

Chapter 1

THE FORGOTTEN PEACEMAKER

“Conrad, do you copy?”

The voice found him in the dark. Static-tainted. Urgent.

“Conrad, respond.”

A glow blinked into being, then another. Shapes quivered at the margins, crimson warnings hovering just beyond reach.

The absence resisted at first. He trembled.

Then a jagged seam split the void, revealing a chamber, or an arcane engine of glass and gears. Light spilled through, erratic and searing.

Arcs skittered across panels, controls pulsing beyond reason.

He blinked. Pain followed. His body felt misaligned, as if it belonged to someone else. Gravity spun without direction. He gripped the slick seat, fighting a pull he could not name. Up twisted into down, the space around him without anchor.

Another comm burst.

“Base to CJ. You’re in the open. Reroute now!”

CJ. They were calling him that. Who was calling him that?

His breath snagged, trapped inside the visor. He swatted at his face once, then again, striking smooth glass. A helmet. Panic became motion. His fingers traced the rim, searching for a release. Instinct took over. He clawed at the collar until it gave with a sharp click.

With effort, he wrenched it free. Smoke burned his nose, bitter with melted insulation. Interference crackled in his ears, the open comm relentless. A shadow streaked past. Metal flashed, then vanished in a white flare. The destruction made no sound.

Beyond the canopy lay stars and smoke. A line of fire tore past. Another fighter came apart mid-flight. A blast hit close. Shrapnel rattled against the hull. Purple-gray fog rolled by, warped with heat.

He leaned forward, scanning the wreck-lit distance. Stars framed distant glints of light. Thrusters? Debris?

A sharp gleam caught his attention.

Not outside. A reflection.

A face stared back, but it was not his own. Younger. Harder. Wild-eyed. The same jawline, marked by a scar he had never earned. Who was this stranger wearing his bones? The beat in his neck quickened as he drew nearer, fingertips lifting toward the image. It moved with him.

It was him. And it was not.

For one suspended instant, time lost its footing.

A pale scrap fluttered near the console strut. Paper, or something like it: foil-backed, scorched along one edge, pinned beneath a cracked strip of metal. Handwriting he almost recognized survived in broken strokes.

...even silence is...

Below it, almost lost beneath soot, a second fragment waited.

Atl—

He reached for it.

The hull groaned. The scrap slipped into the crumbling seams of the console, tore free, and was gone before his fingers could close.

The thought broke with a whisper in his ear.

"CJ... where the hell..."

A shout overran the channel. *"Bandit on my six!"*

The signal collapsed into a wall of noise. He slapped the comm panel.

"What... who is this..." The words came out thin, scraped raw by effort.

The cockpit jolted, or perhaps he did. Fractured arcs spat across the panels. Interfaces spasmed with unreadable warnings, then disintegrated. Stars smeared.

The roar collapsed into the creak of old wood. The smell of scorched wiring dissolved into candle smoke. Voices murmured where alarms had screamed.

Light returned, amber and alive, glancing off crystal and mahogany.

He blinked once. Then again, until the present found its shape.

Seated. Upright. His lower back ached. Only then did he realize how hard he had been bracing.

The nightmare withdrew.



Enveloped by the velvet gloom of a gilded mezzanine box, a man and woman watched the chamber below. In their high-collared tailcoats and silk-lined sleeves, they were indistinguishable from delegates awaiting their turn to speak. The woman held a lacquered opera glass to one eye, her expression as fixed as the stone caryatids framing the tier.

Among the delegates, the talk gathered, rising in uneven swells. Conrad straightened in his seat, one hand moving instinctively to the nape of his neck. His composure had begun to fray.

"See how he moves?" the man said, barely above the velvet rail.

She lowered the lorgnette, her fingers lingering around the handle. "The strain is there. It nearly snapped him."

"But it didn't," the man replied. "And he doesn't need to know."

She turned to him, letting the pause test his answer before granting a slow nod. "I hope your faith in him is earned."

He kept his eyes on the floor below. "He'll hold," he said, as if the matter had already been decided.

Beneath them, the clamor rose, restless and splintered, born of an imperial peace already coming undone.

June 1815. At the Ballhausplatz, the Congress of Vienna pressed toward its final draft. The great hall carried more grandeur than trust, heavy with the scent of beeswax and stale cologne, its polished order beginning to fail. Beneath Baroque spires, diplomats crowded the forecourt, their arguments striking the palace stone. Through its marble corridors, the promise of peace had become something negotiated by exhaustion.

Conrad drew one breath deep enough to steady his first words and forced his hands still as the celestial vertigo began to fade. A sheet of paper caught the candlelight. Ink rippled across it, strange and alive. The phantom vision clung to his retinas, an afterimage he could not yet dismiss. He dragged his focus back to the mahogany table.

"Gentlemen," he began, each word placed cleanly, "we have wandered from the spirit of the draft."

"Spirit? Sir, we are discussing the letter of the law!" The Prussian's fist struck the table. "Saxony was promised whole. Now you offer Prussia two-fifths and call the arithmetic peace. Do not dress confiscation as balance because a neutral hand held the pen."

What folly, Conrad. Even a handful of lost seconds, adrift on the edge of a distant world, had left him out of step. And they could smell it. Predators in silk and brass, waiting for a tremor.

He placed both palms on the table, then spoke, letting the words climb to the high, painted ceiling.

"Peace is not forged by the hand that refuses to release the sword. That is the cost."

"A cost easily paid by one who risks nothing," the Prussian shot back.

Conrad locked eyes with him and answered without lifting his tone.

"I have spent coins you haven't even dreamed of."

The line passed through the chamber like a draft beneath a closed door. Men leaned forward from their weary benches, and the crowd answered with a low chorus of "Aye."

Even the Prussian faltered.

Just beyond the colonnade of the northern transept, where heavy drapery muffled the echoes but not the intent, two men combed through a scatter of parchment and half-finished notes. Vincent of Britain spoke first, low enough to ensure the nearest clerk could not hear.

"Mister Laurent rarely troubled the chamber until today. He has always preferred corners and corridors for his dealings, it seems."

Baron de Villefort of France adjusted one page without reading it. "Most of his influence was cultivated behind closed doors. Baron von Gagern brought him here under the Dutch banner, yet he did not remain in that role for long."

While plenipotentiaries debated in the grand halls, unseen envoys moved between the quarters of lesser powers, stitching private understandings into precarious alignments—a quieter diplomacy conducted by carriage, corridor, and supper table.

"Conrad Laurent," Vincent resumed. "Swiss-born, a scholar of the law of nations. Nominally neutral, yet he has made himself the confidant of every faction in this palace. Some call it political genius, Villefort. I call it a dangerous liability."

"Confidant?" Villefort inclined his head. "That is the polite word for it. An indispensable one, regardless. It was his hand that drafted the neutrality clause, the one that kept Bavaria from quitting the floor. Prussia roared, he whispered. Austria yielded. Württemberg followed. He listens with a terrifying patience, Vincent. That is what unsettles men of power."

Vincent kept his attention on the chamber through the gap between two columns. "Orlov said much the same in the side rooms last night. Not admiringly. He called Laurent a Swiss objection in human form. Russia would set a crown

upon Warsaw, Prussia would take Saxony as payment, and this neutral clerk has made both appetites look vulgar.”

Villefort sneered softly. “Orlov measures diplomacy by the length of a Cosack’s pike, and the Tsar has never understood a peace he could not crush under heavy boots. Petersburg distrusts any man who cannot be inventoried, annexed, or thanked for the privilege.”

“You misread the man,” Vincent said. “Orlov is no blunt instrument. He is many things, Villefort, but seldom careless.”

“I dismiss Russia’s wounded pride,” Villefort replied. “Not its reach.”

A tremor of movement passed through the main hall before Vincent could answer. Applause broke out, tentative at first. “Hear him!” someone called from the floor. A few half-rose; the rest remained rooted. The Prussian’s protest died in his throat, smothered by that unexpected approval. “Vivat!” rose once from the rear benches, sharp and lonely.

Villefort looked down at the spectacle, his thin smile gone. “The final treaty now bears Laurent’s fingerprints, though he holds neither title nor lands.”

“Fingerprints are enough for a noose,” Vincent said, watching the Swiss clerk navigate the crowd. “Or a blade. Orlov is not the only one counting the cost of this peace, Villefort. They have already tried to settle the debt once.”

Villefort gave him his full attention. “Oh?”

“A blade from Saxony,” Vincent confided. “It missed his heart by a mere inch in the alleyways last Tuesday. The man is living on borrowed time.”

Below, Conrad’s thumb found the puckered line of the scar beneath his cuff. He did not look at it. He simply turned the page.

“We must conclude this,” he said, restored to absolute composure.

The Prussian remained standing, his eyes sweeping the chamber in search of allies who had already turned away. At last, he straightened his coat.

“This is no concession,” he said, the utterance pitched higher than before, the bitterness no longer concealed. “It is calculation. And survival. So be it.”

No applause followed. Only the dry rasp of parchment and the collective exhale of men who had run out of arguments. What remained was an acquiescence born not of triumph, but of the burden of grim necessity.

Conrad said nothing. He simply waited. The work was not finished. But perhaps the war was.

When the recess was called, the delegates rose from their benches with the creak of old joints and the rustle of exhausted silk, drifting toward the side chambers in a subdued procession. Clerks moved among them, gathering notes, redrafting articles, preparing seals. The treaty was no longer being debated; it was being petrified into law.

As the movement drained away, the hall lost its momentum.

Conrad remained after the adjournment, standing at the edge of the long table, one hand resting lightly upon the polished surface. He was not reading the final copy laid before him. He was not seeing ink, nor clause.

His mind had traveled beyond Vienna, beyond treaties, to a memory that refused dismissal.

Sophie would have chided him gently, first for not writing, then for the gray hollows beneath his eyes. The sealed letters would have earned a tap of her finger, the look that forgave nothing because it loved him too well. Diplomacy was no excuse for cowardice at home. "You forget you are made of more than work, Conrad," she would have said.

She had wished for quiet days, a garden perhaps, children, laughter in the house once more. Not grand happiness. A kitchen window left open in spring, flour on her sleeve, his books removed from the dining table before supper. They had spoken of it often in the weeks leading up to his departure.

Then came Saxony. The unlit corridor. The brief silver of the blade. The inch by which he had lived.

He had named no names. There was no proof, only the hush that followed, and the knowledge that some would kill to preserve the illusion of order if it kept them in power.

To a few, peace was a crown. To others, a wound carried quietly and alone.

Out of the smoldering wreckage of the Napoleonic years, the Concert of Europe was forged, a precursor to an order the world had not yet learned to imagine. Where Vienna dreamed of kings, a new age would one day dream of its citizens.

Conrad would not live to see that future. Yet in every brittle treaty and every brief spark of hope, he left traces that would shape the centuries to come.

The hall was empty now, steeped in ink, candlewax, and history. Then the stale dust and dry velvet of the drapes gave way to jasmine, subtle at first, undercut with a resinous bite unlike anything he knew.

Conrad turned.

A woman emerged from behind a marble pillar. Her gown was modest and travel-worn, yet her bearing carried the effortless poise of a sovereign.

"Congratulations, Mr. Laurent," she said. "A monumental achievement."

He studied her face, strange to him, yet one that struck a note of forgotten melody, distant and just out of reach.

Have I seen her before?

He offered a thin, tired smile. "I was merely a voice at the table."

"Not all legacies are written in ink, sir," she replied, meeting his eyes for an instant.

He had no answer for that, but his look made clear the words had not been in vain.

As he turned back toward the table, a man passed close behind. A coat brushed his, accompanied by a courteous nod too brief to be remembered. Only a practiced eye would have registered the small, cold weight left behind in his pocket.

No ceremony marked the handoff. No witness claimed it. With that small exchange, the age of kings gave way to the age of men.



Outside, the lamps of Vienna burned low.

June had offered the city little warmth that year; evening took the rest. Beneath the stone arch of the Hofburg, two figures stood cloaked in heavy wool, statuesque and indistinct where the yellow light died. They folded into the obscurity of the imperial square, unnoticed by passersby.

Conrad stepped through the grand doors, drawing his coat tight against the chill. His body ached from the airless, candle-choked hours, but he welcomed the clean shock of the night air. Perilous though it was, the balance held for the moment, and that, he knew, was no small thing.

The man in the shadows watched him. "This is a long chance we're taking."

The woman followed Conrad's progress across the cobblestones.

"Looks like the sequence held," the man added.

Without breaking her vigil, she replied, "It's in the blood now. Quiet. But irrefutably traceable, if the need ever arises."

"If it ever does," the man said with a low, resigned grunt.

"It will," she said, her words catching the wind. "The Earth's edge is closer than they know."

"Let us hope the boss never learns what we've done."

She turned slightly. "Let's hope he never has to."

Their secret remained with them a little longer. Then, under her breath, she added, "Time will tell if he's the spark of what finally matters."

A carriage rattled past the far end of the square, its lanterns briefly flashing against the wet stone. When the light moved on, the archway was empty. There was no sound of retreating footsteps, no rustle of fabric. The two figures had simply vanished into the night.

Conrad walked on. A breeze stirred, cooler now, sharper. It prickled the back of his neck, a fine needle of intuition. He slowed, looking over his shoulder.

Only the city settling into the heavy night, lamps trembling along the avenue.

He shook off the feeling and walked on, his footsteps growing solitary as the city's noise receded. For the first time in weeks, no one called his name.

His work here was finished; the grand diplomats could spend the coming days signing and packing away the world.

One hand slipped into his coat pocket. His fingers touched a cool, unmistakably metallic object. He stopped beneath a wrought-iron post and drew it out with care. Whatever it was, it did not belong to him.

It resembled a medallion. A weight that felt wrong for its size. Bronze, or a similar alloy. Worn at the edges, engraved with symbols he didn't recognize. As he tilted it toward the lamplight, the lines seemed to crawl, the pattern rearranging itself in his peripheral vision. It wasn't the iconography of any nation he knew. Something else. Something ancient.

He lifted it and let it swing once on its chain. Then he closed his fist around it.

Peace isn't something we hold, he thought. Only something we pass on. Like a cipher whispered through the blood.

Chapter 2

THE FIRST REACH

2.1 Echoes Through Time

The Congress of Vienna shrank into a footnote. The ink on the treaty outlasted the men who signed it. Conrad Laurent's name outlasted neither. It was filed, indexed, and buried where minor diplomats and inconvenient witnesses were meant to disappear.

But not everything consents to burial. Some legacies survive in blood, a whisper carried forward through centuries, crossing oceans and generations, waiting for the one life it could wake again.

One hundred and seventy-two years later, in a quiet suburb of Seattle, that whisper found its new host. Not in a diplomat's gilded chamber, but in a child's bedroom lit by soft green constellations.

1987 – The Spark

The door creaked open. A man stepped inside carrying a bundle of rolled-up posters: NASA shuttles, helmeted astronauts, and the violet swirls of the Milky Way.

"Hey, what are you up to, buddy?"

Kai, barely ten, hunched over a notebook at his desk, one arm draped across the page in a hopeless attempt at secrecy.

"Don't look yet!" He grinned. "It's my moon story. I'll show you and Mom when it's done."

His dad raised an eyebrow. "Another space adventure?" He unfurled a poster of the *Discovery* and pressed it against the wallpaper. "C'mere. Let's hang these. Seems your galaxy could use some expansion."

Kai dropped his pencil and scrambled over.

"But first—can you sign this?"

He held up a permission slip with a flourish.

"Future astronaut, huh?" He signed the slip with a chuckle, then taped the shuttle beside a worn map of imaginary planets.

Kai turned toward the wall, caught by the glossy depth of the image. "Do you think someone out there might see this?"

His father paused, raising his eyes to the phosphor stars on the ceiling. "They might," he said. "But even if they don't, it's worth dreaming as if they could." He reached into his pocket. "Almost forgot."

He pulled out a small disc on a worn leather cord and held it out.

The bedroom light glinted off the metal, sharp enough to make Kai blink. It was not quite brass, not quite gold, its surface worn smooth yet untouched by time. Fine symbols circled its rim, curling into patterns that belonged to no language Kai recognized. Two stood out: a sharp-pointed star and a narrow arc bridging two parallel lines.

"Whooooa..." Kai let out a low whistle. "What is it?"

He held it with careful reverence, as if the metal were still hot from the forge.

"Your great-great-granddad brought it back from Europe," his father said. "It's been in the family ever since. My dad gave it to me when I was your age. Guess now it's your turn."

"Does it do anything?"

His dad smiled. "Maybe. Or maybe it's just lucky. Either way, hang onto it." He looped the cord over a small nail above Kai's map. The medallion spun slowly, caught a sliver of the bedroom light, and stopped.

Kai sat back, his imagination populating the dark reaches between his hand-drawn planets. A dozen adventures began to take root, each one ending with him standing between catastrophe and everyone else, powered by whatever untold secret the small disc might hold.

Behind him, a crayon-etched rocket soared across his notebook, destined for a horizon only he could see.

1994 – Stargazer's Oath

That night, a rarity occurred: the sky over Seattle yielded.

No clouds. No familiar curtain of drizzle. Only space and stars, exposed so clearly that the city below felt temporary. From the hilltop, the urban sprawl receded, leaving the heavens stretched wide as if the world had stepped aside.

Kai lay on the damp blanket, jacket zipped to his chin, his telescope angled skyward. Beside him, Jake adjusted a pair of binoculars, his breath fogging in the cold air.

Kai focused on a sliver of light, Arcturus, perhaps, or Regulus, tracking its slow drift across the lens. Only then did he pull back, offering a small smile.

"You ever get the feeling they're watching back?"

"I don't know about aliens," Jake said, "but I hope Jen Parker is watching."

Kai laughed, then shook his head. "I'm serious."

"I know. That's what makes it scary."

This time, they laughed together. The wind combed through the grass, carrying the clean bite of early spring.

Kai shifted onto his elbow. "Sometimes it feels like... if I listen hard enough, I'll hear something."

"Like a cosmic voicemail?"

Kai shrugged. "Like a reply."

Jake shook his head, but he didn't push back. Not tonight. The stars were too bright, the moment too unguarded.

Time slipped past as they watched the constellations wheel above. Kai's telescope swiveled gently, tracing the silver arc of the Milky Way. The same wonder that once lit his bedroom ceiling now pulsed in his chest, clearer, stronger, yet unanswered.

And still, he listened.

1999 – Shelves of Infinity

Five years later, the stars had grown brighter, and the questions heavier.

Kai ducked under the low arch of the university library's mezzanine, a backpack slung over one shoulder, worn volumes pressed into the side pouch. The scent of old bindings and fresh toner greeted him with a familiar, paper-dry warmth.

He stepped up to the circulation desk, checking the shelves behind the counter.

"Hey, do you have *The Physics of Star Trek* or *Hyperspace* by Michio Kaku?"

The librarian, a middle-aged woman with a NASA pin on her lapel, offered a knowing look. "You burned through Clarke and Sagan this month?"

Kai grinned. "Twice. I'm working my way toward wormholes and warp drives."

"Third row, back right. Don't forget there's a planet down here too."

He gave a mock salute and disappeared into the stacks.

He wasn't majoring in astrophysics. His scholarship and advisors had nudged him toward engineering, citing stability and practicality, but his heart had never made that deal. His internal compass still orbited elsewhere.

Kai pulled *Hyperspace* from between two heavy hardbacks, then paused, his fingers tracing the spine of *Contact*. He opened it halfway through and reread a line he had long ago committed to memory:

"The universe is a pretty big place. If it's just us, seems like an awful waste of space."

The words felt like an anchor. Surrounded by equations and mechanical diagrams, he was still searching.

2008 – *The Line You Draw*

Rain pinged off the steel roof, muffled inside the shed, where the scent of insulation foam and welding flux hung thick. This was the first major project the yard had trusted Kai to manage, a full-scale PM role on a flagship build. He stepped through the yawning cutout of the aft sliding door, boots clanging on the steel plating. Around him, the hull of *Mirador* gleamed, her skeleton now clothed in steel, with fit-out just beginning.

The noise was constant: drills, grinders, and metal shrieks from the subdeck. But Kai's attention belonged to the overhead paneling above the salon corridor.

He climbed onto a stepladder. Inside the cable tray running along the finished bulkhead, power lines and data cables were tangled too close, touching in places. An invitation to electromagnetic bleed. Signal degradation. Interference.

He exhaled. "Damn it."

He unclipped his radio from his belt. "Liam, main-deck corridor, starboard midships. Get up here."

A few minutes later, the electrical foreman climbed onto the ladder beside him. "What's the problem, Kai?"

Kai pointed into the recess. "High-voltage power and Cat-6 are laid in the exact same run. No shielding. You're going to get crosstalk, especially when the gensets kick in."

Liam frowned. "That layout was approved last week. Owner's team signed the close-out forms."

"I don't care. It's wrong."

"Then take it up with their inspector," Liam said. "We've already sealed eight sections. You're talking about a three-week rework."

Kai stepped down off the ladder. "Then start today."

"What?"

"I'm the PM on this build. This isn't a discussion. The data lines get their own conduit, clean routing, shielded turns. This is not how we finish a yacht like this."

The production supervisor, Mike, approached, rubbing his jaw. "We lose three weeks. Boss isn't going to like it."

"Good," Kai said. "Consider it the cost of learning how not to screw it up next time."

He turned back to the foreman. "Liam, tell your guys to reroute. I'll inform the owner's rep."

Liam hesitated, then gave a short nod and walked off. Mike muttered something too low for Kai to catch.

He stayed behind, staring up into the exposed wiring runs.

This was the line. His line.

And it would hold.

For once, he was alone, sealed inside one compartment while a hundred fifty others worked across the vessel. His mind wandered to other heights: the sterile glow of a Pasadena cleanroom, the vast shadow of a hangar at Cape Canaveral. He pictured the scorched tiles of *Atlantis* overhead and imagined the complex framework of the next Mars rover, every circuit he once dreamed of wiring himself. He'd followed every JPL update, studied each MSL spec sheet. If he'd trusted his gut, maybe he'd be out there.

But he wasn't. Steel, not stars. And yet, here he stood.

Somewhere, without knowing it, he was preparing for a different kind of routing, a path no drawing office could draft and no timeline could contain.

Chapter 9

CLOAKED IN SHADOWS

9.1 The Empire's Defiance

The lecture had ended seconds ago, but Oron remained near the rim of the amphitheater, angled toward the horizon.

Above Arcanis Prime, the air wore the lie of an ordinary cycle. The academy plateau basked in late light, its sweeping terraces alive with low discussion as cadets gathered their tablets, their arguments, and the certainties Oron had spent the last hour dismantling.

The cadets stood in loose formations, their light-cream uniforms catching the last amber from the twin suns.

"Readiness is not measured in technology or doctrine," Oron had told them moments before. "It is measured by how exactly you read your enemy before they strike. Above all, an enemy you cannot predict. One built to crush you."

A few were still carrying that last line when a high chime struck the sky.

Nothing ceremonial in it.

Every cadet's head snapped around on the same axis.

The sirens followed.

A rising sequence of pulses struck the cliffs and came back harder, a rhythm every Arcanian was drilled to know and almost none had heard for real. Not here. Not above Arcanis Prime.

Oron stepped farther toward the edge.

He did not speak.

Cadets reacted nevertheless.

Along the elevated platforms, instructors and officers broke into action, issuing rapid directives.

The answer came from above first.

Dozens, then hundreds of Theron drones tore through the cloud cover like iron seed scattered from orbit. Some burned on entry, caught by the atmospheric shields. The rest corrected mid-fall and dove for the capital ridge.

The air warped where the defense pylons spun up, an energy net taking shape overhead, strand by strand, until the sky above the ridge was sectioned in light.

A wing of Arcanian interceptors screamed past, climbing on a steep vector, engines compressed to tight blue cores. The second drone wave met them mid-ascent and came apart, reduced to particle arcs before a single unit could lock target.

A flash bleached the plaza. Cadets threw up their hands.

An instructor's command cracked over them. "Ground level, now!"

Few obeyed.

Arcanis Prime's sky was changing color.

Dark red spread through the upper atmosphere, too even for fire, too deliberate for weather. Beneath it ran a dense resonance, low enough to live in the bones.

The cloud layer folded inward.

Through the red, a form emerged.

Not all at once. Lines first. Angles. And a suggestion of scale.

It advanced without hurry.

No identifier codes. No registry. The planetary grid queried it and received absence dressed as data: no spectral match, no IFF, no thermal logic. Composition unresolved. Emissions buried below every threshold the sensors could claim.

Yet the outline kept asserting itself, waking a primal fear in every Arcanian on the plateau.

A hull without curvature. Triangular ventral layers. No visible bridge, no running lights. Its exterior refused recognition, built for psychological displacement as much as destruction.

And it unseated everything.

The plaza locked. Cadets froze. Instructors rooted in place. Even Oron had nothing ready.

Emergency channels flared over the terraces, orders stacking over orders, some calling for medics, others breaking apart mid-command.

And the shape kept coming.

The next change had no sound.

Not a shift of light. A shift of dimension. The sky stuttered. Civilian screams looped, echoing themselves. A cadet reached for his temple and collapsed before he could cry out.

Oron turned. A voice was already reaching him, not from above, but from within.

"Commander Oron, report to the bridge. You will want to see this."