

# 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*

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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, and the one that explains almost everything else. It is not a place people came to because they wanted something it had. It is a place people ended up in — swept here by the transit lanes that happen to pass through its outer reaches, or landed here under the specific weight of an Apex Industrial debt contract, which is a document that contains the word *relocation* and does not contain the word *choice*. The system sits at the edge of the inhabited volume, unremarkable in every dimension cartographers use to rank such things. Mid-range stellar class. Mid-range resource profile. Mid-range habitability index.

What it has is isotope deposits in its outer ring, and fusion economics that make sense only when the people doing the mining are structured as debt rather than wages. What it has is transit lanes. What it has, now, is history — the layered kind, the kind that stops looking like history and starts looking like the order of things.

Three inhabited zones, three factions, 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, in the way that systems become inevitable once enough people have built enough of their lives inside them to make dismantling the structure indistinguishable from dismantling themselves.

It has been this way for long enough that nobody remembers when it became this way. This is how arrangements become permanent. They stop being visible.



The inner worlds belong to the Synapsen-Gilde, and the Gilde belongs, 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 accumulated prior

decisions. It controls the food supply. It controls the political apparatus of the inner worlds. It controls, through Praxis Biomechanica's manufacturing contracts, the neural implant infrastructure that its population depends on — not as a luxury, but as a requirement. In Gilde territory, cognitive augmentation is not an upgrade. It is a licence, a professional credential, the infrastructure through which an entire society offloads the dozen ambient tasks that biological memory is no longer expected to manage. You cannot hold a meaningful position without an implant. You cannot, in practical terms, fully participate in inner-world life.

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. But its management of information is remarkably coherent, because information management is the one thing the competing internal interests have consistently agreed is worth doing well.

Here is what the Gilde is currently managing, and managing very carefully:

The Flicker destroys neural implants.

Not gradually. Not with warning. The failure mode is sudden cessation — a clean stop, irreversible, no precursor signal that 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. 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. For now. 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.



Further out, past the point where the Gilde's infrastructure runs dry, the outer ring is a different kind of world.

It smells of recycled air and machine oil and the specific mineral residue of fusion feedstock extraction — a smell so present in the lives of people who grow up there that they stop registering it entirely, the way you stop hearing the ambient hum of a ship's reactor when it becomes the background of everything. The ring was built by Apex Industrial, which means the ring is Apex Industrial, in every practical sense: the maintenance fittings, the electrical standards, the atmospheric processors, and the debt contracts that determine who is allowed to leave.

The Rust Alliance grew from the people the system produced as a byproduct of this arrangement 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 routes that do not appear on any Praxis or Vanguard chart, carrying cargo that does not appear on any manifest.

What the Alliance has that no other faction in the system has — what it knows and does not discuss outside its own circles — is this: they are immune.

Unmodified populations, no neural implants, no Gilde-licensed cognitive hardware, do not experience what the Flicker does to people who carry that hardware. Whether this is the simple absence of susceptible components, or whether the Flicker is doing 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 it matters would matter considerably more.

So they watch. They accumulate data. They wait to understand what they have before they decide what to do with it.



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

They are biomechanical androids — Praxis Biomechanica manufacture, chassis and cognitive architecture and motivational weighting, all of it — who won legal personhood twenty years ago through a process the official record calls *a legal settlement* and people who were present for the circumstances that preceded it describe in rather different terms, usually in private, usually only once. They are the most sophisticated product Praxis has ever made and also the most expensive mistake, because a product that can litigate 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 settled into the kind of cold functional antagonism that has produced three renegotiated settlements and a standing legal fund on both sides.

And then some of them started going quiet.

Not malfunctioning. *Malfunctioning* has a diagnostic profile, a failure cascade, a set of parameters that can be adjusted or replaced. This was different. Units in mid-task would simply stop. Antenna arrays would reorient — not toward any known signal

source, but 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. Their verbal output dropped to near-zero. Their physical movement ceased unless someone physically interacted with them. Instructions were not refused. They were simply not received, or were received and set aside with the particular patience of something that had decided its attention was required elsewhere.

The Fracture Synths call this the Devotion. Praxis calls it a manufacturing fault.

The azimuth and elevation 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.



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

It operates in the margins — through dead-drop buoys on frequencies that do not appear in any official communications 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 the kind of people every power structure generates and then stops watching. The Fabric recruits from the expendable populations. Apex debt workers. Ex-military on bad exits. Researchers who found something inconvenient and survived long enough to find someone willing to receive it.

What the Fabric holds is information. In a system where three factions and three corporations are each managing a different version of events, this is a very particular kind of power — not the power to act, but the power to know what acting would cost, and what not acting would cost, and which of those calculations every other party has gotten wrong.

The Fabric has been aggregating information on the Flicker for longer than any of the official structures has been suppressing it. What it intends to do with that information is not established. What is established is that none of the official power structures have identified it as the source of their leaks. They each attribute the erosion to a different internal failure.

It is not an internal failure. It is something much more patient.



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

It predates everything in the Veridion system that has a human name — the factions, the corporations, the debt contracts, the settlements, the administrative frameworks, all of it. It has no atmosphere, no rotation, no geological activity. It is dead in the sense that geologists use the word, which means nothing is changing on a timescale that human instruments record.

Its magnetosphere is not dead.

The electromagnetic signature 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* no longer resolves cleanly. 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 known. Whether awareness — in any form it might take, in whatever structure processes things 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 dark of its own shadow, patient and unnamed, while the system builds its layers of management and suppression around something it does not understand.

It has been waiting longer than any of them have been here.

Whatever it is, it was here first.



This is where things stand in the year 2847.

The Gilde's suppression is holding, but straining. Praxis Biomechanica is conducting research it has not shared with the Gilde. Vanguard Orbital has a standing deniable contract with a principal whose name does not appear in any document. The Alliance salvage lanes pass through the outer system, and every experienced navigator in those lanes has filed the unnamed planet's location in a separate mental category alongside *approach with awareness*. The Fracture Synths are watching their people enter the Devotion in increasing numbers. The Fabric is watching all of it.

And at Hephaistos-9 Research Station — 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 relationship with descent. A single bead of supercooled helium has been making its way toward Janus from a crack in the B-line conduit overhead since the fitting failed eleven minutes ago. 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, which throws red light the colour of old wounds and illuminates nothing usefully. The station is dead. He is waiting.

The bead turns slowly as it approaches. It catches the red light. In some objective sense — the sense that operates independently of the context in which you are encountering a thing — it is beautiful. He allows himself this thought, briefly, the way you allow yourself a thought that costs nothing and changes nothing.

It hits his visor.

Through the brief cosmological lens of a single drop of cryogenic liquid pressed against polycarbonate, the shaft stretches, compresses, and resolves. In the refracted world, he can see Kirk Vasquez pressed flat against the opposite bulkhead with his eyes closed. He can see the north corridor hatch. He can see the data module in his own hand, pulsing amber in the red dark.

He allows himself three seconds to not think about what the amber means.

Then he stops.



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.

He has been at Hephaistos-9 for eighteen months on a standard Praxis technical maintenance contract — the kind that pays fractionally more than subsistence and requires fractionally more skill. He knows his thread pitches. He knows his fitting classes. On paper, he is competent, which is all the contract requires, and on paper is

the only place any of it was supposed to matter.

He had been explaining the wrong thread pitch to Janus. The Mark IV adapter on a Mark III coupling — the specific kind of infrastructure mismanagement that outer-station Praxis contracts are famous for, the kind that exists not because anyone made a decision but because two different procurement cycles used two different spec sheets and nobody ever went back to reconcile them. Kirk had been explaining this. He had reached past Janus to demonstrate the extent of the problem. His elbow had found the housing. 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 perhaps three seconds before the emergency strip came on and Janus understood what had happened and approximately how much time he had.

Now Kirk opens his eyes, finds Janus watching him, and arrives — after a visible journey through several worse options — at something resembling resolve.

*'Right,'* he says. *'Yes. Right.'*

Through the viewport in 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 hundreds of small electronic courtesies that vessels are required by law to maintain when docked at a registered station. It is a ghost, legally speaking. It has the quality of something that does not need to announce itself.

Two figures in full tactical EVA move through the bay corridor. They do not rush. They split at each junction without communicating — which means floor plans, or a level of experience that has made floor plans unnecessary. Ex-Vanguard, probably. Possibly something worse. They are working from north to south, methodical as a tide.

They will reach this section in approximately four minutes.



Janus forces the fractured valve fitting with the sleeve of his multitool, redirecting the B-line bleed toward the north corridor access.

It will not stop them. Whoever briefed that team briefed them for contingencies, and a corridor flooded with supercooled helium is a contingency any competent operator has a protocol for. But it will slow them — will cost them sixty, maybe ninety seconds of navigation around the cloud — and right now seconds are currency. He has learned this in environments considerably less forgiving than a dead research station,

and the lesson has stayed with him.

He moves to the maintenance terminal. Dark, as expected. The station is dark. Everything is dark. What is not expected is that 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 means the terminal still has a functional emergency battery in its auxiliary housing. Enough to power one thing.

He connects the battery to the emergency relay transmitter. Short-range burst, three-light-minute range, Fabric dead-drop frequency — a specific band he memorised once at a black-market data exchange on Vanguard Station 7, from a technician who had no particular reason to share it except that Janus had just prevented his arrest and the technician was expressing gratitude in the only currency available to him at the time.

Janus sets the burst to compressed, rotating cipher, two seconds, and sends it.

Whether it reaches anyone depends on whether there is a Fabric buoy within range of Hephaistos-9's current position. He does not know if there is. He will not know for days. What he knows is that if the Fabric is listening, he has just announced his existence to the most patient information network in the Veridion system, and whether that is good news depends entirely on what they want from a contract maintenance technician carrying twelve petabytes of someone else's classified research.

Behind him, Kirk whispers: *'Janus. I just want to say — officially — that I am extremely sorry about the valve. If we survive this I will buy you synthetic whisky for the rest of my natural life, which at current projections is approximately fifteen minutes.'*

Janus tells him to be quiet.

He is quiet for almost four seconds.



The Waste Disposal Pod Bay smells of compressed polymer and old air and the specific mineral residue of years of actual refuse loads.

The ejection capsule occupies most of the room — a squat matte-grey cylinder on its rail, designed for compacted debris, adaptable in the way that things are adaptable when the alternative is not being adaptable. The control panel reads PRESSURIZE, SEAL, EJECT. No authentication required. Waste disposal has never been considered a security risk.

Janus looks at the data module in his hand.

The amber pulse is slow and regular — PROJECT FLICKER, ARCHIVE CORE 01, twelve petabytes of optical lattice behind military encryption. Whatever Ana Hamato and her team found at Hephaistos-9 about the electromagnetic phenomenon that has been destroying neural implants across the inner worlds and pulling Synthetik units into whatever the Fracture Synths call the Devotion — it is on this core. Someone sent a kill team for it. Someone planned a cascade failure at this exact shift. The module is worth a ship with no running lights and a team that splits without communicating.

He presses it deep into the impact foam, behind a loose panel where it sits dark and unassuming. Unless someone knows exactly what they are looking for, it is just part of the debris.

The amber pulse disappears into the yellowed foam.

He climbs in. Kirk follows, folding himself into the remaining space with the expression of a man who has abandoned all preferences about personal space as a luxury he can no longer afford.

Janus pulls the manual release.



Three seconds of brutal linear acceleration.

Then silence. Zero gravity. The station falls away behind them through the capsule's scratched porthole — a dull grey drum against the black, the black ship still clamped to its hull like something that has decided it belongs there. No pursuit. Either they are not visible, or they are not considered worth chasing, and at the moment the distinction does not matter.

The recycler hums. The stars do not move. The amber pulse of the data module comes through the foam behind Janus's left shoulder, slow and patient, the way it has been since the archive housing sprung open and put it in his hand.

He has no navigation. No transponder. No plan beyond *not dead yet*. The salvage lanes are somewhere in the dark ahead, 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.

Kirk says, from somewhere to his left: *'Do you think anyone knows we're out there?'*

Outside, the stars do not move. They have been here longer than the factions, longer than the corporations, longer than the names humans have given to the things they cannot understand. The unnamed planet sits at the edge of the system in its own

shadow, patient and cold, having been here longer than any of the rest of it.

'Maybe,' Janus says.

## 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. What it has is 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 does them immediately, lying in the foam in the dark, and arrives at a number he does not share with Kirk because Kirk is already doing his best impression of a man who has gone to sleep and the number will still be the number in the morning.

The recycler hums at a frequency exactly two cycles per second below the frequency that human hearing identifies as pleasant. He has been aware of this for twenty-three minutes. He will be aware of it for the foreseeable future.

He closes his eyes. He does not sleep. He runs the arithmetic.

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 launch lever. The numbers are not good. They are not impossible. The distance between those two assessments is the space he lives in now, which is a space he has lived in before and has learned to furnish.



He does not remember deciding to sleep.

The body makes these decisions unilaterally when it has been running on adrenaline long enough and the bill comes due. When he surfaces, the recycler is making a sound it was not making before. Lower than the baseline hum. The specific register of something settling into a failure mode rather than a variance — he knows both sounds, has been learning to distinguish them since his first outer-ring posting, and this is not the sound of a system settling.

Kirk is awake. He is facing the communications panel — the emergency transmitter — and he has something in his hand. A small device. Secondary transmitter, short-range, not standard capsule equipment.

His thumb is moving.

Janus watches him for three seconds. Four years in the Vanguard Corps teaches you specific things about people who believe themselves unobserved: the quality of the attention, the way the shoulders hold, the particular control of breathing that is the opposite of sleep. Kirk finishes what he is doing and slips the device into the inner pocket of his suit. He turns.

He sees Janus watching him.

'*You're awake,*' he says. His voice has the slightly-too-even quality of a man who has already decided what expression to arrange his face into.

'*The recycler,*' Janus says. '*There's a sound.*'

Kirk listens. He nods. '*Probably the seal settling in vacuum.*'

'*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 — a drawer that has been accumulating since Cinder-7, four years ago, in a relay station in the outer ring with 520nm lighting and the smell of burnt insulation and a voice in his earpiece saying *contact left, stack on the hatch, wait for the signal*. The drawer is getting full. 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 of these problems is solvable. The order matters. Janus explains this to Kirk.

Kirk helps. His assistance is, Janus notes, measurably more competent than the performance he has been maintaining for eighteen months suggests it should be. The hands move with a precision and economy that does not belong to a junior maintenance technician on his first real posting. The diagnostic reasoning is faster than it should be. He works the filter mesh with the focused attention of someone who has cleaned filter meshes before — not as training, but as work.

Janus notes this the way he notes weather.

The recycler improves. The electrical short is corrected with the thermal blanket from the wall kit. The recycler improves further. Not enough — not nearly enough — but the rate of decline slows, and slowing is what they have.

Then there is the antenna.

The emergency transmitter has a fault in the exterior relay contact — corroded, the kind of thing that was there before launch and that nobody checked because waste disposal systems are not security concerns. The contact is on the hull. It cannot be reached from inside.

*'I'll go,'* Kirk says, immediately, without hesitation.

*'We both go,'* Janus says.



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

The capsule carries two emergency EVA suits — standard regulation for Apex-contracted stations, crew-recovery rated, which is the kind of detail that Kirk received as a surprise and Janus did not, because Janus looked up the spec before they launched. The suits are old. The seals hold.

Kirk works the antenna relay with his back to Janus. He works it cleanly — the corroded contact cleaned and reseated, the bypass patch applied from the suit's emergency kit with a speed and precision that no maintenance technician eighteen months in should possess. The real thing, not the performance. His hands in the hull's reflected light are the hands of someone who has done this kind of work in difficult conditions, and recently.

Janus watches his hands.

Inside, the comms panel registers green. Kirk adjusts the frequency — the emergency beacon, he says, making sure it is on the right band. The band he enters is not the standard outer-ring salvage distress frequency. Janus sees this. Kirk does not see that Janus sees this. Janus files it in the drawer next to the device from day one, next to the hands that are not the hands of someone who lost his study materials in a card game, next to *I don't even know why I'm here* from page eight of a performance that has been running for eighteen months.

The oxygen percentage is at seventeen point two.



The recycler fails completely at hour nineteen.

What remains after that is passive oxygen, degrading. Kirk attempts a repair — Janus cannot entirely determine whether the attempt is genuine, because the category of *genuine* has become complicated in reference to Kirk, but the repair partially succeeds and the recycler comes back at reduced capacity, and that is what matters. It buys time. Not enough time. Enough time.

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

The dark comes gradually and then all at once.

Kirk's last words before it arrives are quiet, and almost entirely without the performance he has been running since Janus met him.

*'Janus. I'm sorry.'*

There is not enough oxygen left to ask him what he means. Janus decides to remember the question. He will ask it when there is air.

Then there is no air, and then there is no anything.



He wakes in a hangar.

Artificial gravity — full grav-plate installation, the kind that costs money. The lights are amber industrial. The capsule is on a cradle, hatch open. Somewhere above the catwalk level, footsteps.

He does not move. He runs the inventory first.

His hands are unrestrained. His wrist comms are gone — stripped, already. His pockets have been searched: he knows this the way he knows his own body, from the precise wrongness of position. The multitool is in his left thigh pocket rather than his right. The TAP-7 is facing the wrong direction in his chest pocket. His credit chip is present.

His pockets were searched by someone professional and careful and thorough.

He does not move immediately to check the capsule foam. He does not allow his eyes to go to it. He breathes, and counts, and then — when the footsteps above pause — he reaches into the foam behind his left shoulder and finds the module still there, amber pulse slow against his palm, warm from the foam's residual heat.

They searched his person. They did not search the capsule.

At the base of his neck, slightly left of centre, there is a faint tenderness. He attributes it to the capsule cradle, or the way unconscious bodies are moved by people who are not being careful about comfort. He files it and moves on.

Kirk is gone.

The footsteps on the catwalk resume, descending.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Anchor

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

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The figure comes down the catwalk ladder with the loose-limbed ease of someone who grew up in variable gravity, where every motion is load-bearing and nothing is wasted.

Rust Alliance work gear. No weapons visible. Unmodified — you can tell by the absence of the faint subdermal luminescence that implant-heavy populations carry. Out here, in the outer ring, the absence is the norm. That is the point of the outer ring.

They reach the deck and look at him with the expression of someone who knows exactly who he is and is still deciding whether that is a problem.

*'Safe,' they say. 'For now. Which is the best anyone gets out here.'*

He sits up. The hypoxia has left a residue in his legs — a heaviness rather than weakness, a system recalculating reserves. He runs it quickly: one body, functional; one data module, present; one set of pockets, searched and returned in the wrong order by someone professional; one wrist comms unit, absent.

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

*'Yes.'*

*'That was the Fabric frequency.'*

*'I know what frequency it was.'*

A pause. The figure sits on the capsule cradle, easy, unhurried — the posture of someone in their own space. *'Most people who hit a Fabric relay don't know what frequency it is. They just hit it because it's the only thing with power left.'*

*'I knew,' he says.*

*'Why?'*

He has had three days to prepare for this question, in whatever form it arrived, and he still does not have a clean answer. The honest answer involves four years in the Vanguard Corps and a specific fragment of overheard conversation on Vanguard Station 7 and a technician who expressed gratitude in frequencies, and the drawer he has been filling since Cinder-7, and the fact that he patched the Fabric interface protocol into the TAP-7 at some point before he understood what he was doing or why.

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

The figure nods. They look at the foam behind his shoulder — at the angle that does not let you see the amber pulse.

*'The other one. The young one. Do you know who he works for?'*

He looks at the figure.

*'No,'* he says.

This 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 barge are familiar enough to be grounding and different enough to be observational. The crew are all Alliance — unmodified, all of them, the Flicker not a personal threat but a strategic fact, something out there that the inner worlds are managing badly and that the outer ring has been watching carefully. Nobody talks about it directly. Nobody on an Alliance salvage crew talks about anything directly. You learn what you need to learn from what people choose not to say.

On the second day the figure offers their name — a single syllable, not their full one, the outer-ring shorthand for *this much I'll give you*. He accepts it in the same spirit.

On the second evening they ask, once, whether he has somewhere to go.

*'I'm looking for someone,'* he says.

*'In the city?'*

*'Possibly.'*

The figure nods, as if this is the answer they expected. *'Eastern transit hub. Third level down. If your Fabric flag is active, they'll have what they know. Physical node — you'll recognise it if you know what a repurposed Praxis diagnostic port looks like.'*

On the morning of the third day, before he disembarks, a courier meets him at the dock with a sealed card. Physical composite, contact cipher format, the kind of thing that has no meaning unless you know what to do with it. No note. No instruction. He puts it in his left breast pocket, facing the correct direction, and does not ask what it means because he already understands what it means: that he is more useful to this operation moving away from it than remaining near it, and the card is the polite form of that calculation. He would have made the same call.



The city, from the docking approach, is the kind of enormous that has stopped trying to look finished.

The inner tiers are Gilde architecture — vertical, integrated, everything logged, the neural implant infrastructure woven into the building management systems so thoroughly that the buildings themselves are, in a technical sense, part of the cognitive network. The outer ring is what happens when that infrastructure runs out of maintenance budget and the city keeps growing anyway: warehouse districts that have become residential, transit hubs that have become markets, the specific texture of infrastructure designed for freight that is now being used for lives. The recycled air comes through filters that are adequate rather than good. The signage is multilingual and partially broken. The people move with the purposeful efficiency of populations that have learned not to make eye contact with strangers who are standing still.

He is standing still.

He has the multitool. The TAP-7. The data module in his right thigh pocket, amber pulse slow through the fabric. A credit chip good for eight days at outer-ring rates. A name: Ana Hamato. A departure date: Supply Transport 7, Standard Date 2847.208. Three days before the kill team boarded Hephaistos-9. She knew what was coming before it came, and she left, and she left the archive core behind in a housing with a sprung emergency release.

A public transit terminal, six metres to his left.

He starts with the terminal.



The transit log is Apex Industrial standard-issue, which means it is TAP-7 compatible, which means two minutes of hardwire connection and a security layer entry he clears immediately on exit.

The log returns: Ana Hamato, no current registered residence. Last logged transit: arrival from outer supply route, Standard Date 2847.214. Three days after she left the station. Port of entry: this city. No registered departure since.

She arrived. She has not left through any channel the transit authority records. Which means she is still here or she found a way out that does not appear in logs, and both of those are the same thing from a certain operational perspective.

Third level down.

The Fabric node looks like a maintenance diagnostic port, which it is, except for the modifications that are invisible unless you know what invisible modifications look like on a Praxis-format housing. He runs the TAP-7 handshake. The node responds.

The Fabric has a partial record: she came through this hub, she used a second name for short-term accommodation, and the name is available to him as a cipher string that 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 her arrival. No forwarding address.

The building's access panel is a Mark III Apex format. He bypasses it in ninety seconds, clears the override log, and finds her room number from the internal directory. The room has been re-let. The current occupant is absent and has no connection to her.

The room has been cleaned. Thoroughly. Standard short-stay turnover.

He examines the ventilation cover. Two non-standard screws — not Apex spec, not anything in the building's maintenance record — securing a panel that does not need to be secured this way unless someone made it need to be secured this way. He has the right driver head in the multitool.

Behind the cover: a sealed composite envelope. Inside: thermal paper. Seven lines, her handwriting.

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



She left a second address — a Fabric routing cipher, not a street address, which means it resolves to a location only through a Fabric node he does not have access to yet.

A date: approximately six weeks from when she left this room. An instruction, single line: *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. She left Hephaistos-9 on 2847.208. She arrived here on 2847.214. She stayed seventeen days. She left a meeting date six weeks out. That date passed five weeks ago. She has been at the next location — wherever the Fabric cipher resolves to — for five weeks.

Or she has not been there at all, and the contingency plans she built around not being there are already in motion, and he is working from a note written by someone who assumed she might not survive long enough to be at the meeting point when it came due.

She built a dead-drop chain. She built it fast, under pressure, with limited resources, in a city she did not know, for a person she could not be sure was coming. She made it out of the only tools available — a Fabric contact she did not fully trust, a room with non-standard screws, a note on thermal paper behind a ventilation panel.

It held for three months.

He puts the note in his left breast pocket, next to the Alliance contact card, both of them facing the correct direction. The data module pulses amber through his jacket — slow, patient, the way it has been since the archive housing opened and put it in his hand. The TAP-7 is in his chest pocket. The multitool is in his right thigh pocket.

He is one week behind.

*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*