.

Just a silhouette.

Too large to be a machine he could name.

Then the cage dropped below the breach and it was gone.

Kael tried not to think about it.

Mara noticed anyway. "There are things in the lower sectors that predate the city's shutdown."

"That is a sentence you should have said much earlier," Dax muttered.

"Would it have improved your mood?"

"No, but I'd feel more respected."

The cage slowed.

Ahead, a circular chamber opened around the shaft like the inside of a giant clock. Dozens of bridges extended from the central well to surrounding vault doors, each one marked with different glyph patterns. Most remained dark. One blazed with blue-white light the moment the cage aligned with it.

The doors opened before they arrived.

Beyond lay a hall of black stone and suspended lumens, lined on both sides with towering figures carved into the walls—not statues placed there, but figures emerging from the architecture itself, half relief and half machine. Each depicted tall, humanlike beings holding rings, spheres, or branching lines of light.

Custodians. Builders. Priests. Or all three.

The lift stopped.

Its doors opened.

No one stepped out at first.

Kael listened.

Nothing. No scavengers. No drones. No command chatter through the hull. Only the low living hum of the city and, under it, a distant rhythm like a colossal heart failing to keep time.

He exited first.

The floor felt warm.

That was new.

Lyra followed with the captured pistol raised. Dax came next, projector in hand. Mara paused at the threshold long enough to touch the implant at her throat, grimacing as it brightened.

"It's stronger down here," she said.

"What is?" Kael asked.

"The interface pressure." She looked ahead. "The system's trying to handshake directly."

"Can it?"

"Not cleanly."

Dax frowned. "English."

"It wants access to my nervous system," Mara said. "Happy?"

"No," Dax said.

The hall ended at a circular vault lined with vertical black ribs. In the center stood a pedestal waist-high, empty except for a shallow depression shaped vaguely like an open hand. White text formed in the air above it.

TRIAD ENTRY REQUIRES HARMONIC CONFIRMATION.

Lyra let out a small, humorless breath. "Of course it does."

Kael stepped forward. The text expanded around him into layered rings.

PRIMARY GENETIC ACCESS VERIFIED.

SECONDARY COMPANION ACCESS VERIFIED.

HARMONIC CHANNEL: MISSING.

Dax pointed at the words. "I would like to formally object to being called secondary."

Mara's face had gone still.

Kael noticed. "You know what it means."

She didn't answer at once.

Then she said, "Maybe."

Lyra swung toward her. "Enough."

Mara closed her eyes briefly, as if calculating the cost of honesty and disliking every result. "Some recovered records mention interface mediators. People altered to hear and stabilize system resonance. Not open gates, not exactly. Translate them. Soothe them. Direct them enough to prevent catastrophic feedback."

Dax looked at the implant in her throat.

Mara held his gaze. "I volunteered."

"Why?" Kael said.

That brought the first crack in her composure.

“Because I was on a station over Cyrene when an unsealed relic woke up in the reactor spine,” she said. “Because I listened to forty-three people die in vacuum while the emergency bulkheads refused to close. Because afterward I found out the empire had known what the relic might do and hid it rather than admit contamination. So I learned how to find these places before they did.”

The room stayed quiet.

Even Lyra let the anger in her shoulders ease by a fraction.

Mara looked away first. “At one site, I found interface notes. Incomplete. Experimental. I paid someone to make the implant work.”

“Paid?” Dax said.

She touched the scar at her throat. “In several ways.”

Kael looked at the hovering text again. Missing harmonic channel.

“You think it means you.”

“I think,” Mara said carefully, “that the city may accept me as a substitute. Or it may burn out my brain trying.”

Dax lifted a hand. “Strong preference for the first option.”

Lyra moved beside Kael. “What happens if we stop here?”

Mara answered immediately. “Whatever breach risk means, it gets worse. The city has been damaged. The anchor is unstable. Every external incursion raises system stress.”

Kael thought of the warning. Do not let them take the gate.

Not open the gate.

Take it.

Maybe that difference mattered.

Maybe it was the difference everything depended on.

He stepped back from the pedestal. “Do it.”

Mara laughed once, softly, without humor. “You really don’t know whether to trust me.”

“No,” Kael said. “But I know time is against us.”

She studied him for a moment, then nodded.

“All right. If this goes wrong, kill me fast.”

Dax grimaced. “Hate that plan.”

Mara placed both hands on the pedestal.

At first nothing happened.

Then the black ribs around the vault ignited with light. Not blue this time. Gold. It raced through etched channels in the floor and climbed the walls in branching patterns. Mara arched sharply, teeth bared, as the implant at her throat flared brilliant enough to cast shadows.

The chamber filled with sound.

Not noise. Voices.

Layered, distant, overlapping in tones too numerous to separate—some human, some almost musical, some so low they registered more as pressure than hearing. Kael's visor blanked out entirely. The air thickened. White symbols spiraled around Mara in fast orbit.

Lyra moved toward her, but Kael caught her arm.

“Wait.”

Mara's eyes snapped open.

They were full of reflected light, pupils swallowed by gold. When she spoke, three voices came out at once.

“Channel recognized.”

The pedestal sank.

The entire far wall divided down the middle and opened, revealing darkness so deep it seemed solid.

Then a bridge extended into it.

Narrow. Smooth. No rails.

At the far end, suspended over an abyss, hung a sphere of black light threaded with gold veins—the same thing from the map, only much larger. Rings of broken machinery encircled it like the remains of a shattered crown. Each pulse from the sphere sent faint ripples across the void, distorting distance and geometry for a fraction of a second.

The anchor.

No one spoke.

Then, slowly, shapes emerged in the dark beneath the bridge.

They rose soundlessly, one after another, until a dozen of them hung below the walkway like drowned things suspended in deep water. Tall, thin, wrapped in strips of metallic cloth and ceremonial armor. Their faces hidden behind smooth masks. At each throat burned a pale line of light.

Custodians.

Not dead.

Watching.

Dax whispered, “That is a nightmare I would prefer remain decorative.”

Mara staggered back from the pedestal, coughing hard. Her own voice returned, ragged and singular. "They're not fully active," she said. "I think they're linked to the anchor."

"You think?" Lyra said.

Mara wiped blood from one nostril. "I'm improvising in a dead alien cathedral, Lieutenant. Yes."

A new sound cut across the chamber.

Comms.

Imperial encrypted.

Kael's helmet display flickered back to life just long enough to render one incoming signal. It carried top-command priority and override authority no battlefield officer could ignore.

Voss.

Kael accepted the channel.

The Archon's face resolved in pale gold static, severe and composed in dress black, silver insignia at the throat. Behind him, command decks flickered with controlled emergency. He looked less surprised than Kael expected.

Which meant he had expected contact eventually.

"Commander Arden," Voss said, voice smooth as sharpened stone. "You have exceeded your operational brief."

Kael stared at him. "You sent me here as a key."

Voss did not blink. "I sent you because you were necessary."

Dax muttered, "That's a yes."

Voss continued as if he hadn't heard. "Listen carefully. The structure beneath you cannot be permitted to fall into scavenger or dissident hands. You are to secure the core chamber and await my arrival."

Lyra cut in coldly. "Your arrival? You're coming planetside?"

"For history, Lieutenant," Voss said, "one should arrive in person."

Kael felt something go still inside him. "You lied about what the Sunborn are."

Voss's expression changed only by a degree, but it was enough to reveal impatience.

"The Sunborn are what humanity required when ordinary blood proved inadequate." His gaze hardened. "Do not make the childish mistake of confusing difficult origins with lack of purpose."

Mara stepped into camera range before Kael could stop her.

Voss saw her and went silent for the first time.

Recognition.

Real recognition.

“Well,” Mara said, breathing hard, “there’s the face I was hoping to find.”

The Archon regarded her with clinical displeasure. “Mercer.”

“Archon.”

Dax looked between them. “You two know each other too?”

Mara did not take her eyes off the display. “He ordered the purge on Cyrene Station.”

Voss’s mouth thinned. “Cyrene was contamination containment.”

“It was civilians and sealed airlocks.”

“It was necessary.”

The word landed like ash.

Kael heard in it every dead cadet, every erased report, every mission wrapped in noble language until the bodies disappeared beneath it.

Voss shifted his attention back to Kael. “Commander, you are close to fulfilling the reason you were created. Do not fail now by indulging sentiment.”

The sentence hit the chamber like a strike.

Even Dax went still.

Kael said, very evenly, “Created.”

“Yes,” Voss said. “Not chosen. Not discovered. Built. Refined over generations from recovered precursor strains and human military stock, until the interface stabilized. You and your cohort are an achievement, Arden. Do not degrade yourselves by pretending otherwise.”

Lyra’s knuckles whitened around the pistol.

Dax took one step toward the comm image as if sheer anger might bridge signal distance.

Kael felt the old rage come up cold instead of hot.

Not because Voss had revealed something unexpected.

Because he had said it with pride.

“What is the gate?” Kael asked.

For the first time, Voss hesitated.

Not long.

Just enough.

“A solution,” he said. “One the empire should have claimed centuries ago.”

Mara laughed bitterly. "There it is."

Kael kept his voice level. "Solution to what?"

"To extinction," Voss said. "To attrition. To the inevitable mathematics of a species spread too thin across too many dying stars. That system below you is transit, energy, and strategic supremacy on a scale you cannot yet comprehend. With it, frontier collapse ends. War ends."

"Freedom ends," Mara said.

Voss ignored her. "Secure the chamber. I will handle the rest."

The comm cut.

For a few seconds only the pulse of the anchor filled the dark.

Then Dax spoke, low and furious. "I know we all hated him already. But that felt special."

Lyra turned to Kael. "He's coming for it."

"Yes," Kael said.

"And he will use you to get it."

"Yes."

Mara looked from the bridge to the black sphere. "Then we're out of time."

As if the city agreed, the masked custodians beneath the bridge all lifted their heads at once.

The abyss answered.

From somewhere beyond the anchor chamber came the shriek of tearing metal and the unmistakable thunder of something large forcing its way through sealed levels above.

Not scavengers.

Not fleet troops.

Something older.

The text returned in midair over the bridge, now flashing crimson.

**CONTAINMENT BREACH CONFIRMED.
NULL ENTITY DISPLACEMENT DETECTED.
TRIAD MUST PROCEED.**

Dax looked at the message, then into the darkness.

"I miss the part of today when the robots were the problem."

One of the custodians rose higher until its masked face hovered level with the bridge.

Its mouth did not move, but a voice spread through the chamber anyway, old and vast and stripped of all warmth.

“Last heirs,” it said. “Choose whether the crossing becomes conquest.”

Then the lights went out.

Chapter 5: The Lights Go Out

Darkness hit like a physical blow.

Not ordinary dark. Absolute dark.

Kael's visor died first, then Lyra's stolen pistol, then the light bands in the floor, walls, and bridge. One instant the anchor chamber glowed with alien geometry; the next, every system cut to black so complete it erased depth, distance, and balance. The pulse of the anchor remained, but only as pressure in the bones.

Somewhere in that dark, Dax said, "I would like to file a complaint."

"Quiet," Lyra snapped.

Kael held still.

Training took over in layers. Control breathing. Fix position. Listen before moving.

He could hear Mara breathing to his left, fast but controlled. Dax farther back, boots shifting a fraction against stone. Lyra had gone so still she nearly vanished from the room altogether. Beyond them, out over the abyss, the masked custodians made no sound at all.

Then came another noise.

A scrape.

Metal on stone, slow and deliberate, from somewhere on the far side of the bridge.

Kael felt the projector hilt in his hand and pressed the thumb plate.

Nothing.

Dead.

A second scrape answered the first, closer now. Then a third, somewhere below the bridge. Then a wet, tearing click from above.

Dax's voice dropped. "That doesn't sound ancient in a dignified way."

"No," Mara whispered. "It sounds hungry."

A dim glow returned—not from the chamber, but from the anchor itself.

Black light veined with gold spread just enough to sketch the world in negative. The bridge reappeared as a narrow line suspended over the void. The custodians hung below it like funeral ornaments. And on the far side, just beyond the anchor's fractured ring array, something unfolded from the dark.

It was taller than a man by half, built on too many limbs, all of them jointed wrong. Its surface looked fluid and armored at once, like polished obsidian poured over moving bones. No face. Only a vertical seam of pale distortion where a face should have been.

A second shape clung to the underside of the bridge, inverted.

A third was already crawling down the chamber wall toward them.

Lyra spoke first, low and cold. "Targets."

The thing on the wall moved.

Kael shouted, "Break right!"

They scattered an instant before the creature dropped. It hit the stone where they had stood with almost no sound, then lashed out with a hooked forelimb that sliced sparks from the floor. Dax slammed into it shoulder-first on pure instinct and got thrown backward hard enough to crack against a pillar.

The thing turned toward him.

Mara touched the implant at her throat and gasped through clenched teeth. "City systems are suppressing visible output to limit its acquisition. Don't ask me how I know. Just move."

Not blind, then. Hiding.

Kael lunged for Dax as the creature struck again. He caught his teammate by the collar and dragged him clear while the hooked limb punched into stone where Dax's head had been.

A pulse of white light flashed across the chamber.

One of the custodians had raised a hand.

A thin beam lanced through the dark and cut across the creature's flank. It recoiled violently, seam-face opening in a spray of warped light instead of blood.

Lyra was already moving. She snatched Dax's dropped field projector, slammed its plate against the floor, and the blade snapped alive for a single second—then died again. But a single second was enough. She drove the brief white edge into the wounded section the custodian had opened.

The creature shrieked.

This time the sound came inside their heads.

Kael staggered with it. Images flashed behind his eyes—falling stars, open mouths, pressure doors buckling inward, a black sea filled with reflected suns. Not his memories. Not anyone's, maybe. Just impact. Violation. Wrongness.

Dax groaned. "I really hate psychic wildlife."

The thing thrashed, hit Lyra hard enough to send her rolling, then sprang backward into the dark with impossible speed.

The chamber fell silent again except for their breathing.

"Status," Kael said.

"Fine," Lyra lied.

Dax pushed himself upright with a grunt. "Bruised. Offended."

Mara's voice was thinner than before. "Those are null entities."

Nobody replied.

She swallowed. "That's what the fragments called them. Things that came through unstable crossings when the system failed. Not invaders exactly. More like... pressure from the wrong side taking shape."

"Wrong side of what?" Dax said.

"The gate."

The answer settled over them.

Kael looked toward the anchor, now pulsing dimly in the abyss. "So containment means keeping those things from crossing."

"Yes," Mara said. "Or from fully manifesting. Or from making local reality less compatible with life. The records weren't comforting."

The creature above them clicked again.

Lyra pointed into the dark over the entry vault. "There."

The wall-crawler detached and dropped.

This time Kael met it halfway.

He didn't think, only moved. The dead projector became a baton in his hand. He struck upward at the joint of the first descending limb, turning the blow just enough to unbalance it, then drove forward under the creature's body before its other limbs could close around him.

It smelled like burned metal and storm rain.

He heard Dax shout something. Heard Lyra's boots on stone. Heard Mara cry out in pain as her implant brightened.

Then the anchor pulsed hard.

A ring of gold-black distortion washed through the chamber.

The null entity froze.

Not stunned. Recognizing.

Its seam-face opened toward Kael. Inside was only depth, a fold of darkness collapsing inward forever. Yet from that impossible mouth came the faintest whisper, the edge of language.

"Bearer."

Kael felt the word like cold water down the spine.

Then Dax hit the creature from the side with a chunk of fallen stone the size of a helmet. The impact broke the moment. Lyra drove the captured shock-pistol into the thing's lower body and fired point-blank. Blue charge burst through it in branching arcs. It spasmed, lost cohesion for an instant, and the custodian beneath the bridge fired again.

The beam cut the null entity cleanly in half.

Both pieces hit the floor and dissolved into smoke-black strands that curled upward and vanished toward the anchor.

No body. No remains.

Nothing to prove it had been there except the gouges in the stone and Dax's swearing.

The third entity, the one beyond the anchor rings, withdrew deeper into the abyss.

Watching.

Mara bent over, one hand on the pedestal, blood running from her nose and the corner of one eye. "The custodians are helping because the system still reads you as authorized," she said to Kael. "That won't last if the breach worsens."

Kael moved to her. "Can you keep going?"

She gave him a look that mixed exhaustion and irritation. "No. Unfortunately yes."

The anchor pulsed again, slightly brighter.

This time the bridge lit with narrow gold lines down its center.

An invitation. Or a demand.

One of the custodians rose until its mask hovered beside the walkway. Up close the faceplate was smooth except for three vertical slits where eyes should have been. Behind them burned a soft white intelligence.

"Cross," it said. "Before the claimant arrives."

"Claimant?" Lyra said.

Kael answered without taking his eyes off the bridge. "Voss."

The custodian tilted its head. "The iron-willed usurper above. Yes."

Dax snorted despite everything. "That is a fantastic villain title."

Another impact boomed somewhere far overhead. Then another, closer. The city was no longer merely being infiltrated. It was being forced open.

Kael turned to his team. "We cross now."

Lyra checked the charge on the scavenged pistol. "Formation?"

"Single line. I take point. Mara in the middle. Dax rear. No stopping, no matter what the anchor shows you."

Dax frowned. "Why do I feel like that last part was aimed at all of us?"

"Because it was."

Mara wiped the blood from her mouth. "The bridge may react to you, Kael."

"Helpful reaction?"

She managed a tired half-smile. "You have a strange faith in me for someone who doesn't trust me."

He looked at her.

"I trust your fear."

Something changed in her face at that, small and quickly hidden.

Then they stepped onto the bridge.

It felt softer than stone, with a slight give like dense living material beneath a hard shell. Gold lines spread under Kael's boots and trailed behind him as the others followed. To either side the abyss dropped away into a darkness that seemed to breathe. The custodians drifted below, pacing them in silence.

Halfway across, the air changed.

The pressure increased. So did the sense of being watched—not by the null entity retreating in the dark, not by the custodians, not even by the city. This attention was focused, immense, and old enough to have forgotten the distinction between machine and will.

The anchor was aware.

Gold veins brightened within the black sphere. Images rippled across its surface too fast to hold: stars collapsing inward, rings of light between worlds, cities beneath alien skies, bodies suspended in glass, children in Imperial training whites standing motionless while unseen observers watched from behind mirrored walls.

Kael nearly missed a step.

Not random images.

Memories. Or records.

He saw himself at seven, smaller than the rifle they gave him to carry. At ten, feverish after one of the medical procedures no instructor would explain. At fourteen, standing over a boy from his cohort whose heart had stopped during interface testing. The medics had taken the body away before dawn and removed the name from all schedules by morning.

The bridge wanted him to see.

Mara's voice came from behind, strained. "Don't let it narrate you. Keep moving."

He forced his gaze forward.

The far platform drew closer. Around the anchor hung broken ring structures, each one carved with the same symbols that had translated for him elsewhere. Some had cracked. Some floated in impossible suspension. Threads of black-gold energy arced between them and the sphere, unstable and beautiful and wrong.

Then Dax swore behind him.

Kael turned just enough to see Lyra had stopped.

Not fully. Just one foot planted, one hand slightly raised, eyes fixed on the anchor's surface as if listening to someone only she could hear.

"Lyra," he said.

No response.

The gold light on her face sharpened the scar near her left brow, the one she'd gotten on Khepri Reach when a station bulkhead blew and she dragged three civilians through vacuum foam with her helmet cracked. Kael knew that story because he'd read the report. The anchor was showing her something else now, and whatever it was had cut deeper than any report ever could.

He moved back toward her.

Mara hissed, "No—don't break line—"

Too late.

The bridge shuddered.

From the abyss below, three null entities surged upward at once.

The custodians fired immediately, beams lancing down and across, but the entities moved in broken stutters that made distance unreliable. One struck a custodian full in the torso. The mask split. Light spilled out like smoke. Another wrapped itself around the underside of the bridge, climbing fast.

Dax dropped to a knee and hauled Lyra backward by the shoulder hard enough to break whatever trance held her.

She inhaled sharply, like surfacing from deep water, and snapped up the shock-pistol.

"Contacts!"

"I noticed!" Dax shouted.

The entity on the bridge crest came over the edge in a blur of limbs. Kael hit it with his dead projector as if it were a hammer. Lyra fired twice into its seam-face. Mara screamed through clenched teeth and thrust her hand toward the anchor.

The black sphere answered.

A wave of harmonic force rolled down the bridge.

Not visible. Felt.

The null entity convulsed, half its body losing shape at once. A custodian beam punched through the rest and flung it into the void. Below, the two remaining entities broke off, one dragging a damaged custodian with it into the dark.

The bridge steadied.

For a few seconds no one moved.

Then Lyra said, very quietly, "It showed me my brother."

Kael looked at her.

"He died before the Initiative processed my file," she said, eyes fixed forward now. "At least that's what they told me."

Mara's expression tightened. "The anchor doesn't lie cleanly. It uses truth to create leverage."

"So that was false?"

"I don't know," Mara said. "That's what makes it cruel."

Lyra swallowed once and set her jaw back into place. "Then let's finish this before it starts talking again."

They reached the far platform without another attack.

The structure there was not a room so much as a suspended sanctum built around the anchor itself. A circular path ringed the sphere at a careful distance, interrupted by three raised stations equidistant around the edge. Each station held a shallow basin, a vertical glyph spindle, and a hand-shaped depression like the one in the vault beyond.

Triad stations.

At the exact center of the ring path, facing the bridge, stood a final figure.

Not custodian. Not null entity.

Human, or close enough.

Tall, draped in black and gold ceremonial armor that had become part of the body inside it. The face was uncovered: severe, pale, almost beautiful in the way statues were beautiful, with fine cracks of gold light running beneath the skin from throat to temple. Its eyes were open and utterly still.

Ancient, alive, waiting.

Dax lowered his voice. "Please don't be another person who knows his name."

The figure turned its head to Kael with smooth, terrible grace.

“Primary heir-pattern confirmed,” it said. Its voice was neither male nor female, but carried both under the surface. “At last.”

Kael did not step closer. “Who are you?”

“Last Regent of Veyra’s Gate Choir. Final coherence vessel. Witness to the closure.” The figure touched its own chest. “You may call me Sael.”

Mara stared openly now. “There were no intact regents in any record.”

Sael’s gaze slid to her throat implant. “No intact records remained to observe.”

Lyra angled the pistol toward the regent. “Tell us what the empire wants.”

Sael answered without offense. “The weaponized convenience of distance undone.”

“That’s not an answer,” Dax said.

“It is the only answer tyrants ever require.”

Kael stepped forward half a pace. “What does the gate actually do?”

Sael turned to the anchor. Gold light moved under the regent’s skin in calm tides.

“Once, it permitted transit between tuned stellar wells. Matter, signal, intent. It also anchored a boundary. Your language has no clean word for the boundary, only approximations: separation, quarantine, mercy.” Sael looked back at him. “When the black star inverted, one crossing failed. What entered could not live here, yet would not die. We closed the system by force. We broke our own lattice. We sealed worlds from one another to preserve what remained.”

Mara said, “And now Voss wants it reopened.”

“Yes.”

“Can it be reopened?” Kael asked.

Sael held his gaze for a long moment.

“Yes,” the regent said.

No one liked how quickly the answer came.

Kael asked the next question anyway. “Can it be controlled?”

Sael’s pause was longer this time.

“For a while.”

That was worse.

Behind them, the bridge lights flickered violently.

A hard metallic tone rang through the sanctum. Then another. Then a voice from every surface in the chamber, translated and cold:

EXTERNAL CLAIMANT HAS ENTERED LOWER RINGS.

MILITARY ESCORT COUNT: THIRTY-TWO.

AUTHORITY CONFLICT IMMINENT.

Voss had reached the descent levels.

Dax exhaled. "He really did come in person. I hate committed villains."

Sael raised one hand. Three stations around the anchor lit in sequence. One beneath Kael blazed gold. One near Mara turned white-blue. The third, opposite them, remained dark for a beat—

Then lit crimson.

Everyone saw it.

Lyra frowned. "That's wrong."

Sael's face did not change. "No. It is the unresolved term."

Mara looked from the crimson station to the regent. "Third voice absent. Reconciliation pending."

The phrase from the lift.

Kael felt the meaning before he understood it.

"Triad," he said. "Not just genetic, companion, harmonic."

Sael inclined its head. "Primary heir. Harmonic translator. Counterweight witness."

Lyra said, "Counterweight to what?"

The regent answered with perfect calm.

"To conquest."

Silence.

Then Dax pointed at the red-lit station. "And who exactly is supposed to stand there?"

Sael looked at Kael.

Only at Kael.

"The one who can refuse him," the regent said. "The one the system cannot predict."

Bootsteps thundered from the bridge behind them.

Not one set. Many.

Imperial voices echoed down the span, clipped and armored and closing fast.

Voss had arrived.

And Kael still did not know which of the people beside him the city was asking to become the third voice.