

The Match - Imogen, Year 11, QLD

They told me I'd be replacing Warden Harrow for the Sector Twelve Simulation Trials. No reason. No warning.

Which meant something was wrong.

Warden Harrow doesn't make mistakes. He makes martyrs. I arrived at the compound under a heavy sky, escorted by two guards who flanked me like shadows. Their faces were blank, movements tight. No one spoke. No one ever does in these transitions. The silence says enough.

The scent of scorched metal clung to the air. It was static and sterile. I passed the reaping square, its stone surface recently cleaned, but blood always finds a way to linger. It stains deeper than the Order admits. Inside the sim chamber, I reviewed the participant files one by one. A routine I'd done a hundred times. The profiles blurred together...until I saw her name.

Kaia Elion.

Survivor. Daughter of the executed. Marked unstable. Quiet. Observant. Dangerous. A name whispered like a warning in the inner circles. A spark the Order hadn't yet managed to stamp out.

And there, buried halfway through her file, was the incident.

Six days ago. Compound K-3. She'd been restrained, undergoing transfer for insubordination. Nothing major, just a missing meal token and an unauthorised entry into Archive Storage. One guard reported she "twitched." Another claimed she "locked eyes and the lights blew out." Officially, it was ruled as a "containment malfunction." Unofficially, one of the guards left with fractured ribs and third-degree burns across his right arm. He later claimed her skin felt like *heat*, like it radiated from inside her. The guard who was carrying her, well he was reduced to ash and bone.

Kaia didn't speak a word during the inquiry. Just sat there, hands in her lap, trembling.

I remember pausing at that part of the file. Rereading the phrasing.

"She didn't scream. She didn't run. But her fingertips sparked. Just once. Like the air around her *changed its mind*."

The Order logged it as a psychotic break. But I've seen psychosis. That wasn't madness. It was ignition.

When I arrived at the observation room. Kaia was already in the chair, her wrists restrained, her posture rigid. She didn't look afraid. She looked... ready. Her eyes scanned my uniform, then my face, as if trying to solve a puzzle with too many missing pieces. She wasn't analysing the room like the others. She was analysing *me*.

"Subject 612," I said evenly. "Phase Three Simulation Trial. Emotional disorientation is expected. You will not be harmed."

She said nothing. They never do. But I could see it in her eyes. She wasn't like the others. She didn't break under pressure. She'd already broken once, long ago, and rebuilt herself from the shards.

I activated the system. The simulation took hold within seconds. I watched her consciousness sink into the feed, her memories were full of market stalls, cobblestone streets, familiar faces. A fractured reconstruction of a day that once seemed ordinary. Then the world shifted. The platform appeared. The memory had been buried, but the Order's system is good at dragging things to the surface, no matter how deep they're locked away.

Her mother stood barefoot in front of the crowd, wrists bound, hair blown across her face like a ghost's. Kaia's simulated body trembled. She was only nine years old in this memory. A command rang out. The blade fell. She flinched, just once, and then locked still. No screams. No tears. Just silence.

I checked her vitals. Spiking, but stable.

Cognitive Strain: 79%. Emotional Feedback: 91%.

I hovered over the emergency override. She should have collapsed by now. Most subjects do. But she endured. She remembered. And she *endured*. Then the feed glitched. A flicker. Static. The sim pulsed unnaturally, like a heartbeat faltering.

A voice broke through.

"Kaia."

Not the Warden. Not her memory. A male voice, calm and firm and real.

Her vitals jumped.

She whispered his name: "Aren."

That name was not part of the simulation. My heart stopped. I leaned toward the screen.

"They're lying to you," the voice said. "Trust the fire. Find the fracture."

Then it was gone. The system jolted. Alarms blinked red. A warning flashed:

UNAUTHORISED INSERT – SIMULATION BREACH.

I ended the trial immediately. Kaia's eyes fluttered open. Her breathing was ragged, but her expression had shifted. She wasn't disoriented. She was awake. She looked at me. Not with fear. With clarity.

"He's alive," she said quietly.

I kept my face neutral. "The trial is complete."

Her gaze didn't leave mine. "You paused. Just now. When I said his name. You know."

I moved to unstrap her restraints. She didn't resist.

"You can't speak the truth out loud," she said softly. "Because there are cameras."

I didn't answer. Instead, as I leaned over her wrist, I slid a thin black strip beneath the restraint. A data shard. Encoded coordinates. One shot at truth.

Her fingers closed around it the moment I stepped away. Quick. Silent. Certain.

I returned to my station and deleted the breach report before anyone else could review it. Flagged the anomaly as phantom interference. Buried the surveillance delay under a diagnostics loop and rerouted the logs through a ghost server I'd built years ago. And then I waited. That night, I read the evaluation notices. Kaia was scheduled for the final phase of selection in three days.

Code: elimination likely.

They were going to erase her. Not for what she'd done... but for what she might become. For the ember she carried.

I once believed in The Order. I used to recite the pledge every morning. I thought protocol made peace. I thought silence was safety. That was before my father was taken in the Northern purge. Before my sister vanished during reconditioning. Before I learned how easy it is to disappear someone who asks questions. Now I survive inside the machine. Quiet and useful. A medic. A technician. A watcher. But I've never forgotten how to strike a match.

The next morning, I entered her file and embedded a sub-layer in the clearance code. Not something flashy. Just enough to bend protocol beneath the surface. It would trigger a hidden route beneath the sim chamber. An old maintenance corridor sealed but not yet decommissioned. Forgotten by most. Buried beneath a floor no one checks anymore. It would

stay open for ten minutes. One chance. One way out. I encrypted the location inside the shard I'd already given her. I didn't include my name. If she made it out, she wouldn't need it.

I didn't see her again. The next report I read listed her as missing. Security footage corrupted. Door logs blank. The guards were questioned, scrubbed, reassigned. No one could explain it. Everyone blamed the system. They searched the entire facility. Found nothing. And then they began to search for *me*.

I write this now from a storage unit beneath Compound D-7, before the signal trace completes. I've rigged the feed to delay for thirty-seven minutes. It won't be enough. But it might be long enough *for her*. I know what happens next. I'll be labelled a traitor. A sympathiser. A threat to unity. But if Kaia made it out, if she carries the fire forward, then it will have been worth it. Because there are worse things than dying. There's watching a world burn in silence and doing nothing. There's seeing a girl walk into her mother's death memory and still rise from it. There's pretending that obedience is the same as peace.

Let them come. Let them write my name in the archive of enemies. I was never a traitor. I was never a sympathiser. I was the match. And Kaia is the spark.