Burning Brighter Than Our System

The ramp began to descend, and Kor Vaal felt his optic guards whir gently as they adjusted to the harsh light that spilled into the shuttle from the *Tarkin’s* embarkation hanger. As the ramp thudded down on the deck Kor strode from his transport, two Palatinean troopers keeping step with him, their rifles held across their chests. The hanger was a bustle of activity; minor repairs and refits being carried out to the structure, Tie fighters being rearmed and tested and droids and menials toing and froing with tools and armaments. A fleet officer was waiting at the base of the ramp. The woman’s uniform was untidy, as if it had been slept in, which matched the ragged and hastily tied pony tail on her head. Her eyes had deep rings around them, and told of too little sleep in too many days, though her jaw was still harsh and set.

“Sir,” she said with less than sincere respect. Kor ignored her, passing her without breaking stride. She began to jog after him, “We weren’t expecting an inspection, we have been keeping the Emperor up to date with the ships progress.”

“I am not here for an inspection,” Kor would have added the woman’s rank in a condescending manner, but he was still getting used to the Imperial ranking system and couldn’t yet translate the pips on the officer’s uniform.

“Then,” the woman’s voice was heavy with confusion, “Can I ask *why* you’re here? And where you are going?”

Kor stopped, failing to stop the low annoyed growl emerging from his throat. He reached a hand into his cloak and brought out a datapad, thumbing the activation button before handing it to the officer. “I am going to the bridge. Do you take issue with this?”

The woman took the datapad and began reading, her expression of annoyance turning to confusion and mild fear. She looked back up at Kor, her eyes wide.

“No sir, no issue at all,” she handed the datapad back, “I’ll escort you to the bridge at once, please follow me.”

Kor let the officer lead the way, and the small group headed to the ships turbolift access. In the silence of their procession, Kor thought back to meeting he had attended only hours previously, and the words of the man to whom he had sworn his immediate future.

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*“I know you are all wondering why you have been summoned here,” Dek Ironius’ voice rang out through the small room, his tone commanding silence, his arms spread wide, “I imagine some of you were expecting some sort of clandestine affair with hooded cloaks pulled tight and cryptic explanations, but I assure you this is not the case. You may lower your hoods if you wish, secrecy is of no concern here.”*

*A few of the assembled group lowered their cowls, and Kor saw that most of the small gathering were members of Shadow Guard. Kor kept his hood up, mostly from habit and his secret passion for esoteric theatrics which were such a common part of the Brotherhood.*

*“You all know me,” Dek continued, “Some personally, others merely by reputation. You all know I played the game of politics, and while I have always been a loyal son of the Empire, it was through doublespeak and manipulation that I showed my loyalty. Everyone knew my name, but my motives and methods were cloaked in shadow and misdirection. Shadow guard was the same, playing its part in the darkness with few knowing its true achievements. But the time for secrecy is over, for me and for you. It is time we thrust ourselves out of the darkness and into the light.”*

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The words were as much a shock to Kor as to anyone. The summons had been voluntary, an invitation to be a part of the future of House Imperium and the Empire, something that he previously would have cast aside as propaganda and delusions of grandeur in normal times. But these were not normal times. Usually he would have been content to keep to himself and his own studies, involving himself with Clan activities only when his precognitions and divinations had indicated an opportunity for him to benefit directly. But since the burning of the Cocytus system, Kor had found himself at a loss. The number of artefacts and the great texts of ancient masters lost during the bombardments were beyond his counting, and he keenly felt the loss of such knowledge. But more than that were the screams. He could still feel the death screams of the billions lost in the attack which had radiated out through the Force. Whether the other Force sensitives in the Clan had felt it or still feel it he didn’t know, and it was not something he wanted to discuss given the current climate in the Clan. He had been part of bloody affairs before, but this attack, the senseless waste of life and the pain and fear on such a massive scale had shaken Kor to his centre. He found himself unable to meditate, the screams filling his head to the point of bursting, while his divinations led him to nothing but riddles or utter nonsense in the worst cases. Kor knew that fate and destiny were complex things; the future was constantly in flux, every action and reaction shifting and twisting what may be, but there were still patterns and likelihoods which could be discerned by one gifted such as he. But the destruction of Cocytus seemed to have shattered everything. It was simply…wrong. Kor had no better way to describe it. Pravus had done something which Kor was certain was not meant to have happened. And because of that, Kor found himself lost. Everything he had done, everything he had achieved, the path he had set himself on, all of it came crashing down around him. The Emperor was the only fixed point he had found in a sea of madness and despair. Though it was precious little, Xen had saved what he could as his Empire burned around him. He had gathered artefacts and important items from the great libraries, and as much of the Clan and the system population as was possible. Xen had saved them and the Empire, and had a plan to keep them alive. When the request to assist came, Kor found he had little option other than to offer his services.

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*“Judecca,” Dek continued, rage and sorrow flashing through the word as he spoke it, “Is gone. The system is gone. But the Empire remains. It would be foolish to think it came through the fire unscathed, it needs healing, it needs a surety to its direction and the vision of the Emperor. And while it heals, it needs protection, both from without and within. But it needs more than protection, it needs a symbol, something for the Imperial people to rally around. You have all been chosen to become that symbol.”*

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“Can you explain what *this* is doing on my bridge Lieutenant Kalis?” The man who Kor assumed was the Captain spat as they stepped onto the *Tarkin’s* bridge. His curiosity was piqued by the mans implied insult, though he wasn’t sure whether it was directed at his race or his position with the Clan, but it would have to be dealt with another time.

“He has…clearance Sir,” the Woman accompanying him replied. She was about to say more, but Kor Vaal cut her off.

“I am here at the behest of the Emperor,” he declared, his voice ringing across the banks of crew members sunk below the bridges central walkway. All heads turned to Kor Vaal at the mention of the Emperor, and the silence became deafening. A wave of unease came over him, as the full weight of the stares came over him. He wasn’t used to being the centre of attention, but whether he liked it or not, the point of no return had been reached. He stalked towards the gaunt figure of the ship’s Captain, thrusting his datapad towards the man.

“Ridiculous,” the Captain spat as he snatched the pad from the Kel Dor, “I would have been notified if…”

Kor Vaal found some mild amusement as the Captain trailed off as he read, his eyes darting across the screen and his mouth beginning to form indignant objections which were never voiced. He turned from the dumbstruck Captain and addressed the rest of the bridge crew.

“Crew of the *Tarkin*, I am Kor Vaal of the Crucesignatis Imperialis, and I am here to arrest Erison Vance.”

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*“The Crucesignatis Imperialis, the Empires own Crusaders. The sword to raise against its enemies and defend its ideals. Don’t be under the idea that this is anything like Pravus’ damned Inquisitorius who skulk in the dark, their names known to none. We will not hide our faces and our deeds, because we will nothing to hide. We will be able to hold our heads high, knowing that we serve the Empire, knowing that our actions keep it strong and its people safe. Whether you are here simply from a desire to serve the Clan and the Empire or recent events have left you lost and in need of a new purpose, know that Crucesignatis Imperialis can bring you both great honour and great rewards. If you want to be a part of it, I have here a number of datapads with our first assignment on. We have been tracing a number of leads which link Clan and Imperial personnel with the Iron Fleets attack. These people are, in whatever small part, responsible for the events on Judecca. They are traitors to the Empire, and justice must be brought to them. Publicly.”*

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Kor Vaal stretched out with the Force, feeling the wave of emotions wash over him until he found what he was looking for; the touch of dread coming from the one whose name he had spoken. Kor pointed to a man a short way away from him, and the two troopers escorting him rushed over, hauling the man roughly from the communications pit onto the bridge walkway. They pushed him to his knees, locking his arms at the side of him, and he stared up in abject terror as Kor loomed over him.

“Erison Vance, we have evidence which shows you sent signals to the Iron Fleet on secured channels for several days leading up to the assault on the Cocytus System. You are charged with high treason against the Empire. How do you respond to these charges?”

“I…I…” the man began to quiver, his voice coming ragged through short gasps of air, “they said…they knew where my family was, I had no choice, they would have killed them!”

Kor was surprised, he hadn’t expected a confession so quickly. If anything, he felt a little disappointed.

“You bastard Erison,” a woman shouted from the communications pit, “I know your family got off the planet before the bombardment, that was because you knew the attack was coming didn’t you? My brother didn’t know! He didn’t make it off!”

“My parents were still there,” another shouted, “we all lost someone because of you Erison!”

“He and others like him,” Kor Vaal boomed. The tension and anger was bubbling through the Force from all around the bridge now, and he needed to get control of the situation before the crew tore the snivelling man apart, “And justice will be brought to all of them.”

“My family,” Erison blurted out, “They knew nothing, please they didn’t have anything to do with this!”

“No evidence has been found linking your family to these crimes. In the eyes of the Emperor they are loyal Imperial citizens and will be treated as such.”

Erison sighed in relief, his breath calming, “Then take me. I did it, I can’t hide that, but I’m no traitor, I just wanted to keep my family safe.”

The bridge crew were on their feet now, shouts of “traitor” and “murderer” ringing out from them.

“Why would I be taking you somewhere Erison Vance?” the Kel Dor said quizzically.

“You…you said you’re arresting me, you’re taking me to a cell, I’ll…I’ll be standing trial?”

“You are a confessed traitor to the Empire Erison Vance, you need no trial. In the name of Empire and on the authority of Emperor Xen’Mordin, I Kor Vaal of the Crucesignatis Imperialis sentence you to death.”

Kor Vaal flicked his right arm and the blade slid from his polished metal bracer. Before Erison Vance had time to scream the Kel Dor raised his arm and plunged his blade down through the traitors neck. A wave of shocked gasps passed through the bridge, and Kor pulled his blade free, his two guards letting Vance’s twitching corpse fall to the floor. Kor looked around the assembled crew, and suddenly realized that he hadn’t given any thought to the events immediately after the execution, and even less to how the rest would react. As he turned his eyes caught site of the *Tarkin’s* Captain, his head slowly giving a slight nod.

“Justice for the Empire,” he said softly. The words carried through the rest of the crew, first as a whisper, then becoming a shout. Within moments, they were cheering in unison.

“Justice for the Empire!”

Kor Vaal smiled beneath his mask. For so long he’d hidden himself away in dark places with his books and his meditations. Perhaps being in the light would be better than he’d first imagined.

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