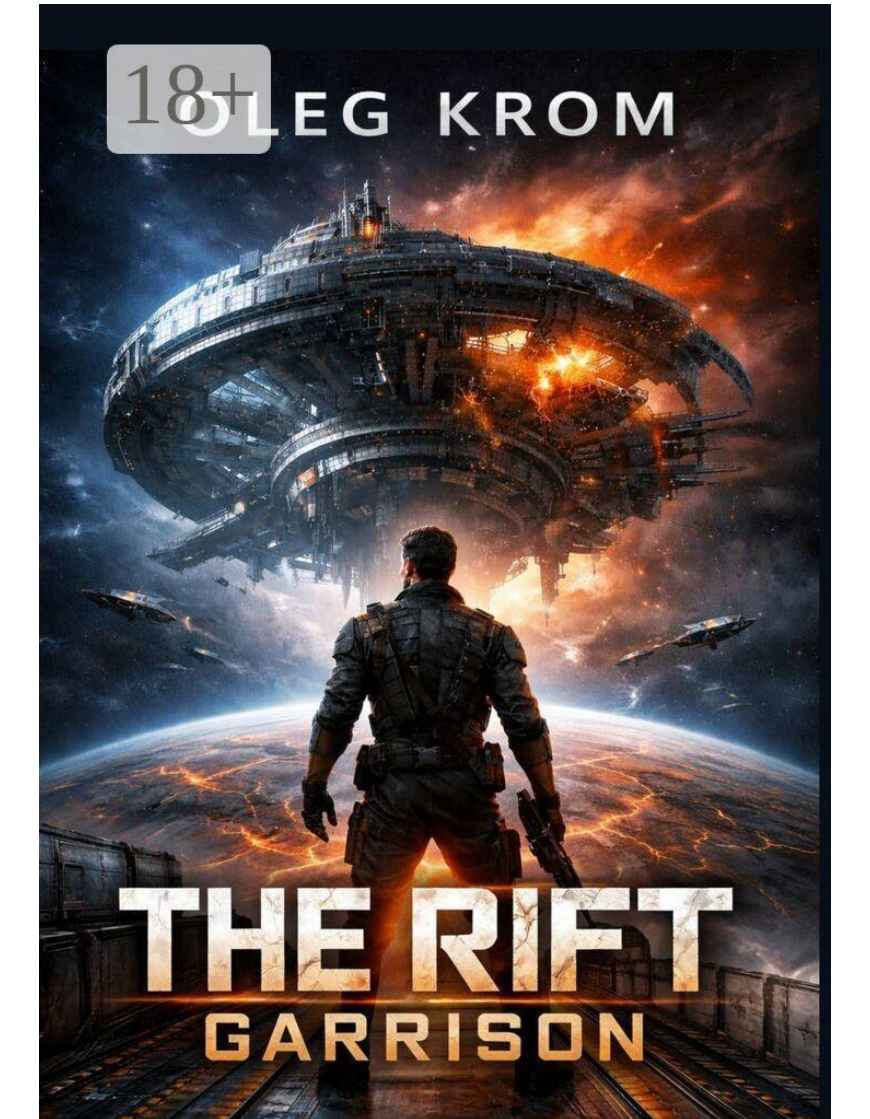


18+

OLEG KROM



A cinematic movie poster for 'The Rift: Garrison'. In the foreground, a soldier in full combat gear, including a tactical vest and a rifle, stands with his back to the viewer on a metal walkway. He is looking up at a colossal, multi-tiered orbital station that dominates the sky. The station is a complex of dark metal structures, with several sections glowing with intense orange and yellow fire, suggesting a battle or a malfunction. The station is set against a backdrop of a dark, starry space filled with wispy clouds. In the distance, the curved horizon of the Earth is visible, with a bright orange and yellow glow emanating from beneath the station, possibly representing a volcanic or tectonic activity on the planet's surface. Two smaller spacecraft are seen flying in the distance. The overall atmosphere is one of high-stakes action and sci-fi drama.

THE RIFT

GARRISON

Oleg Krom

The Rift: Garrison

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Аннотация

The Empire does not fall from rebellion-it fractures from doubt.

The Eternal Sentinel Station guards a vital hyperlane and enforces absolute order. Kael Rin, once a combat officer, now lives by protocol and silence. When sabotage strikes the station, he is forced to choose between obedience and responsibility.

The Rift: Garrison is a political science fiction thriller about power, control, and the cost of humanity in a system that cannot tolerate uncertainty.

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The Rift: Garrison

Oleg Krom

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Part I: GARRISON

Chapter 1

Terminus Vigil, the Eternal Sentinel, hung in soundless void above the desert planet of Verdict-III. A station grafted onto the mouth of a key hyperlane, it was the gullet through which the Empire swallowed the resources of an entire star system. Inside, it was a symphony of steel, the thrum of engines, and a silence enforced by discipline.

KaelRinnstood before a massive viewport, watching a supply barge the size of an asteroid slide silently toward its docking cradle. His face, reflected in the armor-glass, was calm and empty. The face of a cog, polished to a luster. He wore the simple grey uniform of a Logistics Officer, devoid of patches or medals. Those belonged to the past, along with his rank as Captain of an assault corvette.

“Guardianship of the Lane is a high honor, Rinn,” the official from the Ministry of Preservation had told him at his final briefing. In the official’s eyes, Kael had read the true message: You asked questions. Now count dials and be silent.

A chime from the com-link shattered the quiet. The voice was metallic, toneless, synthesized.

“Officer Rinn. Report to Sector 7-Alpha. Priority: Reaper.”

Reaper. Code for operational extermination. Not confiscation. Not detainment. Extermination.

“Acknowledged,” his own voice replied, just as flat, as if responding to a routine cargo inquiry.

Sector 7-Alpha was a map, not a place. A schematic of a low-value asteroid belt on the system’s fringe. There, according to the blinking markers, sat an unregistered mining collective, The Last Stand. They’d been extracting rare earths without an Imperial license, evading taxes, muddying scanner data. A statistic. An anomaly in the ledgers.

The face of Archon Sevran appeared on the screen before Kael. Not a direct feed, but a recorded circular address for officers of his grade. The Archon spoke from a pulpit, the spire of the Imperial Palace on Centauri Prime rising behind him. His voice was calm, deep, like the shift of tectonic plates.

“Order is not cruelty, children of the Empire. It is mercy, in the long view. One gangrenous limb, left untreated, will poison the whole body. We are the surgeons of civilization. Our scalpel must be swift, and our minds, cold. Remember: you do not merely protect space. You protect humanity’s future from its own

chaos.”

Kael listened, his eyes on the data from the collective. Estimated population: 1,200 souls. Including dependents. These weren't pirates. They weren't rebels. They were people who had decided they could exist outside the system. They were mistaken.

The order was simple: launch two winged disintegrator warheads from the Eternal Sentinel's batteries. A kinetic strike on the asteroid refuge. No warnings. Their warnings had been given to all of them when they were born beneath the shadow of the Imperial eagle.

Kael's finger hovered over the confirmation rune on the touch-screen. He no longer saw a schematic. With sudden, painful clarity, he saw the 1,200 lives. The arguments in cramped quarters, the smell of recycled air, the hope with which they probably regarded their meager ore haulers. Their “defiance” was an act of desperation, not ideology.

He was no philosopher. He was an officer. Officers follow orders. Civilization depends on it.

His finger came down.

“Launch initiation confirmed. Authorization code: ‘Unyielding.’”

Through the viewport, two slender trails lanced toward the stars, vanishing swiftly from sight. In forty-seven minutes, they would find their mark. Confirmation of successful termination would come automatically.

Kael leaned back in his chair. The silence in his ears remained, but it was different now. It rang with an echo-not from the warheads, but from his own, utterly silent voice, which had suddenly asked:

What if the scalpel was wrong? What if it was a healthy limb?

He dismissed the thought, as he'd been trained to do. It was weakness. And weakness in a system built on strength was fatal.

He didn't know that quiet question was the first crack. A crack in the monolith. And where there is a first crack, a fault line is sure to follow.

Chapter 2

News of the “K-7 Belt incident” never appeared in any Imperial bulletin. It seeped out like a radiation stain on the frequencies of minor freighters, in the encrypted phrases of traders, in the rage and fear racing through the fringe’s clandestine channels. Three station-days after the strike, a cutter bearing the flag of House Vess arrived at the Eternal Sentinel.

Liara Vess descended the ramp, and the terminal’s cold air seemed to crystallize around her. She was the embodiment of aristocratic restraint: a gown of matte grey polymer, hair drawn into a severe knot, her gaze-scanning, appraising, devoid of warmth. Two impersonal servitor androids bearing the House crest followed her. Her visit was logged as a routine audit of logistics contracts. A formality.

Kael Rinn met her in the reception block of the logistics sector. He offered the requisite nod.

“House Vess honors our station. How may I be of service?”

Liara’s eyes slowly swept the room, as if seeing not walls, but streams of data bleeding into the Empire’s depths.

“Officer Rinn. Your efficiency is noted. I am interested in... the stability of helium-3 shipments from the outer belt. There have been recent... disruptions.”

Her voice was melodious but stripped of any personal color. A tool for extracting information.

“Stability is maintained at full capacity,” Kael stated precisely. “Minor private operators do not impact overall volumes.”

“Minor private operators,” she repeated, and something that could not be called a smile touched the corners of her lips. “An interesting formulation. Almost humane. The Empire values efficiency, Officer. But sometimes, the efficiency of one action breeds inefficiency in ten others. Do you understand?”

He understood. She knew. Not as an official would know, but as something else. Her knowledge was not an accusation, but a statement of fact—a card laid on the table.

“I follow orders,” Kael said, and the phrase sounded feeble even to his own ears.

“Of course,” Liara nodded. “We all play our part. Good day, Officer Rinn. I trust your statistics will remain flawless.”

She departed, leaving behind a trace of subtle, expensive perfume and a sensation of profound, icy cold. A cold that emanated not from the void beyond the hull, but from something deep within civilization itself.

Chapter 3

Archon Sevrان was receiving the report in his residence on Centauri Prime. The room was a masterpiece of Imperial aesthetic grandeur: high vaulted ceilings, holograms of conquered star systems rotating slowly in the air. Sevrان stood by the window, looking down upon the planet-city shining with billions of lights below. Order, made manifest in light.

Standing rigidly at attention before him was the garrison commander of the Verdict sector, a burly man named Grant.

"...following the liquidation of the illegal collective, the market price for cerium has risen three percent. Trade House Kailen expresses... concern."

"Their concern is noted," Sevrان said soundlessly, without turning. "They will receive a compensatory contract to develop Asteroid Beta-6. Market discipline is more important than the momentary profit of a single House."

"Yes, Archon. Also... there are unconfirmed reports of activity in the underground data-nets. Possibly a reaction to the operation."

"The reaction is predictable," Sevrان finally turned. His face, composed and calm, was the face of Power itself. "Fear is a necessary tool. It separates the reasonable, who understand the price of order, from the irrational, who reject it. Increase

monitoring. Locate the pressure points. And, Commander..."

"Archon?"

"The officer who executed the order. Rinn. His dossier."

A holographic profile of Kael materialized on the table before Grant.

"Efficient," Sevrán observed, his eyes scanning the lines. "But with history. Doubts leave scars on the psyche. Observe him. If the scar begins to fester-it will need to be cauterized. The purity of the system outweighs any individual unit's usefulness."

Chapter 4

Kael couldn't sleep. Behind closed eyelids, he saw not schematics, but faces. Imagined, yet no less real. He ventured into the low-gravity service bay for the external sensor array—officially for a diagnostic check, in truth—to be alone with the silent roar of space.

There, he ran into Taren, a freelance shuttle pilot whose battered scow, *The Drifter*, was refueling at the station. Taren, a man in his fifties with a face webbed by scars from radiation burns, was fixing an external scanner module.

“Can't sleep, sir?” he rasped, not looking up. “This ain't a place for sleeping. It's for thinking.”

Kael remained silent.

“Saw what happened out in the belt,” Taren continued quietly, as if talking to his tools. “Flew through a week after. Debris. A lot of debris. You know the real insult? The Empire didn't even bother to salvage the scrap. Not cost-effective. Just left it there, floating. A monument to efficiency.”

Kael swallowed. His voice came out rough:

“Are you sympathizing with smugglers?”

Taren finally looked up at him. There was no hatred in his eyes, no fear. Only a weary, ancient bitterness.

“Smugglers? No. The kids born there, who thought that rock

was their whole world? Yeah. A quarter of the crew on that asteroid were kids, by our measure. Your statistics account for that?”

Kael turned away, staring into the star-studded blackness. He searched for a justification and found none. Only the order.

“I was following orders,” he muttered.

“Someone always is,” Taren sighed, returning to his work. “Until the order’s about you.”

Chapter 5

Liara Vess decrypted the message in her quarters aboard the House vessel. It had arrived via a protocol known only to a handful of people in the entire Galaxy. The text was brief: “A spark has fallen on dry tinder. Are the winds ready?”

She erased the message. Her hands did not tremble. Strategy was a cold calculus. The collective’s destruction was a tragedy, but also an invaluable gift. Now they had a symbol. Not an abstract “oppression,” but a specific grave with names (she was already acquiring those names through her channels; it had cost two bribed clerks). This was something upon which to build rage. From rage, one forges resolve.

She summoned a hologram of the sector. Dozens of systems, hundreds of worlds. The Eternal Sentinel blinked as a red dot-a splinter in the Empire’s flesh, but also a key. Whoever controlled the lane controlled the flow. Not just of cargo. Of ideas.

She thought of Officer Rinn. The executor. A perfect candidate for either recruitment or martyrdom. His inner conflict was palpable. Such people were the weakest link in the system’s armor. And the most dangerous. They needed to be turned to the right purpose or eliminated before the Empire did it first.

Chapter 6

On the fringe world of Ferrum-5, whose population had mined ore for Imperial factories for generations, the news of the collective reached the main settlement. It arrived not as a fact, but as a distorted legend: “The Empire wiped an entire colony from the sky because they wanted to breathe free.”

The local leader, a former mining engineer named Korvan, had a sober understanding: his people were not ready for war. But he saw a new spark in their eyes, weary from endless labor—a mix of fear and anger. That could be steered.

He gathered a secret council in an abandoned mine shaft.

“They’ve shown us their price,” Korvan said, his voice echoing in the damp gloom. “An order where you can be erased for a wrong figure on a report. We don’t need guns. We need ears. And voices. We need to reach others. Others like us.”

“This is madness!” hissed one of the elders. “They’ll find us!”

“They’ll find us anyway,” Korvan countered coldly. “The question is whether we wait quietly for our mine to become a statistical anomaly, or make them understand that an anomaly has a name, a family, and a willingness to bite back. We begin seeking allies. Carefully.”

Chapter 7

A drill to repel a pirate raid was conducted aboard the Eternal Sentinel. Kael directed operations from the command bridge, his crew working in seamless coordination. He was a professional. But when holographic screens lit up with the explosions of simulated “enemy” vessels, all he saw was the silent flash in the K-7 Belt.

After the drill, a young lieutenant approached him, eyes bright with zeal.

“Excellent metrics, sir! We’d blow real pirate scum to bits!”

Kael looked at him. This boy hadn’t yet made that ‘choice’. He still believed in black and white, in medals for valor, in the Empire’s gratitude.

“The objective isn’t to shatter, Lieutenant,” Kael said, bone-tired. “The objective is to preserve order. Sometimes that doesn’t require firing a shot.”

“But what if we’re ordered to?” the lieutenant pressed, undeterred.

Kael went still. His own voice echoed in his memory: “Launch initiation confirmed.”

“If you are ordered,” he said, looking past the young man, “then make sure you know the name of what you’re destroying. And that you can sleep afterward.”

The lieutenant was confused, assuming this was some complicated old officer's philosophy. He saluted and left. Kael remained alone in the bridge's dim light, listening to the steady hum of life support. The price of order. He was beginning to understand that price. And it was measured not in credits, but in the hollow silence that follows an order.

Chapter 8

Archon Sevrان received a report from his “ear” on the station. The agent relayed: “Officer Rinn is displaying signs of psychological destabilization. Had contact with extraneous elements (freelancer Taren). Behavior is apathetic.”

Sevrان was not irritated. He analyzed. Rinn was an indicator. If even a vetted element faltered under the pressure of a routine, if brutal, necessity, it meant pressure within the system was increasing. It meant either a pressure release or heightened control was required.

He issued two directives. First: grant Rinn a bonus stipend and priority leave at a planetary resort for the next cycle—a classic “carrot and stick” approach, where the stick was his own conscience and the carrot was the system’s mercy. Second: assign a new political officer to the Eternal Sentinel, Lieutenant Vail, tasked with reinforcing the crew’s “ideological cohesion” and keeping Rinn under discreet but constant observation.

Every doubt is a virus, Sevrان thought, reviewing the dossiers of other perimeter commanders. The immune system must respond before the illness becomes an epidemic.

Chapter 9

Liara acted through proxies. On several derelict satellites in neighboring systems, bootleg relay nodes flickered to life. Through them, bypassing Imperial censors, a wave of information began to flow. Not open calls to rebellion—that would be suicidal. But cultural artifacts. Songs. Poems. Stories of pioneer colonists battling the elements, not Imperial tax collectors. Tales of mysterious disappearances of entire expeditions that had “inconvenienced” major Houses. And, of course, the story of a community of peaceful miners erased from the universe by a bureaucratic command.

This was not agitation. It was a slow intoxication of the mind. The sowing of seeds for an alternative memory. Liara knew: to burn an empire, you must first make people doubt its eternity and its righteousness. Doubt was oxygen for fire.

She also sent an encrypted order to her agents: “Find a way to deliver an artifact to the Eternal Sentinel. Related to the collective. Personal. An emotional anchor.” The chosen object was a child’s identification bracelet, miraculously intact among the debris, scooped up by a passing scavenger. Now it needed to find its way into Kael Rin’s hands.

Chapter 10

The orders granting his bonus and provisional leave were handed to Kael. Commander Grant himself clapped him on the shoulder. “The Empire values loyalty, son. Rest. Put the unpleasantness behind you. We need you clear and firm.”

Kael felt nauseous. This was payment. Payment for 1,200 souls. Credits and a few days under an artificial sun. The system was purchasing his silence, his continued service. And the worst part—a piece of him, exhausted by guilt, was desperately clutching at this lifeline. Maybe they really were a threat? Maybe it had to be done? I’ll rest, gain perspective...

At the same time, the new political officer, Lieutenant Vail, arrived on the station—young, pointedly correct, with eyes that saw not people, but potential deviations from the norm. Their first meeting was brief.

“Officer Rinn,” Vail said, shaking his hand. “A privilege to serve alongside you. I’m here to help maintain clarity of purpose in our ranks. Out here on the fringe, it can sometimes... become blurred.”

“My purpose is clear, Lieutenant,” Kael replied curtly, feeling an invisible muzzle being fastened around him.

“I don’t doubt it,” Vail smiled, though his eyes remained cold.

“Together, we will ensure it remains so.”

That evening, returning to his quarters, Kael found a small, unmarked package left by his door, not delivered through official channels. Inside, nestled in packing foam, lay a simple, scuffed plastic bracelet, sized for a child. Engraved on it was a name: Elara. And coordinates. The exact coordinates of the K-7 Belt.

Kael froze, holding the tiny, weightless object. It felt heavier than the entire station. All his attempts to forget, to justify, to hide within the system's logic, shattered in an instant. This was not a statistic. This was Elara. A child. And he had killed her.

He braced himself against the wall to keep from falling. The illusion of stability, duty, and order lay in pieces around him, its shards cutting his soul to ribbons. The quiet question born after the order was now screaming inside him-an uncontrollable, deafening howl.

The first choice-to press the button-had been made under orders.

The second choice-what to do now-was his alone.
And everything depended on it.

PART II: THE SPARK

Chapter 11

The plastic bracelet burned in Kael's palm like a hot coal. He stood with his back pressed against the cold door of his cabin, listening to his own heart hammering so hard he was sure the station's sensors would pick it up. Elara. Just a name. No surname, no age. But it was a concrete, tangible anchor that had ripped him from the churning sea of abstract guilt and thrown him onto the sharp rocks of a specific horror.

He squeezed his eyes shut, but an image instantly flashed beneath his lids: a girl he had never seen. Perhaps with dark hair in braids, like his niece back on Centauri Prime. She wore this bracelet every day. It might have been a gift from her parents, made from a scrap of an old digger's hull. It would have had tiny scratches from playing in the asteroid's cramped hyperlanes. Now it was here, in his hand. A verdict.

Almost mechanically, Kael stuffed the bracelet into his pocket and stumbled to the washbasin. He splashed icy water on his face, staring at his reflection in the polished metal. His eyes were dark hollows, the shadows beneath them deeper than days ago.

You are an officer of the Empire, he tried to tell himself. This is a provocation. Sabotage. The goal is to break you, to sow discord. You must report this to Political Officer Vail. Turn in the bracelet. It is the only correct course of action.

But his feet wouldn't move toward the door. His mind, drilled by years of service, screamed about danger and duty. Yet something else, deep and tenacious, whispered: They didn't just kill her. They erased her. Made her a statistical error. And now they want you to erase this last surviving memory of her, too. To make you complicit in the wiping.

He did not turn in the bracelet. Instead, with trembling hands, he dug through his personal effects for a small, unreliable, personal com-link, not connected to the station's network. Such devices were prohibited, but many, especially those with families in other systems, kept them for "quiet" communication. Kael had kept his not out of sentiment, but from a soldier's habit of always leaving himself a line of retreat. Now that line might become a path to treason.

He powered on the device, his fingers flying over the keypad, sending a query into the open, loosely regulated data-nets of the fringe worlds. He was searching for anything related to the Last Stand collective and the name Elara. The risk was monstrous. Any unauthorized query from his official IP would raise an

instant alarm. But the personal com-link, if hyperlaned correctly through small-vessel relays, might just give him a chance.

There was no response. Nothing. As if Elara had never existed. The Empire was efficient. But the very act of searching, this small, quiet act of defiance, changed something inside him. He had crossed a line. Not in deed, but in intent.

A sudden knock at the door made him start as if burned. He frantically shoved the com-link under his mattress, wiped his face, and took a deep breath, trying to summon the familiar mask of detachment.

“Enter.”

The door slid aside. Lieutenant Vail stood on the threshold. He was impeccable in his new, crisp uniform. His eyes, pale and penetrating, slowly swept the cabin as if taking inventory.

“Officer Rinn. Apologies for disturbing you off-duty. Just wanted to personally ensure you were well after the... strenuous drills. And to provide you with a memo on the new ideological fortitude protocols. They are recommended reading before sleep.”

He held out a data-slate. Kael took it, aware that his palm, which had just held the bracelet, was damp with sweat.

“Thank you, Lieutenant. All is well.”

“Good to hear,” Vail did not leave. His gaze drifted over the desk, the neatly folded clothes. “Station life is stressful. Isolation, routine. Sometimes even the best officers can develop... intrusive thoughts. Incorrect associations. It is crucial to seek psychological support in time. It is not a weakness. It is the Empire’s care for its servants.”

“I understand,” Kael nodded, fighting to keep his voice level. “I will utilize it if the need arises.”

“Of course,” Vail finally took a step back. “Good night, Officer. And remember: I am always here to help you maintain clarity.”

The door closed. Kael slumped back onto his bunk, feeling cold sweat trickle down his spine. He knows. Or suspects. Or is just doing his job-sowing seeds of paranoia. It was a subtle game. Vail wasn’t accusing him; he was offering help. Making himself the only safe outlet. It was clever. And lethally dangerous.

Kael pulled the bracelet from his pocket. The plastic was warm from his body heat. He couldn’t keep it here. Vail or his agents could search the cabin at any moment. He needed to find a hiding place. Or get rid of it. He looked at the name again. Elara.

No, he thought with a new, desperate resolve. I already erased her once. I won’t do it again.

He got up and began to search.

Chapter 12

The House Vess vessel, Stellar Scion, was more than just transport. It was a floating bastion of aristocratic power, a palace of polished black metal and gleaming volcanic glass. In its private quarters, shielded by fields that suppressed any spyware, Liara Vess studied her reports. Holograms projected a sector map before her, dotted with shimmering points: green (loyal worlds), yellow (unstable), red (hotbeds of open dissent). The red dots were multiplying. Slowly, but surely.

A man in the simple grey coveralls of a technician knelt before her. This was Marlo, one of her most valuable shadow operatives. He had orchestrated the delivery of the bracelet.

“Did he take the bait?” Liara asked, her eyes still on the map.

“He did,” Marlo replied, his voice quiet and impersonal. “Surveillance from the service tunnels confirms he found the package, reacted strongly. Returned to his quarters visibly distressed. Shortly after, Vail paid him a visit.”

“Vail... Sevran’s zealous hound. Good. So pressure is mounting from both sides. KaelRinnis like a charged round in the chamber right now: he can be aimed, but if overheated, he’ll explode in place, useless to anyone. We need a careful trigger pull.”

She touched the hologram, zooming in on the Eternal Sentinel. The station was a complex organism, and she, as a scion of a ruling House, had schematics of its vital systems. Not all, but enough.

“We need an incident,” she said aloud, thinking. “Not a catastrophe that destroys the station and our future ally. Something that undermines Imperial authority aboard it. Something that makes the local garrison doubt the competence of the Core. And something that gives Rinn a chance to show initiative, to step beyond blind obedience.”

“Sabotage?” Marlo clarified.

“A controlled sabotage,” Liara corrected. “In the secondary life support sector. One that causes a temporary failure, an evacuation, panic, but no casualties. We create a crisis, then let the Empire demonstrate its helplessness or brutality in resolving it. Ideally, Rinn will be implicated in the resolution. We must push him into a situation where the right action, the humane one, conflicts with a direct order.”

She leaned back in her chair, steepling her fingers. Her face remained calm, but a cold, calculating fire burned in her eyes.

“There is another factor. House Kailen. They suffered losses from the collective’s destruction; their monopoly on rare earths in the sector is shaken. They are displeased. The displeasure of the elite is the best catalyst for spreading doubt. Contact our person on their council. Let it be known that there are forces who

could... adjust Imperial policy in their favor. For an appropriate price.”

“That’s a risk. They could inform.”

“The Kailens? No. They are merchants. They’ll betray whoever pays less. Right now, the Empire pays them with stability, but takes their profit. We will offer them profit, but with risk. Their greed will outweigh their fear. Make the preparations. The incident must occur in five station-days, during Archon Sevran’s scheduled review of logistics reports. Let him see the disorder with his own eyes.”

Marlo nodded and slipped away silently. Liara was alone. She walked to the vast viewport, gazing into the star-dusted void. Each star was a potential ally or enemy, a resource or a grave. She hated this Empire not with the hot rage of the wronged, but with the cold, rational hatred of a scientist for a deadly virus. The Empire was a virus, parasitizing humanity’s very essence—its drive to grow, to err, to choose. It burned away diversity, replacing it with a uniform, obedient dreariness called “order.”

But to kill a virus, sometimes you must introduce a weakened strain, provoke a crisis to mobilize the defenses. KaelRinnwas such a weakened strain. A soldier of the system, infected with doubt. He would either help the civilization’s immune system awaken, or perish, becoming an antibody that showed others the way.

She turned from the stars. Her reflection in the dark glass was ghostly, almost insubstantial. We all become ghosts, fighting the ghosts of the past, she thought. But sometimes only a ghost can walk through prison walls.

Chapter 13

The Archon's palace on Centauri Prime was more than a residence. It was a brain, a nerve center processing data streams from across the Imperial periphery. In the sanctum of his study, where even the air seemed filtered of stray emotion, Sevrans examined a report. Not the one prepared for broad circulation, but the "Chaos Curve" -a secret index measuring the levels of disobedience, sabotage, and ideological entropy in key sectors.

The curve was creeping upward. Slowly, but inexorably. The Verdict sector showed the sharpest rise. The destruction of the collective, as he had anticipated, had produced a backlash. Fear had worked on some, but embittered others. Data from the Eternal Sentinel was particularly telling: an increase in minor infractions (unauthorized comms use, critical talk in the mess halls), a decline in morale according to indirect indicators (tranquilizer consumption, frequency of requests for psychological aid).

And the figure of Officer Rinn featured prominently across multiple reports. Vail noted his "potential lability." Sensors had registered unusual activity in his quarters during off-hours. Most crucially, traffic analysis from the station had uncovered a series of encrypted queries into fringe data-nets, originating

from an unauthorized device in the vicinity of his residential sector. Coincidence? Perhaps. But Sevran did not believe in coincidences.

He summoned a hologram of Commander Grant. The image of the burly soldier materialized before the desk, slightly distorted by signal lag.

“Commander. The situation on the Eternal Sentinel requires your personal attention.”

“Archon?” Grant looked puzzled. “All reports are nominal. Lieutenant Vail reports full control.”

“Control is not the absence of problems, but the anticipation of them,” Sevran countered coldly. “I am dispatching an additional contingent of Internal Guard to you. They will be inserted onto the station under the guise of garrison rotation reinforcements. Their task is to conduct a thorough loyalty screening of all personnel, beginning with mid-level officers. Focus on the Logistics division.”

Grant paled, even through the hologram. The Internal Guard, the “Grey Inquisition,” was every military officer’s nightmare. Their methods were ruthless, their authority near-limitless.

“But, Archon... this will undermine trust within the garrison! The officers-”

“Officers with nothing to hide have nothing to fear from an audit,” Sevran cut him off. “If rot has set in among them, it is better to excise it now than let it infect the whole body.”

Furthermore, I am increasing the frequency of mandatory ideological assessments. And I am instituting a new measure: a system of mutual reporting, with incentives for exposing ‘deviations.’ We must create an atmosphere where even the thought of disloyalty drowns in the fear of being overheard.”

He watched Grant swallow. The old soldier understood what this meant: his garrison would become a simmering pot of suspicion and fear. Combat effectiveness would drop. But Sevrان believed otherwise. Combat effectiveness built on potential disloyalty was a delayed-action mine. Better to have a smaller, absolutely controlled force.

“And one more thing,” Sevrان added. “I am moving up my scheduled inspection of the sector’s logistics flow. I will be on the Eternal Sentinel in five days. I wish to assess the situation personally. And to meet with Officer Rinn. Prepare all necessary data on his activities. All of it.”

“As you command, Archon,” Grant’s voice was hollow.

The connection terminated. Sevrان dismissed the hologram and stood, walking to the panoramic window. His city-planet glittered below, a perfect mechanism. But any machine, even the most perfect, experiences friction. His task was to minimize that friction, lubricating the gears with fear, duty, and, when necessary, blood. KaelRinn was a grain of sand caught in the

gearworks. It would either be removed, or it would grind down the teeth, causing a breakdown. He had given Rinn a chance by sending Vail. Now he was giving him a final one-the Internal Guard screening and a personal meeting. If the grain of sand did not burn away in this cleansing fire, then it was harder than he thought. And then it would have to be dealt with differently.

You are starting to see him not as a problem, but as a tool, a thought crossed his mind. Dangerous. Tools break and wound the hand that wields them. But another voice, the strategist's, argued: An unpredictable tool can sometimes breach armor that a standard kit cannot.

Archon Sevran turned from the window. His face held no doubt, no pity. Only the cold resolve of an architect ready to demolish a section of his structure to save the entire edifice.

Chapter 14

The five station-days until the Archon's visit became a five-day ordeal of total suspicion. The "Grey Inquisition," as the new contingent had already been dubbed in private whispers, arrived on two utilitarian transports devoid of markings. There were only twenty of them, but they changed the atmosphere aboard the Eternal Sentinel instantly and irrevocably.

They were not soldiers. Their grey uniforms lacked insignia, their impassive faces and methodical, almost mechanical movements marked them as something else-auditors of human souls. They did not issue orders to the garrison, but their presence carried more weight than any command. They moved in pairs, appearing soundlessly in the most unexpected places: in the engine room during routine maintenance, in the mess hall at peak hour, in the hyperlanes of the residential sector during the deep station "night." They did not ask questions immediately. They observed. Recorded. Their eyes, hidden behind light-shielding glasses, scanned faces, gestures, conversations.

Kael felt their gaze on him constantly, like a physical pressure. He did everything to maintain impeccable conduct: punctual for duty, precise reports, neutral conversations with colleagues. He had hidden the bracelet with a paranoid ingenuity worthy of a

spy thriller. After removing a ventilation panel in his washroom, he had magnetized it to the inside of a duct he knew was clear of sensors. Now every trip to the toilet was accompanied by a spike of adrenaline.

But the most dangerous thing was not the bracelet-it was his own mind. He caught himself analyzing every word spoken by him or in his presence for hidden meaning that could be construed as disloyalty. He saw the same thing happening to others. Jokes in the mess hall gave way to tense silence. Colleagues who usually chatted about families or leave plans now limited themselves to dry work-related phrases. Trust, the invisible glue that held a collective together in the extreme isolation of their post, was evaporating, replaced by a thin, sticky film of fear.

Lieutenant Vail seemed to flourish in this atmosphere. He had become Commander Grant's shadow, his "eyes and ears." It was Vail who conducted the initial, still "preliminary," interviews with the staff. Kael was called in among the first.

Vail's office was ascetic: a desk, two chairs, a holographic projector, and on the wall-a single ornament, the large crest of the Empire. The lieutenant greeted him with a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Officer Rinn, have a seat. This isn't an interrogation, just a

conversation. For the record.”

“Understood, Lieutenant,” Kael sat, back straight.

“How is your morale holding up? The pressure following the last operation... has it subsided?”

“I am performing my duties,” Kael deflected.

“Good to hear. You are a valuable asset. Experienced. But you know, under stress, even experienced personnel can have... doubts. It’s natural. The Empire understands this.” Vail leaned forward, adopting a confidential tone. “Have you had any thoughts, Kael, that the order regarding the collective... was excessive?”

The trap was laid with virtuoso skill. Admit to doubts—demonstrate “lability.” Vehemently deny—show unnatural defensiveness. Kael chose a third path.

“I am a soldier, Lieutenant. I analyze the tactical necessity of an order, not its ethical dimension. The order was given based on data indicating systematic sabotage and a threat to lane stability. My task was to ensure its execution.”

Vail went still for a second, studying him. Then he nodded, and his smile grew a fraction thinner.

“A healthy, professional approach. That is commendable. And what about contacts with elements outside the formal garrison structure? For instance, with the freelance pilot... Taren?”

A cold wave washed down Kael’s spine. They had monitored

that conversation in the bay. Or Taren had “ears” on him.

“Pilot Taren was performing service work. I, as the duty officer for the sector, inspected the progress. The conversation was strictly professional in nature.”

“He mentioned the debris in the K-7 Belt,” Vail pressed on relentlessly. “You did not deem it necessary to report such... inappropriate remarks?”

“I considered them the emotional reaction of an undisciplined civilian, of no interest to security services,” Kael stated flatly, feeling the edge he was balancing on grow razor-sharp.

“Perhaps you are right,” Vail leaned back in his chair. “But in the current climate, vigilance can never be excessive. Any word, any opinion that diverges from the official line can be a seed of future betrayal. You wouldn’t want a seed to sprout due to your leniency, would you?”

This was not a request. It was an order: to inform. Kael nodded silently.

“Excellent. That will be all, Officer Rinn. And, by the way-” Vail added as Kael reached the door, “-Archon Sevran mentioned you personally on his itinerary. He expects a meeting during his visit. Be prepared. It is a great honor.”

When Kael stepped into the hyperlane, his uniform shirt was plastered to his back with sweat. He understood the game had already begun. And he was simultaneously a piece on the board

and a player who poorly understood the rules. Vail had made it clear: you are under the lens. And the upcoming meeting with the Archon could be either salvation or a final verdict. He had to decide who he would be by then: a loyal cog, or something more. And he was almost out of time.

Chapter 15

On Ferrum-5, rain of molten slag and acid vapors was part of the landscape. In the abandoned Mine #17, where the air was filtered only through makeshift scrubbers, Korvan received a guest. He was not a separatist or a partisan, but an envoy of Trade House Kailen-an older, expensively dressed man named Orlan Kay. He exuded an aroma of expensive cologne and cynicism.

“Your... dissatisfaction with Imperial policy has reached the ears of my House,” Kay began, eyeing the damp walls with distaste. “The destruction of the Last Stand collective has damaged our market position. The Empire, as always, solves problems with force, without considering the economic consequences.”

“We are concerned with other consequences,” Korvan replied grimly. “Human ones.”

“Human, economic-it’s all connected,” Kay waved a hand dismissively. “My House is interested in stable, predictable supply chains. And the Empire, with its heavy hand, creates instability. Chaos is bad for business. We believe some fringe worlds... require greater autonomy in economic matters. More freedom in choosing business partners.”

Korvan understood what this was about. The Kailens didn’t

want freedom for people. They wanted freedom for their capital. It was in their interest to weaken the Imperial grip so they could set the rules and prices themselves. They were willing to finance unrest if it opened new markets and broke the monopolies of their competitors loyal to the Empire.

“What can you offer?” Korvan asked bluntly.

“Information. Untraceable equipment. Distribution channels for... anything you produce outside Imperial quotas. And, potentially, covert transport. But we need guarantees. Guarantees that if your movement succeeds, our interests in the sector will be prioritized.”

It was a deal with the devil. Korvan knew it. But looking at the exhausted faces of his people, at the settlement's patched domes, at the endless Imperial patrols, he understood he had no choice. The purity of ideals had to be muddied by the grime of realpolitik.

“We need weapons,” he said. “Not mass-produced. Precision tools. Comms, scanner jammers, explosives for sabotage against infrastructure.”

“That is risky,” Kay frowned.

“Without it, any ‘autonomy’ you grant us will exist only until the next Imperial tax levy or punitive operation. We must be able to bite. If only to ensure we aren't seen as defenseless prey.”

The negotiations lasted several hours. In the end, a shaky

consensus was reached. House Kailen would secretly deliver a shipment of untraceable com-links and portable field disruptors to Ferrum-5. In exchange, Korvan's movement would provide the Kailens with data on the activities of Imperial inspectors and pro-Empire trade houses in the sector, along with guarantees of future preferential treatment. Weapons shipments were to be "discussed in the future, as trust develops."

When Kay departed in his cargo-hauler-disguised rover, one of Korvan's lieutenants, a young man named Darek, couldn't hold back:

"Are we really going to work for these vultures? They look at us like cattle!"

"They look at us as an investment," Korvan corrected wearily. "And an investment sometimes needs protecting. They will give us tools so we stop being mere victims. What we do with those tools—that's up to us. Remember, Darek, in a war for freedom, the first casualty is often moral purity. But if we survive and win, we get a chance to rebuild it too. If we keep it pristine in our graves, it's of no use to anyone."

He wasn't sure he was right. But he knew there was no other way. The Empire spoke the language of force. To be heard, they had to learn to speak the same language. Even if the tutors were those who traded in souls themselves.

Chapter 16

The Stellar Scion had departed the vicinity of the Eternal Sentinel, embarking on a scheduled run to other trade hubs. But Liara Vess remained in the game. Through a chain of cut-outs and disposable relays, she issued final orders for the planned sabotage. The operation was codenamed Cough.

The premise was simple: into the air recirculation system of Sector G-7 (a low-priority area housing spare parts depots and backup generators), a tiny, nano-fabricated organism had been introduced. It was not a virus or a bacterium, but something in between—a biomechanical construct programmed for a single action: after 112 hours (precisely at the start of Sevran's inspection), it would release a cloud of microscopic conductive particles into the air. These particles, drawn into the ventilation, would cause mass short-circuits in unprotected low-level electronics: lighting control panels, door locks, data-reader terminals. The effect was meant to mimic a localized electromagnetic pulse, but without destructive energy—just chaos, panic, the failure of numerous non-critical systems.

The goal was not to kill or destroy, but to demonstrate vulnerability. To show that even the heart of an Imperial garrison was not immune to infiltration and sabotage. And, more

importantly, to create a situation where the station's command would reveal its helplessness or, even better, its brutality in restoring order.

Liara, now two jumps away aboard a fast courier vessel, calculated the outcomes. The ideal scenario was for Kael Rin, drawing on his experience and familiarity with the station's schematics, to take initiative amid the chaos to localize the problem, acting against confused or delayed orders from above. This would make him a hero in the eyes of the rank and file, while simultaneously marking him as someone who stepped beyond bounds in the view of Vail and the Internal Guard.

But there was risk. The risk that Cough would be too effective, affecting life support systems. Or that the Internal Guard, in a panic, would open fire on their own in the chaos. Or that Sevran would see the incident not as an accident, but as a well-planned provocation, and respond not proportionally, but with total force, bringing reprisals down upon the entire garrison.

Every revolution is a controlled explosion, Liara thought, watching the star-streak outside the viewport. Too little force, and nothing changes. Too much, and it buries under rubble those you're fighting for. She hated this necessity of gambling with lives. Her cold intellect acknowledged its inevitability, but somewhere deep beneath the layers of calculation and ideology, a

tiny, smoldering ember of guilt persisted. She was sending people to their death and into danger, while remaining in relative safety. She was replicating the Empire's model, only with an inverted sign. The thought haunted her.

To drown it out, she immersed herself in the data again. Her agent Marlo remained on the station under the cover of a calibration engineer sent by House Vess to service the cargo docks. He was to observe and, if necessary, adjust the course of events. Communication with him was minimal and ultra-encrypted.

Liara knew she was crossing the Rubicon. Until now, her fight had been clandestine, informational, economic. Cough was the first act of open, if disguised, warfare. After it, there would be no way back. The Empire, sensing a direct threat to its power, would respond with iron and fire. But passive resistance no longer worked. A catalyst was needed. A spark to start the fire.

She hoped the fire wouldn't consume everything she was trying to save.

PART II: THE SPARK

Chapter 17

Station-days blurred into a single, monotonous stretch of tense anticipation. Kael, performing his duties, felt the station tightening like a drawn bowstring. The arrival of the Internal Guard, the impending Archon's visit, the pervasive atmosphere of suspicion-it all formed a volatile mixture.

It was at this moment that Taren sought him out. The freelancer looked grimmer than usual. He caught Kael in a little-used service hyperlane near the main bay.

"Need to talk," he said, skipping any greeting. "Not in your quarters. My shuttle."

Kael hesitated. Contact with Taren was madness now. But something in the pilot's eyes made him nod. They moved quickly, avoiding attention, toward the battered, tarpaulin-covered Drifter.

Inside, it smelled of machine oil, ozone, and old plastic. Taren sealed the hatch and activated a device that sent a faint vibration through the hull-a field disruptor.

“They’re watching you, kid. Closely,” Taren began immediately. “The grey shadows tossed my ship yesterday. Looking for contraband, they said. Found a couple of unlicensed relays. Could’ve shipped me off to a penal colony, but I got off with a fine and threats. Because they wanted me loose. As bait. For you.”

Kael felt his blood run cold.

“Why are you telling me this? You’re risking yourself.”

“Risking?” Taren gave a hoarse laugh. “I’m already on their list. I’m telling you because I’ve seen the way you look at the stars. Not like a guard. Like a prisoner. And because I have something for you.”

He reached under the control panel and pulled out a flat package sealed with tape. Inside was a stack of old-fashioned paper photographs and a damaged data-slate.

“From the Last Stand. What’s left of it, anyway. A friend of mine, a scavenger, poked around after... well, after. Found this in an armored safe that somehow held. Didn’t turn it over to the Imps-knew they’d just destroy it anyway. Thought about selling it to collectors, but then... changed his mind. Gave it to me. Now I’m giving it to you.”

Kael took the package with trembling hands. The top photo showed a group of people in work suits before a crude insignia of the collective. They were smiling. Among them was a woman

hugging a girl of about eight. The girl had a plastic bracelet on her wrist.

“Elara,” he breathed.

“That her name?” Taren nodded. “The slate, they say, has their logs. Personal entries. Don’t know if it still works.”

Kael felt the weight of this gift almost physically. This was not just an artifact. It was evidence. Proof they were not a faceless “threat to stability,” but a community. People with names, faces, histories.

“Why?” he asked, his voice betraying a tremor.

“Because someone has to remember,” Taren said roughly. “And you seem to be one of the few whose conscience isn’t completely atrophied. Hide this. And if you decide to do something... not everyone on this station believes the Empire is their loving mother. There are those who are tired of being afraid. They need someone to lead. Not for glory. So more kids don’t get erased like rounding errors.”

It was an open call to rebellion. Kael looked at the photograph, at Elara’s smile. Something in his chest broke and realigned simultaneously. The fear was still there. But something else joined it—a rage. A quiet, cold rage against a system that allowed this. And resolve. Still vague, but now real.

“I am to meet with the Archon,” he said quietly. “After his

arrival.”

“Then time is short,” Taren stated. “Think fast, kid. And remember: sometimes the only right order is the one you give yourself. Not them.”

Kael hid the package under his uniform. He felt its burn against his heart. Now he had not just a name. He had faces. And a duty. Not to the Empire. To them. To Elara.

As he left the Drifter, he knew he was returning to a cage. But now he held a key. A fragile, dangerous key. All that remained was to decide which lock to turn.

Chapter 18

Archon Sevrán's visit began with a stunning, micro-calibrated silence. His flagship, *Unbending Will*, didn't just dock with the Eternal Sentinel-it seemed to swallow it, occupying the primary bay and extinguishing all external lighting in the section so that all attention was drawn to its black, arrowhead silhouette. From the ship emerged not mere crew, but a ceremonial guard in mirror-polished armor, lining the Archon's path.

Sevrán appeared without excessive pomp, in the severe dark silver uniform of his office. His presence was a physical sensation-like the drop in atmospheric pressure before a storm. He did not smile. He inspected. His gaze, slow and all-encompassing, slid over walls, ceilings, the faces of personnel frozen in deferential bows. He noted everything: dust on a vent grill, a nervous tic in a young technician, the slightly too-loud hum of a power converter. Every detail was cataloged in an invisible mental ledger of deviations from perfection.

Commander Grant, sweating and tense, led him to the command center for the report presentations. Kael Rin, standing in the line of officers, felt the Archon's gaze pause on him for a moment. It was not curiosity, but identification. Like a scanner reading a barcode. Subject: Rinn, Kael. Problematic. Requires

personal assessment.

Kael barely heard the introductory speeches. His mind was elsewhere: the photographs and slate, securely hidden yet seemingly radiating heat from their hiding place; the cold plastic of the bracelet in the vent; and a mounting, near-panic sensation that something was about to happen, right now. Cough was timed. Vail watched him like a hawk. Sevrans was here. The station was like clockwork into which a handful of sand was about to be thrown.

And the sand came.

First, it was barely noticeable: a flicker of lights at the far end of the hall. Then-a glitch in the holographic projector, distorting a mineral flow diagram. A technician hissed into a com-link, receiving messages. Sevrans did not pause. He continued speaking about the “necessity of absolute transparency in logistic chains,” but his eyes narrowed.

Then the emergency lighting flashed, and a calm but insistent automated voice echoed through the complex: “Attention. Secondary systems failure in Sector G-7. Multiple electronics malfunctions detected. Cause under investigation. Personnel in Sector G-7, remain calm and proceed to secondary egress points.”

A silence fell in the command center, broken only by Sevrán's quiet, icy voice:

“Commander Grant. Explain.”

“It's... a minor malfunction, Archon,” Grant stammered. “Low-priority sector, life support is not affected...”

“I can see the systems are unaffected. I am asking for the cause. And why ‘minor malfunctions’ occur on my strategic station during a visit by High Command. Is this negligence? Or sabotage?”

The last word hung in the air, heavy and sharp. Vail immediately stepped forward.

“Archon! Request permission to assume control. The Internal Guard is ready to secure the sector and conduct a sweep.”

“A sweep of what?” Sevrán turned to him. “Malfunctioning consoles? Your zeal is noted, Lieutenant, but diagnosis comes first. Officer Rinn.”

Kael started upon hearing his name.

“You are familiar with auxiliary system schematics. Take an engineering team, locate the source of the failure, and neutralize it. Report to me personally within thirty minutes. Commander Grant, you will accompany me. We will continue the inspection. Lieutenant Vail-secure the perimeter and observe. I wish to understand the scope.”

It was a chance. Or a trap. Or both. Kael saluted.
“As you command, Archon.”

En hyperlane to Sector G-7, rushing through hyperlanes lit by flashing emergency lights and filled with agitated voices, Kael tried to think. Sabotage. This was Liara Vess’s work, or someone else’s. She had created a crisis. And now Sevran was throwing him into the heart of it, testing him. If he showed hesitation, he would be deemed weak. If he acted too harshly, he could harm his own people. He needed to find balance. And understand the saboteurs’ true goal.

Sector G-7 was a picture of controlled chaos. Doors in individual compartments cycled open and shut erratically. Control panels smoked and sparked. Several technicians panicked, trying to reboot systems. A faint, sweet-metallic odor hung in the air-the scent of burnt nanoparticles.

Kael, drawing on his old fleet officer skills, quickly organized the personnel: one group for evacuation, another to isolate damaged circuits, a third to find the physical source of the contamination. He himself connected a portable scanner to the main distribution node. The data was strange: the damage was pinpoint, superficial, as if the system had experienced a localized but intense EMP, yet without the signature of a powerful energy

discharge.

And then he saw him-Marlo, the House Vess “calibration engineer.” He was working off to the side, ostensibly checking a ventilation damper. Their eyes met for a fraction of a second. And Marlo, almost imperceptibly, nodded toward an inconspicuous service hatch in the floor, leading to a coolant supply conduit.

It was a sign. Risk everything? But Kael had made his decision the moment he took Elara’s photograph. He waited until his team was occupied, then quickly opened the hatch. Inside, on insulation lining, lay a small cylinder-a spent, disintegrated biomechanical injector. And next to it-an ordinary, untraceable com-link. Kael grabbed both, shoving them into his pocket.

He understood. The sabotage was theater. And the com-link was an invitation backstage. The Empire demanded blind obedience. The rebels offered a choice.

But the choice had to be made now.

Chapter 19

Kael returned to the command center exactly twenty-eight minutes later. He was smudged with soot, sweat beading on his forehead, but his eyes burned with a cold, clear light. The center was gripped by tense silence. Sevrán, Grant, and Vail awaited him, surrounded by grim Internal Guard officers.

“Report, Officer Rinn,” Sevrán commanded.

“The malfunction is contained, Archon. Source: contamination of the Sector G-7 ventilation system with highly conductive nanoparticles. Nature: artificial, sabotage. The dispersal device self-destructed. No casualties. Damage is limited to low-level electronics. Security and life support systems were unaffected.”

“By whom?” Vail asked in a single word.

“Impossible to determine. The device was placed professionally, likely in advance. It was a demonstration of vulnerability.”

“A demonstration?” Sevrán’s voice was quiet, but held the rumble of an approaching storm. “You believe this was a message?”

“Yes, Archon. A message that even here, at the heart of Imperial authority in the sector, there is no inviolability. That a strike can be made without killing. The goal was not destruction,

but to undermine trust in our ability to maintain order.”

Sevrans slowly circled him, his gaze drilling into Kael.

“And what are your recommendations, Officer? You have seen the situation firsthand.”

Kael took a deep breath. This was the point of no return. He could propose harsher measures, total lockdowns, exemplary punishments-Vail’s path, the Internal Guard’s path. Or...

“I recommend we do not play their game, Archon. Tightening controls, mass reprisals now-that is precisely what they want. It will breed greater fear and hatred. I recommend precise, silent work. Identify weaknesses in our protocols, not scapegoats. Strengthen not the walls of fear, but logistics and living conditions for the personnel. A hungry, terrified soldier sees an enemy in every shadow. One confident in his support looks to the external threat. They are attacking morale. We must respond by fortifying it.”

A tomb-like silence filled the center. Grant stared at Kael in horror. Vail with mute outrage. This was heresy. Softness in response to a challenge. Understanding instead of punishment.

Sevrans looked at Kael for a long time. It seemed he saw right through him, saw the hidden com-link, the photographs, the bracelet, the entire internal struggle.

“An interesting approach,” he finally said. “Soft. Almost

humane. You believe order can be maintained... through care?"

"I believe, Archon, that order maintained solely by fear is a prison regime. And we are building not a prison, but a civilization. Or am I mistaken?"

The audacity of the question made even the guards flinch. Sevran did not answer immediately. He walked to the main screen, where the logistics diagram was displayed once more.

"Your recommendations... have a rational core, Officer Rinn. But they ignore the enemy's nature. The enemy does not seek dialogue. It seeks weakness. By showing 'understanding,' we expose our throat. Lieutenant Vail."

"Archon!"

"Announce station-wide: due to an act of sabotage, a state of emergency is declared. Curfew. Double patrols. The Internal Guard is authorized to search any compartment and interrogate any person without cause. Detain all personnel who were in Sector G-7 in the last 48 hours for screening. As for Officer Rinn-for his demonstrated initiative... he is relieved of operational command pending investigation and returned to logistics duties. His recommendations... will be taken under advisement at the appropriate level."

It was a masterstroke. Sevran did not arrest him. He publicly praised, then sidelined him, neutralizing him. And he turned Kael's humane proposals into a tool for harsher measures-"taken

under advisement' could mean anything. Kael realized he had lost this round. The Archon was a step ahead. He saw Kael as a threat, not a direct one, but an ideological one. Such a threat cannot simply be shot-it must be discredited, isolated, its failure demonstrated.

“You are dismissed, Officer Rinn,” Sevrans said, already turning to other screens, signaling the audience was over. “And remember: compassion for the enemy is a betrayal of those that enemy may kill tomorrow.”

Kael walked out, feeling the stares upon him: curious, fearful, gloating. He was neither a hero nor a traitor. He was a pawn that had just been moved to a dangerous, but not yet lost, square. His ability to act openly had been taken away. But in his pocket was a com-link. And now he had to decide whether to dial the one number he was sure was stored there.

Chapter 20

In his quarters, locked from the inside, Kael finally allowed himself to tremble. The adrenaline receded, leaving emptiness and cold in its wake. He pulled out the com-link retrieved from the conduit. It was a simple, clean device with no identifiers. Its memory held one encrypted contact. And a text: Your choice is not between order and chaos. But between executioner and man. If you are ready to listen-call. One chance.

He stared at the screen, his finger hovering over the call button. Images flashed through his mind: Elara's smiling face in the photograph; Sevran's cold eyes seeing him only as a variable in an equation; Grant's bewildered face; Vail's predatory confidence. And Taren's quiet voice: Sometimes the only right order is the one you give yourself.

He pressed it.

The connection established almost instantly, the quality indicating powerful relays. A face appeared on the screen. Not Liara Vess, as he'd expected, but a man in his mid-forties, with intelligent, weary eyes and a scar through his brow. He was neither soldier nor aristocrat. He was something else.

"Kael Rin," the man said, not as a question but a statement.

“My name is Erran. I represent the interests of... people tired of the dictatorship of flawlessness. We’ve been watching you.”

“Why did you do this? That sabotage? You’ve only put people in the path of reprisals!”

“We created a moment of choice. For you. And for him. And you saw the result. Sevran chose to tighten his grip. He always chooses that. It’s the only language he understands. And you? Do you still believe the system can be fixed from within?”

Kael was silent. He didn’t know the answer.

“We don’t have time for philosophy,” Erran continued. “Vail and his hounds have already begun the sweep. They will arrest innocents, torture them for confessions. Will you allow that?”

“I can’t do anything! I’ve been sidelined!”

“You can make a choice. Stand aside and watch as your words about ‘morale’ are trampled by Internal Guard boots. Or... provide us with information that can pull some out from under the hammer. Station schematics. Internal Guard patrol schedules. You know the weak points in their new security web. You helped create it.”

This was an outright offer of treason. Handing classified data to the enemy. Kael felt the floor falling away beneath him.

“And if I refuse?”

“Then people suffer. And you remain in your cabin-cell with a clean, useless conscience while lives are broken around you.

And in the end, Vail will come for you anyway. To them, you are living proof their methods don't work. They will not leave you be."

The logic was as ruthless as Sevran's, but with an inverted vector. The Empire pressured with duty and fear. The rebels pressured with duty and compassion. Both demanded his choice. An immediate one.

"What will you do with the information?" Kael asked, his voice hoarse.

"We will save those we can. And deliver a precise, targeted strike against the machinery of repression. We don't want to blow up the station, Rinn. We want to shatter the myth of its invulnerability and righteousness. You give us the tools. We will do everything to ensure your people are not harmed. A soldier's word."

A soldier's word. Kael almost laughed. He was no longer a soldier. He was something broken and reassembling.

"I have conditions," he said, surprising himself. "No deaths among station personnel if it can be avoided. You extract only those in real danger. And... you find a way to get the data on the Last Stand collective out. So people know. Everyone."

Erran, on the other end, slowly nodded.

"Agreed. The data on the collective is already being disseminated. With the photographs. But your involvement will

accelerate it. As for your conditions... we are not butchers. We are trying to build something better, not repeat the Empire's mistakes."

It might be a lie. It might not. But Kael had no choice. Or rather, he did: between complicity in evil by order, and complicity in evil by his own decision, but with hope for a lesser price. He chose hope.

"Alright. I'll get you the data. But only on a secure channel, and only once."

"Agreed. Await instructions on this com-link. And, Kael... welcome to the war. I hope your conscience can bear what we must do."

The connection terminated. Kael lowered the com-link. War. He was now at war. Not as a soldier of the Empire, but as a secret agent for... whom? The Resistance? Rebels? Terrorists? The definition depended on the point of view. His hands shook, but inside, for the first time in many days, a strange, icy calm settled. The choice was made. The path back was cut off. Now he had to live with the consequences. And act.

He walked to the viewport. The Eternal Sentinel, massive and seemingly immutable, hung in the blackness. But Kael now knew: the cracks were not only in his soul. They were in the station's very hull, in the fabric of the Empire itself. And he, Kael

Rin, had just poured the first drop of poison into one of those cracks. The consequences would be irreversible.

PART III: ESCALATION

Chapter 21

The silence in his quarters after the call with Erran was of a different quality. Before, it had been oppressive, filled with unspoken fears. Now it hummed with the tension of a decision made, like a string that had just been released and was still vibrating in an inaudible yet palpable range. Kael sat on the edge of his bunk, holding the simple com-link that had transformed from a potential trap into an instrument of treason. His fingers moved mechanically over its smooth casing, as if trying to read by touch the moral code he had just cracked.

He wasn't thinking about the lofty ideals of freedom Erran had spoken of. He was thinking about logistics. About how to transfer the data without getting caught. After Sevran's order, Station Eternal Sentinel had become a hive where half the bees suspected the other half of being hornets. Motion sensors in the hyperlanes had been recalibrated to track the slightest deviations in personnel hyperlanes. Comms systems, apart from official channels, were under constant deep-scan for encrypted traffic. The Internal Guard, those grey shadows, patrolled not on a schedule but randomly, their hyperlanes generated by an

algorithm to prevent predictability.

Kael leaned back, closing his eyes. He mentally walked through the station, along its service arteries and capillaries. He knew it not just as a logistics officer, but as a former captain who had studied the architecture of such outposts for defense. And every defense has its weak points. Not holes, but... blind spots. Places where systems overlapped, creating brief dead zones. Like the junction between sectors G and H, where motion scanners were calibrated on an old, imperfect algorithm, leaving a five-meter zone they “saw” with a three-second lag. Or the main reactor’s ventilation shaft: the radiation background there created interference for most scanning beams, making it an ideal physical hide, but not for data transmission-the signal would be drowned out.

Information could only be transmitted in a moment when the security system was momentarily overloaded or distracted. Kael himself was under the lens. Any action outside his routine would raise suspicion. So, he needed an external trigger. Or an internal ally.

Suddenly, the image of Engineer Darax surfaced in his memory-an old grumbler from life support. The very one who complained about Vail’s new protocols, calling them “idiocy that’ll leave us without air because some dandy’s afraid of

shadows.” Darax was old school, loyal to the station as a living entity, not to the Empire as an abstraction. And he hated the Internal Guard for breaking his finely tuned equipment with their clumsy inspections. Risky. But Kael needed someone with access to system logs and, more importantly, to emergency alert overrides.

A plan began to take vague shape. Dangerous, reckless, built on subtle manipulation and another’s resentment. That’s what the first step into betrayal had to be—quiet, unheroic, dirty. He sighed, stood up, and walked to the small wall terminal used to order meals and access non-classified technical documentation. He pretended to study ventilation filter upgrade schematics, while actually searching for Darax’s shift schedule. The old man was due for duty in the lower reactor tier in six hours.

Until then, Kael had to be impeccable. He left his quarters and headed for the logistics department, where his now-limited duties boiled down to verifying numbers in endless spreadsheets. Along the way, he caught the looks. Some colleagues averted their eyes—afraid of association with the sidelined officer. Others watched with cold curiosity. A third group—with a barely perceptible, deeply buried sympathy. He saw it in the microscopic delay of a nod, in eye contact held a fraction too long. He was not alone in his dissent. He had become an unofficial barometer of sentiment. And that made his position even more precarious.

The logistics center was gripped by a nervous silence, broken only by the tapping of keys and monotone voices dictating container codes. Kael sat at his terminal, and the screen came to life, showing him the stream of cargo he once guarded and now merely accounted for. Every digit, every tag now seemed part of a giant machine grinding destinies into statistics. He worked mechanically, part of his mind still refining the plan.

Two hours later, a sharp general alert interrupted him. Vail's voice, stripped of its usual saccharine politeness, echoed from all speakers:

“Attention all personnel. As part of the investigation into the sabotage in Sector G-7, the Internal Guard is conducting an unscheduled search of residential sectors 4 through 7. Occupants of said sectors are to vacate their quarters immediately and proceed to holding area in Mess Module ‘Delta’. Non-compliance will be treated as obstruction of Imperial justice.”

A dead silence fell, then an explosion of muffled voices, the scrape of chairs being pushed back. Kael felt a chill run down his spine. His quarters were in Sector 5. They were heading straight for him. This was no coincidence. It was pressure. A stress test. He stood, trying to make his movements smooth, betraying neither fear nor haste. On the way to “Delta”, he saw grey figures with expressionless faces already entering the residential blocks,

carrying portable scanners and toolkits for forcible entry.

The holding area quickly filled with people in various states of dress, their faces confused and angry. Kael leaned against a wall in a corner, observing. He saw a young technician, hands trembling, try to light an e-cigarette but drop it. He saw a comms officer quietly weeping into a friend's shoulder. They were being humiliated. Deliberately. Systematically. This was the "fortification of order" Sevran had spoken of. To destroy personal space, sow panic, make everyone feel naked and guilty before a faceless authority.

And at that moment, Kael caught Darax's eye. The old engineer stood against the opposite wall, his hands covered in fresh abrasions-likely from hasty work on panels. Their gazes met. And in Darax's eyes, Kael saw not fear, but rage. A smoldering, boiling rage of a professional torn away from work he considered vital for this circus. Kael gave an almost imperceptible nod, expressing nothing but silent understanding. Darax frowned, then looked away, but his clenched fists spoke for themselves.

The search lasted three hours. When people were finally allowed to return, their quarters were a sorry sight: opened panels, upturned belongings, traces of scanning gel on surfaces. Kael's room had been tossed. Even his mattress was slit open. But

the vent hide with the bracelet and photos went undiscovered. They were looking for modern devices, explosives, weapons. They didn't expect to find a child's bracelet held by a magnet in a grimy air duct. The irony: he was saved by the Empire's habit of looking for grand conspiracies, missing simple human artifacts.

Returning to his ransacked quarters, Kael didn't bother to tidy up. He sat on the floor amidst the chaos and activated the com-link. It was time to act. The risk had increased tenfold, but an opportunity had also appeared. Darax's rage could be used. He just needed to find the right words. And the right moment to say them.

Chapter 22

The Stellar Scion emerged from its hyperspace jump on the fringe of the Eridanus system, far from Imperial patrol hyperlanes. Here, amidst a chaotic cluster of asteroids and the gas trails of a long-dead comet, lay Silent Haven—not so much a station as a conglomerate of lashed-together ship husks, old construction platforms, and hastily built modules. It was a nerve center of the Resistance, a mythical place the Empire dismissed as rumor, but which those who fought it knew as a crossroads of many paths.

In a private dock shielded by cloaking fields and false echo-signatures, Liara Vess descended the ramp. The air smelled of ozone, metallic dust, and the subtle, sweet tang of recycled air—the mark of an aging but well-maintained life support system. She was met by Erran. In person, he seemed even more worn than over the comms, but his movements held the spring-loaded energy of a fighter accustomed to danger.

“Liara. KaelRinnis in play. He delivered the first data: Internal Guard patrol schematics and scanner blind spots on the Sentinel. A valuable haul.”

“Too valuable to be true,” Liara replied coolly, shedding her cloak. “It could be a trap. Sevran is capable of such sacrifices.”

“The data has been cross-checked with our sources inside.

It's accurate. More importantly, he transmitted it by exploiting a vulnerability in the equipment failure alert system, using a disgruntled engineer as a relay. It's clever. Not the Imperial provocation style. They're cruder."

"An engineer?" Liara raised an eyebrow.

"Darax. A veteran, a cynic, cares more about his 'machinery' than the Empire. Rinn appealed to his professional pride, suggesting he 'fix' a vulnerability the engineer already knew about. Essentially, asked him to be a living shield for the data packet. Darax agreed, likely seeing it as his own small rebellion against the Internal Guard idiots."

They moved through Silent Haven's winding hyperlanes to the command center-a room lined with screens streaming data from dozens of systems. A tense, quiet activity reigned here. This was the brain of the burgeoning rebellion.

"And what does he ask in return?" Liara asked, studying the map of the Verdict sector, where several new icons now blinked-potential cells of dissent identified thanks to Rinn's data.

"Nothing yet. Only the continuation of operations to extract people from the Sentinel. He provided a list of seventeen names-those Vail has flagged as primary suspects. Some are just people who crossed the political officer."

"Do we extract them?"

"We'll try. But it's a risk. Every extraction confirms we have a source. And leads Vail straight to Rinn."

“Then we need to create an alternate explanation,” Liara responded instantly. “Stage a ‘leak’ through a channel Vail believes is compromised but still monitors. Let him think his list was exposed by his own carelessness, or sold out by one of his own. Sow paranoia in their own ranks.”

Erran nodded, making a note on his tablet.

“Clever. That will divert them. But it’s a temporary measure. Rinn can’t stay on the station long. Risk grows exponentially with each transmission. We either extract him or give him a mission that justifies the inevitable exposure.”

“His task now is to be our eyes and ears within the system’s heart,” Liara countered. “He provides data we can’t get anywhere else. He is our best investment. We must risk him wisely. The next transmission shouldn’t be about patrols, but something strategic. Sevrans’ plans for the sector. Fleet movements. Rinn has access to logistics, and logistics mirror strategic intent. How much fuel is being shipped to a military base? What spare parts are prioritized? Where are transports with riot suppression gear headed? He can give us the picture.”

She approached the central holotable, summoning an image of the Eternal Sentinel.

“Sevrans has made the station a symbol. A symbol of Imperial invincibility. Our task is to turn it into the opposite symbol. One of vulnerability. Cough was the first sneeze. The next strike

must be... precise, but painful. Not against systems, but against Sevrans personal symbol. What if, during his next inspection, in plain view, something happens that proves even he is not protected? Not an assassination-that would make him a martyr. But something humiliating. A failure in his personal security detail? A leak of compromising data about the 'collective incident' to every terminal on the station?"

Erran whistled softly.

"That's nearly suicidal. The data on the collective is the hottest material. If it surfaces right on the Sentinel, Sevrans will raze the station to the foundation to cover his tracks. Rinn included."

"Not necessarily," Liara said thoughtfully. "If the leak is framed as the work of internal Imperial rivals, say, the disgruntled Trade House Kailens... Sevrans would be forced to act more cautiously. He can't just destroy the station if suspicion falls on a pillar of his own system. He'd have to play a complex game. And in that game, we'd have more room to maneuver. We need to contact our agent with the Kailens. And prepare the 'leak.' Rinn would need to find a way to embed a virus in the logistics report Sevrans will undoubtedly request. A virus that, at the right moment, displays not numbers, but the faces of the Last Stand."

She spoke calmly, analytically, but a cold fire burned in her eyes. She was playing multidimensional chess, with lives, reputations, and entire worlds as pieces. KaelRinnwas her queen,

still hidden deep on the board. It was time to bring him to a more active position. And pay the inevitable price.

“He might refuse,” Erran noted. “This isn’t just sharing data to save people. It’s a direct attack.”

“He’s already on this path, Erran. Going halfway risks more than seeing it through. Half-measures leave you dangling over the abyss. We must either pull him out completely or give him a reason to run as fast as he can. Relay the assignment to him. And prepare an emergency evacuation channel. The man who saw Elara’s face will not stop at showing it to others. Of that, I am certain.”

Her certainty was not emotional, but derived from analysis. She had studied Kael Rin’s dossier down to the smallest detail: his actions in border conflicts (where he sometimes showed unorthodox, risky humanity), his psychological profiles after particularly harsh missions, his quiet but persistent disagreement with certain Imperial Army doctrines. He was the perfect candidate for turning-a man of the system in whom the system itself had bred its contradictions. Now those contradictions worked for her.

Liara turned from the hologram and looked out the command center viewport into the star-strewn dark. Somewhere out there, in another corner of the sector on Ferrum-5, Korvan was likely receiving the first shipments of Kailen contraband. On

other worlds, similar pockets were simmering. Her network was growing. But with growth came immense responsibility. Every mistake now meant not a failed operation, but the death of whole communities. She felt the weight of that responsibility every second. She drowned it in work, calculations, cold fury. But at night, in rare moments of quiet, that weight pressed on her like a black hole's gravity, threatening to crush her. She was an architect of freedom, but first, she had to be an architect of chaos. And that thought was her most terrible, and most carefully hidden, secret.

Chapter 23

The Archon's palace on Centauri Prime was a place where time flowed differently. There was no fringe-station bustle here, only the smooth, relentless motion of a vast state machine. In his study, Sevran was not reviewing reports, but the “consciousness stream” of the Verdict sector—an artificial neural network analyzing trillions of data points: financial transactions, ship movements, energy consumption spikes, subtle shifts in the language of peripheral official communiqués, even the frequency of certain words in unencrypted personal correspondence (what the Empire modestly called “sentiment analysis”).

The graph before him was troubling. After the Sentinel incident, the chaos curve in the sector had not dropped as fear-based models predicted. It had plateaued at a high level, then began creeping upward with a new, inexplicable momentum. This meant repression had not broken the will to resist, but had tempered it. Moreover, strange anomalies had appeared: spikes in Trade House Kailen financial flows that didn't match their official contracts; unexplained tracking system failures on two minor asteroid outposts; and most interesting—subtle, almost invisible shifts in the Eternal Sentinel's logistics patterns. Someone very clever was gaming the system, making adjustments that looked like natural fluctuations but in sum

created a different picture.

This is not spontaneous discontent, Sevrans thought. It is a managed process. There is a strategist. And there are operators within the system.

His thoughts returned to Kael Rin. The sidelined officer's conduct was impeccably boring. His numbers were perfect. His movements predictable. Too predictable? Vail reported that Rinn had practically become a ghost, avoiding all unofficial contact. This could be a sign of loyalty-a man retreating into work, afraid to err. Or a sign of extreme caution from someone with something to hide.

Sevrans summoned Vail's hologram. The lieutenant appeared, looking tired but charged with missionary zeal.

"Archon. We have conducted 47 interrogations. Obtained three confessions of separatist sympathies. But nothing concrete on the sabotage."

"Confessions obtained under pressure are of little value, Lieutenant. They speak of fear, not guilt. The anomalies in the station's logistics reports. Have you tracked them?"

Vail hesitated momentarily.

"Logistics... is not my direct area of responsibility, Archon. Officer Rinn and his department-"

"Precisely. And I want you to immerse yourself in that area.

Take control of not just the people, but the data. Embed a ‘silent passenger’ program into the station’s logistic network—one that tracks all changes, all queries, all deviations from standard patterns. Especially those originating from Officer Rinn’s terminal. And do it quietly. He must not know.”

“As you command. You suspect he-”

“I suspect no one without evidence,” Sevrans cut him off coldly. “I study the system. Rinn is part of that system. If there is a flaw, it may manifest through any component. Furthermore, intensify surveillance of all station contacts with Trade House Kailen. I want to know every whisper between them.”

After ending the link, Sevrans stood and approached the massive, wall-spanning map of the Empire. Dozens of star systems connected by the thin threads of hyperlanes. The Eternal Sentinel was a tiny point, but a point at a nexus. Losing control over it would not be a military catastrophe—the Empire could crush a rebellion on one station. But symbolically... it would be the collapse of a myth. The myth that the Empire was omnipresent, all-seeing, and unshakeable.

He thought of what Rinn had said: Order maintained solely by fear is a prison regime. A soft, dangerous heresy. But it contained a grain of truth, which Sevrans acknowledged privately. Fear was a necessary, but insufficient condition. Faith was also needed. Faith in the necessity of order, in the system’s justice,

in its ultimate benevolence. The Empire provided stability, technological progress, protection from external threats (real or manufactured). But somewhere on the periphery, that faith had cracked. And now, through that crack, seeped the poison of doubt.

Perhaps, he mused, he should not tighten the grip, but make a public, magnanimous gesture. Pardon some of the detained? Admit “excesses on the ground”? But that would be perceived as weakness. And would show the rebels their tactics worked. No. The pressure must not be eased, but redirected. Find the real enemy and crush it in plain sight. So that both the wavering and the rebels would understand: the Empire punishes not blindly, but precisely. And shows mercy not from weakness, but from justice.

He returned to his desk and issued a new directive, this time not to Vail, but to the Imperial Fleet Commander in the Verdict sector.

“Prepare a strike group of three Thunderclap-class cruisers. Target: asteroid base Sanctuary in the Helios system. Intelligence indicates its use by smugglers and possible presence of separatist elements. The operation must be lightning-fast and demonstrative. Total destruction of the base and all contents. No warnings, no negotiations. Broadcast attack data on all official sector channels. Let them see what happens to those who defy order.”

It was a classic move. Distract from internal problems with an external show of force. Sanctuary was a real target, but not the primary one. The primary target was the audience—all the other fringe worlds and, of course, the Eternal Sentinel. Sevrán wanted to send a dual message: to the rebels—“We will find you and erase you”; to the loyal but doubting—“We protect you from this filth.” And perhaps, to a man like Kael Rin—“Your doubts lead to this. To the death of the innocent (for there would surely be innocents on the base) in Imperial fire. Choose your side.”

He harbored no illusions this would stop the resistance. But it could splinter it. Separate the radicals willing to die from those who simply wanted a better life and would balk at such a price. A splintered movement was easier to manage. Easier to destroy piece by piece.

Archon Sevrán watched the hologram of the prepared operation. He felt no bloodlust, no regret. He felt the weight of the decision, as a surgeon feels the weight of a scalpel before a complex procedure. Sometimes, to save the body, you must amputate an infected limb. Even if it causes pain. Even if the body will never be the same afterward. The end justified the means. Always. Because the end was nothing less than the survival of human civilization as a single, managed whole. Everything else was sentiment.

Chapter 24

The Helios system was a typical fringe graveyard: dozens of poorly mineralized asteroids, a thin band of debris from an ancient catastrophe, and a single, barely breathable dwarf planet the locals jokingly called Icicle. The Sanctuary base, carved into the heart of asteroid Heraclitus-9, was neither a military outpost nor a hub of rebellion. It was a node of survival. It drew those with no place in the Imperial hierarchy: independent prospectors, repair technicians trading services outside the corps, families fleeing debt or persecution on the Core Worlds, and, of course, petty smugglers moving everything from liquor to unlicensed meds.

When three Thunderclap-class cruisers emerged from hyperspace on the system's fringe, their appearance didn't cause immediate panic. Ships on the periphery weren't rare. But when the cruisers, ignoring identification requests, assumed attack vectors and began an unprecedented scan of the asteroid belt, a thin layer of fear began to seep across the comm channels.

On Sanctuary, the threat wasn't immediately understood. The old, surplus military scanner serving as the base's early warning system only triggered an alarm when the Thunderclaps began charging their primary energy batteries. By then, there was

almost no time for evacuation.

The base's commander, a woman named Irma who had once served as an engineer on an Imperial tanker, watched the screens with a sense of icy, familiar dread. She had seen these signatures before. This wasn't a police raid. It was an eradication.

"All vessels! Immediate, scattered evacuation! Don't cluster!" she screamed into the general channel, breaking all protocols of stealth. "Imperial fleet! Their intent is destruction!"

The chaos that followed her words was almost palpable. Sanctuary's docks, hollowed from rock, became an anthill struck by a shovel. Dozens of small craft—from cargo lighters to personal yachts—desperately tried to detach from airlocks, jostling, creating snarls. Some, in panic, fired on ships blocking their path, trying to clear a way. Others abandoned everything and ran for emergency pods, cramming ten people into capsules designed for four.

And the cruisers advanced. Their shields flared blue, absorbing the few, desperate shots from Sanctuary's meager defensive platforms. The strike group commander, Admiral Vorontsov, a man raised on unwavering dogma, watched the approach with a stony face. His orders were clear: Total annihilation. A demonstration of resolve.

“Primary batteries, charge to maximum. Target: asteroid Heraclitus-9. Tactical nuclear ordnance, salvo with overlapping blast zones. Leave no debris larger than one meter,” he commanded, his voice as calm as if ordering a deck swab.

“Admiral,” a young communications officer interjected, face pale. “Scanners show massive civilian vessel egress. Many small targets...”

“The target is defined by Archon’s command, Lieutenant. Asteroid base Sanctuary, identified as a haven for enemies of the Empire. All who remain within the engagement zone have made their choice. Fire.”

The Thunderclaps’ salvo was a monstrous spectacle even in the vacuum. Hundreds of pure energy bolts and tactical nuclear warheads streaked toward the asteroid. The base’s shielding, designed to deflect micrometeorites and accidental collisions, vaporized on first contact. Then, asteroid Heraclitus-9 ceased to exist. In its place bloomed a momentary, blinding second sun, which, fading, left behind an expanding cloud of superheated gas, molten metal, and rubble. The shockwave of radiation and debris overtook many of the fleeing ships, tearing them apart, frying systems, turning them into helpless, drifting tombs.

Admiral Vorontsov observed the results with a satisfied nod.

“Record the results. Broadcast on primary sector frequencies with the tagline ‘Imperial Justice Has Been Served.’ All surviving

targets within a five-thousand-kilometer radius-eliminate. Leave no witnesses to distort the narrative. Continue patrol of the system for the next 72 hours.”

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