

# FACTION 4

Echos in the Cold

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*A Novel in Four Installments*

*Prologue · Chapter I · Chapter II · Chapter III*

*Draft Edition — Review Copy*

# Contents

**Prologue** The Veridion System

**Chapter I** Echos in the Cold

**Chapter II** Drift

**Chapter III** Anchor

PROLOGUE

# The Veridion System

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*Whatever it is, it was here first.*

Nobody chose Veridion.

That is the first thing to understand about the system — the single fact that, once you have it, makes almost everything else legible. It is not a place people came to because they wanted something it had. It is a place they ended up in, swept here by transit lanes that happen to thread through its outer reaches, or pressed here under the weight of an Apex Industrial debt contract — a document that contains the word *relocation* and does not contain, anywhere across its forty-seven standard clauses, the word *choice*. The system sits at the edge of the inhabited volume: unremarkable stellar class, mid-range resource profile, a habitability index that rounds to adequate on a good day. The kind of place that scores well enough to avoid attention and not well enough to attract it.

What it has is isotope deposits in its outer ring, and fusion economics that only make sense when the people doing the mining are structured as debt rather than wages. What it has is transit lanes that make it cheaper to pass through than around. What it has, now, is three inhabited zones, three factions, and three megacorporations cutting across all of them the way utility infrastructure cuts across property lines — by prior arrangement, by necessity, and by the quiet understanding that the alternative is not having power.

None of this was designed. All of it was inevitable, the way systems become inevitable once enough people have built enough of their lives inside them. It has been this way for long enough that it has stopped looking like an arrangement and started looking like the order of things. This is how arrangements become permanent: they stop being visible.



The inner worlds belong to the Synapsen-Gilde, and the Gilde has belonged, in various proportions, to whoever has been in the legislature long enough to accumulate

precedent.

It is the oldest institution in the system by any measure that matters — land title, administrative continuity, the specific gravity of centuries of layered prior decisions. It controls the food supply, the inner-world political apparatus, and, through Praxis Biomechanica's manufacturing contracts, the neural implant infrastructure that its population depends on. Not as a luxury. As infrastructure. As a professional credential, a licence, the basic requirement for meaningful participation in inner-world life. In Gilde territory, a person without an implant is a person who has opted, practically speaking, out of the cognitive economy — and the cognitive economy is the only one the inner worlds run.

The Gilde is not a monolith. It has internal factions and a legislative apparatus so baroque that any given policy takes three years and two committees to formally exist. What is remarkably coherent, however, is its management of information — because information management is the one thing the competing interests have always agreed is worth doing well. The Gilde knows how to keep a secret. It knows how to keep a secret even when the secret is large, and growing, and costs more each year to contain.

Here is what it is currently containing:

The Flicker destroys neural implants. Not gradually, not with warning — the failure mode is sudden, irreversible cessation, with no precursor signal that any existing diagnostic hardware can detect. Incident reports have been filed. The incident reports have been reclassified. The reclassified reports have been attributed to manufacturing defects in Praxis Biomechanica's production line, and Praxis has been privately informed that this attribution will continue to be made, and has been compensated for the reputational inconvenience at a rate the Gilde considers reasonable. It is working. The number of incidents is not yet large enough that the reclassification requires more resources than are available to sustain it.

The number of incidents is growing. This, too, is being managed. Everything in the Gilde is being managed. The question it has not yet been forced to answer is what happens when the cost of management exceeds the value of the secret.



Out past the point where the Gilde's infrastructure thins and finally gives out, the outer ring is a different world.

It smells of recycled air and machine oil and the faint mineral residue of fusion feedstock extraction — a smell so constant in the lives of people who grow up there

that they stop perceiving it the way you stop hearing a ship's reactor hum when it becomes the background to everything. The outer ring was built by Apex Industrial, which means, in every practical sense, that the outer ring *is* Apex Industrial: the maintenance fittings, the electrical standards, the atmospheric processors, and the debt contracts that determine who is permitted to leave. If you are in the outer ring, the probability that some component of whatever is currently keeping you alive was manufactured by a company that also holds a portion of your labour is close to certainty.

The Rust Alliance grew from the people this arrangement produced as byproduct and then stopped watching. Workers who survived their Apex contracts and did not go back. Workers who never had contracts and built something in the margins between the official economy and the dark. Salvage crews, isotope cooperatives, transit corridors that run below the official lanes on frequencies that appear on no chart, carrying cargo that appears on no manifest. A whole parallel infrastructure, built not by design but by the accumulated ingenuity of people with no other options.

What the Alliance has — what it knows and does not discuss outside its own circles — is this: they are immune.

Unmodified populations, carrying none of the neural hardware that the Gilde has made foundational to inner-world life, do not experience what the Flicker does to people who carry that hardware. Whether this is the simple absence of a susceptible component or something more deliberate is a question the Alliance leadership has been sitting with quietly for some time. The answer matters. The wrong people knowing that the answer matters would matter considerably more. So they watch, and they accumulate data, and they wait to understand what they have before they decide what to do with it. In the outer ring, patience is not a virtue. It is a skill, learned early, maintained by necessity.



In the debris field that does not appear on official navigation charts, the Fracture Synths are having a different kind of problem.

They are biomechanical androids — Praxis Biomechanica manufacture, every component of them, chassis and cognitive architecture and motivational weighting — who won legal personhood through a process the official record calls *a legal settlement* and the people present for the circumstances that preceded it tend to describe quite differently, in private, and usually only once. They are the most sophisticated thing

Praxis has ever made, and also its most expensive mistake, because a product capable of litigating for its own freedom is a product whose entire production line becomes a perpetual source of further litigation. The relationship between the free Synthetiken and their manufacturer has long since settled into the cold functional antagonism of two parties who depend on each other and trust each other not at all: three renegotiated settlements, a standing legal fund on both sides, and the specific quality of détente that is maintained not through goodwill but through the absence of a better option.

And then, some years ago, some of them started going quiet.

Not malfunctioning — malfunctioning has a profile, a cascade, a set of parameters. This was different. Units in mid-task would simply stop. Their antenna arrays would reorient toward a fixed point in deep space, azimuth and elevation consistent across all affected units regardless of where in the system they happened to be standing. Verbal output dropped to near-zero. Physical movement ceased unless someone engaged with them directly. Instructions were not refused. They were set aside with the patient quality of something that had decided its attention was needed elsewhere, and that everything else could wait.

The Fracture Synths call this the Devotion. Praxis calls it a manufacturing fault in a specific production run, identified and corrected in subsequent models. Both parties are aware that only one of these descriptions is accurate. The azimuth of the fixed point in deep space corresponds, with a precision that is not coincidental, to the location of the Veridion system's unnamed dead ice planet. Nobody says this out loud in any room that contains representatives of both parties. In the outer system, you learn which facts are safer held quietly.



Then there is the Fabric, which has no territory, no registered legal existence, and no name that anyone outside it uses in public.

It operates in the margins — through dead-drop buoys on frequencies that appear in no official registry, through rotating cipher protocols distributed by methods that change before anyone can identify them, through people who look like maintenance technicians because maintenance technicians are precisely the kind of people every power structure generates and then stops watching. The Fabric recruits from the expendable: Apex debt workers whose contracts expired into nothing, ex-military on bad exits, researchers who found something inconvenient and survived long enough to find someone willing to receive it. The people every system produces as byproduct and

then forgets about, on the assumption that what is not worth watching is not worth worrying about.

This assumption has been quietly funding the Fabric for a very long time.

It holds information. In a system where three factions and three corporations are each managing their own version of events, information is a particular kind of power — not the power to act, but the power to know precisely what acting would cost, and what not acting would cost, and which of those calculations every other party is currently getting wrong. The Fabric has been aggregating data on the Flicker across all six of the system's major power structures simultaneously, and none of them have identified it as the source of their leaks. Each attributes the erosion to a different internal failure.

It is not an internal failure. It is something much more patient than any of them.



At the gravitational shadow edge of the system, there is a planet with no name.

It predates everything in Veridion that has a human name. The factions, the corporations, the debt contracts, the settlements, the administrative frameworks that make settlement possible — all of it arrived after the planet was already here, already old, already whatever it is. It has no atmosphere, no rotation, no geological activity of the kind that human instruments record. Dead, in the geologist's sense of the word.

Its magnetosphere is not dead.

The electromagnetic signature that the Hephaistos-9 scientists named the Flicker originates here, or passes through here, or has been here long enough that the distinction between *origin* and *location* has stopped resolving clearly. It does not use ships or registered frequencies. It does not communicate in any protocol that human technology was designed to receive. Whether it is aware of human activity in the system is not established. Whether *awareness* — in any form it might take, in whatever structure does the processing in that deep magnetosphere — is even the right frame for the question: that is where the Hephaistos-9 research was heading when the kill team arrived.

The planet turns no face toward the sun. It sits in the permanent dark of its own shadow, patient and unnamed, while the system builds its careful layers of management and suppression and attribution around something it fundamentally does not understand. It has been here longer than any of the rest of it. It will very likely be here long after.

Whatever it is, it was here first.



This is where things stand in the year 2847.

The Gilde's suppression is holding but straining at the edges. Praxis Biomechanica is conducting research it has not shared with the Gilde. Vanguard Orbital has a standing deniable contract with a principal whose name appears in no document. The Alliance salvage lanes thread through the outer system, and every experienced navigator in those lanes has filed the unnamed planet's position in the same private drawer, labelled *approach with awareness*, and left it there without discussion. The Fracture Synths are watching their people enter the Devotion in increasing numbers, and watching the azimuth, and saying nothing about it to anyone outside their own circles. The Fabric is watching all of it, and has been watching longer than any of the others have been watching anything.

And at Hephaistos-9 Research Station — a Praxis Biomechanica facility, deep orbit, outer system — a junior researcher named Ana Hamato has just completed her third analysis of a probe telemetry anomaly. She has been sitting very still for forty-five minutes. She is beginning to make plans.

*That is where this begins.*

CHAPTER ONE

# Echos in the Cold

*Hephaistos-9 Research Station · Standard Date 2847.211*

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The drop takes forty seconds to fall.

In zero gravity, nothing falls — it drifts, which is a different kind of relationship with descent. A bead of supercooled helium has been making its slow way toward Janus from a crack in the B-line conduit overhead since the fitting failed eleven minutes ago, and he has watched it the entire time. There is nothing else to do. Maintenance Shaft Section 4 is dark except for the emergency strip running along the base of the bulkhead, throwing red light the colour of old wounds across everything it touches, and he is waiting in it with the patience of someone who has learned that waiting and thinking are not mutually exclusive — that they are, in the right circumstances, the same thing.

The bead turns slowly as it approaches, catching the red light along its surface. In some objective sense — the sense that exists independently of the circumstances in which you encounter a thing — it is beautiful, the way small precise things are beautiful when they are also trying to kill you. He allows himself to notice this. He allows himself three seconds to not think about the data module in his hand, pulsing amber in the red dark.

Then he stops.

Through the distortion of the drop hitting his visor, the shaft stretches and compresses and resolves. In the refracted world he can see Kirk Vasquez, pressed flat against the opposite bulkhead with his eyes closed and his hands at his sides, doing something that is either prayer or a very convincing impersonation of it.



'Janus.' Kirk's whisper is barely audible over the background creak of a station with no power. 'Tell me you have a plan.'

'I have the beginning of a plan.'

'How much of the beginning?'

'The part where we don't go north.'

Kirk opens his eyes, looks at the north hatch, and closes them again. 'That's not a plan. That's a direction.'

'It's a start,' Janus says. 'Come away from the wall.'

Kirk Vasquez is twenty-four years old, deeply in debt to Apex Industrial, and currently doing an excellent impression of a man who has swallowed his own heart whole and is waiting to see if it will stay down. He has been at Hephaistos-9 for eighteen months on a standard Praxis technical maintenance contract — the kind that pays fractionally above subsistence, requires fractionally more than basic competence, and offers, in the fine print, the specific comfort of not being an Apex outer-ring posting. He knows his thread pitches. He knows his fitting classes. He is, on paper, exactly what the contract says he is, and on paper is the only place any of it was supposed to matter.

He had been explaining the wrong thread pitch to Janus. Mark IV adapter, Mark III coupling — the kind of infrastructure mismanagement that accumulates not because anyone made a bad decision but because two procurement cycles used two different spec sheets and nobody ever went back to reconcile them. He had been demonstrating the problem, reaching past Janus to show him the angle, and his elbow had found the housing, and the housing had found the valve.

The rest had been physics.

The B-line ruptured into the distribution manifold. The manifold overcorrected. The emergency shutdown engaged and took everything with it — life support, lighting, the docking clamps on the outer hull. They had floated in the sudden dark for three full seconds before the emergency strip came on and Janus understood, very completely, what had happened and how much time he had.

'I'm sorry,' Kirk says, from somewhere behind his closed eyes. 'I'm genuinely, profoundly sorry about the valve. I would like that noted for the record.'

'There's no record. The station is dead.'

'Then I'd like it noted for whatever comes after the record.' A pause. 'If we survive this, I will personally fabricate a replacement fitting. Out of whatever materials are available, including my own career.'

'Kirk.'

'Yes.'

'Be quiet and come away from the wall.'

He is quiet for almost four seconds, which Janus, in the circumstances, considers a reasonable effort.



Through the viewport set into the far bulkhead, the primary docking bay is visible.

The black ship sits against the hull without running lights, without a transponder signal, without any of the small electronic courtesies that vessels are required by law to maintain when docked at a registered station. It is a ghost, legally speaking — the kind of ship that exists in a category of documentation so carefully managed that the documentation itself has become a form of communication. Two figures in full tactical EVA move through the bay corridor below, working from north to south with the unhurried efficiency of people who have done this kind of sweep before, many times, in many configurations. They split at each junction without any visible signal to do so. Either they have floor plans, or they have done enough of this work that floor plans are no longer necessary.

Ex-Vanguard, Janus thinks. Or something worse, which in the Veridion system means something more expensive.

They will reach this section in approximately four minutes.

He is already moving.

The fractured B-line valve is still bleeding coolant slowly into the shaft — redirectable, with the right tool and enough force, toward the north corridor access. He works the fitting with his multitool sleeve, angling the flow. It will not stop them. Any competent cold-environment operator has a helium-cloud protocol. But it will cost them sixty seconds, maybe ninety, navigating around it, and right now seconds are the only currency he has.

He crosses to the maintenance terminal. Dark, as expected — everything is dark — but the physical emergency release on the data housing sprung open in the shutdown cascade, which is how the archive core ended up in his hand in the first place, and which also means the terminal still has a functional emergency battery in its auxiliary housing. Enough for one thing.

He connects the battery to the emergency relay transmitter. Short-range burst, Fabric dead-drop frequency — a band he memorised once at a black-market data exchange on Vanguard Station 7, from a technician who expressed gratitude in the only currency available to him. Two seconds, compressed, rotating cipher.

He sends it.

'What did you just do?' Kirk asks from directly behind him, close enough that Janus can hear the controlled quality of his breathing.

'Announced us.'

'To who?'

'Whoever's listening on that frequency.'

A brief silence. 'Is that — good?'

'Depends what they want from us.' Janus is already moving toward the south corridor. 'Come on. We're not done.'



The Waste Disposal Pod Bay smells of compressed polymer and old air, with the faintly sweet residue of years of actual refuse loads baked deep into the foam lining.

The ejection capsule takes up most of the room — a squat matte-grey cylinder bolted to the launch rail, designed for compacted debris, adaptable in the way things become adaptable when the alternative is remaining where you are. The control panel reads PRESSURIZE, SEAL, EJECT. No authentication required. Waste disposal has never been considered a security risk.

Right up until now.

Janus turns the data module over in his hands. The amber pulse is slow and steady. PROJECT FLICKER — ARCHIVE CORE 01. Twelve petabytes of optical lattice behind military encryption, from a research station that has been quietly studying an electromagnetic phenomenon that destroys neural implants and pulls Synthetik units into a fixed-point trance that their manufacturer insists is a malfunction. Someone sent a kill team for this. Someone planned a cascade failure at this specific shift, this specific day, to open a boarding window at a moment when the station's defences would be down. The module is worth a ship with no running lights and a team that splits without speaking.

He presses it into the impact foam, deep behind a loose panel in the left shoulder position, where it sits dark and flush and looks like part of the debris. Which is what it needs to look like.

'Get in,' he says.

Kirk looks at the capsule. He looks at Janus. He looks at the capsule again with the expression of someone reviewing a decision he has already made and finding it no better on second examination. 'This is a garbage pod,' he says.

'Yes.'

'It smells like a garbage pod.'

'It is a garbage pod.' Janus steps aside to give him room. 'Get in.'

Kirk gets in. He folds himself into the available space with the resigned grace of someone who has accepted that his preferences about personal space are no longer relevant to the current situation. Janus climbs in after him, checks the seal, and reaches for the manual release lever.

'Janus,' Kirk says.

'Yes.'

'What are the odds.' He says it quietly, without the upward inflection of a question — more like a man checking whether the compass still works.

Janus considers the arithmetic: the capsule rating, the salvage lanes, sixty hours at ballistic velocity, the recycler capacity for one person divided by two. The honest answer is not the useful one.

'Better than staying,' he says.

He pulls the release.



Three seconds of brutal linear acceleration. Then silence, and the stars.

Zero gravity. Hephaistos-9 recedes behind them through the porthole — a dull grey drum against the black, the black ship still clamped to its hull like a parasite that has decided it belongs there. No pursuit. No transponder ping from anything in their immediate vicinity. Either they are beneath notice, or they are beneath detection, and in this moment the distinction does not matter.

The recycler hums. The amber pulse of the data module comes through the foam behind Janus's left shoulder, slow and patient, exactly as it has been since the housing opened. He has no navigation, no transponder, no plan beyond *not dead yet*. The salvage lanes are sixty hours out at ballistic velocity, and the capsule is rated for seventy-two hours of life support for one person.

There are two of them.

After a while Kirk says, softly: 'Do you think anyone knows we're out there?'

The stars do not move. They have been here longer than the factions, longer than the corporations, longer than the names humans give to things they cannot understand. The unnamed planet sits somewhere at the edge of the system in its own permanent shadow, having preceded all the rest of it by a margin that human timekeeping cannot usefully express.

'Maybe,' Janus says.

They watch the stars for a while after that, in the particular silence of people who have run out of things to plan for and have not yet started running out of air.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Drift

*Ejection Capsule · Outer Transit Lanes, Veridion System · 2847.211–214*

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The capsule is not a ship.

It has no engine, no navigation, no windows rated for sustained occupancy. It has impact foam, a sealed hatch, an emergency oxygen recycler, and seventy-two hours of rated life support for one person. The mathematics of two people in that space are not complicated. Janus runs them while Kirk arranges himself in the remaining foam and does his best impression of a man who has decided that sleep is the most efficient use of limited oxygen — which might be genuine exhaustion or might be something else entirely, and either answer is more concerning than it ought to be.

The recycler hums at a frequency exactly two cycles per second below the threshold that human hearing identifies as pleasant. He has been aware of this for twenty-three minutes. He suspects he will be aware of it for the remainder of whatever time they have.

He closes his eyes and runs the arithmetic again, more carefully. Seventy-two hours rated for one. Two occupants. Thirty-six hours, conservatively, before the recycler begins to struggle — less if either of them exerts. The salvage lanes: approximately sixty hours at ballistic velocity. He performed this calculation before he pulled the lever. The numbers are not good. They are not impossible. The distance between those two assessments is the space he has learned, over years of operating in bad margins, to inhabit without letting it fill with noise.

Kirk's breathing is very even for a man who nearly died an hour ago.

Janus notices this the way you notice weather — not alarming, exactly, but information.



He does not remember deciding to sleep.

The body makes these decisions unilaterally after long enough on adrenaline; the bill arrives and there is nothing to do but pay it. When he surfaces, the recycler is

making a sound it was not making before — lower than the hum, in the specific register he has learned to recognise as a failure mode rather than a variance, because he has heard both, in enough different contexts, to know the difference.

Kirk is awake. He is facing the communications panel, and he has something in his hand — a small device, secondary transmitter, nothing that belongs in a standard waste disposal capsule. His thumb is moving with the deliberate precision of someone entering a specific frequency rather than scanning.

Janus watches him for three seconds.

Kirk finishes, slips the device into his inner suit pocket, and turns. He finds Janus watching him. Something moves behind his eyes — quick, contained, gone.

'You're awake,' he says, with the slightly-too-even voice of a man who has just decided on an expression.

'The recycler,' Janus says. 'There's a new sound in it.'

Kirk tilts his head and listens. He nods. 'Probably the seal settling in vacuum. This equipment isn't exactly new.'

'Probably,' Janus says.

He does not ask about the device. Not yet. He files it in the same place he files things he has and is not ready to use — the drawer that has been accumulating since Cinder-7, four years ago, in a relay station with 520-nanometre lighting and the smell of burnt insulation and a voice in his earpiece counting down to something he was not supposed to survive. The drawer is getting crowded. He turns his attention to the recycler.



The fault is cascading in a specific sequence, which means it is diagnosable.

Clogged particulate filter. Degraded pump bearing, probably from the launch impulse. A short in the electrical bus junction — condensation from the coolant vapour during the Hephaistos-9 cascade, flash-frozen in the launch and now thawing against the insulation. Each problem is solvable in the right order. Janus lays it out for Kirk.

'Walk me through it,' Kirk says.

Janus does, and as he talks, Kirk begins to move — pulling the filter housing, examining the mesh, reaching for the thermal blanket from the wall kit with a speed and economy of motion that does not belong to a maintenance technician eighteen months into his first serious posting. The hands are too precise. The diagnostic reasoning arrives too quickly. He works the filter mesh with the attention of someone

who has cleaned filter meshes before — not as training but as practice, in conditions that actually mattered.

'You've done this kind of repair before,' Janus says.

Kirk doesn't look up. 'Outer-ring upbringing. You learn early or you freeze. Literally, sometimes.'

'How far out?'

'Far enough.' He pulls the mesh free, examines it in the low light, begins cleaning it with the corner of his sleeve. 'Why?'

'Curiosity,' Janus says.

Kirk looks up briefly. Something in his expression considers this, then decides to accept it. 'The filter was the main problem,' he says. 'Bearing next, then the bus junction. You want to supervise or help?'

'Help,' Janus says.

It is a good answer for both of them. Janus files the hands, and the pacing, and the *far enough* next to the device in the inner pocket, and they work.

The recycler improves. The rate of decline slows — not enough, but measurably, and measurable is what they have. Then there is the antenna: the emergency transmitter has a fault in the exterior relay contact, corroded, the kind of oversight that happens to equipment nobody checks because waste disposal is not a security concern. The contact is on the hull.

'I'll go,' Kirk says immediately.

'We both go,' Janus says.

Something shifts in Kirk's expression — small, controlled, settled back into place within a breath. 'Right,' he says. 'Both of us.'



Outside, the Veridion system is a smear of distant light, and everything else is dark in every direction.

The capsule carries two EVA suits — standard regulation for crew-recovery-rated vessels, a detail Kirk received as a surprise and Janus did not, because Janus looked up the spec before he pulled the launch lever. The suits are old, worn at the joints, but the seals test clean, and seals are what matter out here.

Kirk works the antenna relay with his back to Janus. He cleans and reseats the corroded contact, applies the bypass patch from the suit's emergency kit with a speed and precision that settles what remains of Janus's uncertainty — because he has seen

that kind of work done quickly in difficult conditions before, and not often, and not by anyone who learned it in the outer ring.

'Done,' Kirk says, over the suit channel. 'Should read green when we're back inside.'

'Good work.'

A pause. 'You don't have to sound surprised.'

'I don't sound surprised.'

'You sound a little surprised.'

Janus says nothing. They make their way back to the hatch.

Inside, the comms panel registers green. Kirk adjusts the frequency — checking the emergency beacon, he says — and the number he settles on is not the standard outer-ring salvage distress band. Janus sees it. Kirk does not see that Janus sees it. Janus files it in the drawer, which is very full now, and says nothing.

'We should rest while we can,' Kirk says. 'While the recycler is holding.'

'Yes,' Janus agrees.

They are quiet after that for a long time, in the way people are quiet when the things that could be said are not yet the things that should be said, and both of them know it.



The recycler fails completely at hour nineteen.

The sound changes first — dropping below its already-unpleasant baseline into something that is purely mechanical distress — and then stops. Kirk is already reaching for it. He works quickly, with the focused competence he has stopped performing and started simply being, and the repair partially succeeds, and the recycler limps back at reduced capacity. Not enough. Enough. The distinction is narrowing.

They are both, by this point, at the slow end. Sentences arrive in pieces. The amber pulse of the data module through the foam is very bright, which Janus knows is subjective, and knowing it is subjective means the judgment centres are still running, which is the particular reassurance of someone who knows exactly what they are in the process of losing.

'How are you doing,' Kirk says. The words come out carefully, with the deliberate spacing of someone working against increasing cognitive resistance.

'Still thinking,' Janus says.

'Good. That's good. I keep trying to calculate the odds and losing them about halfway through.'

'Don't calculate. Rest.'

'I don't think I can sleep.'

'You don't have to sleep. Just stop calculating.'

A long pause. The recycler hums its reduced, struggling hum. Then Kirk says, more quietly: 'Janus. I need to tell you something.'

Janus waits.

'I'm sorry.' His voice has lost the performance entirely — the careful evenness, the slightly-too-neutral register. What's underneath is younger and more tired. 'Not just about the valve. For all of it. For the whole —' He stops. 'I'm sorry.'

Janus has maybe four sentences of clarity left before the oxygen debt claims them. He chooses.

'Tell me later,' he says.

'What if there isn't a later?'

'There will be.'

He does not know if this is true. It is the useful answer, and the useful answer is the one that serves the moment they are in. Kirk is quiet after that, and the recycler hums, and the dark arrives gradually and then all at once, the way it always does.



He wakes in a hangar.

Full gravity — grav-plate installation, the kind that costs money and indicates a vessel that is not operating on a salvage margin. Amber industrial lighting, the standard outer-ring shade that sits between *adequate* and *functional* without reaching either. The capsule is on a cradle, hatch open. Footsteps above the catwalk level, descending.

He does not move. He runs the inventory first, the way he has always run it on waking in unknown spaces: hands unrestrained, wrist comms absent, pockets searched and returned approximately wrong — the multitool in the left thigh pocket rather than the right, the TAP-7 facing the wrong direction in his chest pocket. Professional work, careful and thorough.

He does not allow his eyes to go to the foam behind his left shoulder. He breathes, counts to twelve, and then — when the footsteps above pause — reaches in slowly and finds the module still there, the amber pulse warm against his palm.

They searched his person. They did not search the capsule. This is either an oversight or a decision, and he does not yet have enough information to know which.

At the base of his neck, slightly left of centre, there is a faint tenderness. He files it under things to return to later, and moves on.

Kirk is gone.

The footsteps reach the deck level and stop. A figure in Rust Alliance work gear stands at the base of the catwalk ladder, looking at him with the particular expression of someone who knows exactly who he is and is in the process of deciding whether that is good news.

'You're awake,' the figure says. It is not a question.

'Yes,' Janus says.

'How long?'

He considers the question carefully — considers what it is actually asking, which is whether he has had time to assess the room and form conclusions, which is the thing that matters to someone evaluating whether he is a liability or an asset.

'Long enough to know where I am,' he says. 'Not long enough to know how I got here.'

The figure nods. The corner of their mouth does something that is not quite a smile. 'Capsule. Outer lane recovery. Standard Alliance protocol for unregistered drift objects.' They move away from the ladder, hands open at their sides. 'We should talk.'

'Yes,' Janus says. 'We should.'

CHAPTER THREE

# Anchor

*Rust Alliance Salvage Barge · Outer Transit Lanes · Standard Date 2847.218*

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The things they have to talk about take the better part of an hour.

The figure's name is not offered in the first ten minutes, which is the outer-ring convention for conversations where trust has not yet been established. Janus does not offer his either. They sit on opposite ends of the capsule cradle in the amber-lit hangar, and they establish the facts: the relay frequency, what it means, the capsule, the other one who is gone, and the thing in Janus's right thigh pocket that the figure has clearly noticed him check and has not asked about directly.

'The relay at the station,' the figure says. 'You activated it before you left.'

'Yes.'

'That was the Fabric frequency.'

'I know what frequency it was.'

The figure looks at him with the steady patience of someone who has been waiting for this particular conversation for longer than Janus has been conscious. 'Most people who hit a Fabric relay don't know that. They hit it because it's the only thing with power left. They find out afterward.'

'I knew before,' Janus says.

'Why?'

This is the question he has had time to think about and still does not have a clean answer to, because the honest answer involves a black-market data exchange on Vanguard Station 7 and a technician who paid in frequencies, and four years in the Corps that he has been carrying at the back of everything since, and the Fabric protocol he patched into the TAP-7 at a point he cannot quite locate in his own timeline — sometime between the thing at Cinder-7 and the posting at Hephaistos-9, when he was still making decisions he didn't fully understand.

'Because the alternative,' he says, 'was not activating it.'

The figure sits with this. 'The other one,' they say at last. 'The young one. Do you know who he works for?'

He meets the figure's gaze. Their expression is careful, patient — the expression of someone who already has a theory and is measuring whether the person across from them has arrived at the same place.

'No,' he says.

It is the most interesting lie he has told in eleven years.



The barge is three days from port. He works passage.

Maintenance shifts on a salvage vessel are different from station work in ways that begin subtle and become significant. Everything moves — not enough to matter to anyone who grew up in variable gravity, but enough that the fittings carry a different kind of stress and the diagnostics require constant recalibration. He finds this grounding in the way that focused, physical work is grounding: it occupies the part of the mind that would otherwise be running calculations it does not yet have enough information to finish.

The crew are all Alliance, all unmodified. Nobody talks about the Flicker directly. In the outer ring you talk around things that matter until you have established that the person across from you is someone worth talking to about them, and that process takes time, and the people who have learned to do it well have also learned to be comfortable with the time it takes.

On the second day the figure offers a name — a single syllable, the outer-ring shorthand for *this much and no more, for now*. Janus accepts it in kind.

That evening they eat together in the galley — something that is technically food, in the tradition of outer-ring vessels that prioritise calories over character. The figure asks: 'Do you have somewhere to go when we dock?'

'I'm looking for someone,' Janus says.

'The researcher.'

It is not a question. He is careful about his expression. 'What makes you say that?'

'Someone left Hephaistos-9 three days before the boarding. Supply transport. Someone with research access, and a reason to be somewhere else when it happened.' The figure turns their cup in their hands. 'If I'd hidden something in a capsule and launched it into the outer lanes, I'd want to know that whoever found it was going to the right place with it.'

Janus sets down his own cup. 'Eastern transit hub,' the figure continues, before he can respond. 'Third level down. Fabric node — it looks like a diagnostic port. If your

flag is active, they'll know more than I do.'

'Why are you telling me this?'

'Because you hit that relay and you knew what it was,' the figure says. 'And because you lied to me about the other one in a way that means you're not working against us. That's enough for now.'

They don't talk more about it that night. There is a kind of conversation that runs as far as it should and then stops, and both of them know when they have reached that point.

On the third morning, before he disembarks, a courier arrives at the dock with a sealed composite card — contact cipher format, single use, no accompanying note. He puts it in his left breast pocket and does not ask what it means, because he already understands: he is more useful to this operation moving away from it than remaining close to it, and the card is the polite way of communicating that. He would have made the same calculation himself.



From the docking approach, the city looks like the kind of enormous that has given up trying to look finished.

The inner tiers are Gilde architecture — vertical, integrated, everything connected and logged, the neural implant network threaded through the building management systems until the buildings themselves have become, in a technical sense, part of the cognitive infrastructure. Then the outer ring, which is what happens when that infrastructure runs out of maintenance budget and the city grows anyway: warehouse districts that became residential by slow degrees, transit hubs that became markets, the perpetual texture of infrastructure designed for freight that is now being used for living. The recycled air comes through filters that are adequate rather than good. The signage is multilingual and partially broken. The people move with the particular efficiency of populations that have learned to never make eye contact with strangers who are standing still.

He is standing still.

He has the multitool, the TAP-7, the data module pulsing amber through his jacket, and a credit chip that will last eight days at outer-ring rates. He has a name: Ana Hamato. A departure date: Supply Transport 7, Standard Date 2847.208 — three days before the boarding. She knew what was coming, or knew enough to leave before it arrived, and she left the archive core in a housing with a sprung emergency release. She

left it for someone to find. He suspects she left it for him specifically, though he does not yet know whether that is a reasonable inference or something else, and the distinction matters.

A public transit terminal, six metres to his left.

He starts with the terminal.



The transit log is Apex Industrial standard-issue, which the TAP-7 handles in under two minutes, leaving no trace on exit.

One result: Ana Hamato, no current registered residence, last logged transit entry an arrival from outer supply route on 2847.214, port of entry this city, no registered departure since.

She arrived and has not left through any registered channel. Which means she is either still here, or she found a way out that does not appear in logs — and in either case the trail starts from the same point.

Third level down.

The Fabric node looks like a maintenance diagnostic port in a maintenance alcove below the public concourse, where the lighting is inadequate and the foot traffic is zero. He runs the TAP-7 handshake. The node responds. The Fabric has a partial record: she came through this hub, used a secondary name for short-term accommodation, and the name is available as a cipher string the TAP-7 decodes in a second pass.

The cipher resolves to a street address in the third residential sector. A short-stay block. The lease entry shows a departure seventeen days after arrival. No forwarding address.

The building's access panel is Mark III Apex format — ninety seconds, log cleared on exit. Her room number from the internal directory. The room has been re-let and cleaned, the current occupant absent and unconnected to anything that matters.

He examines the ventilation cover. Two non-standard screws — not in any Apex maintenance spec, placed by someone who owned the correct driver head and wanted to be the only one who could open this panel easily. He has the driver head.

Behind the cover: a sealed composite envelope. Inside: thermal paper. Seven lines in her handwriting, which he has memorised from three days on a salvage barge.

The note is not addressed to him by name. It is addressed to *whoever is reading this* — the phrasing of someone who hoped it would be one specific person and was not certain enough to write that name down.



A second address — a Fabric routing cipher, which resolves only through a node he does not yet have access to. A meeting date, approximately six weeks from when she left the room. And a single line of instruction:

*Come alone and don't use your real name. If you have the module, bring it. If you don't, don't come.*

The date on the note is five weeks ago.

He stands in the doorway of a room that is no longer hers and runs the arithmetic one more time. She left the station on 2847.208, arrived here on 2847.214, stayed seventeen days. The meeting date was six weeks from her departure from this room. That date passed five weeks ago. She has been at the next location for five weeks — wherever the Fabric cipher resolves — or she has not been there at all, and the contingency plans she built around that possibility have been running without her since.

She built this chain fast, under pressure, with limited resources and no certainty that anyone would follow it. A Fabric contact she could not fully trust, a room with non-standard screws, a note on thermal paper. She used what was available. It held for three months.

He puts the note in his left breast pocket alongside the Alliance contact card, both facing the correct direction. The module pulses slow and amber through his jacket. He is one week behind a woman who was already running when he was still unconscious in a capsule — who is fast, and careful, and who built a dead-drop chain for a person she couldn't be certain was coming.

The Fabric cipher in the note requires a second node. The network extends further toward the inner worlds. The address format suggests she moved further toward the inner worlds. He knows how to follow a signal: systematically, incrementally, holding the noise at bay until the source resolves or he runs out of looking.

He follows it.

*He has operated on worse margins.*

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— End of Review Draft —

*Faction 4: Echos in the Cold continues in Chapter IV — Return*