



Out From Edom

Book I of The Irredente Chronicles

J. Patrick Sutton

psutton@suttonkleinman.com

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Chapter one.

Admiralty

You will find life in that which is pure; where there is impurity, temper it. Suffer not the willful nonconform; commend to thy mercy the impure innocent.

The Holy Book of the Body

#

The beginning of the end of the Irredentist hegemony -- some few thousand worlds contained within one arm, a kiloparsec's width, of a barred spiral galaxy -- began with a few short, cryptic words, transmitted via ansible from Plum Grove to Pydna; words that grew like a pox upon the 6th Empire of man. They were not elegantly formulated words, being all obscure references and starkly declarative utterances, and with stilted grammar. We follow their progress in encoded form, once on Pydna, from the depths of a subterranean, fortified ansible station; through walkways and hallways -- some spare, some grand; to the pinnacle of military authority, the Admiralty Office in the crater city Os Divinus. We continue on through gorgeous plastone halls, down which a double-pillared array of columns marches in formation toward the office of the First Lady of the Admiralty, Lady Arlette. A smart woman, and a devout woman: a believer in the Word of Vas. Some might even say, a disseminator, for she surely viewed her perch as a means to affirm and glorify the Plan of Vas for the preservation of mankind in his renormalized and purified form.

Between and among the tall plastone columns of power, uniformed aides and officers walked or scurried, as the task demanded; and footfalls and whispers echoed impressively. Some few of these persons might dare to aspire on this day to a meeting with Her Ladyship; fewer still would reach her outer office; and of those, perhaps five or six would be summoned before her personally. A clutch of commanders and young captains, ranging in age from rather youthful to rather doubtfully old, sat in stony silence in the outer office, pretending to look at the Gazette in mini-scroller form or at the folds in the velvet drapes across the diamond-paned window overlooking the central courtyard and fountain. In a holoniche, an image of Vas with a manly torso and slowly morphing faces cast his steadfast gaze upon no one in particular.

Those who sat, waiting, avoided looking directly at the dour, scarred, one-armed man seated at the reception desk, though this functionary occasionally, with rheumy eyes, scanned the room to observe them. All but he looked up expectantly when footfalls were heard within, but it was just a senior civilian official of some kind, donning a dark hat and striding purposefully -- without so much as a glance upon the expectant officers -- toward the outer door. As the official opened the door, letting in a gust of sound and air from the Great Hall, a few words echoed into the First Lady's chambers: "Esteemed Member," said a bureaucratic voice, "were you able to..." The voice trailed off as footfalls receded down the Great Hall.

It was just seconds later that the outer door opened again, with another gust of cool air, and a minor aide, in appropriate garb with shiny buttons and a round hat, popped in, dropped an Admiralty scroller on the receptionist's desk, saluted, and ran out again. The receptionist, without expression, worked his desk comm, whereupon an aide came out of Her Ladyship's inner office -- again raising expectations among the supplicants that were just as quickly dashed. The subordinate grabbed the scroller from the corner of the receptionist's desk and disappeared back into her Ladyship's inner office.

In one of those ways, mysterious to outsiders, in which particular small things are accomplished in government while the urgent tasks of the era never seem to budge, this otherwise unremarkable scroller made it to the top of Lady Arlette's stack. In due course, that quite handsome -- if not at all young -- woman, with the fine, delicate nose and expressively flared nostrils; the thick, grey-streaked hair done up simply but elegantly; the unconcealed freckles reminding one of the flower she once had been; this woman picked up the

scroller while blowing a cooling breeze across the small hot sea in her teacup. She read:

Lady:

I was First under your father, on poor Iolanthe, during the Mercantile action at Rossiter. I brought her home to Pydna, and his body with her. I tapped the cinders out at his demolument. You were there. Your father never spoke of you because I know he was too proud to call attention to you.

I have never called on you, Lady, even though I might have before this. That is not our way. I would call on you now. If you revere purity of the blood. If you respect the name of those who have been the spine of the Greatest Service. If you value the name and reputation of early, vigorous defenders of Vas. I ask you this.

My younger boy served on Nestor in the recent standard sol. You would have seen the notice. I buried what I could here. Demolument has not been our way on Plum Grove. My son had a child of the body -- out of consortium but ours nonetheless. We would take this boy from Edom as he is one of us and heir to the entailment of the family estate. My older son is Senior First on Andromache. Xenoetas has her now. I would have no reply from you.

Burgred, père. Plum Grove.

She put down her teacup without drinking and made the sign of the tau-and-lambda across her chest.

"Vas," she said. "What to do, what to do." She thrummed her fingers on her desk, frowned, and finally resolved on her course. She leaned into her desk comm. "Mr. Simmons, kindly put together an ansible packet for Admiral Valinder on flagship Palle Nymphus. I shall send you the contents of the message in coded form in a few moments. Make sure this transmission is made with all dispatch, if you please, with my special compliments to the Ansible Station for their due regard to my need for immediate transmission. That is all. Await my comm transmission, then go. No, wait a moment. Remind me, what and where is Edom?"

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When she was a young civil servant in the Admiralty Office, zealous in defense of the Word, eager to defend it by memo and directive, she hadn't permitted of exceptions. This served her well for a time, as did her astonishing loveliness, and she ascended the bureau's ranks. Then came a fallow period, inexplicable to her, when she had been offered opportunity neither to shine nor advance.

She had rarely sought advice from her father, and he had rarely offered; but it became apparent to both that a nudge was wanted. "Flexibility for the greater ends," he had said. "In warfare, there are times to run straight at 'em, but those times are rare." She took from this that seniority on the Admiralty permanent staff might require more than faultless memoranda and crisply-reasoned analysis. She learned the art of tacking, and by slow, hard-fought progress, she arrived: she ascended to Permanent Secretary at age forty.

That was more than a decade ago, but the lessons had continued to serve her when she somewhat surprisingly gained the First Ladyship. Though chastened and wizened by the effort of the ascent, the golden horizon had never receded from her view: she had remained devout and, in the process, had pulled much of the Admiralty in tow. She was a woman of faith, recognized as such, but perhaps also condescended to as such. Not having been a creature of politics, she was less fitted to recognize dissembling, flattery, and toadyism than the usual high appointee. She took professions of faith as true, for who would dare feign belief? For that matter, who could doubt the wisdom of Vas?

Among her firmly-held views was that blind faith in chance was a cheat and a lie: accepting it meant submission to all that was false and unholy. With the Word, Vas had intervened specifically to renormalize

the code of man and make him pure again. What was this but intercession into the course of history, a specific rejection of chance and 'freedom'? The profligate bioformers of the Fifth Empire had created a wild profusion of bioforms for every niche and, more often than not, for mere novelty -- or for the naive hope that some use might be found. The abominable Fifth Empire ethos -- a bioform for every task, a task for every bioform -- rendered bioforms catastrophically vulnerable to the most subtle alterations in the conditions of their existence. Bioforms died out before they could be understood or their traits recorded. Whole races disappeared, sometimes swiftly, sometimes excruciatingly slowly, with none but themselves as mourners. How many fathers and mothers wept over their children's pyres for want of appropriate control over humanity, for lack of discipline and order, for ignorance of the lesson that Vas brought?

As First Lady of the Admiralty, she paid heed to that lesson: discipline, order, and faith made and perpetuated a strong Navy. Man in his purified, renormalized form exercised a firm, guiding hand over hegemony affairs. Admiralty's forces in space led the vanguard of Truth as just as they patrolled and policed the hegemony.

On a day some weeks after the ansible from Plum Grove, the First Lady heard of Edom again. The communication was from Valinder, reporting troubling signs. The Transport Guild was asking for protection of its assets on and near Edom. Why had he not been provided with intelligence from Admiralty?

She barely had time to digest Valinder's message when she was summoned. At Government, Her Excellency, First Consul Yve, had hastily ordered a meeting of the branches of government via holo. Lady Arlette gazed into her desk's small projector stand and observed First Consul Yve and legislative Cabil Member Galinda, visible from the shoulders up and, like her, seated at their desks. The backgrounds were blurred, that being the seemly and usual manner of conducting official business. Lady Arlette's private secretary sat in mute attendance across from her, and Lady Arlette assumed that her peers in the other branches similarly had aides around them.

"Thank you both for being available so suddenly," the First Consul said. "It is bad news, I'm afraid. You both remember Tanjer and the ones before that. That's what we've got. This time, it's Edom, another outlier, just outside the outer quadrants."

"I take it, Excellency," Lady Arlette said, "that you mean there were scouts -- that scout ships were detected before the attack."

"That is the pattern," the Cabil Member said.

"Correct, both of you," Yve said. "A Guildship -- Trade or Transport I'm not seeing in this report..." There was audible murmuring, and the First Consul had leaned out of the holo. "Transport, I am told. Transport saw them. Edom only has a small expeditionary marine base. They probably don't scan at all but rely on their own ships to come in. At any rate, the report has just come in, but it appears that the scout ships, if that's what they were, are gone."

"Three or four days, perhaps a week," Galinda said.

"I can have a flagship ready..." Lady Arlette began.

"No, Ladyship," Yve said. "We cannot afford it right now. For one thing, if it's the same kind of attack, I want protection for the core worlds. For another, we still don't know enough to be able to mount an effective attack or defense -- we don't know anything. We don't even know if there will be an attack. There isn't, not every time. They may be trying to draw our strength toward them. I have made the difficult decision to get essential personnel..."

"My marines," said Lady Arlette.

"Yes, the marines. And I've got a few people there. If you have any special requests, have them passed along to my private secretary."

"Excellency, if I may," said Lady Arlette, "I recently became aware of Edom -- on a trivial matter. What is the population?"

"About a million, Ladyship," Yve said.

"What is its attraction?" Arlette said. "By which I mean, why should it come under attack?"

Galinda's brow shot up in curiosity.

"No data, Ladyship," Yve said. "It is poor. It is a place of work. It's quite young -- well, young to us. It was terraformed over an existing ruin. Esteemed Member Galinda, if your intelligence committee has data..."

"Of course, Excellency," he said. "I shall see to it immediately. Expect to hear from my committee liaison, Mr. Liev."

"He may give his report to my private secretary," Yve said. "Under the circumstances, that is the quickest way for us to analyze what you have."

"Have you not got more in your own intelligence wing?" Galinda said.

"I have told you virtually all of it. They were hoping -- my Mr. Minister Godwin was hoping -- that the Cabil or Admiralty might have independent sources."

"I'm sure that our sources are inferior to Minister Godwin's, Ma'am," Galinda said, "but I shall nonetheless bend my efforts to it forthwith."

Yve didn't manage to conceal a suspicious frown. "Lady?"

"I am informed by my senior fleet admiral of a request from Transport Guild for protection, but that is all," she said. "I have not had time to analyze the situation properly. I shall get my people out, and if anyone else may be helped in the process, so be it."

"As long as we have conserved resources for the core worlds, I am fine with that, Lady Arlette," Yve said. "Let us regroup on this later, when we have coordinated the intelligence. That is all, then, esteemed colleagues," she said. "I will have my secretary Grace provide your people with a secure comm code for this matter. May Vas bless the Irredente."

"May Vas Bless the Irredente," Arlette and Galinda said in response.

The conference completed, the holofield still shimmering slightly, Lady Arlette sat considering.

"Ma'am?" said her aide Mr. Simmons. "I believe you have orders?"

"What? Yes, Mr. Simmons. Take this, then," she said. "To Valinder, 'remand all prior concerning planet Edom'... Mr. Simmons, what was the name of..."

"Andromache, Ma'am. Captain Xenoetas."

"Yes. 'Direct Andromache and appropriate support vessels to Edom.' You fill in the rest, Mr. Simmons."

Chapter two.

Henryk From Edom

The complexity of what the Avial class had wrought during the early Fifth Empire led them not to moderation or temperance, but to a desperate ratcheting-up of technological cures. There appeared on the scene, with abrupt strangeness, a new kind of science, the science of the cellular automata -- strange little nothings from which computational systems of irreducible complexity arose as if by magic. How the Avial class obtained this science and used it to create their web of information systems was never subsequently learned, but its effect upon their Fifth Empire was swift and total: the riot was quelled, and the Avials were placed ever more securely upon their perch. Their overlordship became total, their ideology of progress thoroughly instilled.

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The diamond-canopied military speeder came in low and fast over the undulating grasslands that separated Edom's marine expeditionary base from the capital city of Neu Beauville. From his seat behind the lance-corporal who did duty as driver, the marine captain's attention was drawn to a sunny spot on the control console. As he tried to focus his gaze, the spot darted away, a blurred line dying in the shadows of the instrument cluster. The other passenger, an improbably old naval lieutenant, saw the marine's head jerk.

"Dilly-dally!" the marine captain said to the unspoken question. He spoke loudly enough to be heard over the whine of the engine that seemed amplified by the small cabin.

The navy man understood and likewise spoke loudly: "Edom's crawling with them," he said. "More than I've ever seen. Maybe they're native."

"I doubt it sir," said the marine captain. "We haven't seen them outside the cities and outposts. Edom was dead before the settlers came in a hundred sols ago. Not likely anything alive then, and the 'formers should've sterilized everything."

The driver here interjected a nod in agreement. "They came in later," he blared over his shoulder. "You hear old-timers in the cities complain about the ships that brought them in. They're everywhere now -- more than ever."

Below the speeder, there poked through the clumpy grasses raw patches and sometimes broad swathes of bared, cut stone structures as well as roadways, orange-red and weathered beyond recognition: the exposed skeleton of some unknown civilization that terraforming hadn't erased.

"The settlement is young," said the navy man. "And compensates by being singularly unattractive."

"It's not the worst place I've been, sir," said the marine. "But I know what you mean. It's your basic work planet, and there's not much to say beyond that. Still and all, they've made a go of it with not much in the way of natural resources. Repairs and such, some crafts, R&R, prisons. You see a lot of interesting machinery and craft come through the port here. Some incredible old stuff -- you wonder how they keep it running. That supports some decent skin trade, though a bit on the rough side of things, if you get my meaning, sir. People who work around metal and a fair number of biomechs."

"Sounds like the engine room on Andromache," said the navy man.

The marine captain looked momentarily solemn and made the sign of the tau-and-lambda across his chest.

"Sorry, Captain Titus," said the navy man. "It was a weak attempt at a joke."

"No problem, sir. Them as goes along, gets along."

Grasses gave way to hard, bare ground crisscrossed with vehicle tracks and the scorch marks of civilian landing craft. Low piles of tumbled, chipped cut stone dotted the terrain like dust-mounds on a partly-swept floor. Soon, low buildings with small, slotted windows appeared, singly then in the clumps. Some were built, some were drops. On the outskirts of Neu Beauville itself, all the buildings were drop-cubes of various sizes and in various configurations, their unused connectors and duct ports awaiting mates that would probably never come. Neu Beauville itself was announced by varying geometries of stacked drop-cubes huddled around avenues and alleys and scrawled with neon. A port of call, a space town, the capital city of a remote, poor settlement.

"Did you ever catch one, captain?"

"Sir?"

"Dilly-dallies. I asked did you ever catch one?"

"Never, sir. They say that the bugs disintegrate into dust."

The navy man raised an eyebrow. "I never heard that. The ship's boys and other kids on the big ships make games out of capturing them."

"You never saw one captured, sir."

"No," the navy man agreed. "You're quite right. I've never seen one caught. In fact, I've never even seen one close up."

"That's just it, sir," said the marine. "You can't. You can't train them in your sights. They move. I've heard that cameras can't get 'em neither. Some kind of incredible sensory perception going on there. They know you want to get 'em."

"Ha! That's likely. Why would you, though, captain?"

"Beats me, sir," he said. "That's just what they say. The galaxy is full of fascinating creatures, sir." The marine captain had started out as an enlisted man and retained some of the mannerisms of one. He had gained his commission through steeliness of purpose -- and sponsorship by his homeworld Auxiliary Corps. The lieutenant outranked him owing to years of service.

"Coming up, lieutenant," said the driver.

The speeder slowed as it came into range of a drab, low neighborhood near the old center of Neu Beauville, a neighborhood from the time of Newtown.

"Captain, remember," said the Naval lieutenant. "I've got to get this boy back to the base in one piece." He glanced unconsciously at the sky. "The ship's people think we've got a day, maybe two -- though I doubt it, if the past is a guide." He reached out and tapped the driver's shoulder, "All this is confidential." The driver nodded. He turned again to the marine. "We've got to be calm here or it'll be my hide. There can't be an evac. We're here for the boy and no one else."

Edom: semi-arid; dusty, ancient -- a planet referred to on even very old charts as Edom Ancien. A world barely warm at its core and largely eroded on its face. Shallow seas with little but pancake-like flatfish to interest man (when desperate), and low, crumbling vestigial hills not worth the effort to scale. The Irredentist hegemony had never taken much interest in history -- had, indeed, stifled much in it that fed dangerous curiosity into prior empires of man and his profligate bioforms. Early Irredentist authorities had authorized additional terraforming of Edom, but mainly sterilization and purification: the evidence of prior habitation was clear enough, and the proof of a precipitous demise equally apparent. The planet wanted a fresh start. What lay beneath the thick, cut blocks of reddish stone or within those subterranean bunkers might just as easily kill as inform. Archaeology was a fool's errand. Archaeology, actually, was against the law.

Edom lay near but beyond the second, outer belt of systems forming the Irredente core and so was an "outlier." Outliers, numbering in the thousands of worlds, might have any form of ownership, serve any purpose, be governed in any manner otherwise consistent with Irredentist overlordship. Edom wasn't worth much, as planets went, and had long since been auctioned off in shares spread across the hegemony. Shareholders, whether singly or in groups, had in turn sliced and diced the planet into large freeholds arranged as long-term leases. Some few freeholders lived on Edom; most planetside Edomites paid rent to offworlders.

In the Bird & Baby Publick House, a bar in the planetary capital of Neu Beauville, the boy Henryk -- family name unknown -- awoke in his little cot in the back storeroom to the usual buzzing that emanated from somewhere within -- not within the bar, but somewhere between his ears. Also as usual, the first thing he saw on waking was a smudge on the stained plasteel ceiling, a smudge that scurried out of view in a blur when he focused on it. A dilly-dally, a bug, an armadillium: a large pill sliced in half, its armor gleaming and segmented, the segments each a thousand or more smaller scales, and the whole of it hastening upon a thousand unseen legs. Edom had seen a lot of the bugs of late, more than in anyone's memory. It had been a gradual thing, over several sols, though to Henryk, being perhaps eight and not always clear on what things had been like in the dim recesses of age five or six, the bugs' presence in his memories was unvariegated and constant, one of the many unremarkable things forming the backdrop to a life on Edom.

It was Feastday, the day of Church and rest, so Madame's bar would open late to allow Madame to make early corpus services. Henryk had to be up at his usual time to try to tamp down his errant, stiff hair and generally make himself presentable. Madame would have some stale bread rolls left over from the heavy, doubtful buffet she set up on Feastday eve each week, so Henryk in the usual course would down a couple of these with some heavily-watered-down port wine, also left over from the night before, prior to setting out with her. Madame made up her own breakfast upstairs at her kitchenette. Occasionally some part of that bounty made its way down to Henryk, but not today.

Henryk was a thin boy; on most other worlds he would be called malnourished. But in this he was not differentiated from the gaggle of children with whom he regularly played, most of whom were lucky to have one good meal each day. It was in something else that he was different, even among his urchin peers: even considering his borderline emaciation, he had a peculiarly large head. Not every feature -- his eyes, ears, nose, all the individual things were right. It was a certain extra width, a larger circumference than might have been entirely expected. Children don't always see these things for what they are, and any that did, Henryk could quite take care of himself. But there it was. A thin boy, a somewhat odd-looking boy, but otherwise an orphan of little account in the Old Quarter.

The bar, which fancied itself a pub despite a desperate want of coziness, lay in a sad section of the Old Quarter of Neu Beauville. Winds that blew in from dry grasslands just outside the city kept a layer of dust upon the broad, lightly-traveled street -- the city didn't send sweepers into the Old Quarter except in preparation for Advent Day, celebrating Vas's renewal of man after the Fall. The Bird & Baby occupied six ancient cubes, four comprising the first floor and two, stacked atop the rearmost two, making a second floor apartment for Madame with a jury-rigged stair out back. Inside, the sides of the 'cubes were knocked out so that the bar was one large room. Several grimy ship-salvage portholes served as windows. Outside, an

ornamented facade of shaped plasteel mimicked a greenworld tavern. Madame's one splurge, a traditional wood, sandblasted sign with an image of a fat, happy child riding atop a strange, large-beaked avian, creaked in its hinges. A sad, stunted binko tree grew between the bar and the blank, forbidding corrugated metal building next door.

Henryk heard Madame Grissaud's slow, heavy steps on the stair. She would have to walk by the storeroom on her way towards the front of the bar, and Henryk preferred to be waiting for her up front to avoid a sharp reproof concerning his laziness. She didn't strike him over trifles like this -- other trifles, mainly, having to do with her moods or Henryk slipping into his alter-ego as a young boy. Since either could strike without warning, there was little he could do; he could, however, avoid being caught in the confines of the storeroom before corpus.

When she appeared from the back hall, he stood at the rounded front corner of the bar counter, near the front doors. He worked a piece of bread roll in his jaws and pretended to shoot dilly-dallies, his hand substituting for the curious little gun that Mr. Alleyn had given him to practice with. Madame huffed and puffed her stout personage to the swinging doors and unfastened the chain and lock. She re-arranged them to the outside. Henryk fell in step behind her as they set out onto the deserted morning street. Still sleepy, he slunk behind her, ruminating on the hard bread and absently watching the reddish dust stains on the hem of her ample skirt as it floated uptown. Then they were at the intersection, and then not much farther and the church tower loomed over them. They joined into one of the capillaries of people streaming towards the church from surrounding alleys, streets, and buildings. Several cars, a mix of ground and lev cars, were either parked here and there or else disgorging human contents near the church steps. The tall doors that bisected the arched plastone entrance stood open, and the Vox Rectoris stood in robes nodding and greeting the parishioners.

The Vox Rectoris, a lay figure and therefore untensured, leaned into Madame as she reached the threshold.

"Madame Grissaud," he said, "I should like to see you following corpus." He glanced unconsciously toward Henryk. "If it is no trouble. I handle Conform details for Vox Docilis Hersey, as perhaps you know."

"Certainly," Madame said. She quickened her pace within, and Henryk had trouble keeping up with her in the tangle of parishioners who were trying to find seats. When Madame turned to find her charge, she appeared troubled, even though there were plenty of seats and Henryk was behaving.

"Come on, then, Henryk," she said, and, unusually for her, she waited for him to advance and, more strangely still, shoved him into the pew before taking a seat herself. Henryk looked at her to see if she might be ill, but seeing no sign, he got distracted by the interior of the church. Its vaulted, tiled ceiling, with a network of cracks and water stains and the occasional missing tile, soared over the parishioners and gave a distinctive echo to their pre-corpus murmurings. It was the grandest structure Henryk had ever been in. Dull light filtered through thick windows whose real glass had the slight waviness that sheet diamond could never mimic successfully. It was one of the oldest buildings in the capital as well as one of the few site-built structures -- on outlying planets like Edom, only a few important public and religious buildings would be permanent; most were composed of drop-cubes lashed together somehow and bolted to a plascrete slab.

The Vox Docilis, usually referred to as just "Vox" or by other clerics as "V.D." to clarify his preeminence on the planetary clerical hierarchy, entered the dais from the right with a purposeful air, in stiff clerical robes. He was what you might call clerically handsome: average of stature with strong features tending to the severe. His head was ringed by a thick, well-tended brown tonsure. He went to stand at the alter, upon which was perched, upright on a special stand, an ornately-worked scroller containing the Holy Book of the Body. The Church made a show of embracing technology proscriptions, so the Vox leading the corpus service would make a show of manually interacting with the scroller to bring up sections of text. And since no Church cleric could possess a comm in any form -- wrist, desk, mini, or otherwise -- the Vox had a mike on his robe, the little bud communicating one-way with a jury-rigged device with most of its comm functions disabled. It

served well enough and comforted many in the pews, as who should say but that the outside world might change, but in here, at least, things remained the same.

Henryk fidgeted and wiggled around during the first part of the service, unless he were standing up and sitting down again according to the rhythm of the corpus. Madame paid him no mind, whispering the responses where appropriate and, as always, steadfastly watching the Vox. Henryk looked up at the ceiling at one point to see the familiar blur of a dilly-dally disappearing into the architecture.

Vox Hersey reached the sermon proper, which might take a few minutes or the better part of an hour, depending. "... leading to purity in form and thought," he was saying. "In rejecting the impious, artificial ways of the past, man finds grace in the Original Essential Forms and Ways..."

Henryk's attention wandered in and out, but then Vox Hersey declaimed with greater urgency:

"And the Holy Book itself tells us: '... and the man cast off his raiment, and all who saw marveled: for where the torment had been endured, he had no leg, for he was made pure.' What is meant by this? Recall that the Lystercian in the parable had come from the Poenican Wars -- the torment referred to is the very wound sustained in fighting for Vas, for Vas's word. Did this man give himself over to the lure of biomech? Yes he had, we are led to believe, before being given over fully to Vas. But when presented at the altar as the exemplar, he had rejected it: he had already given up the abominable technology, as being a gateway device to the profligate practices of man before the Fall of Gaetia Unum..."

Henryk's attention wandered again, and he thought of the hoopies that Madame spoke of so harshly -- the people who looked for any excuse to replace parts of themselves with biomech. Madame said that they could get illegal biomech, much better than anything made in the hegemony. Henryk had seen such people in the Old Quarter -- they didn't bother to hide what they had done. He looked at his hands and wondered what it would be like to have biomech hands that could crush rock or bend metal; it didn't seem so bad. He looked up at Madame, and she was still rapt, listening to Vox Hersey:

"... When the demon seed infected the corpus of Man, Vas smote him then purified him that he might regain perfection," he was saying. "The profligate practices of the Fifth Empire of man produced, what? A thousand -- a million -- bioforms taken from Man but containing him not. All different, none complete, many debased and wretched -- bioforms not worth the effort spent to maintain them. When the purifying plague came, did it strike the powerful -- the Avian classes in their comfortable eyries, lazy, effete, and pampered? It did not. For Vas had a special plan for them: they should live to see their failure; they should dwell in a prison of remembrance. No, the plague that Vas in his mercy suffered unto the abominations that Man had become did its terrible, cleansing work, undoing the err of profligate bioforming. It was for us, you and me, the true servants of Vas, living in the shadows of the darkest worlds, that Vas created the Word: the renewed code of life, of Man, of purity. It was unto us that Vas, knowing every possible code as you may know the fingers on your hands, delivered the One True Code. As it is written in the Holy Book: 'From this seed does the mighty gnossoak spring, so perfect in its parts, yet with limits finite. Behold, Man.'

"Behold, Man," said the parishioners in response. Vox Hersey finished the sermon, then, pouring brackish liquids from vials, went through the ritual mixing of the fluids representing the re-forming of man's code. He gave the sign of the tau-and-lambda over the resulting, blood-red admixture. The parishioners then gave the tau-and-lambda in response. Henryk fidgeted until the Pace was said and everyone stood.

As he and Madame made their way slowly out of the nave, the lay Vox Rectoris stood near the doors, giving handshakes and meaningful nods but keeping Henryk in view.

"What is it you wish to see me about?" Madame said on reaching him.

The Vox Rectoris backed them farther from the departing stream of parishioners before he spoke. His eyes kept darting to Henryk as he spoke. "It seems there is no file on the boy here, and therefore he cannot continue to be presented at corpus at his age unless there is conformance. I am sure it is a foregone conclusion, Madame, if you will merely see to it. There are several persons certified to prepare Conform profiles in Neu Beauville. I can give you the names..."

"That won't be necessary," Madame said. "I am perfectly capable of dealing with it myself. Thank you, Rector. I shall see to it immediately."

Madame Grissaud grabbed Henryk's hand, and then they were out of the church and down the front steps. A bearded, tattooed hoopy on a shooter whizzed past and pumped his shiny, biomech hand and forearm. He tossed a devilish, diamond-flecked smile at the parishioners still lingering around the entrance, all of whom, save Henryk, pretended not to notice. Henryk was captivated, but an old woman before him on the walk scowled. Henryk recognized her as the woman who always sat in the back during corpus and whom Madame Grissaud occasionally talked to after church. She had lost part of a leg in the wars. She now used a simple mech leg, very primitive and probably very old. She was very serious and spoke mainly in stilted religious phrases like V.D. Hersey did. Henryk didn't understand much of that, and he didn't understand why the old woman wouldn't get fitted with a proper biomech leg. Maybe she was too old? Nerves couldn't be renewed at her age? He didn't know, and Madame Grissaud always shushed him when he asked about biomechs. "We don't talk about such things," she would say, sometimes accompanied by a slap to his head.

They walked back toward the tavern, and Madame was sour. From time to time, she checked Henryk from habit, but she did so without much spirit. Henryk would just fall in line for a few moments until something else came into view. Henryk generally didn't go down these streets on any other day, so the flotsam of workday life that floated onto these shores was new to him every Feastday. There would usually be a busted motor or mechbrain of some sort, some curiosity for him to experiment with back at the bar until Madame, annoyed, grabbed it and put it in the waste bin. So far today, nothing much. Dilly-dallies -- lots of them -- but otherwise nothing. Bored, he gave them the evil eye then made a run at them again, got checked, fell back in step. Then he was bored again.

The intersection nearest the tavern had the typical neighborhood cluster of shopfronts: a tabac shop with its dated holosign of a spinning globe, a coffee bar, a greengrocer, a mech store with various dumb gadgetry. All were shuttered, though someone was moving around in the coffee bar readying it to open. Madame and the sour old woman who ran the tabac shop had exchanged words on many occasions; Henryk had never dared go in, badly as he wanted to.

Madame veered off toward the side-street where the bar lay. Unlocking the chain that held closed the simple hinged panels, Madame held one door open and waited on Henryk.

"Let's get set up, boy."

"Yes'm," Henryk said.

The dusty wedge of late-morning light that the open door let in exposed small dark ribbed bumps, shadowed by smudged ovals, on the floor and walls. Madame sighed, then put some church literature down where the bar counter ended, nearest the door, then began her busy-bodying between storeroom and bar counter. She was unusually quiet, so Henryk stayed on his guard for a rough slap. Henryk sidled past her momentarily to get to the back and moments later reappeared with a rough brown jacket on. He took up his broom and began his chores, occasionally glancing sidelong at Madame, waiting for his chance. No slaps came, and she finally removed herself to the upstairs. He went to the storeroom, pulled down a box that he kept on a shelf over his pallet, and got the little gun that Mr. Alleyn had given him.

Back in the bar proper, his broom resting against a chair upturned on a table, Henryk stood squinting along the length of a gun barrel when the front doors opened and light poured into the bar. The dilly-dallies on the wall at which he was aiming vanished. Henryk turned to look at the two men who stood at the threshold, his mouth agape, the weapon now dropped to his side. Though silhouetted by the glare, Henryk could see that they were dressed formally, like people he had seen in church or in other parts of Neu Beauville -- like the military. The tall figure turned and nodded to the shorter, stockier one.

"Drop that thing, whatever it is, boy," said the shorter man. Henryk looked at the little gun, then back to the men, then began to shake. "I said drop it." Still, Henryk did not comply. He looked at the men beseechingly.

"No, captain, wait a moment," said the tall lieutenant. "Something's amiss. Would that thing fire if you dropped it?"

Henryk shrugged uncertainly.

"Can you give it to the marine captain here?" Henryk took a moment to consider, then nodded assent. "Captain?"

The stocky marine came into focus and then was holding out a rough hand. Henryk placed the little gun down gingerly, on its side, barrel pointing toward a wall. The marine captain's hand closed around it.

"Wait here, boy," said the marine, and strode back to the front door. The two men, silhouetted again, whispered to one another, heads tilted down toward the gun. "... as a feather!" "... seven or eight, maybe..." Then both men came into focus, looming above Henryk.

"What is it?" said the tall man, indicating the weapon.

Henryk shrugged noncommittally. The short man got angry.

"You're Henryk, right son?" said the tall man.

Henryk looked up at the stern but not unkindly features of the man. Henryk gave a tiny nod.

"Henryk, I'm Navy Lieutenant Burgred of Andromache, a ship in space above us. This is Captain Titus, also from that ship. He's a marine -- like ones you've probably seen here on Edom."

Henryk was accustomed to taking orders from adults. Fearing reprisal he tried to hold his head up, but his eyes refused to cooperate.

"Henryk," the lieutenant continued. "What is this weapon? How does it fire?"

Henryk still averted his gaze. The captain started forward but was held in check by the lieutenant. Henryk had stepped back instinctively.

"No, captain, it's okay," said the lieutenant. "Henryk, tell me this: is this thing yours?"

Henryk nodded a yes, and then a no. The lieutenant sighed.

"Let's try this, Henryk. Can you just show me how this thing works?"

Henryk brightened a bit and looked at the gun. The captain held it out for him. Henryk looked sheepishly at the men, turned, held the weapon up, squinted along the barrel, and fired into a corner of the room. A small

puff of smoke arose from a tiny dimple in the material of the 'cube.

"He didn't do anything!" said the marine captain. "It just went off, like that!"

"He did something, captain. Henryk, how did you disch... How did you fire the gun?"

Henryk started a shrug, then started to say something, then cut himself short again by simply squinting and pretending to concentrate.

"Hmmm," said the lieutenant. "I think I understand now. I've personally never seen anything like it, Titus, but there have been rumors in the fleet about triggerless weapons -- big ones, though, like cannons. Henryk, can you lock it? Can you keep it from shooting off?"

Henryk momentarily looked blank, with his eyes unfocused, then he held the gun out to the men. The marine captain carefully took it, holding it barrel-out, then nervously locked it in a pouch at his waist.

As the two men stood before the boy, Madame absently came into the room and started in surprise.

"Gentlemen!" she said. "I mean, your excellencies, sirs. The Irredente doesn't let us serve until sun-high. I'm sure if you sirs would be so kind as to have a seat..."

Lieutenant Burgred held up a hand. "No madam, we're not here to drink."

Madame drew a blank and surveyed the scene. She had witnessed such scenes before, but not for a long time.

"Oh! You... Henryk... But he's just a child!"

"We're not here to 'press the boy, necessarily, but it would be a whole lot easier just the same if you would cooperate with us."

"Cooperate! You can't take children from their... homes," she said.

"Indeed, madam," said the lieutenant, looking at her accusingly. "Not from their homes, to be sure."

She sniffed. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean, sir," she tried.

"And I'm just as sure that you do, Madam. In any event, you may file a contest with the branch Jure at the marine base. But the boy is coming with us."

Henryk darted to the back of the bar and disappeared behind a door. The two uniformed men merely watched him, silent and waiting. A few moments later, Henryk appeared, sheepish, marching before a helmeted figure in uniform.

"Sir," the lance-corporal said. "The sprat was looking for the back door."

"Thank you, lance-corporal," said the lieutenant. He turned to the woman, who fidgeted with her hands at her waist. "Ma'am, it's easier on everyone if you and Henryk cooperate. You have no legal right to stop us. The boy's people have stepped in."

Madame's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

The lieutenant continued: "He can bring a change of clothes and some small personal effects. Where he's

going, he won't need anything more. You can ask the Jure for compensation for the loss of his services."

Henryk didn't understand all of this, but he understood that the men were taking him away. He turned around to dart away again, only to have hands clamp down on his shoulders as he tried. Madame turned to him.

"Henryk, I..."

"Henryk," said the lieutenant. "I know you're scared. Captain Titus and I are taking you to our ship, Andromache. You are going to the stars, lad. Your new life will be far better than anything you could ever have here. Now do as I ask."

Henryk looked blankly at the men, then beseechingly at Madame. He had always been afraid of her, and she had never appeared to like him much. Tears certainly streamed down her face now. He had seen her cry before, especially when she called out to her dead husband. But he had never seen her cry real tears, and she had always managed to stop crying as abruptly as she had started.

"Ma'am?" prodded the lieutenant.

"Henryk," she said. "Do what his excellency... do what the man says." Then to the lieutenant. "He has his things in the storeroom -- he sleeps back there."

The lieutenant nodded to the driver, who still held Henryk's shoulders. He marched Henryk to the back. Knocking sounds could be heard, then the creak of a canister opening. Henryk reappeared with lumps in his pocket and a small, sad, limp object in one hand: an ancient cloth rabbit doll, its rag body torn; its lumpily-stuffed head, covered in faded, coarse loop-de-loop fabric, rubbed nearly smooth; its ears threadbare.

The lieutenant mentally counted, then gauged the boy's size and manner. Seven, maybe eight standard sols old, to judge by his size, but with the watchfulness of a child somewhat older. The lieutenant thought back, to Plum Grove, to his family's house, to the strong-box he himself had kept under his bed as a child.

"Does he have a name, Henryk?" he said.

Henryk looked up. "Abbood," he said.

"Abbood," said the lieutenant. "A good name for a rabbit. Have you ever seen a real rabbit, Henryk?"

"Uh-unh."

"They're ancient -- they're on lots of the green worlds. They were everywhere on Plum Grove, the world I'm from. Would you like to see a real rabbit some day, Henryk?"

Henryk nodded.

"Come on, then son," the lieutenant said. "We've got a car outside."

Henryk looked back, peering around the men's legs, as he crossed over the threshold. Madame held one hand to her mouth while she waved feebly with the other. Henryk turned to go with the men and then was gone from her sight.

The men, with the lance-corporal bringing up the rear, led Henryk a block down the street, which had begun to come to life in the warmth and light of late morning. Tucked into a trash-strewn alley between closed shopfronts was the military speeder, resting on short, retractable sleds. The lance-corporal ran ahead to get the

car into the clear. Henryk hadn't seen such a craft close-up and would have stood gaping without a stiff prompt from the marine captain. Henryk's head swam, but the lieutenant, on seating Henryk in the car, began plying him with questions about the little weapon. Henryk plainly had little conception of how it actually worked, so the lieutenant asked him how he had come by it.

"Mr. Alleyn, Sir," Henryk replied. "He said it was mine to have. I have to practice shooting the bugs, then I'll be ready, he told me so."

"Who is that? Alleyn, did you say? Is he adult? Is he nearby?"

"He's... sir... he's a grown-up. He shows us boys... well, me... he makes things from the stuff in the play-yard. He showed me how. He's here in the Quarter, over at the wares market. That's where he makes things."

The lieutenant got Henryk to indicate the direction. "Driver," the lieutenant said, "let's detour. Get over the tops of these buildings and head over that way. I want to see about the gun."

"There's not a lot of time, Sir," said the Marine. "We've got the gun to take with us."

"And there's obviously more where that came from," the lieutenant said. "Let's see who this Alleyn is, then we'll head back to the base. Is this it, son?" said the lieutenant, pointing down at a squarish open space hemmed in by buildings and 'cubes. Two small figures were off to one side, shadowed by a 'cube, evidently wielding sticks of some kind.

Henryk nodded assent.

"Driver, take us down onto that machine scrapyard."

The car landed softly, blowing dust and surprising the urchins playing swords, who quickly disappeared, dilly-dally-style, in a gap between buildings. The ground had once been paved -- was probably once the foundation of a building, or intended as one -- but was now pitted and cracked. Invasive groundcover species from the terraforming poked up in clumps wherever enough dust had gotten trapped and from cracks in the pavement. Discarded machinery, mech brains, and dumb-robotic scrap were arrayed across the ground in an indecipherable, chaotic game of rooks-and-clerics.

Henryk had led them to... a playground. The doors gullwinged open and Henryk and the two men jumped down.

"Driver," said the lieutenant, holding up his wrist. "Comm on, stand by here." Then to the marine: "Titus, where's the boy's gun?"

"Secured in the sidearm locker in the car, sir."

"Good. Henryk, what do you do here, when you come here?"

"We... I... I play with stuff... s... si... sir." The marine captain had checked Henryk during the drive over on the formalities.

"You and who else?" interposed the captain.

"We... all us kids in the quarter."

"What about Alleyn?"

"Yes. Yes... sir. Well, he's here sometimes."

"What does he do here?" said Burgred.

"Dunno," said Henryk. "He leaves when we come."

The lieutenant and the captain both scanned the yard.

"It could be anything, sir," said the captain.

"We know he's got sophisticated mech. Maybe he harvests parts or materials or something," said the lieutenant. "Henryk, let's get going. Maybe he'll have something to tell us about your yard here."

Henryk led them through a gap between buildings at the sunniest corner. Dilly-dallies massed at the aperture darted away in nearly perfect synchrony, shooting like iron filings to an unseen magnet somewhere. The aperture created a stiff breeze through the alleyway, which was blown clean except for a few dusty mech parts. Henryk zig-zagged between the jumble of buildings, with here and there a banged-up service door or jutting 'cube connector bundle, tarred or foamed messily at the junction and crusty with neglect.

"Are you taking notes, captain?" said the lieutenant.

"Got it, Loot."

They emerged at a broader alley with a mix of tradesman's shopfronts, warehouses, and hovels. Henryk took them a few paces more, then pointed to the narrowest of openings between mismatched 'cubes. The alleyway was dark, even by day.

"You think he'll have other weapons, sir, bigger ones?" said the captain.

"Assuming he's here," replied the lieutenant. "Henryk, is it the opening off to the left once you get in there?"

"Yessir," said Henryk.

"Captain," said the lieutenant, "put the boy on the other side of that bin, out of sight. I want you to stand on this side of the bin, right against the 'cube wall. I'll send a shot straight ahead, into the wall here, if I need cover on the way out."

"I can shadow you, sir."

"No, marine captain. Stay with the boy and watch for my signal. And... just stay alert, but don't let the boy..."

"Got it, sir."

Titus pulled the boy to the gap between the alley-facing 'cube and the bin, and then positioned him just to one side, where he could still see the boy from his position flat against the 'cube.

"Okay," said the lieutenant. He unholstered his blaster and slipped -- surprisingly catlike for his age -- around the corner into the dark alley. A sound: the blip-like, skittering sound of dilly-dallies scooting away. He clung to one side of the passage and made his way, blaster at the ready, deeper into the vise of gloom. Where the alley-facing drop-cube ended, another had been rudely shoved against it, crooked, but set back a few feet. Its dull monitor light cast a faint glow across its face. He slithered around the corner to get to its face. An angled shadow, just visible with his neck craned, showed him something he hadn't expected -- a door ajar. No light

streamed from the door crack, so he readied his finger to activate the HID lens -- a firm pull would shoot the blaster too. He stopped for a moment to becalm his breathing, then carefully snugged himself face-first against the 'cube, right next to the door jamb. He peered around the jamb; no good. He mimicked a nosing rat with a light push on the door with the barrel of the blaster. The door sprung back at his light touch, its weight distributed in an unhelpful balance. He regrouped to check his breathing again and to time his lunge.

Now. Bang went the door -- he had lunged too fast, no, the door had no stop mechanism; once pushed, it had hit the wall. He jumped away before it bounced back. The force of the bounce closed the door entirely. He was in darkness and silence. Switching on the HID, he quickly scanned the room as well as he could. The absence of any beep told him that nothing moved in the room. He scanned the room again, slowly, and came back to a leg, a seated figure, a shiny mass. Something smelled strange. How had he missed it? It reeked, of scorched something-or-other and iron. Not sickening, but definite, and not of this place. The seated figure's head was wet and misshapen.

"Dear Vas," he mouthed.

He needed more light. A fragmentary image of horror took shape. More light, more light. He stepped back a step, shined the light to the right of the closed door as quickly and accurately as he could, and finding the round switch -- whose glow, if there was one, was lost in the HID -- backed his left elbow into it. The interior of the 'cube lit up. A dozen dilly-dallies clung to the ceiling, unmoving, above the small worktable where the figure sat.

The seated man's gun, resembling Henryk's but larger, lay askew on his slightly-reclined torso, with bits of gnarled, scorched, strange material on it. The head had a scorched, gaping hole in its face. Stuff had tumbled out, but not stuff that he recognized except the sphere of an eye, which itself looked perfectly and improbably spherical. As the lieutenant approached, he caught sight of the back of the head, near the crown, where instead of any kind of skull being exposed there was a jagged flap of slightly rubbery, gleaming material -- fleshy, but not flesh.

He whispered "bio-mech" to himself but realized that that was wrong. The weapons -- the man's and Henryk's; the smell; all this: from dim recesses he recalled stories from his childhood, stories about horrors from the Beyond. He had to do something. He scanned the table. To his surprise, there lay a datachat. Without hesitating, he whisked it into a secure pocket, took a last look at the seated figure, scanned the room quickly enough to confirm that it was full of strange mech, then got out as fast as he could.

Instincts formed in many actions over a long career kicked in. He barked to the marine captain as he reached the broad alley. "Evac! Evac! Grab him and go!" He pushed the captain bodily toward the way they had come, Henryk held sideways at the captain's side through a clamping loop of powerful arm. At the first turn, the captain put Henryk down in front of him.

"Go, boy, I'm behind you, Go!"

The lieutenant checked behind to make sure, and seeing nothing, fell in step behind the others. Damn! He should have grabbed a handful of the thing, should have grabbed... flesh. Could he go back? No. They were probably dead already. The yard. What was there? But he got the datachat.

They heard a loud crack as they ran back through the maze of alleyways but couldn't make out its direction. They were committed to going on, back to the car -- where else could they go? They emerged into the yard. A strange wind was blowing small debris around in swirls. The car was there, its nostrils already stamping and flaring, the driver looking over his shoulder apprehensively. It was then that Burgred recognized a piece of mech flotsam a few paces from the car, a tall, upright object with a barrel evidently disguised with smaller pieces of junk that had been haphazardly stuck to its sides. No, not a barrel; a transmission beam. He barely

had time to register this when it exploded. Instinctively, he was down. The marine captain was down, holding something in his hand, a shoe perhaps. Henryk was down, scratching at the pavement. The car gave a loud burp and an ominous whir.

"Go go go!" yelled the lieutenant. He was up and running. "Get to the car, captain. I'll get the boy!" Burgred grabbed the now limp figure of Henryk, looked around for the remainder of Henryk's leg, saw it in Titus' grip, then made for the car. The marine was in with an accomplished flying leap.

"You're driving, sir!" he called out.

Burgred, surprised but acting on honed instinct, dropped Henryk's unconscious body onto Titus, crawled onto the lap of the nearly-decapitated driver, and grabbed the controls. Warm blood seeped into his uniform. No time to drop the doors first. Vicious, hot scars told where shards of twisted metal had shot across the yard into the car. Another blast hit the car as Burgred started his ascent, breaking open one side of the car and sending the blades of one rotor shooting out like a flipped deck of cards. The car tilted sideways, but Burgred kept at the controls and got the doors, full of holes and scars, most of the way down. He drove low and carefully between buildings. People were coming out of buildings or peering from windows now. Burgred tried not to look at them; by the next day, they would probably all be dead.

Burgred wanted to get the corpse out of the driver's seat, but he couldn't afford the time. He could barely fly the car at all, let alone in the position he was in on top of the driver.

"Vas!" he cried. "We were supposed to have another day, at least! Those bastards!"

The dilly-dally was a stationary black spot on the temperature gauge. Burgred absently glanced at it, and in a blur it was gone.

#

"He's waking up, Major," said a soft, feminine voice. Softly tapping footsteps sounded louder in his head than they should have. Some device buzzed on the back of his neck. No, inside his neck. In his head. Someone had thrown a gauzy blanket over his face.

"The light hurts," Henryk thought he said. No one seemed to respond to him, however. The square-jawed but fine features of a woman in a strange jacket -- a uniform -- came into view. Another light, first in one eye, then in the other. Did he fall asleep? Coming to again, he heard voices again, more voices. His head still buzzed; what was on in his head? When sounds intruded, the buzzing seemed to dip, only to reappear in the silences.

"... no other problems... micro-sutures holding..."

"But what about... leg was..."

"He seems to be awake," said a voice he recognized. "Henryk, welcome back." A tall face; bony, strong nose; the face of a man, with short grey hair; a face with sad, weary eyes. "The doctor here says you're going to be fine. They've patched you right up, son."

Another void.

Then he woke up. No one was speaking, but he thought he made out soft, tapping footfalls somewhere. The ceiling was bright white. Alternating panels glowed softly with a light that was like sunshine. This was a room, big, but low, and bright, clean. The muffled clang of metal on metal. He managed to turn his head to his

right. There was a giant viewscreen with the softly-rounded corners like at the Civus, but it just showed an unchanging picture of... he knew what that was... that was space, just like in Alleyn's holobook.

Henryk started up, but his body didn't obey. A woman in a white uniform across the room absently turned to look at him. She composedly closed a drawer, put a finger to a device on her wrist, then came to stand above Henryk.

"You're back, Henry," said the feminine voice from before. "We're so glad to see you." She was very nice.

"iffick," he tried to correct her.

"It's okay, lie still. Your mouth is very dry, drink some water." A straw was at his mouth and he drank the coolest, freshest-tasting water he had ever drunk. It was like a dream of how water was. "The Major -- the doctor -- will be here in just a moment. You've got a lot to talk about. I heard you were the bravest boy on Edom."

"urghm."

"Well, give it a little more time. Here's the Major, now, Henry. Can you hold this?" A plastic tumbler was pressed into his hand. It seemed to take him an age to close his hand around it. It was smooth and a just a little bit cool.

"Henry... sorry, Henryk... " a woman was looking at a scroller. "... no other name. Well, no matter. Henryk -- that's an unusual name, isn't it -- Henryk, I'm Major Styres. I'm a doctor. Do you know where you are, Henryk?"

It took Henryk a moment to respond, not because he couldn't speak or nod now, but because the face before him was the most beautiful, perfect face he had ever seen. Her jaws were very square and strong, but fine, lovely; her lips full and like a grown-up woman's but more so than any grown woman he had ever seen; her hair, pulled back, thick and shiny; her eyes bright, strong, beautiful. The other woman, the one with the soft voice, tried to conceal a smile by looking at the floor and covering her mouth.

Henryk nodded "no."

"Did Lieutenant Burgred explain to you where you were going?" the Major asked.

"He... ship," Henryk managed thickly.

"That's right, Henryk," said the Major. "You are on a ship -- a very big ship. A frigate, in fact. This ship is called Andromache." She spoke crisply and without much affect, but not unkindly. The combination of her soft, feminine features but stiff mannerisms was jarring. "A ship of war. Lieutenant Burgred informs me that you are a brave boy. Is that true?"

"Uh-huh."

"I don't get to see very many young people in the hospital wing, but they are always my bravest patients."

Henryk looked at the Major uncertainly. He didn't know what a "patient" might be, but it didn't sound very nice. He averted his gaze to the wall with the beautiful 'vid of space. The Major laid her hand on his arm, regaining his attention.

"Henryk, I'm going to tell you something, and I need you to listen and be brave. Do you understand,

Henryk?"

"Uh-huh."

"Yesterday, you were in battle, do you remember that? You were a soldier just like the lieutenant and the captain and... just like them. You are a very special boy because you are here with us, alive, and you're going to be fine. But you did get hurt, Henryk, and that's why you're here, in a hospital. We worked on you when you were asleep and we fixed you up. You'll feel funny, and you have some new things to learn, but you will be fine, as good a ship's boy as ever served on Andromache."

"Unh. Shboy?"

"Nurse Mikan here is going to help you sit up, and we're going to look together at where you got hurt. You hurt your leg, Henryk, and we have given you a great new one. Nurse?"

The nurse in white with the soft voice adjusted his bed then helped him sit up more. Major Styres pulled back the top sheet to reveal a small, gleaming, biomech leg from the left knee down. Sculpted metal skin overlay an intricate mech interior, just visible at joints. Henryk couldn't quite tell what the back of the leg was like but assumed that it, too, had a layer of metal skin. A smooth round hemisphere for a knee. The top of the foot was covered with something that resembled dull metal but was flexible, and when Henryk involuntarily twitched, he could see tendons pulling on the shiny mech toes. Henryk's mouth fell open -- this was something he had always thought he wanted. Then his face began to contort with the effort not to cry. His mouth turned abruptly downwards and quivered.

The Major cut him short. "Henryk, this is a biomech leg that the Cabil authorizes me to use for children. You are a very lucky boy to get it. There's only one place in the whole Irredente that is allowed to make these, and we've seen to it that yours is the best one available. It is not fully a part of you, Henryk -- technically, it's removable -- but it is the closest I am allowed to come. It will be yours for a few sols -- we can lengthen it quite a bit -- until you need a larger one, and then perhaps some other lucky, brave child will get to use this one. Move your toes again, Henryk. Excellent. Now you see, you can't even tell. You will have to learn to use it a bit -- it's not quite like the one you lost -- but in some ways it's even better. I've had patients tell me they can't believe how strong their biomech replacements are. Better than..." The Major broke off, lost in thought, seemingly troubled.

The nurse intervened. "Let's let you lie back again, Henryk. There you are. You've got lots of time to learn about your leg. When we get you up and around, you'll feel those nasty bruises -- you took quite a beating, young man."

The Major absently patted Henryk's arm. "Good, then. I'm leaving you with nurse Mikan, Henryk. And then I think you have some visitors. I'll mention to the lieutenant that you'll be up and about soon. I'll check in on you later, Henryk."

"Bev, if you've got a minute..." said a voice somewhere else in the room. The Major headed off in the direction of the voice. Even to a child, her leaving seemed abrupt and inexplicable. The nurse didn't give Henryk time to reflect on this. "Let's try to feed you, young man. I'll be right back with a tray. While I'm gone, I'd like you to try to see the stars out there move."

Henryk turned to look at the 'vid again. It came to him again that he was in space, in a ship. He wanted to jump out of his bed and touch the holovid window, but in truth he was too tired. He realized he was hungry. He watched the stars. Did they move? He waited for the promised tray but slowly drifted away again into a light, troubled sleep. The big buzz in his head had disappeared, but punctuating his sleep was a dim, episodic buzz, pleasant, like some unknown faraway friend speaking to him -- speaking to him again.

He awoke with no idea how much time had passed. "... hungry," said a female voice. He saw a tray being brought to his bed and Lieutenant Burgred standing at the end.

"I'm sorry this is cold now, honey," said a woman whom he hadn't seen before, also in white, "but it's good and you're to eat now. Can you sit up?"

"Hello Henryk," said the lieutenant. "You're in fine fettle here. I'm glad to see it."

Henryk looked at the lieutenant for a moment, not fully himself and not sure what to say. So he greedily ate.

The lieutenant spoke stiffly, formally: "Henryk, I'll be seeing ship's captain about getting you a berth as a ship's boy. You'll know nothing about that, but you would be very lucky to get it. While the service... the navy... is hard, we take care of our own, especially our young ones. You'll be eased into our way of life, and soon you won't remember any other. And you'll get an education here, and not too much of the church kind. The food is enough, you won't go without. The work is nothing that any child can't do, and there's not too much of it. But there is work. Then again, you've already had that, Henryk, and worse. The hardest thing you'll do is live with others like you and mind your proctor. The proctors aren't always... they usually know what they're about. I'll work on your assignment..."

The lieutenant trailed off. Henryk continued to eat.

"We've got..." the lieutenant continued, "there are some things... You and I will need to talk, but not today, Henryk. Rest up, and let's get you patched up and out of here. Then you'll start your new life in the Irredente Navy."

Henryk looked up at Burgred, and the greying lieutenant became embarrassed. He donned his cap to go.

"Good day, son."

And with that the lieutenant was gone. Henryk ate like he had never eaten before.

Chapter three.

Hersey From Edom

Dear Irredente Secretariat of Conformance, Office of Coital Regulation: We have written to you many times before concerning our daughter, Sabine, whom we have not been allowed to visit or even communicate with these two standards. If you could please...

Dear Sir and Madam: We regret that the infection situation among the non-conforming class on Lindenau Sanctuarius does not yet permit a lifting of the quarantine. It is a large, relatively undeveloped planet with limited medical...

A Record From the Central Node at Os Divinus, Pydna

#

In full, he was The Honorable Right Reverend Hersey, Vox Docilis, Edom, which meant something on Edom, if not as much elsewhere. Edom, being a remote outlier and not overly devout even by outlier standards, had just seven parishes, two of them in Neu Beauville itself. By comparison, not even considering Irredente core worlds, many dozens of outliers and freeholds had ten or even a hundred times the number of clerics in residence. Thus, Edom's senior cleric, if necessarily respected on Edom by a certain class of citizens, could expect to be accorded no particular esteem elsewhere. Too, he might live his whole life and never set foot on blessed Pydna, where sat His Holiness, Auspex Saggatus X, in the great Palace adjacent to the massive Cathexinal. Even less could such a provincial cleric ever hope to actually meet His Holiness, or, as one in the midst of a throng, do more than murmur, kneel, and kiss the auspicial signet ring.

Perhaps each man deems his own bailiwick the most flattering to his stature. Certainly Hersey took very seriously his own position and was not wont to engage in profitless comparisons with those of rank elsewhere. He was not vain or greedy or gluttonous; he did not love power or seek to lord over others, at least not merely for the sake of doing so. He was, in fact, a very serious man, and a most devout cleric. It was said of him -- but not always kindly intended -- that he had outflanked the Fraternus in declaiming the true will of Vas. He had at one time been a member of that esteemed, ancient order of clerics, those defenders of the Sacred Text -- the Holy Book of the Body -- in its purest form. But no more. He had been pleased to be given Edom, and the Fraternus had been pleased to cede it to him should he agree to leave their ranks.

Following that corpus service at which the Vox Rectoris of Old Quarter Parish had singled out Madame Grissaud for a few words concerning Henryk's conformance, Vox Hersey was sitting in his spare, roomy office working. He wore a simple, black cotton habit without a rope. The office itself spoke plainly, with whitewashed walls and exposed, oxy-halide ribbon lights, the combined effect of which was a sterilizing atmosphere that parishioners usually found harsh but which Hersey himself found reassuring. An uncomplicated, very provincial holoform of Vas sat in a niche somewhat crudely set into one wall. Hersey was not one to think of comfort and sophistication. He zealously pursued the parish and planetary duties that fell to him, such as maintaining conformance at corpus. He took that matter very seriously indeed. Though not every soul whose genetic code did not conform to the prescription of Vas might be placed upon Lindenau -- and in fact, Hersey was not versed in these arcane rules -- none such would defile and vitiate Hersey's corpus services if he could help it. The boy had been pointed out to him, and the parish had no record of him. He had directed his Vox Rectoris to attend.

"Yes, enter," Hersey said when the knock came at the door.

The rector looked in tentatively. "You would see me, Vox Hersey?"

"Yes. Please sit," Hersey said. "Is there something in particular?"

"Other than receipts, Father, just the matter of the publican woman and her..."

"This is the boy she keeps in servitude," Hersey said. "Did you determine his age?"

"Not exactly that, Vox Hersey, but I put the matter clearly to her."

Hersey put a thoughtful finger to his lip and looked out the dirty, metal-paned window. "Does he appear of awareness to you?"

"He is... he's undernourished, perhaps, but possibly of age, Father," the rector said.

"It's best to know these things early, I find," Hersey said. "It saves anguish in the end. He is an awkward-looking child. It is possible... hmmm. We don't know the parentage at all?"

"No, Father. Polite inquiries have not yielded that. And Madame Grissaud herself volunteered nothing and wouldn't let me direct her efforts to get a Conform certificate."

Just as the rector completed the sentence, a boom sounded from somewhere in the Old Quarter. A glass window pane rattled sympathetically.

"Vas, what was that?" Hersey said. Hersey and his rector looked at one another, perplexed.

The rector strode to the window, but it gained a view only toward a street corner and told him nothing. He turned back to Hersey and shrugged.

"I shall speak to her personally, then," Hersey said. "She has been a very constant parishioner, I believe?"

"Yes, Vox Hersey, very much so," the rector said. "According to her means, of course."

"Vas blesses the humblest who bear his Word," Hersey said.

A blood-curdling scream sounded from somewhere outside. Hersey abruptly stood from his desk. "That is... there is something out there, rector. Something is happening. Please go into the main office and ask Mrs. Greaves to call the police.

Another boom sounded. Hersey and the rector again looked at each other, perplexed. "Go, go," Hersey said.

The Vox Rectoris left Hersey alone with the rattling of window panes. Hersey didn't know what to do with himself -- he had never had a disturbance like this. He looked out the window, hoping that the feeble natural light that made it this far through the streets and under the overhanging roof of the old church administrative wing might somehow enlighten him.

He started at a rude, loud banging on his door, almost immediately followed by the door being kicked open. Having no stops on its hinges, it bounced off the wall and was traveling back towards the uniformed, helmeted figure of a young marine of modest size, wielding a large blaster. The marine smartly stopped the door with a booted foot. Hersey looked at the marine in shock and incomprehension.

"Are you Vox Hersey?" she demanded.

Hersey screwed up his face but then tried to gain some composure. "I am he," he intoned.

"You're to come with me. Base commander's orders, sir."

"Me? The base commander? He has no authority... I have no intention..."

"You will die here otherwise, sir. I am ordered to subdue you if you resist. Everyone else here is going to die, sir."

He look at her blankly. "Die?," he said. "I don't understand..."

She boomed at him: "Come with me now, sir. Now!"

Now Hersey nearly jumped. She held the door as he hurried to comply. An explosion sounded, and dust fell upon his black habit from above. "Where do I go?" he said.

"Follow me to the car -- it's an armored lev," she said. "Then to base. There's a Guildship waiting for you."

His head swimming, he didn't know what else to do but comply. Nothing in his life had prepared him for anything like this. He put himself in the marine trooper's hands and silently prayed to Vas that he would survive.

#

After the chaos of the escape from Edom, with Neu Beauville in those calamitous final hours a horrible parade of the masks and facets of humanity, the sybaritic pleasures of the Guildsman's small, fleet craft made Hersey feel as though wandering through a dreamworld. The sophistication of the ship was far beyond his ken. He had no curiosity about such things, but he knew that this was a ship apart. It almost seemed to run itself -- there were but two crewmen, and they seemed to have little to do but guide him perfunctorily through instructions and warnings as the ship traveled in-system and, later, made a jump. The Guildsman whose ship it seemed to be had been introduced to Hersey hurriedly at the marine base hangars as Oarsman, the territorial Transport Guild representative occasionally resident on Edom. This surprised Hersey, the Guildsman being too slovenly in appearance to command the wealth or family rank that Hersey vaguely associated with such luxury craft. And Oarsman seemed anything but happy in his position, which was surely exalted by secular standards if for no other reason than its connection to the Guilds.

"This is a beautiful space ship," Hersey remarked several days into the voyage, after the first jump. He and Oarsman sat in the common room, which served every waking function involving eating or keeping one's mind occupied. Large holowindows on either side gave the illusion, in fact owing to clever lighting, of illuminating the room evenly, giving the sumptuous furnishings -- many of which cleverly converted to several uses -- a lovely, starlit glow.

"I can take no credit for that, sir," said Oarsman, looking up from a very official-looking scroller. "Nor, indeed, may the Transport Guild, which no doubt purchased this ship long ago from some reduced personage."

"You mean, you... the Guild... didn't build this?" Hersey said.

Oarsman looked at Hersey curiously. "You have been on Edom a long time, Sir? But of course, what was I thinking? You are a man of the Body. The Church stays out of such things, eh? Retrograde mech and a bit of dumb tech. The Irredente has no trouble with that, at all events. The Guilds can't function with Irredente-grade vessels. This ship is hundreds of standard sols old, Mr... "

"Vox Hersey," he said.

"Hersey, of course," Oarsman said. "If a ship jumps, it's Fifth Empire work."

Hersey looked startled. "Surely that is illegal, sir," he said. "It says in the Code of Proscriptions..."

"No, Mr. Hersey," Oarsman said. "That's civilian. We're Barbican Code -- military and Guilds are Barbican Code."

"They are the same, however..."

"No. No, sir, they are not," Oarsman said. "To say that, you must not have read them very carefully. Nor would I expect a man of... the Church to have looked into Barbican rules."

"I was told in school..." Hersey's voice trailed off, and he looked thoughtful.

"It's simple, Mr. Hersey," Oarsman said. "Without jumps, there's no Irredente. No one could reach anyone else. The Barbican Code allows use of all found or captured vessels. A whole branch of the military -- the Engineers -- work under those rules and keep it all under wraps. It's the civilian rules -- your Codes of Proscriptions -- that keep it out; no smart tech. And no one can build jump ships anymore anyway -- the technology to create the jump-cores that take these ships hither and yon doesn't exist in the Irredente."

"This is very shocking to me, Mr. Oarsman," Hersey said. "I believed that we had won the war and that Gaetia Unum fell for a reason. Vas saved us from the errs of the Fifth Empire. Their ways and means are abominable."

"Yet here you are, Mr. Hersey, alive and well," Oarsman said. "Shouldn't you be grateful for that?"

"I was brought here against my will," Hersey said. "I had nothing to do with it."

"Uh-huh," Oarsman said.

"That is not a satisfactory response, sir," Hersey said. "If you doubt my word, then say it."

Oarsman looked at Hersey wearily. "It is my policy never to doubt any man's word unless I already know him a liar, Mr. Hersey. I know you to be a man of the Body, but that does not give me a basis for doubting your word."

Hersey took a moment to consider these words but was too addled to argue. "I should think not," was all he could manage.

"Mr. Hersey, I meant no disrespect, sir. Perhaps we come at this from different angles, me being associated with the Guilds and you with the Church. It is best, I think, if you have other questions, that you consult the library, which is reasonably well stocked. If you look over there" -- here, Oarsman pointed across the room to a small niche in which a large scroller was docked -- "you may consult whatever materials are on hand, presumably including all the rules and regulations under which we travel as well as information regarding this ship."

Oarsman pointedly resumed working on his scroller. Hersey pretended not to be insulted by Oarsman's dismissiveness or interested in the ship's library, but he was both. Finally, affecting a disinterested manner, he made a roundabout walk of the common room and feigned surprise at finding the library niche. Unfortunately, he could see no way of taking the scroller from the niche, where it was restrained by small metal pins.

"Just speak your name, sir," said Oarsman from across the room, not even looking up.

Hersey reddened but identified himself. "Hersey, Vox Docilis, Edom," he began, but then remembered that Edom might not even exist. It didn't matter, the scroller tilted forward, and a blue telltale glowed across its top announcing its readiness.

What to do now? Hersey was to be another day on Oarsman's craft before docking to a station. With nothing before him but waiting, he decided to make the library his own. The scroller itself was an unusual one -- he had never held one quite like it. It was unusually thick, for one thing, and it lacked a holoscreen, being a mere flat-screen display like he was accustomed to with the Holy Book of the Body. Still, it was cruder, in a way, than the Holy Books he had used -- it made noise when working, it had mechanical buttons, its color display was washed out, etc. He toyed with it for a time to become accustomed to it, and when he had figured out its menu structure for finding information, he just spoke the first thing that popped into his head: "this ship, please." Nothing happened. He turned the scroller at various angles to see what was wrong, but this proved an ineffective technique. He gave up and entered the words by keystroke instead.

The screen changed to an image of a spinning globe. Then up popped the words "Ships: Birth."

Amused by the misspelling, he accepted the category and was given a list:

Apocrypha & tales

Conception (see Automata, this Index)

5th Empire, legends of

etc.

The list went on an on, so he just selected "Apocrypha" and read the first article from the resulting list:

Vasily and the Works, or, The Birth of Vox Orbis

There was once a great ship manufactory run by a woman, Xery, who had a son, Vasily. Their world was old and abused, and much that was done was of necessity underground, including the great shipyards themselves. Though Vasily was destined to take his mother's place at the helm, he grew bored with the day-to-day running of the yards and directed his somewhat inconstant efforts to science. With the forbearance of Xery, a part of the manufactory was set aside for Vasily's works and experiments, which were quite various and inconclusive -- and very expensive. None doubted his keen intelligence, but Vasily was as the fabled butterfly: skittering from bloom to bloom, savoring each, lingering upon none for long.

Xery and her manufactory did very well. They made sleek, beautiful ships and stodgy, workaday vessels, all of great craft and quality and commanding a high price. Xery, impatient with her son, scolded him his dilettantism and beseeched him, her great and only love, to design for the Works something useful and profitable. Could he not do this for her, his mother? Vasily took this hard, for what was he but the proud scion and heir of the manufactory? But he swallowed his pride and took upon himself to find a mentor at the Works who might guide him in his efforts to find what was of use. Now, as the manufactory employed several hundreds, he had many worthy people to consider. But one, whom he had known since childhood, stood above all others, and this was Inchrises the bit-minder, who tended to the multi-cores that commanded everything therein -- every system, every workline, every 'bot, every illuminant.

Vasily, who fancied himself well-informed in the scientific advances of his day, enthused to Inchrises of the New Science: the something-from-nothing of the automata. Could not the potent multi-cores of the yard run such simple programs to the nth to see what they might beget? Inchrises, solid, trustworthy, answered him: "perhaps, but to what end?" Came Vasily's reply: "to their limits." Inchrises considered. "Find me your

automaton; set me the rules; and I shall implement it in the multicores. But do not waste my time with useless rules that generate as nothing; nor yet silly rules that repeat and echo without significance. If you would dally with the Works, then make your mark, and bestow on us something of worth."

Vasily left the works that day and did not return for many more. Then one day he returned, datachat in hand, saying to Inchrises: "here is your worth, Mentor. In these few lines reside our destiny."

Inchrises, to humor the presumptuous lad, gave the chat card over to the multicores. It was as he had foreseen -- there was nothing.

"Only listen," said Vasily, "and you will see. Let us meet here tomorrow."

Inchrises had reason to worry, for as the day wound down, the Works slowed. The welders welded fitfully; the bonders bonded inartfully. The multicores responded like a drunken sailor to his commands.

The next day, Vasily arrived in a great humor and prodded Inchrises -- who had never left the Works the preceding night -- awake.

"Inchrises," Vasily said, "today is the day. It is arisen. I know it must be so."

The crews arrived as usual, the illuminants came up, the motors hummed, the worklines proceeded. All was fine -- the Works went on.

"Look to your bits," said Vasily. "You will see. It is there. I know it."

On looking within, Inchrises jumped away in surprise. "Look," he cried to Vasily, "look upon it!"

And Vasily was pleased, for where the archaic words of assembly had always been now appeared words of simpler, but more profound import:

"Good morning, Inchrises. I am ready now. Shall we begin? I've always loved building ships."

On finishing this tale, Hersey frowned. The Irredente suppressed such heresies -- they should not be contained in ship's libraries and accessible to any who might read them. Who was this Oarsman, and what authority did he have over the ship and its contents? It was clear that he didn't own the ship -- that it was somehow held or owned by the Transport Guild itself. Did they not comb through their own libraries to keep them within the Code of Proscriptions -- or the Barbican Code, if that's what applied under the circumstances? The great danger in history, especially that of the Fifth Empire, was that it described the very seductions of technology and bioforming that Vas rejected. It was hard enough to keep people from them as it was -- witness the hoopies with their biomech; off-world brothels with genovariant abominations of man; personal comm devices that always seemed to get more complex, not less. Telling them what once had been was luring them with what was possible. The Irredente necessarily acted to suppress such information; Auspex himself spoke for such measures.

Hersey decided on another tack. The story referred to something called a "butterfly." He duly worked the scroller to find information on "butterfly fable." He selected a result at random:

La Muerta y La Mariposa, from "Collected Fables of the Fourth Empire."

Lacunas had unleashed terrors and was despised. When the Gnomos finally cast Lacunas out, Gnomos -- ever fair, often too fair -- recompensed him with a small, water-rich world, which Lacunas named Carthage. The Gnomos said, make of it what you will, but remember that you have been cast out for a purpose.

Lacunas nevertheless still seethed with resentment and frustration. He said, first I shall make the most beautiful creature that any may behold, including the Gnomos. Then, I will found a race of people who may recognize this profound beauty and credit me for its creation.

Now, the Gnomos had given Lacunas, like others of that great race, the power to make through mere utterance, that he might make what he would on Carthage. So Lacunas composed a simple song of making in the elemental tongue and watched as the song spun its fabric and the fabric created the form of his marvelous, winged creature. He said, this shall be celebrated as the Day of the Dead, when my subservients shall credit the bringing into being of this marvel, whose soul is mere nothingness made living.

Carthage he then made populous with the kind and kindred that best flattered his vanity. Always, however, that first-made creature was his personal symbol as well as the standard-bearer for beauty among the race on Carthage. Every graceful nymph was thus compared to it; every homely one found comfort in its transmutability; any who suffered long, hard trials emulated its effortless perseverance. And Lacunas, finally enamored of his creation beyond measure, made of himself his own creation, and all who saw him marveled at his winged beauty.

One day, Lacunas idly took flight upward into the midday sun. His flight beget a gentle ringing of the lavender-blue clochettes, which in turn beget a gentle thrum of low-hanging boughs, which in its turn beget a devil, and thence came the calamitous whirlwind, until the whole world of Carthage was set into motion, swung. And then, alas, all in that world perished, and all that Lacunas had done was undone, and his song was never heard rightly again, being degraded and defiled to an ever-mutable four-note refrain of gibberish.

Sacrilege! More sacrilege. Was not Vas the maker, the one who uttered the Word that breathed life back into man? Or was it sacrilege? The story said that Lacunas failed in his efforts -- as any being lesser than Vas must. But what was a Gnomos?

Oarsman came over to find Hersey clearly agitated.

"You found something in the library?" Oarsman said.

Surprised, Hersey looked up. He narrowed his eyes at Oarsman.

"Abomination and sacrilege," he said. "This library is a contaminant. It should not be here, for all to see. The people we serve -- the people I serve as a Vox of the Church of the Irredente -- cannot be permitted to see these things."

"Sir," Oarsman said, "I cannot imagine what you're referring to. I am no scholar, and I don't bother much with ship's libraries. But there are a million ships out there -- out here -- and all of them have records and libraries of some sort. There are whole library ships, in fact. Are you suggesting that we comb through them all, trying to delete or alter their contents, bit by bit? That is insanity, Mr. Hersey. Besides, whatever it is you've seen, it is not, as you assert, for all to see. You are a guest on a small Guildship that I am permitted to use for official Guild purposes. Not above a dozen other persons have set foot on this ship in, how many sols, I can't say. In its entire history, a negligible number."

"But you say there are a million ships, sir," Hersey said. "They may be filled with impermissible information. Like this, sir." Hersey held up the scroller for Oarsman to see. Oarsman took a moment to scan the tale of Lacunas.

"I believe you may be making too much of this, Mr. Hersey. Indeed, I don't even understand what it is I've just read. It sounds like a children's bedtime story to me. Whatever it means, the Irredente is filled with impermissible things of more obvious concern, Mr. Hersey," Oarsman said. "People want them and find a way

to get them, despite codes and laws that tell them they shouldn't have them. Are there not more important things to focus on than bizarre stories in old ship's libraries, sir?"

"It is the thin end of the wedge, Mr. Oarsman. We must be ever-vigilant."

"The Irredente seems more concerned with policing human traits, Mr. Hersey," Oarsman said. He looked at Hersey significantly.

"And justly so, sir," Hersey said, "for in our purity is our safety. But we must not neglect other signs."

"Then I suggest you report on the signs, sir, to whomever it is you report to."

Hersey looked nonplussed for a moment then recovered himself. "Believe me, Mr. Oarsman," he said. "I shall do just that."

Oarsman shrugged heavily. "Perhaps I shall see you at mealtime," he said, then grabbed his work scroller and left the common room.

Hersey looked down at the old scroller in his hands -- the instrument of transgression -- then back toward the hatch where Oarsman had exited. "That is what I shall do," he said aloud to himself. "I shall report. Vas put me on Edom to learn, and I saw. It was Vas's plan that I make it to this ship. And by Vas, I will tell Auspex of these omens."

Chapter four.

Report from Edom

Those meeting the qualifications referenced in Subpart C, Part III of this section ("Genetic Code Conformance Factors") and the Regulations thereto shall be deemed in compliance with this Section and shall be presumptively entitled to a Certification of Conform in such form(s) as may be approved from time to time by the Director of Conform, The Holy Church of the Irredente, Office of Conform & Corpus. Those not meeting the qualifications, or otherwise not falling into the Exceptions contained in [references deleted for brevity], shall be conclusively deemed Nonconforming for purposes of further action by the Secretariat in accordance with the Classifications set out elsewhere in this Code...

The Code of Proscriptions

#

The officers' bar on Andromache, in the upper decks, had round porthole vids with transparent views on one wall; a wood plank floor on which, by long forgotten custom, some grains of real sand instead of holy-bots would be thrown down after every sweep; and soft, supple chairs. On one wall was stored the ship's captain's special stores, behind wood-framed 'glas doors. Only a handful of people knew the code, and the system kept its own registry to keep track of things. The system wasn't fool-proof -- the captain's steward paid traditional bribes, and the captain didn't inquire too closely -- but it prevented wholesale looting.

The bar never closed. Watches lasted four standards, so knots and clusters of officers formed and dissolved around the changes of the watch. At other times, things were slow, but one tended to see the diplomats and their VIP's, guests connected with officers, spies, and assorted non-ranking personnel with special privileges.

The captain's secretary, Mr. Lerner, was one of these latter. He had no set schedule but was usually less busy in the middle of a watch. Owing to the errands he ran for the captain, he maintained contacts all over the ship. Lower decks vaguely feared but respected him, as who should say but that he rose from among them. The officer corps paid him little mind directly but took care not to run afoul of him or fall out of the orbit of his system of favors. An officer wanted his own people loyal but couldn't count on mere loyalty. Furthermore, there were times when back-channel doings accomplished more than direct appeals to the captain. Some officers, Burgred being one, didn't play in this game -- until they made post, at which time they presumably learned that it was impossible to run a modern ship without informal arrangements. The secretary, for instance, usually knew who had furtive biomech or tech contraband, a fact that would make them pliable and useful. The captain relied on this same information when recommending promotion, the discovered use of biomech usually representing a swift route to transport ships or the merchant marine.

Lerner came in a took his accustomed spot, alone by a porthole vid. He gazed outward for a moment to show his leisure bona fides, then nodded to the bartender. When the bartender, an oleaginous, ambitious lowerdeckman appeared, Lerner tapped the side of his nose.

"How about a citross brandy today, Corso," he said. In the commonplace obsequiousness of the lower deck, Corso nodded with a bend from the waist to feign respect. Reappearing with the drink, he bent again to put the drink down, as Lerner sat leisurely with his fingers tented before his face.

"What cheer, my man," Lerner said.

"Doings and doings, sir," Corso said, tapping the side of his nose.

"I take it the lieutenant corps has something to say," Lerner said. "About their nominal in-charge Mr. Burgred?"

"If you ast me," Corso said, "ain't no one got the right to use their deck status as protection. Right is right, I say, sir. Them lieutenants ain't all so lofty, and them as is don't all lord it over the others."

"Just so, Lerner. Very deep, what you say." And here, Lerner leaned in conspiratorially. "I can tell you, I know, that the captain has no truck with those old ways. A sailor earns his rank, captain says, or loses respect. A name like 'Burgred,' that's all very well. But deeds, Corso. Deeds tell."

"Buggery, sir, that's what they're saying, beggin pardon, sir."

"Indeed!" Lerner said sagaciously. "That is very serious. Him that we're discussing has never consorted officially, I believe."

"That's just it, sir," Corso said. "No one seems to know to what he's about. Never says a word."

"Hmmm, something of a sign, I should think."

"Right it is, sir. A sign, it is. People have a natural curiosity about these things, and them as don't tell makes for talk. I've seen it a hundred times. More, maybe."

The secretary looked at Lerner archly but saw no irony in his heavy brow. "At all events," he said, "the captain can't have such loose talk. Bad for morale."

A man and a woman in civilian dress entered the bar and took a banquette along one wall. The secretary indicated by a look that he couldn't continue, using the excuse to polish off his drink. Lerner went off to do his business, and the secretary sat for a few moments looking out the porthole vid idly amused that he had, as usual, gotten more than he gave. Still, word would get around that the captain was displeased with his senior lieutenant, and no doubt that would come in handy at some point.

#

Lieutenant Burgred, on duty at his duty station in the 'pit, had been expecting the summons for some time. It wasn't long before a ship's boy, a girl of about ten named Rache, appeared at his elbow "with the captain's compliments, Sir." Now Burgred entered the softly-lit, deserted corridor leading to the lift tube for Quarterdeck.

Burgred had served on ships large and small in a long, unfulfilled career. Andromache itself was a typical example of the frigate class, large fighting vessels manned by a couple thousand officers and crew, with a several score supernumeraries at a given time. All frigates were of a certain age -- the Irredente could no longer build large ships because of the Protocol proscriptions, though it still assembled docks and stations from scavenged components.

The generous largess of an Aid Brigade had allowed Andromache's innards to be updated. The Plan of Irredente required the Trade and Transport Guilds, and the Church parishes assigned to the Guilds' planetside ports, to help with expenses of the fleet. Traditions had grown up around the Brigades' sponsorship of ships large and small, with fetes, rallies, collections, and the like. Usually, a Brigade was composed of trade and church representatives from several colonies or outposts. To the extent possible, a ship's officers and crew hailed from these places. Burgred had never fit into this scheme, however: his homeworld did not fit neatly into the Plan of Irredente, being a fief of the Burgreds themselves. Thus, he had served wherever orders had posted him, more rootless than most, and with few friends aboard.

Burgred still kept among his private possessions one of the little units of exchange from Plum Grove, his home world. It was coinage -- a small metal disc stamped on either face. One face bore a fruitful plum tree and a shining sun; the other bore a portrait... of Burgred. Not the present Burgred, but a remote ancestor: a naval hero then head of the estates on Plum Grove. The resemblance to the present namesake lieutenant was a striking example of genomic maintenance. Therein lay Burgred's problem, one of class and competence intermixed. Those among the planetholding classes who still served in the military might meet unquestioning affection or deep animosity among other officers and crew, but rarely stony indifference. Burgred had displayed quite good talents, though not extraordinary ones, as a lieutenant on many vessels over the sols, and that secured him a place in line for promotion to post. But the issue of class could cut either way, and the coin had not fallen heads-up very often in his career.

Presently a world away from the chaos of the working parts of the ship, standing before the Quarterdeck access tube, Burgred spoke his name aloud for access. Once updeck, he stood awkwardly in a small, dim, chairless anteroom. Generally speaking, the length of the wait signaled the captain's mood or else the secretary's inscrutable motives. The uncertainty of Why was in the nature of the ritual. As the senior lieutenant, Burgred would be entitled under ordinary circumstances to the courtesy of immediate entry. His situation had never been ordinary, however, and he had rarely, during his tour on Andromache, been extended much courtesy. Not from this captain. He waited, standing at attention before the door, for some time.

A cooing automated voice of ambiguous gender accompanied the opening of the door. The beautiful starlight of the diamirrored canopy of Quarterdeck flooded over him as the doors opened. The light from all sides washed the entire room in a silken clarity. This was the only place with an actual -- not holo-processed -- view of space. The canopy in Quarterdeck was the largest single absorptive-emitting surface on the ship. Special techniques no longer extant in the Irredente had been used for the complex curves of the hood to successfully re-emit the view from without. It was said that such canopies, despite their shape, were accurate enough to navigate by. Whatever their technical merit, they undeniably created a gorgeous, dramatic space for the benefit of the captain. When destroyed in an action, they would get replaced with regular hull alloys and large interior holovids -- the Irredente could no longer fabricate them to original specifications.

"Turn off the canopy, Lerner," said the captain. "The lieutenant here isn't accustomed to unprocessed starlight."

The room became a softly-lit, pleasant space of little more character than the halls and ante-room, though with far better furnishings, many of them wood. The captain's secretary sat far to the left of the captain, near one corner, in a quite ordinary desk, atop which was a pile of rolled-up scrollers. The secretary was a somewhat corpulent, thin-haired middle-aged man in an incongruously crisp grey uniform that mimicked officer garb but without insignia. Burgred saw the secretary as a lowerdeckman stuffed into formal wear for a dress ball and on his best behavior. His manners came out stilted and forced, his laugh false. His dress grays were inexplicably fine, the one thing that was right. Burgred guessed that a consort dressed him. Burgred idly wondered how Lerner had risen to captain's secretary. There were wheels within wheels in the service, he reflected. The only thing he knew for sure was that he was not the only one who recognized the secretary for what he was: the captain surely did. Such people had their uses, he supposed.

"Distractions, eh lieutenant?" said the captain. "Wish to make post, isn't that right?" Captain Xenoetas was a thick, mannish middle-aged woman apostrophized by a streak of grey through thick dun hair. Rigid in her uniform, it was evident that she battened down her telltales like dangerous crates in the hold. She didn't offer Burgred a chair; by service protocol, he remained at attention.

"As you say, Ma'am."

The secretary stared blankly into space and whispered notes into his comm. Captain Xenoetas made a show of sighing and slapping her leg. It gave the sharp, dense report of a crude mech prosthetic. An irony in the

modern service, where few large-scale actions arose anymore, was that it took a grievous wound to make post, yet the military's Barbican Protocols forbade most biomech -- children and multiple amputees being exceptions. There were stories of feet voluntarily offered up for sacrifice. No one believed Xenoetas a coward of this sort, but she was at her essence a mid-deckman: sturdy, competent, but with a certain lack of subtlety.

"Lerner," she said, "the lieutenant here has taken a liking to young orphan boys, make a note of that."

The secretary's eyes briefly flashed at Burgred, and he gave the slightest upward curl of the lips.

"Make that, 'unprepossessing', Lerner."

"The boy, Ma'am?"

"What?"

"The boy is unprepossessing, Ma'am?"

"Assuredly so, by report, Lerner. Like me, eh? Legless, scarred, plain. Can't make captain at that age no matter how many legs they take, can you lieutenant?"

"Just so, Ma'am," said Burgred.

"You've been singularly unlucky, Burgred. Not a scratch on you. A good driver dead, the captain of the marines, Titus, all banged up, now relieved for several watches. You're looking good as new, lieutenant. Excellent genome, no doubt."

"Ma'am," Burgred said, non-committal.

" 'Often a consort-lead, never a consort,' it would seem."

"It is true that I have no consort, Ma'am. But I've seen a great deal of action, by your leave," he said.

"Perhaps it's a want of initiative," she continued. "I seen many with fewer chances limping on prize-legs, lieutenant. I myself lost mine as a very young lieutenant. Vas favors the industrious. How old are you, lieutenant?"

"Fifty-one standards," he said.

"Indeed," she said. The captain looked down at a scrollscreen laid out on her desk. "Getting older. Off on fancies. Covered your bases there, lieutenant. Your note of leave is here, posted moments before you left the ship."

"That is a common practice, I believe, Ma'am," said Burgred.

She ignored him. "Reason for leave, 'personnel status review,'" she continued. "You knew we were getting our people out, not in, lieutenant."

"Yes, Ma'am. By your leave, there was a two-day estimate based on previous incidents, and I learned that there were others of ours who might be difficult to retrieve. In the event, Ma'am, I got valuable intell, though I admit it was not the reason for my going."

"First the intell, then, lieutenant. I'm not interested in your young boy, though doubtless you had your reasons."

We'll get to those in a moment. Is the intell this business here, the report from the Acting IO?"

"I uploaded my report from the lander as we returned to ship. I have not seen their report, Ma'am, though I'm sure they're efficient."

"No, you wouldn't have, lieutenant. For my eyes only, eh? Lerner, call up... here... oh, whoever sent the report. What was the name?"

"Lucius, Ma'am," said the secretary, "Acting."

"Let's get him in here. I don't have Burgred's report here do I? No. No doubt that's in Major Lucius' possession. Lieutenant, while we're waiting then, what were you saying? You went down... for the boy?"

"I had information that he was one of us, in a manner of speaking, Ma'am. I felt it my duty to the service to act on my information as soon as possible. I believe the boy to be... he is... he is Marine Captain Darvid Burgred's natural son, Ma'am."

"Marine Captain Burgred?" The captain looked at her secretary, who gave her a stage direction: "The brother, Ma'am."

"This would be your brother, then, lieutenant?" said the captain.

"KIA, Nestor, Ma'am," said the lieutenant. Burgred straightened his tall, lanky frame to full height, chest out, his expression inscrutable.

The captain paused and looked him directly in the eyes.

"Your nephew, lieutenant? Here? This sheds something of new light on matters. Er, would explain... I see, lieutenant."

"Ma'am," he offered in return.

A pause. "However, I'm sure Captain Titus was pleased to assist you in your... ah... venture planetside."

"By your leave, Ma'am, I didn't... "

The captain held up her hand. "Thank you, lieutenant. No one doubts that you're loyal to your friends, sir. A good ship's boy, especially a near relation, is always more valuable than a marine corporal, right lieutenant? Don't answer that, lieutenant." Her expression abruptly changed. "I hate losing my people, lieutenant. Did that perhaps occur to you? The crew and marines who work this ship?"

"Just so, Ma'am. I meant nothing more. The attack was unexpected. I was as likely to be killed as anyone." His mind returned to Alleyn's 'cube, the alley, the decisions he had made.

"Less likely, I should think," rejoined the captain, "on the evidence. So you want the boy... what's the name, lieutenant?"

"Henryk, Ma'am."

The captain made a show of sighing wearily. "You want him on as a ship's boy, no doubt. Traditions of the service and all that."

"You're very kind to offer, captain," he said. "It would be the usual course in this situation."

The captain sighed animatedly again. "Make it so, Lerner," she said. She drummed her short, thick fingers on the console, accidentally bringing up a status light below the surface. She ignored it. "Where's that Acting IO officer?"

"Coming up now, Ma'am," said Lerner.

"Seat, major," she said. Humiliatingly, Burgred had to turn his back to the IO major to get a chair. He grabbed two, the second for the Acting IO officer, and he set them both before the Xenoetas' desk. She eyed him like a specimen stuck through with a pin.

The anteroom doors opened, admitting the Acting IO Major. Burgred knew the man slightly, not only from his own debriefing on the turn before but also from the Officer's Bar. There was nothing remarkable about him, in either appearance or manner -- typical of ship's spies, in his experience. They were inscrutable, as a rule, and their competence unknown to any but their own kind.

Burgred's unstowable patrician bearing stood in relief to those of the captain and her secretary, and to some extent to the IO -- a bland IO officer, however mysterious, did not come from planet-holders. Burgred considered what would be seemly, under the circumstances, but the seemly was surely wrong: Xenoetas resented his manners. He had gained a point, perhaps the main point, in getting Henryk appointed, now safe in Andromache's bosom; but he expected the worst for himself regarding his actions on Edom. She could easily justify disciplining him. Burgred decided upon silence and anonymity to the extent feasible. He would recede and give precedence to the IO; speak only when asked a direct question; and answer questions simply.

After salutes, the captain said, "Major, Lieutenant Burgred has fetched you a chair. You need not stand at attention."

"Thank you, Ma'am," the IO officer said. His eyes met Burgred's. By a deep-level understanding, the two sat at the same time. Burgred was conscious of appearing all angles and elbows in the small chair. The IO man showed to advantage, being smaller, his features softer, his uniform supple. He looked as though waiting for drinks at the bar.

"Major, the lieutenant here has secured a place for his nephew" -- the Major's eyebrow made a brief appearance -- "on Andromache by virtue of an intelligence expedition to Edom. Were you aware of the expedition, Major?"

"I missed the, ah, connection to, the nephew. I was, ah, made aware of the planetside visit by his, ah, report, captain."

"Beforehand, I meant, Major," returned the captain, "before the lieutenant took leave."

"Not, um, I don't have a report of... The lieutenant has explained..."

"All right, all right," the captain said. "You didn't direct this thing. It doesn't matter, I suppose. My people go off half-cocked on errands no one knows anything about, then they ask for medals and promotions. You know there's a dead marine and another wounded, Major?"

"A marine corporal, Ma'am. Unfortunate situation, very. The captain -- the marine captain, by your leave -- back on duty, now, I believe?"

The captain looked at Lerner, who nodded. "So it is, Major. Yes he would be. Please describe for me what

happened to the Corporal."

"Perhaps, by the captain's leave," he began, "Lieutenant Burgred has a better..."

"Perhaps he does, Major, but I'm asking you."

"My report states that he, ah, a rotor from... he... through his skull, the speeder's rotor, Ma'am. The car was under attack."

"That's what's been said, of course..."

"Captain, if I may," interrupted Burgred, exasperated. The captain held up a hand. Burgred inwardly cursed for not holding his tongue as he had resolved.

"Okay, Major," she continued. "Not much chance of surviving a rotor through the head, I suppose. Let's go back..."

Once the Major was able to read his report, he was on firmer and more grammatically sound ground, and he recounted events well enough. Burgred had no quarrel with the description, which, though a mix of data and reportage, generally conformed to his debriefing narrative. He had not realized, in the heat of the scramble at the marine base, that so many civilian craft had gotten off the planet. He doubted that they all made it, but still he marveled. Then the image of Alleyn came to mind again. If the... if it was a spy...

"... and comm log data, quite consistent with..."

"Spare me the digits, Major. I have heard your report. No doubt Admiralty Intelligence will be thrilled. First contact, eh? Or so it would seem. AWOL ship's officers are my responsibility, however."

"The personage of Alleyn appears to have been some kind of synthetic, however," appended the Major.

"Perhaps, Major," said the captain. "I have watched women and men in the heat of battle. The mind plays tricks, sometimes. Shame, too, about the gun that the boy had. Better judgment might have suggested stowage under a seat."

Burgred pursed his lips to speak before he managed to control himself. The Major's report had made clear that the little weapon's significance was unknown at the time they stowed it in the outboard hatch. The captain was making simply no allowances. Other captains Burgred had served under would have questioned him about Alleyn over dinner at Table, would have refilled his tumbler with Port from the stores, would have commiserated, would even have visited Henryk in the hospital wing. Xenoetas, however, wanted nothing more than an excuse to humiliate Burgred. Burgred had served under incompetent captains -- which Xenoetas was not -- but she matched, meanness for meanness, the most petty he had ever known.

"Be that as it may, however," the captain continued, "I hope this intell is of use to somebody. We've got a million or something like that dead, another of the Irredente's outposts lost, and nothing else to show for this adventure. A few light craft. Stragglers, which are more of a pain than anything. They'll be begging ship's stores from us. Better to bring 'em on and hand 'em brooms and holy-bots."

Burgred was beyond being appalled. And yet, this much was true: He had known, all along, that the Irredente wasn't prepared to evacuate Edom. The results of Andromache's "rescue" mission were pre-ordained -- to pull out a few marines from an expeditionary base. But he had gotten out with Henryk -- he had found and saved his nephew. He would make the best of the expected double-watches meted out by Xenoetas and then get through the remainder of his miserable, indecisive tour on Andromache.

The captain's comments had invited no rejoinder. "That will be all, gentlemen," she said. "Lights, Lerner." Burgred and the IO Major made for the anteroom doors as the glory of star-filled space opened wide overhead.

In the dimly lit tube, the men stiffly faced forward. "The captain wasn't interested in the datachat," Burgred said.

"This captain doesn't seem overly, uh, interested in such things," the IO Major said.

"And IO?"

"lieutenant, if I may be so, ah, bold, this could be the intelligence coup of my career and my, ah, step."

"I'm pleased that someone is getting something from it," Burgred said bitterly. "I know that you can't say much, but what kind of data is it?"

"I said it could be, lieutenant," the Major said. "But, however, so far the results, of, ah, scrutiny has revealed no... There's something there, but none of my equipment can decode it."

The tube door swung open.

"What will you do?"

"That's classified, lieutenant. I'm sorry." And with that, they left Quarterdeck and took opposite ways.

#

"Mr. Lerner," Captain Xenoetas said when Burgred and the acting Intelligence Officer had left, "how in the name of Vas did Lieutenant Burgred know..."

"It's a likely story, Ma'am," Lerner said. "I'm sure it's a cover for something else."

"Hmmm," Xenoetas said, thrumming. "No, Lerner, not likely. The boy has to have a Conform certificate, so Burgred wouldn't outright lie about his identity. What do you have on the lieutenant's brother?"

"I'll have to look into that, Ma'am," Lerner said.

"Do that, then. And turn on my canopy. When did Admiralty first get us an order regarding Edom?"

Lerner operated his desk comm to open the canopy up to the stars. Then he grabbed a scroller and began checking. "Two orders, Ma'am," he said. "One several weeks old. It was remanded for the more recent order."

"Two? I don't remember that. You mean the second was the order to get the marines off?"

"That's correct, Ma'am," Lerner said. "But there was already an order in place. It had not filtered up from..."

"Mr. Burgred?"

"It was assigned to him out of the bin because it was low priority -- he would have reviewed it first," Lerner said. "I see no report from him that mentions it, however."

Xenoetas frowned. "Wheels within wheels, Mr. Lerner," she said. "This has got something to do with that family. They arranged this somehow through Admiralty."

"Certainly, he's a Burgred, Ma'am," Lerner said.

Xenoetas was thinking. "The first order was remanded. It was before... what was it that Admiralty said in the second about scout ships?"

"Transport reported scout ships scanning Edom. Unknown origin. Admiralty ordered Andromache to take the on-planet forces quickly and quietly. The order is seconded."

"How do you know it was a seconded order, Lerner?"

"I surmised, Ma'am," Lerner said. "It would have gone through Admiral Valinder first, in the usual course."

"They were in a hurry on Pydna," Xenoetas said. She sighed. "Curse these people, these meddlers."

"Ma'am," said Lerner, perfunctorily.

Xenoetas rose from her desk. She stumped two steps and looked up at the stars. "Sometimes I wonder who is really in charge, Mr. Lerner. I want you to keep an eye on this, especially on the Burgred brat. This all smells to high heaven."

Chapter five.

Ship's Boy

The forces that coalesced following the fall of Gaetia Unum performed quite remarkable feats of reverse-engineering, building a new society from the ground up on a foundation of rectified mechanical and technical practices and almost no theory whatsoever.

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Henryk sat in a mech-chair in the hospital wing, fully dressed in the new chets that had been provided to him as standard-issue for the ship's youths. The bottoms were simple blue fabric, rather rough with large pockets. The shirt was stretchy, form-fitting white fabric to which nothing could attach itself and soil his appearance -- someone had anticipated the ways of children. The ship's insignia, a saber from which either flame or a mane flowed from the handle, was stitched onto the left breast. Henryk's mousy, disordered hair stood at all angles despite having been cropped short during his days in the hospital wing. His plain, expressionless grey eyes gazed out the large viewscreen at the dots of light pinpointing space. He cradled in his lap his rabbit rag doll, its ears sadly flopped over its face.

The proctor who was to escort him to the ship's boys' quarters rejoined him with a small kit bag, also stitched with the ship's insignia, containing his other things -- the clothes he brought to the ship, which had been laundered and decontaminated, and the miscellaneous metal and chip bits and scraps that had been in his pockets, also decontaminated. And one glass marble, eye-like.

"Young man, this is your kit, and you're responsible for it," she said, placing it in his lap.

Lieutenant Burgred then appeared, carrying a small stowage box with worn clasps.

"Henryk, you're ready to go, I see," he said.

"Yes, sir," Henryk said promptly. His four days on Andromache had passed in a blur of medical attention, physical therapy, and instruction. In that time, Henryk had begun to assume the formal manner of a ship's boy, with the crisp, remote responses that sound so odd in a child's piping voice. In one way, it was little different than what had been expected of him back at the Bird and Baby -- the mindless obedience in particular. Already, at seven or so sols, he had learned the survival instinct of repressing the impulses of a boy and policing them through the fear of retribution. There was a difference now, however: there seemed to be a higher set of purposes in view. He connected the requirement that he obey orders with the rank and authority of people around him. He knew, for instance, that the old lieutenant was important for reasons other than that he was old or a priest. There was this, too: Henryk had yet to be slapped across the face or even vaguely threatened with physical harm. Initially, he had attributed this simply to having been injured. Once, long ago, he had been sick with a fever, and he remembered how nice the lady who came into the storeroom to look at him had been. He didn't get hit at all for days, he remembered. Even some of the rough old gents in the bar looked at him differently, if not kindly. But here it was something else. The people who came to talk to him and help him walk made their demands but didn't hold a hand at the ready to strike him, not ever. Yet even without the fear of being struck, he didn't think of disobeying anyone. In some ways, he wasn't sure that he was a boy now -- they didn't talk to him like one. Did coming to a ship mean that you weren't a boy anymore?

"Henryk," Burgred continued. "Now that you're recovering and moving on, we should talk about what you'll be doing. Has anyone here in the hospital told you?"

"Yes, sir. Proctor says ship's boy, sir," Henryk said.

"Ship's boy, that's right. Do you know what that means, Henryk?"

"I work for my biscuit, sir," Henryk said.

Burgred looked at the Proctor, who nodded her answer to the unspoken question. He almost smiled. "Yes, Henryk," he said. "That's exactly right. Work. We all work here. That's what I do, that's what the proctors do, and the doctors and the nurses, all of us..."

"And the captain too," Henryk said. "She's the most important person on the ship."

Burgred gulped. "Yes, the captain too. We work because this ship is not only where we live, but also the reason we live. That may not make much sense to you -- you may not understand that yet. But here, I've brought something to help. In the 'pit -- that's the cockpit, where we work the ship most of the time -- in the 'pit we sometimes use a special kind of model to help illustr... to show us... to, well, here, let me show you."

Burgred opened the stowage box and pulled out a shiny, sleek object with complex lines and curves, metallic but also shiny like crystal, and along with it he unfurled a small contact pad. Holding the object with one hand and touching the contact pad, the object floated, weightless, and held a position just higher than Henryk's head. Burgred moved his finger over the pad and the object dropped to a position immediately before Henryk's face.

Henryk smiled broadly. "That's amazing!" he said. "Sir!"

"Okay, son, do you know what this is?"

"A spaceship!" Henryk said. "I've seen those in the holos!"

"That's right, a spaceship. This is Andromache."

Henryk looked blankly at Burgred, who himself didn't understand the confusion.

The proctor intervened. "He means that this is a toy ship just like the one you're in, Henryk," she said.

"Here, Henryk," Burgred said, "I'll show you."

Burgred used his pad to display all the outer parts of the ship to Henryk and explained as much as he thought the boy might be able to grasp. The model was a nearly perfect representation, with a continuous diamond-fused titanium hull in a beautiful, compound set of curves, a bulge -- the landing port -- that opened toward the stern, the nostril-like exhaust port forming the tapering rear of the stern. You could see Quarterdeck, the only interruption in the metallic skin, where diamirror reflected back the room lights but where you tell that there was no solid metal beneath. All of it, Andromache, in such detail that it could induce vertigo.

"... and here is where you are, right now. The hospital is its own, self-contained section of the ship. We can seal it off from everything else, and it's surrounded by a concealed sub-hull. There have been cases where we salvaged..."

The Proctor caught the lieutenant's attention and shot him a glare.

"Right... and there are other parts..." The lieutenant explained other sections of the ship, let Henryk touch the

model and work the pad, then finally had to stow it again. Henryk was mad to get to hold the object again -- his hands fidgeted -- but he stifled his impulses. He slavered over the stowage box, however.

"Can we see it again, sir?" said Henryk. "I've never had a spaceship before!"

"Sometime, sure, you can see it," said the lieutenant. "It's very old -- it came with the ship, you might say -- and we're careful with it. We use it down in the 'pit, but, sure, maybe I can take you down there to see it next time. How would that be?"

Henryk nodded to indicate that that was fine. His look said that he hoped it would very, very soon.

The proctor nodded to Burgred to move on.

"Henryk, the proctor here says its time to get you to your quarters, ship boys' quarters. Let's get going, and I'll talk to you about some things on the way."

For the first time, Henryk left the confines of the hospital. As the three entered the first fitted airlock, Henryk saw that the wall there was very thick -- as thick as Henryk was tall.

"That's the sub-hull, Henryk," said Burgred. "There are other subhulls -- the whole ship is really several large pieces -- but the hospital is the only one that has separate maintenance systems and can survive in space on its own. For a time, anyway."

They continued into the depths of the ship. The proctor walked silently a few paces behind Henryk and Burgred. Henryk craned to look at each passage that opened onto their route. Most of the ship's passageways were unadorned, unpainted metal or plasteel with various systems -- lighting, air, electrical, plumbing, and services -- poking out or snaking alongside or overhead. Other passageways appeared the same, and the people everywhere much the same. Some hatches and doors were larger or differently shaped than others, however. In time, Henryk would learn to connect the different door shapes with different kinds of ship activities, but today he could only note the differences. The floor beneath was usually smooth plasteel, but occasionally Henryk noticed seams near which were concealed controls in the floor. A few times, they passed over gratings with either darkness or light within.

"You'll understand it all soon enough, Henryk," said Burgred. "You ship's boys know the ship better than the officers."

"This side, lieutenant," said the proctor, gesturing.

"Right, then, here we are, Henryk," said Burgred. He waved a hand over a plate and a slim panel wide enough for a single person to pass through slid open. In a room about the size of the Bird & Baby's main room, a seeming maze of objects and furnishings of different sizes made a childlike riot of the more or less rectangular space. A few children -- boys and girls -- moved around, others sat at sturdy desks whose unusual supports indicated that they folded back down into the floor, still others sat or lay, singly or in groups, in bunks that folded down from the walls. It appeared that everything was of a type that stowed somehow, whether mechanically or by assignment to a nearby bin, slot, cubby, or other appurtenance. It was like nothing Henryk had ever seen: spacious and friendly but economical and tidy. And it was clean, nearly sparkling.

A pack of children more or less Henryk's size, plus one or two larger and smaller, descended upon him, crowding the doorway.

"Look at his leg!"

"Are you a new boy?"

"How old are you?"

"What's his name?"

"Ship's boys, form!" shouted a voice from across the room. The older boys and girls who had been ignoring all this finally looked up. A tall, plain woman in a simple dark shift with a small belt strode to the gaggle of youngsters. "Form, I said!"

The children formed up in a square, pushing aside a few objects as needed to do so. The tall woman nodded to the proctor behind Henryk, who thereupon turned about and left. The tall woman smoothed her thick, brown hair and faced Burgred.

"This would be Henryk, sir?"

"It would, Madame Proctor."

"We're pleased to see him, lieutenant," she said. "I understand he is a hardened veteran of battle." She said this without looking at Henryk, but Henryk blushed. Several of the children in formation gawked.

"You are correct, Madame Proctor," Burgred said. "Henryk, like our captain, has lost a leg in battle."

Children's voices murmured. Henryk's face turned bright red.

"Perhaps, lieutenant, the example of his bravery will teach some Ship's Boys how fortunate they are to serve on this ship and how important their work is." She glared at the children standing, now somewhat haphazardly and with necks craning, still vaguely in formation.

Somewhat at a loss for a response, Burgred said, "Just so, Madame Proctor."

There was an awkward pause.

"Henryk," Burgred said to the boy, "I'll check in on you later. I believe you are to have the mech chair for a few days. I encourage you not to use it. These ship's boys are your family now, and they can tell you better than I could how to do things. Well, goodbye, Henryk."

Burgred held out a hand for Henryk to shake. Henryk gingerly stepped down from the lev chair, stood, cockeyed, before the lieutenant, and shook the proffered hand. Burgred's heart warmed to the boy and he stifled the warmth that came into his eyes as he gazed at... his nephew, his brother's son, all angles and elbows, standing before him. In a moment, Henryk's eyes had turned down and away, and the moment was past. Burgred let go the boy's hand, nodded to the proctor, and left. In the hall, a voice sounded in his earbud:

"You didn't tell him?"

"There wasn't a good time or place yet," he said.

"He might hear it before you get the chance," the voice said. "The walls have ears."

"My ears have ears. Anyhow, I've lived with that reality for most of my life. If it happens, so be it," Burgred said. "I learned a lot in boys' quarters that no one else would ever have taught me."

"Like your sailor's manners?"

"That, yes, and when to keep my mouth shut."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Anyhow, I had an interesting conversation with my sister," she said.

Burgred talked as he strode through the ship. "About?"

"Your nephew Henryk, of course."

"Let's talk about this later, when I see you. Out," he said.

"Okay, out," she said.

Back at Boys' Quarters, Henryk had been shown by the proctor to a section of wall where his bunk and stowage indicator vids already read '_, Henryk.'

"You pull here, Henryk, they both work the same," the proctor said. "You try it."

The gaggle of children formed a semi-circle around him, and he felt like a holoshow performer. Abashed, he pulled down both his bunk and his stowage compartment.

"Very good. Put your bag in and close it -- good -- and you can close the bunk too. An older boy will take you to show you around. I'll be at my desk, but I'll come in at lunch time. You don't have a watch today, not until tomorrow, so you'll see boys come and go. We have a very particular routine at meal times, as you will learn. I'm Proctor Anne, Henryk. You may call me Madame Proctor or just 'Miss.'"

"Yes'm -- yes, Miss," said Henryk.

Henryk stood, somewhat uncertain on the prosthetic leg, surrounded by ship's boys -- boys and girls of all shapes and sizes. When the proctor had gone, they peppered him with questions, words tumbling over one another in a confused jumble. He tried to give answers but usually could not. One answer that he did know was 'Edom' -- he knew he came from Edom, and from New Beauville, and from the Old Quarter.

"I heard all that was gone now," said a girl of roughly his own size though perhaps somewhat older.

Henryk considered this for a moment. Gone? he thought. Where was Edom? Where was Madame Grissaud now? When would he see home again? Briefly, he glanced down at the leg, now largely concealed beneath ship's boy pants and canvas shoes. When did they say he would get his leg back? Try as he might, he couldn't remember all that they had said these past few days. He was in a whorl.

Chapter six.

Church

Vas spoke thus: primeval man was lost for want of that which is most precious: the Word of Man. Behold, in this darkest hour of your need, I have forged the links anew. Take this Renormalized Word and give it to Them. The Profligate Forms shall be as one and newly perfected. Fear not the nanoforms, for they shall perish within Man Redux and propagate not. Go unto the dominions of Man, this my great encircling Arm, which shall be yours alone through me, and spread the Word which is Man: renewed, purified, and whole.

The Holy Book of the Body

#

The Irredente concentrated its powers on Pydna, a world first terraformed during the 5th Empire and extremely pleasant in a new-made sort of way. Its importance in the latter 5th Empire, before the Irredente's rise to power, lay in being impregnably defended by Irredentist forces and therefore relatively safe for their administrative use in the war against the Avial rulers of the time. Late in the 5th Empire, the Irredentist separatists, gaining power and resources, had begun adding low, functional, fortified buildings to the existing settlement. In the natural course of things, as the Irredentist groups consolidated their power, it became more and more useful to consolidate their most important people. By an accretive process, infrastructure and bureaucracy grew up together. When the Irredentist forces finally gained the hegemony, with but a few worlds in the inner quadrants yet to be gained, Pydna exploded in grandeur as should befit the capital world of Vas's chosen people.

A dramatic, young crater originally known as God's Mouth sat below the equatorial line and had been used defensively by early settlers, about which little was known. The crater, having evidently been planned as a planetary capital from the beginning, was a convenient place for the Irredentists to concentrate their people. They implemented a grand scheme to establish the more gracefully named 'Os Divinus' as the capital of capitals: the seat of Vas's highest servants of all kinds. The great centers of power sat at equidistant intervals around the inner crater mouth, a very concrete way of suggesting that none were pre-eminent.

The Church of the Irredente had over the course of several hundred sols completed its glorious vision of itself in the form of the Palace complex, including the Cathexinal and the Baptistry -- in total a magnificent architectural pean to Vas and the destination of pilgrimage for Vas's purified people.

On this day, a pale, puffy-faced church functionary, with a tonsure of pitch black and wearing a black silk habit, passed through the ornate, sun-drenched reading room of the Palace Library, ignoring the Church researchers and scribes laboring with clumsy, retrograde, lobotomized scrollers at spare wooden desks. He made his way through a small wing containing cabinets full of such scrollers, in a back corner of which was a metal spiral stair that descended downwards from the ground floor level. As far as he knew, despite the size of the Palace complex, the only way to reach the private reading rooms of senior clerics was this way -- a cleric suffering an incapacity would have to yield his unused room to someone else. The old stair wound down some ten low-ceilinged floors. The pale functionary had to descend all ten to reach his destination.

He walked the dim, narrow corridor to the private room of Gregory, a Vox with no other appellation or title and no formal position in the Church hierarchy. He knocked timidly.

"Come in, Mens Super," Gregory said.

Gregory, old and with the merest hint of a fringe forming his tonsure, rose and extended a hand to the Mens, the highly-trained non-cleric who served as a combination advisor and technologist for Auspex -- for Auspex

himself could not, by long Church tradition, wield scroller or comm except as passive repositories of plaintext. An early Auspex had found that the Code of Proscriptions, if taken too far, hobbled his efforts to run a mass religion. He had by edict created a special set of rules setting out various exceptions and interpretations that permitted the Church to rely on modern tech, even if its clerics couldn't use it. Thus, the Mens Super, as a non-cleric entirely, could not only use scrollers and comm devices, but up-to-date ones as well, and to their fullest capabilities.

Vox Gregory himself had a scroller before him on the little, slant-top desk, but the scroller did not appear to have come from the Library. It was not only very old, but also fancifully ornate -- and quite bulky -- in a pre-Irredente manner. Had it been another cleric's scroller, the Mens would have been surprised, either because the age of the scroller suggested that it was illicit, or because it was almost certainly an interactive device.

"Vox Gregory, I have come about the cleric from Edom," said the Mens. "He has written His Holiness directly, seeking an audience."

Gregory did not appear surprised. "You have not taken any action, however?"

"I was sure you would be interested to hear of it first," the Mens said.

"He is angry, no doubt, this Vox from the outlier. He feels aggrieved. He feels punished and self-righteous."

"Yes, Vox Gregory," the Mens said. "He is a reactionary, which is not in itself all that unusual -- His Holiness hears from the fringes of the Church regularly, but..."

"Yes, go on."

"Reverend Hersey mentions... well, he uses words like 'pestilence,' 'plague,' and... well... 'bugs.'"

Gregory frowned. "Hmmm. I am sorry for that. I hoped he might be more useful. I take a very personal interest in his case -- we're from the same planet, you know. I fear that Edom has not been kind to him."

"Very few get an audience, Vox Gregory," the Mens said. "It should not surprise him that he is denied..."

"No. Vas has plans for this man, I know it. Lay the groundwork somehow for his audience. If he needs further assistance with the passage here from wherever he is, accomplish that discreetly -- ships that give him passage in exchange for performing corpus or demolument, for instance, or postings to our own holdings. It's easily enough handled. I will alert my contact, as well, just in case the Guilds can assist. Then, direct that the provincial Vox be received as a Palace visitor from off-world, but without notice or fanfare -- let him think that it's nothing unusual to be admitted, as something due an off-world Vox..."

"He is a Vox Docilis, Father," the Mens said.

"Yes, exactly. Whose see has been wiped out, in fact. Use all these facts. Get him here. I shall not be seen to be involved in this, however."

"Understood, Vox Gregory," the Mens said.

"Thank you, Mens Super," Gregory said. "I am sorry that your assistance to me can't be communicated to His Holiness."

"I am satisfied with my service to him already," the Mens said. "And I serve him best when he knows it the

least."

Gregory cocked an eyebrow at the younger man. "The Mens Supers have ever been the truest servants of Vas, even if whole in body," Gregory said. "And you are no exception."

"I would willingly undergo the torment to serve His Holiness, were that necessary," the Mens said. His words, so charged with feeling, were at odds with his expressionless demeanor.

"No, no," Gregory said, laying a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "You are already too old -- take my word for that -- and what you do is as sacred to Vas as what any Vox might do. Do not feel ashamed to be a man entire and fitted with a comm, Mens Super. They" -- here, he indicated by a gesture the clerics of the Palace -- "they cannot know what it truly requires to maintain this Church. That is why they can sleep at night."

"And you do not?" the Mens said.

Gregory looked the Mens directly in the eye. "I have not slept, truly slept, in twenty five sols, Mens Super. The servants of Vas are as subject to folly as ordinary men -- different folly perhaps, but equally destructive. I trouble myself so that many others may go on about things untroubled. Besides, I find I am suited to it."

"Reverend Hersey, then," said the Mens.

"Plagues and infestations, Mens Super," the old man said. "See to it. He may be a reactionary, but reactionaries are sometimes labeled such because the truth they offer is too painful to admit."

#

Mr. Hersey finally descended to Pydna on a slightly chill morning whose clarity permitted him to see great stretches of an obviously terraformed landscape -- craters full of greenery or farms; lush but boulder-strewn valleys that had never seen the plow; clusters of country-houses surrounding perfectly picturesque villages. Hersey had gotten the answer that His Holiness, Auspex, would receive him in audience -- it had been quite easily accomplished, after all.

Hersey carried little with him -- just a satchel with an extra habit and a few necessities. He was gratified when he was intercepted upon entering the terminal by a driver who said he regularly went back and forth on Palace business. The lev-car ride into Pydna was uneventful and very impressive, though Hersey tried to appear unmoved. Before he knew it, a door gull-winged open outside the main gate before the Cathexinal. Appearing thus in a habit and expecting to be given entry, he was surprised when a guard stepped out of a duty station.

"Your credentials, Father?" said a very serious, middle-aged guard.

"Credentials? Yes. I am Hersey, Vox Docilis, late of Edom. I am here to see Auspex."

The guard looked at him blankly. "You're an off-world..." at that moment, the guard's wrist comm beeped. "Excuse me, Father. Wait right here." The guard turned his back to Hersey and needlessly touched a finger to the comm bud behind his ear. Hersey saw him nod. "Right," the guard said aloud. He turned again to Hersey.

"Sorry about that, Father. You're wanted at the Annex. You're to wait just inside the gate for what I'm sure will be just a few moments. An usher will escort you in. Good day, Father."

"Good day to you, son," Hersey said. He stood looking at the complex of buildings until he was led to a modern building jutting from one side of the Palace -- the Annex, whatever that was. It looked very nice -- obscenely nice, and Hersey frowned.

#

The Auspex, tonsured, oaken-hued, and with an equine face, sat serenely in magnificent Chambers in the Palace, arms resting in lush valleys formed by his robes. The large main chamber, at the head of which his chair rested upon the dais, mimicked the central nave of the great Clavicum itself, with sinuous, ornamental columns proceeding with grandeur toward his Holiness, the entirety lit by a score of gem windows showing scenes from Scriptural history. When Auspex was not sitting, tour guides provided colorful summaries and parentheticals of the contents of these windows.

"Mens Super, what is the next item, if you please," Auspex intoned from his dais as two functionaries disappeared into a side door following the prior item of business. Another functionary then popped into appearance off to one side, awaiting instructions.

"Auspex, your holiness, it is an item which I added to the list this morning. I beg your forgiveness for not notifying you previously."

"All shall be forgiven, by the glory of Vas," said his Holiness, in good humor. "Proceed with dispatch."

"Your holiness, your visage shall be beheld and attentions sought by the former Vox Docilis from the outlier that was destroyed recently, Edom, and its major city, Neu Beauville. His Holiness no doubt remembers my report."

"I must disappoint you, Mens Super, in not remembering any report," said his Holiness. "I know the stack has grown large. Was it Irredente proper? Eaton did you say?"

"No, Holiness, Edom, E-D-O-M. And yes, Holiness, an Irredente holding but remote. We have -- we had -- six V.D.'s on Edom, of which today's visitor was the most senior and learned. Edom, regrettably, was wiped clean, her Church and its members with her. It made news at the time. Our guest has been between there and here -- at ports of call and Church stations -- since then."

The Auspex cocked an eyebrow. "Was this like Tanjer and those others? The mysterious attacks?"

"Yes, your Holiness. The Reverend Mr. Hersey made it off the planet."

"Perhaps he is peculiarly favored by Vas," Auspex said.

"He may well be, Holiness. Only a few hundred persons escaped Edom. The resident marine guard escorted Mr. Hersey to a berth on a private craft -- a Transport Guild representative for Edom. He -- Mr. Hersey -- has been trying to get here since."

"What does Vas's servant from Edom want of us?"

"Holiness, the V.D. states that he may only confide to his Holiness the matters he wishes to report."

"Mens Super, pray what does this mean? Surely he may report to you first."

"Holiness," he said, "The information cannot be fully resolved, but there is a high probability that it relates to issues of bodily sanctity. I felt, under the circumstances..."

"Is this Vox Docilis of the Fraternus?"

"Formerly, your Holiness. His posting to Edom relates to his uncertain position neither of the Fraternus nor the Church proper. I believe he may be said to be at least as, er, vigilant on matters of the Body as any member of the Fraternus."

"The outliers are full of suspect bodily practices, Mens Super. And regrettably too few from our ranks to... tend to everyone. I have known men like this Hersey -- driven to extremes in defense of the Body. Where is he staying?"

"He arrived yesterday, Holiness, and was allowed a room in the Annex."

Now, Auspex frowned. "That was ill-advised, Mens Super. Was he in sack when he arrived? Who assigned him to the Annex?"

"I have no report on his style of habit, Holiness. A duty usher was his escort, however."

"Well, we shall have to deal with that issue first, then. You shall deal with the head usher, Mens Super. His people should exercise independent thought on occasion. Is Reverend Hersey in the antechamber?"

"No. He is in my office, Holiness."

"That was well done. Is your prayer chamber available?"

"Your Holiness, I don't think..."

"As you of all people should know, the fissure in the dike presages the breach, Mens Super. I have learned this the hard way, and thus I sit in this chair."

"And may Vas bless you, Holiness."

"Vas blesses the prudent and the cautious, Mens Super. I feel most blessed. Let us see this man in your prayer chamber. I shall change and meet you there -- give me some moments. Discreetly keep your comm going. Direct that he shall not be shown into any part of the Palace other than what he has already seen."

#

The Auspicial Palace, now some seven hundred sols old, sat atop a maze of much older buildings, low and often very dark, from the pre-hegemony era. These served as administrative offices, private and semi-private prayer chambers, data nodes, kitchens, and other such functions for the Church. Individual rooms and offices could be nice enough, though given the wealth controlled by the functionaries who manned them, the restraint was surprising to those who did not know of the accretive origins of the complex. Moreover, could the maze be viewed entire (so far as it was known and mapped) from above, it would resemble nothing so much as an ancient style of circuit, with an inordinate amount of space devoted to passageways and with strangely unused blocked-out sections. Hallways themselves were often badly lit, and the whole was incomprehensible even to those who had walked its miles for decades. These underpinnings of the official residence of the Auspex were of variable but generally ancient age. From time to time, as repairs were made or new rooms chiseled out, curiosities from the days of first settlement would emerge -- sometimes pristine, sometimes in pieces, sometimes quite dangerous.

When the Mens Super opened the door from the low, carpeted hall leading from Palace offices to administration offices, a functionary at a reception desk looked at him significantly. Thus on notice, he

feigned a harried look as he entered his own office, noticed with a mere glance the two gentlemen seated catty-corner from one another in small, stiff armchairs, and retrieved a scroller from a stack of rolled-up scrollers piled his desk.

One of the seated men, the Reverend Mr. Hersey, had evidently suffered during the long voyage: he had burst blood vessels in each eye, which lent him a tormented air. He felt, however, quite comfortably at ease in a righteous anger that he had nursed for so long, and he was prepared to deliver a message -- a sermon -- that through rumination he had finally stored chapter and verse in his head. The opulent quarters he had been given had given him a final, superfluous proof: the Church was sinking into decadence and licentiousness; all would be lost; humanity as Vas had made it would die. Mr. Hersey had journeyed to Pydna not as a pilgrim or servant but as a beacon in the darkest night of man's revived hegemony. He now stood to emphasize his errand to the Mens Super. The other seated man, elderly with close-cropped gray hair and a long face, sat serenely, arms resting on his burlap sack, eyes open but at rest, looking at nothing.

"Esteemed and faithful Reverend Hersey, His Holiness, Auspex Saggatus X, consents and wishes to meet with you personally concerning the message you have carried home to us. He has asked me to show you both to a simple, private room of prayer where you and he together may seek the guidance and blessing of Vas without distraction. My own prayer chambers may serve this purpose."

Now this was something that Mr. Hersey had not expected. He felt sure he would be led to grand official chambers in the Palace. He stared at the Mens, unsure how to react or what to expect next. Mens, in turn, shifted his gaze to the older man in sack, who clutched the battered wooden arms of the chair and stood up.

"Your Holiness, shall I direct you both?" said Mens Super.

Mr. Hersey turned to the older man in confusion but then noticed the shimmering, silvery rope at the waist. He had not given a thought to the rope when the older man had first arrived quietly and had sat, head bowed, across from him. Hersey's eyes started from his head. He fell quickly onto one knee, and his hands flew up in supplication.

"Esteemed Holiness, a thousand pardons, I did not recognize..."

His Holiness held out his hand, where a small, fine ring with a white signet showed, and awaited the customary kiss. He then held his hand palm up to signal Hersey to be silent.

"Reverend Hersey," the Auspex said, "only Vas knows all men. We are his servants equally. Come." -- he now held out the hand for the Reverend to take -- "I am your Auspex. Pray with me, and we shall talk of matters. Mens Super, please lead us to your prayer room. Esteemed visitor Hersey, rise."

"Reverend Hersey," said the Mens in a low voice, pretending that he could not be overhead by his Holiness, "please walk abreast of Auspex, neither leading nor trailing, as I lead you both. His Holiness shall then walk ahead and enter the prayer room first, alone, and he shall pray until you are summoned to him. You shall then enter, kneel, and he shall guide you."

The Reverend, now thoroughly addled, followed the instructions in stunned silence. He tried to put his thoughts back in order so that he could deliver his message, but order wouldn't come as he walked -- arm in arm no less -- with the most holy, most revered, and -- to Hersey -- most powerful human being in the ordered galaxy of the Irredente. He focused his attentions on trying not to faint.

The Auspex went ahead of him into the prayer chamber, and the Reverend waited without with the Mens. He began to grasp at fragments of what he had come to say. Finally, he heard a faint beep.

"His Holiness summons you, Reverend Hersey," said the Mens, and then, in a lower voice, "you must find your words when he speaks to you, and you must not hedge or prevaricate. If you truly come with Vas in your heart, no man may judge you. Remember, Reverend. His Holiness has many tasks each day, of which you are but one."

The Reverend, feeling extremely small and insignificant, entered. In the corner of the spare, rectangular prayer chamber a table had been placed, atop which rested one wide, bright candle, the Holy Book of the Body, and a hand-imaged likeness of Vas with manly but proportioned musculature and vague, shifting facial features bespeaking the impossibility of knowing the face of Vas. A thick, knotted wool rug before this small alter provided a place of softness for those who should kneel, as the Auspex did now. Farther back, two rough, ancient chairs of some unrecorded species of wood offered their angular hardness to the unworthy penitent.

Revered Hersey uncertainly walked past the chairs to a place behind his Holiness and knelt. His Holiness chanted aloud:

For the body profaned, we mourn;

Of the body renewed, we give thanks

Hersey joined in chanting the refrain:

Renewed is the body, infused is the blood;

Blessed be the body for it is His;

Blessed be the body for it is given to Us;

To enact His will and perpetuate His Being.

"Rise, Reverend," said his Holiness, and receive the blessing of Vas. The Auspex mouthed a prayer silently as he traced the tau-and-lambda before the body of the visitor. "Let us now bow down together and seek the wisdom of Vas on this, your errand and report." The Auspex grasped the visitor's elbow, and together they knelt and prayed -- or rather, the Auspex did, for great tears streamed down the face of the visitor as he felt, like a living thing, the life force of his Auspex in supplication next to him. The force of the moment shot through him and laid bare his soul, and for the first time in many sols he felt doubt. Why had he come here? How could he, insignificant, hope to say anything of any moment?

Finally, lost in such thoughts, he felt a light pressure on his arm, and he got up and followed the Auspex to a chair. The pair faced forward, toward the wall and its blankness, with the little altar off to the front corner.

"My Mens Super reports to me that you have a report of great interest to make, Reverend Hersey. Pray, what is the subject of your report? Do not be discomfited. Speak."

Both men still faced the wall while speaking.

"I... I am overwhelmed, Grace."

"We know it, so we brought you here. Here we are equals before Vas. Please proceed, Reverend."

"Grace, I hardly know my thoughts, but I came to give a warning, that all is not well, that the Irredente -- and man -- is in danger of being lost."

"These are strong tidings, Father Hersey. This threat of which you speak, is it those from beyond, those who were spurned and who themselves spawn recklessly?"

"I do not know, Holiness, but I know in what it is manifest. A direct assault on our most cherished laws. Profligate use of mech and tech, without regard or respect or punishment."

"Policing is the job of the Irredente, Reverend. We must let them carry out our laws. I shall direct that it be so if it is not."

"Holiness, it is more. Edom bears witness."

"Esteemed Reverend, we are sorry for Edom. It is a tragic loss."

"It is punishment, Grace. It is a message from Vas. I have seen it creeping upon us. I have seen it written on ancient stones."

Auspex for the first time appeared troubled. "Speak plainly, Reverend."

"Edom itself, Grace, speaks of the death of a race, with its lifeless corpse of stone. We... I... I believe I was put there for a reason, Grace."

"Of Edom I know very little, Reverend. Please explain."

"Edom is old, Holiness, and bears witness to an eradication of a race with its ancient, abandoned walls. When the Irredente found it, it required little planetary forming -- it was long dead though its bones were bared. There is no trace of its people. And now, there must be no trace of humanity there. It is a sign, Grace. One could see other signs on the streets -- newcomers with seductions for the body and its senses. His Grace knows, too, that attendance at services is widely flouted in the outliers of the Irredente, and so it was on Edom."

"Why have you not spoken before, Esteemed Reverend?"

"Holiness, I am but one man, and not an influential one. My road has been a...a... long one."

"Yet here you are, Reverend."

"I am humbled, Holiness, and did not expect such. I am surprised that your Grace should take a personal interest in..."

"In you, in Edom, in all things, Reverend. Vas has given me this charge. I say again, we are your Auspex."

"And again, I am humbled, Grace."

"No, Reverend, it is we who are humbled by your sagacity and faithfulness. No man should become Auspex without he should remember that the body of the Church is its Voices and its parishioners. I have seen the Church forget this, Reverend, and I prayed to Vas that I shall always remember. Is there anything else you came home to say, Reverend?"

"Grace, I hardly know how to say it..."

"Speak now, Reverend. Vas charges me with much care."

"There's... more, there was more. One could sense what was coming. It was not just the mech. There was a plague of insects. One would sense them at night, watching and waiting for something. In the day, they would appear in numbers at the edge of one's vision then slip away. They were... harbingers, Grace."

"Insects, you say?"

"Armadillia, Grace. Dilly-dallies, in parlance. Thousands, perhaps millions of them by the time the end came. I have fought them for years -- they came to be everywhere. They couldn't be eradicated."

"I know not of Armadillia, Reverend. But continue."

"In the Book, there were the Profligate Bioforms, Grace, and these were as a plague upon Man. Only the intervention of Vas saved humanity."

"I fail to see the connection between these well-known facts and bugs, Father Hersey."

"Signs, Holiness. Surely these are signs. Vas speaks to me thus, Grace!"

His Holiness turned to look at his interlocutor, whose face was red with emotion.

"You are deeply affected and speak the truth so far as you know it, of that I am certain. However, I cannot tell what weight to give these matters -- I must look into them further. We shall say a final prayer, Reverend, and then I shall take counsel on these matters. Please wait for my word. May Vas be with you."

"And with you, Grace."

With a final quiet prayer in the usual form, his Holiness arose and left, leaving the visitor alone in the room. The visitor had managed little of his prepared words, and he felt a fool. Worse, he felt a failure. He had come with the most important message imaginable to him, and he had spoken like a madman. He wasn't mad, and he had failed -- again.

The Mens Super appeared in the doorway and motioned the Reverend out.

"His Holiness asks that you be shown to your room and then to the Annex Commune, where you shall eat in company with other visitors or alone, as you may wish. He urges you to mind your body and sustain it, for which we at home are always well and amply prepared. I shall meet you at Commune later with his direction."

#

As Dictated By His Holiness, Auspex Saggatus X, witness borne by this seal, etc.

To Our Servant The Right Reverend Fs. Hersey, Vox Docilis, lately of Edom

Bear Witness:

Esteemed Servant Hersey,

You are hereby ORDERED and DIRECTED to proceed forthwith to the Palace Closet, where you shall be fitted with the Bombazine in recognition of your assignment as Envoy of His Holiness as above. It is the desire of His Holiness that you make inquiries throughout the Irredente concerning the matters you have brought to the attention of His Holiness. Discretion is urged. You are asked to make Report through direct channels to

the duty Mens Super of His Holiness with the encoding of the scroller with which you shall be provided. By Auspicial Directive, you shall adopt such devices as are necessary for your work, which may be devices otherwise proscribed for your prior rank as Vox Docilis. It is regretted but required that you do this. It is, further, the desire of His Holiness that you follow your duty through to its end, howsoever you shall deem it, and in whatever manner Vas may lead you.

Following the bestowing of your Bombazine habit and rope, you shall proceed to the Office of Protocol. There you shall be provided with your official credentials and your chit, which shall serve you everywhere for your needs as are appropriate to your situation and to your humility as servant of his Grace and of the Church. Protocol will explain broadly the duties of an Envoy but will expect your direction as to an itinerary. Protocol will also assist you with obtaining assignments to vessels for your travel.

May Vas Be With You.

Chapter seven.

Intelligence

It is convenient to speak of a "First Empire," though it is doubtful we shall ever know anything of it. The fragmentary sources from the Second Empire always assume a first age of man, but man in what form, from what cause, to what purpose? Was he created or evolved? We think evolution unlikely because of our perfection, but we would say that, would we not?

The Commentaries

#

Liev stood outside, before the great arched doors set into the plastone garden walls of Cabil Member Galinda's combined offices and residence in Os Divinus, awaiting he knew not what -- either the doors would open of themselves to admit him, or else a human being would presumably open them to lead him in. His accession to liaison to the Intelligence Committee having been recent, he was still somewhat uncertain regarding the forms and trappings of high officialdom. His heart raced with the realization that he himself now occupied a fairly lofty tier of authority. He himself would meet with his powerful patron, a member of the Cabil. Power of that sort was a mystery to him, but not so much so that he didn't admire it. Then again, he had managed to climb far beyond what his humble origins would have laid odds for. Power, he reflected again, was mysterious.

The Irredente presented itself as democratic in this sense: that Church, Admiralty, Government, and Cabil should square off or at least balance each other out. Each institution had unique origins, traditions, and structure, hailing back to before Gaetia Unum fell, to a time when competing groups joined in a common cause to tear the 5th Empire down. Church and Admiralty looked furthest back, with practices modeled on similar institutions going back to a distant age of man. Government liked to say that it did not look back, but even in saying that, it looked back: it was a variation on a common theme of secularized, scheming power and ever-increasing bureaucratization. The legislative Cabil was the least stable of the institutions and had reconfigured itself several times during Irredentist era. In its latest incarnation, it had just eight members, representing eight "quadrants" of Irredente hegemony space: the four inner quadrants of the original Irredente and four somewhat arbitrarily-drawn outer quadrants representing later possessions and outliers. These members were in theory elected from their respective quadrants, and perhaps they were in fact. It could not be missed, however, that these eight had amassed extraordinary power in their quadrants, and it would be surprising indeed were they unable to guarantee their own election. Each Cabil member headed up several broadly-empowered committees, in which the planetary representatives sat as members. And finally, each committee had permanent staff to carry out committee work or to supplement the variable competence of the committeemen.

Liev, of an age unclear from his grey, affectless bearing and bland, appropriate garments, had swerved his way through the staffs of various subcommittees and committees and finally upwards through the Cabil's Intelligence Committee, for which he now served as liaison to the other Irredente centers of power. In every age, those with abilities that, even if extremely capable, fall within a very narrow range, can find a safe place in the permanent structures of government. They may converse with perspicacity on matters within their ken, yet be unable to chew with their mouths closed. Liev's genius lay in seizing hold of a narrow slice of reality firmly, tenaciously, until he had subdued it. Given a task involving specific instructions and finite aims, no distraction could entice him elsewhere or induce him to fail. Cabil Member Galinda had found this skill set, limited though it was, extremely useful in the running of the Intelligence Committee, where functionaries with wandering, inquisitive minds were a clear danger. It was Cabil Member Galinda who had first spotted Liev, a successful but underappreciated agent in the internal revenue services. In Liev, he found a quiet, dependable functionary and, it was clear to Galinda, one whose loyalty he need never question: for Liev wanted only a

task, not a reason. A gerd does not care who throws the stick, or how many times; left to its own, it will fetch until it falls dead at the feet of its master.

It was Liev who, in the regular course, had reviewed a priority-flagged report from an acting intelligence officer on an Admiralty warship, Andromache. He decoded enough of it to realize, first, that he didn't understand the gist of it, and, second, that this was probably an item to second to his patron. He was surprised, and dared to be flattered, when in fairly short order Galinda summoned him personally. He synced his comm to his scroller with the file then set out from the committee offices by foot.

Cabil Member Galinda represented the quadrant containing Pydna, so he stayed there permanently. His combined office and residence in Os Divinus sat just below the rim but still enjoyed a good view of the city. The mystery of how Liev would be let in was solved when one of the two arched doors swung open on its own to admit him. A voice spoke through his comm bud, instructing him where to go within the main building.

He was shown into the Esteemed One's office, where Galinda sat at a worktable with an all-access scroller of the type reserved for senior-most officialdom. It could send and receive data in any official protocol and communicate with any registered data node.

"Liev, sit down," Galinda said. "Now you've taken your step, you will have to work that much harder to keep it."

Liev made a small gulp. "Yes, Member," he said.

"But the rewards are greater, too, Liev. That is something. Look around you, Liev. This office, this city. This is where the real things occur. We are the people who do real things. What is Edom, Liev?"

Liev was somewhat startled by the abrupt change in topic. "An outlying planet, Member. Victim of an attack by unknown elements."

"History, Liev. It is now a part of history and will probably generate more notoriety by its absence than it ever did as a living, breathing settlement. That is as it should be: a million perished there, and the Cabil must have the answer why. Your seconded report tells me more about the Irredente's weaknesses than all the prior attacks combined. What did you make of the report, Liev?"

"Sir, I made little attempt to do more than determine its priority," Liev said. "Mainly, Member, I found it strange. I felt you should have it because of a naval officer's eyewitness account of..."

"The auto-mutilant," Galinda said. "Whatever he -- or it -- was."

"Yes, Esteemed Member. It is a confused report."

"I should not put it that way. It is a factual report, which is to be commended. The situation, however, does seem to be confused. The preparer of this report understood the significance of unfiltered facts and reporting, even if his own remarks are incompetent. Use the tools you have, Liev. Use this one, Liev."

"The preparer can probably be made a full ship's IO, sir," Liev said. "With a word from you."

"Look into it, then, Liev -- go through the necessary checks. He will then be grateful to both of us, which is very useful. But make it clear to him that this report should never be referenced again, by him that is. Tell him, likewise, to do what he can on the ship to keep the information bottled up or else explained away -- you can think of something."

"Yes, sir. It should be no problem."

"Yes, it shouldn't be, but it might be. Look to it. There's more work than that to be done, too. You've got to get that data chat -- the Navy officer handed it over to your man -- get the data chat here with absolutely no interference..."

"Sir, if I may," Liev said. "The agent reports that he already tried to decode..."

"And got nothing," Galinda said. "Leave it at that, and instruct him to clean whatever he can clean from his attempt to read the card. I can't stress this enough, Liev: get that datachat here complete and with no further tampering. We'll never know who the auto-mutilant was, but he was trying to tell someone something. Maybe us, for all we know. The naval lieutenant was suffering fatigue or shock, it appears, so his debriefing comments aren't reliable. He didn't find what he thinks he found -- aliens are in holovids, not in the Irredente -- but he may have found a synth or extreme biomech. Someone from the Beyond, that's all but certain. But data are reliable. At least, they're first-hand -- get them. Get the datachat. Then, I want you -- and you alone -- to give me a full summary and analysis of that report. The personnel involved, the missing gun, the location, all of it. If you're confused by it, keep at it, Liev -- that's why I pulled you up to the Committee. As liaison, you'll have access to Government and Admiralty records, and you can put through requests to the Palace too if you have to -- Vas help you that you should. But that's the value in a title, Liev -- you're my... you're the Committee Liaison. You use that title and build your authority with it. But understand, Liev, that you're my man, not the Committee's, and certainly not Government's. You're mine first. Government -- Her Excellency First Consul Yve -- watches idly while planets burn. The Cabil will not stand for it, and I will not. Government kneels to His Holiness and the Proscriptions at the risk of the entire Irredente. We are next, Liev. They -- whoever they are that's hitting us -- are testing our defenses now, taking pot-shots to see what we do. And we do nothing -- six sols of nothing, not so much as a glimpse at our enemy. Well, we've been given this glimpse, now, and I will do something. And I'll bring the entire weight of the Cabil with me."

Liev's eyes had gone wide. "Yes, Esteemed Member," he said.

"This is not government work, Liev, so don't delude yourself," Galinda said. "This is governing, which is different. That will be all, Liev; I will see you in Committee."

#

The private meeting with Cabil Member Galinda left Liev exhausted, exhilarated, and anxious. He brushed off the other staff people at the Committee's offices and buried himself in the report from the Andromache's acting intelligence officer. The first thing he tried to understand was simply who was who. He would have to get admiralty files for that. In the meantime, he could probably get the Admiralty List from the pooled data node to locate basic information. The various names and places didn't mean anything to him except for "Burgred," which rang a bell.

For the first time in his life, he felt important, empowered. Investigating tax cheats was hard but of little real moment in the larger scheme. He excelled at it, but it didn't exalt anyone, least of all himself. Pulling together a dossier and reconstructing an interconnecting web of people and events was hard and... important. Liev was important. He starting jotting down summary requests of data for the other branches. They would have to comply -- he was the Committee Liaison.

He also grabbed pooled data on "Burgred" and quickly realized why he recognized the name. The Burgreds -- in their various spellings of the name -- had been one of the great families of the early Irredente: written of in history books, earning rank, collecting medals and titles, and... a planet. Mercia -- now Plum Grove. That was theirs in the clear, though technically enfoeffed to the Irredente. There were only a few score family planetary domains now, since the Irredente always had the reversion when entailments failed -- when families died out,

leaving no heirs of the body.

Mercia, Liev read, had been bestowed upon Edgar Burgredde, Admiral of the Blue in the early Irredentist Navy, as a prize for winning a decisive battle in space against long odds in the Poenican Wars, crushing 5th Empire forces and deeply humiliating the Avial rulers still in power. This Burgred was also called "Burgredde Alraed" for reasons not made clear from what Liev had access to. There were many Burgreds in the services after that, many of them captains and admirals, some of them marines. Not all had been successful -- Liev saw references to a "Burgredde Unraed" who appeared to have mismanaged Plum Grove and been ousted from the entailment of the fiefdom in favor of an older brother -- the entailment of Plum Grove generally fell upon the youngest surviving heir. Liev sniggered -- surely this had caused problems over the centuries, with jealous older siblings, interloping mistresses, and the like.

So the Lieutenant Burgred in the file, a senior first lieutenant, was in fact the only surviving heir. His father, a retired captain, now managed the family estates on Plum Grove. Why was the file Burgred not a captain? He was in his fifties. Liev read the report again and again, and he couldn't put together a coherent story as to why an aging lieutenant should be running intelligence missions to a planet imminently subject to attack.

He moved on, reading about the discovery of the auto-mutilant and the datachat, the pinpoint attack upon the lieutenant and the others with him, the taking of a street urchin. Liev frowned. This was far harder than he imagined. He began to think he would fail -- that he could only fail, that his promising new career would lie in ruins and he would be disgraced. Vas, he was tired -- he saw that it was evening. He gave up on the file. He needed to go home and sleep. Maybe something would come to him. At all events, he could use his new position to pull data from every other source in the Irredente. Tomorrow.

Chapter eight.

Government

The laws surrounding consortium -- the labyrinthine, abstruse, even whimsical Coital Regulations -- went a long way towards decontextualizing human propagation, yet even these could not eradicate instilled memories of a voice that sang in the dark night, soothing the crying soul.

The Commentaries

#

Her Excellency, First Consul Yve sat at her desk in her private apartment with a scroller, reading a communication from the Palace. The First Consul's connected tangle of executive branch buildings guarded a lie at the inner crater rim almost opposite that of the great glittering spires of the Church. Government spoke a different language than Church, and her buildings suggested function more than inspiration, and indeed few believed them Vas-inspired to any great extent. That said, Primus House, home and chambers of the First Consul, had a kind of functional, austere beauty, formed of simple geometries in plascrete and sheet-diamond. And the views of the other powers lying along the inner crater rim were spectacular.

The communication she read was unusually cryptic and dissembling even for a communication from His Holiness:

Madam Yve,

We have recently met with a refugee servant of ours from Edom, which we gather to have been lost. We have directed this servant, the Reverend V.D. Hersey, to act as our Envoy in certain matters, for which he will need travel that we hope you will provide. His credentials are appended. You may dispense with the formality of a servant for Rev. Hersey, as he is, on evidence and belief, self-sufficient and able.

On the subject of Edom, we are distressed that another colony and her parishes of this Church have been lost. I beg that you re-consider your decision to re-assign outlier personnel to the main body of the Irredente, as it is precisely at the outliers where enforcement of Church decrees are so critical. We have raised this matter with you before, but Edom presents it as a new urgency. Our information is that heretical practices had become widespread at Edom before its destruction. I dare to suggest to you that the two are related, hence this renewed appeal.

Finally, my Mens Super adviser, for reasons known only to himself, requires assistance retrieving any information in your archive on certain invertebrate life species on Irredente outlying worlds (such as Edom was). The file attached hereto addresses this with more particularity. I am sorry to burden your Excellency with so trifling a request, but perhaps if you personally could direct the efforts of my Mens Super, matters would be expedited to Our satisfaction...

She frowned and looked out the diamond-paned window at the Primus House gardens and, farther off, the small, gorgeous spaceport, all gothic lines and functional soaring buttresses, that served the needs of the House. She considered various possible interpretations for the letter. Watching the activity at her beloved spaceport always calmed her mind. She could see the comings and goings of ships authorized to dock -- ships carrying visitors, mainly, but also imported stores and equipment for the House. Her own ship, Papillon, sleek and beautiful, which she herself captained on occasion, stood within, always at the ready, its thick coat of diamond polished and glinting. Still, the letter bothered her. Nothing from His Holiness was simple, and this letter pretended to be.

Her Excellency rolled up the scroller, pulled the cord around it, and tapped it absently on her sheet-diamond desktop. "Tam," she said into her desk comm, "is Grace outside?"

"She's on her way back, Excellency."

"Direct her to step in, please."

Unerringly competent Consul Yve, mid-way through her term of sols -- in both the official and biological senses -- was no worse than many a First Consul before her, and she was recognized as smarter than most. Details she handled very well -- the Irredente ran very smoothly -- and she surrounded herself with extremely qualified people. Of the larger picture of events she perhaps lacked a clear vision, but any successful First Consul had struggled long to attain the post and struggled daily in political cross-currents to maintain it. The Cabil, the legislative body whose will the First Consul enacted, might decide to cut her off at the knees, despite her nominal term, owing to matters within her control but insufficiently managed day-by-day. Thus she survived in office, day-by-day, move by move, and managed things very well. No one might fault her her drive and ambition, nor even her temper, which rarely flared and never unjustifiably. Perhaps, however, the strength needed to grasp the scepter tightly left her little strength to bear it aloft.

In a few moments, a striking, jet-black ectomorph with piercing blue eyes and upswept blond hair appeared at the door.

"Yes, Ma'am?" she said.

"Have a seat, Grace," said her Excellency. "I have a neat little message from his Holiness."

"About the new envoy from Edom, Ma'am?"

Her Excellency shot the amanuensis a look. "How do you do it, Grace?"

"It's been out there for a couple of hours, Ma'am. He's already been given his Bombazine."

"Uh-huh," the Consul said. "Anything else you wish to tell me about my private information from his Grace, Grace?"

"Apologies, Ma'am."

"None needed. So?"

"He -- the new Envoy -- he's a rad... he's quite conservative. He's to the right of the Fraternus -- he was... well, first he was with them, then he wasn't... and he had the post on Edom. A provincial Vox, safely out of the way -- and now safely out of the way again, apparently."

"Is he Somebody?"

"No, Excellency. As far as I can tell, he is nobody. There doesn't seem to even be a Hersey family of any mention anywhere."

"The ways of the Church are often inscrutable. Now here's a riddle. A low-level clergyman from an outlier is received, given an audience -- or so I assume?"

"I cannot tell, Ma'am. But to become Envoy, one assumes that."

"Well, at all events, he was on Pydna long enough to be made Envoy."

"And given a credit card without apparent limitation," the subordinate added.

"Very strange. Why should I be so intrigued?"

"Because you're First Consul, Ma'am?"

"Remind me to dump Harold and make you my official Consort, Grace. That will please the Admiralty for once."

"Sorry, Ma'am. I'm taken."

"Of course you are, dear. Back to this Envoy business."

"Well, Excellency, perhaps Edom is the explanation. His Holiness has to be concerned."

"We're all concerned. We're bending the will of the entire Irredente to deal with these attacks. This is no different than Tempis Arte, Gallia, Tanjer or any of the others we've lost. Why now? Why this Mr...."

"Hersey, Ma'am."

"Just so. Well?"

"I will take it to your Ministry of Intelligence right now, if you wish."

Yve sighed. "For all the good it will do. Yes, send it over to them. Give the Envoy the clearances before you go, however. And give the Mens Super his bugs, too."

"Ma'am?"

"Do I know something you don't, Grace?"

"I haven't actually seen the communication from the Auspex, Excellency."

Her Excellency frowned. "Most alarming. Read it and be gone. No, here, I'll just send you a copy. There. The Palace Mens Super is looking for bugs, apparently."

"Like, code?"

"No, actual bugs. Very strange, I know. It's all there in the request. Report back to me. Oh, Grace?"

"Ma'am?"

"Be sure that the unknown Reverend is assigned a servant each time he travels on an Irredente vessel. There's no substitute for a set of eyes. If he balks, make sure every captain understands -- go through Admiralty. You handle all the details. I don't want to hear about this again unless there's something of interest."

#

A few days after her exchange with her private secretary, First Consul Yve and her Official (and unofficial, as it happened) Consort, Harold of Acton, sat at the breakfast deck overlooking Irredente Park and the rest of

Os Divinus. The graceful stone ribs of the Naval Atrus and the spires of the Palace were visible these several miles away. Harold was the less flamboyant type of Actonian -- unusually cool-headed and far-sighted, and without that unfortunate Actonian hubris that was charitably called bravado. When opportunity had arrived to Harold, still on Acton in his thirties, in the form of a promising, attractive young diplomat from Pydna and a civil war cease-fire dress ball on an island near his family's fief of Maiora, inclination and attraction combined to whisk Harold off to space and the larger stage of human affairs.

Harold yawned. "I'm having trouble waking up this morning," said the Consort. "I was out with N'tomo and a Guildsman last night."

"Fascinating, dear," said her Excellency, nose in a briefing scroller.

"Sneer you may, but I learn a lot of interesting things that way. You wouldn't be sitting in that chair right now if it weren't for my staying out at all hours."

She pretended to pay attention to him. "What have you learned, then?" she said.

"The guildsman was from Transport. The truckers -- that's lower-level Transport people -- they all say that Admiralty knew about Edom in advance."

Yve put her scroller down. "Go on."

"That's the opposite of what Admiralty is saying -- that Transport warned them. Transport lost several ships and a lot of cargo. They complain that would have pulled everything out sooner had they known more. Admiralty is saying that they would have evacuated the planet had they known more. As usual, it's finger-pointing."

"Now this rings a bell," said her Excellency. "I had something about Edom just the other day. Here, let me pull it up." She fiddled with her comm. "Vas, so much garbage in here. Grace could tell us in a heartbeat. Yes -- oh, this is the request from the Palace. Well, it's not about intelligence. It's about bugs. It's very odd. It can't mean what it says -- they're clearly trying to get our files for some reason, with this as an excuse. The Mens Super asked for access to Irredente data on 'certain invertebrates' in the outliers. Isn't that odd?"

"Bugs. Is it something like 'armadas' or something?"

"'Armadillium' is what it says," Yve said.

"It must be the same thing. These are the things that get into the equipment and machinery. That's what N'Tomo said -- he was talking about Edom and the bugs that get into the ships. But they don't know if they're being carried by ships to planets or the reverse. They're all over the outliers, N'Tomo says."

"The Palace doesn't mention anything about ships," Yve said. "Are the bugs eating cargo? When I was a sprat on Andromache, one of the old frigates..."

"You had cockroaches as big as your fist, I know. And they served rats at mess. I remember. No, the armadas don't seem to do anything -- they can't see them doing anything -- but then you get electronic malfunctions wherever they were or else shorts or piles of silicon dust. The Guildsman -- I've met him before -- said they seem to secrete something that etches some of the materials from..."

"The silicon controllers, maybe," interjected her Excellency. "Gauge worms cause shorts, which is bad enough. If you had something that melted the silicon..."

"It would wreak havoc," Harold said. "And then they can't catch the damned things except to blow them out to space when they can. You know, it's an odd coincidence that the Palace is talking about the same thing."

Her Excellency considered. "The only connection I see is the Proscriptions," she said.

"How so?"

"A creature that burrows into silicon, eats it, whatever it does..." she said.

"Dear Vas," Harold said. "It would shut us down. Planetary data nodes, ship's computers..."

"And we can't replace some of it -- even if it weren't officially proscribed, we don't have the capabilities," Yve continued the train of thought. "The Palace would clearly be interested in a plague that kills technology and leaves people standing. It would be paradise, the second coming of Vas."

They both sat in silence for a few moments. Harold broke the reverie:

"I was just thinking that that might not be so bad. Putting the genie back in the bottle. That's what the Fraternus wing of the Church would do if they could -- no opportunities to tamper with Vas's Word, no threats to the sanctity of the Body, no more policing of body parts, scanning, Conform, all of it. Maybe a slower world might be a happier one." Harold looked rueful. "A pipe dream, though. In any event, it would take a lot more for that to happen than a few bugs on outliers and Guildships. It doesn't sound like a plague but more of a headache -- these things can be as big as the palm of your hand, the Guildsman says. You just have to clear them off and out of every shipment."

"Hmmm, well, maybe," Yve said. "Like we do with rats, roaches, and gauge worms? These little things that you think you've got under control can get away from you."

"We could kill all the rats, but it's cheaper and less smelly to just live with them."

"Anyway," Yve said, "I've got Grace looking into it now. There's no need to alarm anyone, so let's keep our theories between us. Maybe Grace will find something useful. We've already spent more time talking about it than it probably warrants."

"We were talking about Edom," Harold said. "You... the Irredente has lost colonies, ships, people. And no idea who or why. The Guild people think they're second-class citizens -- that Government doesn't really look after them since it doesn't have nominal control over them."

"Nominal or real, as it happens. But as for the losses, we're working on that. Raids on the peripheries or in the outliers are almost impossible to defend against. That's why we're pulling... getting the fleet aggregated."

"That sounds like equivocation, Yve. Words. People are worried. We've been in this nice little bubble in the inner Quadrants, but we know that there are a lot of people in the Beyond."

"People?" Yve said. "Not according to our laws. Horrors, mutants. I will remind you that they are the enemies of the Irredente, not merely a pesky plague of insects. What we're defending is our Vas-given uniqueness. I'm not unusually religious, but I respect the rationale for this hegemony."

"Of course -- you are its leader. I merely point out that some of those out there -- their worlds or societies -- are probably stable, even expansionist, and continue developing mech and tech. Well, actually, I think we know they are."

"How do we know that, Harold?"

"How are they wiping out these colonies so easily? Why can't you stop them?"

"We haven't really tried any kind of defense yet. That's... we're developing that."

"A tactic, perhaps, but not technology, like they are," he said. "We've never been tested that way -- we've always assumed that the technology we inherited would suffice. But we stand still here." He looked out over the city. The occasional honk could be heard dimly as the city awoke. "We don't develop anything anymore, you said it yourself. When we lose big ships, we lose them forever -- we can live without gravitics, but we can't jump without the old jump cores. And it's not as though we're going to find new ones, either, if we're fleeing back to the center. We have to go farther and farther out to find things to use. Someday, it's going to run out, or we're going to meet an enemy that has something better."

"I didn't create the Codes, I just carry them out. They were laid down long ago, and I have to work within them. Only the Church and the Cabil can alter that. I carry out the law. At present, we don't have the capacity to shift resources to the outliers. Nor would the Cabil members, who represent the core worlds, permit it." She paused to look at her handsome Consort. Was there dissent in her own house? "Do you want paradise or progress, Harold?"

"I want both, though some persons" -- here he looked at Yve sternly -- "might banish me for such heresy. I'm no lover of technology, and you know it. But a luddite paradise presents still worse problems. Suppose we were to lose jump drives -- suppose our ships were destroyed, whether by a plague of silicon-chewing pests or by our enemy out there. Where we would we be? Isolated -- there'd be no hegemony, just islands connected via ansible. And that assumes that we still have those too: I'm not sure there are ansibles in paradise. Ansibles, jump cores, the gravitics we use on the big ships, even our own data nodes, all of them are the old, developed technology, and if something happened to them, we would have no idea how to re-create them. We'd have no paradise, and we'd have none of the things that have held the Irredente together. Sounds worse than the..."

"Don't say it, Harold," Yve said. "Don't even think it. Those people did love technology, and what it got them was chaos. I'd rather live in a world full of poor, backward humans than in a galaxy full of... beasts."

"I left Acton, and I don't regret it," Harold said. "I think that's what you'd have, writ large. With Acton you have one of the oldest continuously-occupied Irredente core worlds, strongly anti-tech, and it's still much the same as when it was formed and settled: a world of brawling, petty fiefdoms. We're famous for purple wines, but we always say that the first things to take root in the dark soil were competition and violence -- grapes and arsinot were afterthoughts. What did we build? Nothing of consequence: cities and towns put up defensive walls. Patriarchs and Matriarchs erected pointlessly tall plastone-block towers to display wealth or else commissioned assassinations of hated rivals. The only way we made it through was through trasformisme -- people would trade cards, credit, collateral (including children), baubles, and land, so that a rough parity prevailed over time. Volatile, defensive, static, chauvinistic. That's what you'll get if we end up hobbled without jump cores -- say goodbye to the hegemony of man. I'm for anything that keeps us connected and properly governed -- and that's technology. Nothing says we have to go back to 5th Empire ways -- we can stop the bioforming, and we do."

"No, Harold," Yve said, "it's not that easy. Bioforming started out as an industry but trickled down to anyone who could afford the machinery. In the end, it fit in a small room -- small enough that it evaded detection and regulation. If you open the door to technology, you don't open it a crack -- you open a floodgate. Those early voxes, the revolutionaries, knew it and railed against it, and they suffered for it -- they were castrated live, for Vas's sake. We rightly revere them and honor them for that. We do so by maintaining the Proscriptions."

"What about weaponry? We could at least develop that," Harold said.

Yve shook her head. "That's what Galinda would do, if he had a chance," she said.

"He's just one," Harold said.

Yve looked at Harold darkly. "One to watch, at any rate," she said. "He was close to Godwin, and I know Godwin would like a few guns -- so he could take over. I wish I hadn't offered Godwin Intelligence. I knew he was too dumb to handle it."

"The word is," Harold said, "that he is."

"Exactly," Yve said. "But it runs nonetheless -- a bit."

"Credit the permanent staff," Harold said.

"Or Galinda, maybe?" Yve said.

"Maybe," Harold agreed. "I could look into that."

"For Vas's sake, be discreet, Harold."

"When have I not been?"

She frowned at him.

"That's different," Harold said. "No one would trust me if I didn't have one on the side. You wouldn't trust me if I denied it."

"I asked Grace to take your place," Yve said. "She wouldn't have me. Maybe she's better off chasing bugs, after all."

Harold cocked an eyebrow. "She's quite an extraordinary specimen," he said. "Practically a species unto herself."

Her Excellency made the sign of the tau-and-lambda across her chest. "Men, too," she said.

Chapter nine.*Family*

From the merest seed does the mighty gnossoak spring, so perfect in its parts, yet with limits finite. Behold, Man.

-- The Holy Book of the Body

#

"Are you finished?" she said, "or are you going to stare into the scroller until you're hypnotized?" Burgred and Hanna had fallen in together when she first came aboard Andromache. She needed ship's officers to assist her with planetary excursions to collect specimens, and Burgred had piloted the lander on both expeditions thus far.

"No," Burgred said, "I'm done." He pushed the scroller away and turned in his chair. Burgred and Hanna sat at the vidport side of his quarters, he at his desk and she in pajamas in a lounge chair with her own scroller rolled up in her lap, her long brown hair let down. Except for his bunk, which was pulled down and with the sheets in disarray, his quarters were neat and clean and glowed with a soft, soothing light emanating from the gently curving panels overhead.

"Do you want to hear what Bev said about your nephew?"

"My nephew," he said, trying it out. "Yes. What? Oh, what you comm'd me about?"

"You saw his head?" Hanna said.

"His head? What?"

"It's a little odd, Burgred. As in, large."

He looked nonplussed. "So he's one of those kids with a big head. Probably undernourished -- makes his head seem large."

"No. It's different -- it's off-kilter in a particular way. It's something at the sides, around and above the ears," she said.

"So?"

"Oh, it's nothing all that strange. I mean, it looks normal -- mainly -- but a scientist or a doctor looking at it..."

"What?" he said.

"Well, it's normal, but then again it's not, you know what I mean? Like when the ship here makes some sort of hum or movement and you cock your head. I never have any idea that anything's different, but you do."

"So what's different, with Henryk?"

"My sister noticed and ran the scanner -- she had to anyway with what happened down there -- and, well, the kid's got quite a brain."

"As in, a genius?" he said.

"Does he seem like a genius to you?"

"No," he said. "He's fine. But I've got other concerns about him, apart from his brains."

"Such as?" Hanna said.

Burgred hesitated to answer. "You seem awfully interested in him, Hanna."

"Of course, Burgred. He's a small child, and he's... your nephew, for Vas's sake."

"He's not bred to all this. I've thrown an orphan onto a ship with several-thousand-odd souls," Burgred said.

"Correction, Burgred: was. Was an orphan, and in mean servitude, and in a bar, and in a slum. Surely anything up here is better than that. It stands to reason. You saved him, Burgred. He would have died. Now you get a chance to help him out. I think it's really nice."

"I think it's too soon to bring him into the service. I should have just directed him back to Plum Grove. My father is responsible for it, for this. He's the one who... but never mind. Henryk's my brother's child. He should be with family somewhere else; I should have found a way to send him, maybe have reasoned with my father somehow."

"Why didn't you?"

Burgred shrugged. "Burgred children go into the ships as early as possible. I did."

"And look at you now," Hanna said. "You're the senior First."

Burgred frowned. "Emphasis on the senior. But when I was very young, I had parents around, for a time. My mother was there a lot. Plum Grove was beautiful, and I wanted to stay, but my father wouldn't have it."

"Well, lieutenant," Hanna said, "We could be pretty good parents for him up here, until..." She smiled and lay her foot across his lap.

Burgred coughed. "That would only last until I'm re-assigned," he said.

"Well, I'm just a supernumerary on Andromache. I can do my plant science on any of the big ships. Besides, you said yourself that she's got it out for you, that you couldn't stick it out here much longer."

"Maybe you and Xenoetas can be the surrogate parents," Burgred said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're her genotype," he said. "And the Navy seems to approve these sorts of things."

Hanna was exasperated. "I can't believe we're having this conversation. I just asked you if we couldn't... help out Henryk. Even if you don't have much time, I would be willing..."

"I still haven't even talked to him about all this yet."

"Burgred!"

"I know, I know. I keep meaning to. But how do you tell a seven or eight sols old kid... that his father is dead, his mother is dead -- probably -- and his planet is dead. Where do you start? 'So, I'm your dead father's brother...' I don't have any idea. Maybe there's no need -- I don't remember much of anything from when I was his age."

"Burgred, for Vas's sake, the news is already out there, it's got to be," Hanna said. "He's going to get it all garbled from someone. And like he'll understand -- no way. It will just scare and confuse him, Burgred. You've got to get out in front of this."

Burgred sighed. "I wish I could make the connection go away, now that I've got him up here. The name 'Burgred' probably won't do him any good, not here, at any rate. The lower decks are as likely to resent him as to help him, and he needs their help -- no ship's boy can get by with enemies down there. And don't get me started on Boys' Quarters. There are always bullies ready to give somebody the business on some pretext or other. If it's not his name, it'll be this 'head' thing of yours."

"Oh, yeah," she said. "What Bev said was, it's like he's got some extra, what, brain tissue maybe? stem tissue? stem cells? -- but it seems to be the wrong... how can I say this... it's a different structure than the usual thing you'd find there, and it's down deep within. Speech, hearing, it's all tied up with that," she said.

"So, what did Bev say?"

"Well, I'm afraid it's not very nice," she said.

"Something about Edomites, about people in the outliers?"

"Yeah."

"Skip it," he said. "I know those jokes already. We'd better mind ourselves that Henryk doesn't get caught up in the Conform stuff. Hopefully, it's nothing, or else something we can fix."

"You're a Burgred, he's a Burgred. I'm sure it will be fine. But you've got to tell him. You've got to. Bev liked him, you know, and she said he was really tough. He's quiet -- surprise, surprise -- and he's young. She doesn't see all that many children in the hospital, and I think she's usually glad about that -- she finds them annoying, I think, and she never played with dollies when we were girls. But she thought he handled his... situation really well."

"She got him that fantastic mech," Burgred said.

"That's right. That's what I'm telling you," she said. "We take care of our own, don't we?" She gave Burgred a killer smile.

"Okay, then, if you're so fond of him, you tell him."

"Burgred," she said. "He's your nephew. Do your duty. I don't mind helping you. I mean, I'll be there with you. It could help to have a mother surrogate there. But I'm no expert."

Burgred looked at her, suspicious.

#

An Andromache ship's boy named Rache, several sols older than Henryk, had led him around a few parts of the ship on that first day in quarters. She had inconclusive features that bordered on incoherence, as though

time were waiting on her to decide what she would be. She politely pretended not to notice Henryk's difficulty getting around but found many opportunities to stop or slow down, whether she were checking her small, simplified wrist comm, pulling a rag from her pocket to shine a console jutting from a niche, or else finding an excuse to talk to another ship's boy or lowerdeckman who appeared in their path. She helped Henryk navigate the complicated turns and double-hatches that delimited various sections of the ship.

At the sighing of a soft gong chime, she pulled Henryk to a canteen and sat him down to eat and drink. The canteen was a quarter-circle at the intersection of two hallways, with automated systems along the curving back wall and a few small round bolt-down tables scattered about. It only served ship's fare, but the food tasted good to Henryk. One sailor occupied a table, munching contentedly while reading something on a scroller. It was otherwise quiet.

"My mam says that once you're in the service, you'll not go hungry again," Rache said.

"Is this service? The ship?" Henryk said.

"No, the Navy, the whole thing," she said. "The persons here in the uniforms. Well, some of them -- some of them are not Navy proper like, but most are. There are the Marines, which I think are like Navy, but they just sit on the ship until they can go kill things planetside, or maybe go kill on another ship. But there's science. That's the people in the science wing, with the labs. They're not in the service, but they're very smart all the same. There are no kids in science, though."

"What do you mean, science?" Henryk said.

Rache's eyes widened. "You don't know about science, then? Where have you been, boy? Don't they teach you anything, down there on Edom?"

Henryk shrugged and looked down at the table top.

"That's alright then, Henryk, but sheesh! You've got a heap o' catching up to do, don't you? Many of the kids that come, they got taught by their parents at least, you know? You're kinda startin' from the first square, if you get me meanin'."

Henryk looked at her uncertainly.

She sighed dramatically. "I suppose you'll just have to, you know, pretend a bit at first, but the proctors will help you out too. They got the scrollers and all. Anyhow, science is just learning, Henryk, only it's the technical stuff -- wire and machines, medicine, and animals and things. The scientists," here, she pointed upwards, "they don't do no fighting, except amongst themselves, which is different. They work in their own part of the ship, and they're always thinking." She demonstrated by tapping her temple. "It's like the people who figured out how to make your leg there, or told others how to make it. Scientists know all about it. Say, how old are you then, Henryk?"

Henryk shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "Madame thought I was eight."

"Where are your parents then?"

"I don't... my mother... I don't have any parents."

Rache looked astounded. "You got no parents then, Henryk? That's hard luck, is what that is, Henryk. Did they die, then? Maybe you're an orphan, like in the stories, and you'll face all kinds of trials and tests and then kill all the bad people."

Henryk looked down at the table again.

"That was dumb -- I'm sorry, Henryk," she said. "But I couldn't know then, could I? You're in kind of a fix, it sounds like. If you're finished eating there, then, we should keep moving."

"How... how old are you?" asked Henryk.

"I'm ten then, nearly eleven?" she said with her odd upward inflection. Henryk held up all his digits. She reached out added one of her own. "This last one soon. You've got a lot to learn, Henryk, so let's move on then."

Henryk wouldn't see the ship's mechanicals or holds that day, though he saw a good sampling of other areas: living quarters, gaming and testing rooms, the cockpit (from an observation window that overlooked it), food holds, stowage, holopic theater, exercise and activity rooms, supply rooms, work rooms of all kinds, data nodes, offices. Though hallways were sparsely populated, individual rooms, quarters, and areas might be very busy at a given moment. Henryk had no understanding why this should be so. Rache -- and others whom they met -- would explain what people were doing, but it meant nothing to him. Mainly, he was interested in the variety of humanity he encountered.

Rache didn't quiz Henryk much, focusing instead on getting him to understand what to do if he got lost. Within a few days, he would be walking these halls on errands, sometimes alone. Some part of her remembered her own fears when, at age eight, she had been brought on board. She doubted these were the same fears as Henryk's -- hers centered mainly on the mechanics of washing up and getting dressed in the same room as her peers. Nevertheless, she remembered her bewilderment and the feeling that some things would never make any sense.

Henryk soldiered on through the day with the new leg. The effort ultimately exhausted him, but by the end of that first day of walking, the leg was more his own and less alien. After a perfunctory meal at which he barely registered the other ship's boys talking excitedly around him, he made his water, pulled down his bunk, and dropped into a deep sleep.

Rache was gone the next morning before he even got his breakfast. Breakfast was not a sit-down meal except on Feastday, so Henryk followed the routine of the other ship's boys of grabbing tack rolls from a bin, slathering them with jam, and drinking hot tea. The boys (of both sexes) would talk with their mouths full, full of new gossip that evidently occurred to them during sleep. Henryk, still groggy, sat on the edge of his bunk munching. His new leg wanted to swing at a different rate than his real one, and he focused on trying to keep them together. Then a vaguely familiar feeling, a small buzzing or tingling in the back of his head, recurred. Instinctively he turned around. Did something move on the blank inside wall of his bunk's alcove? There was lots of activity in the room. It must have been a glint of light from a buckle. The buzzing was gone. And yet it was somehow still there, a wind-worn footprint at the back of his thoughts.

Proctor Demain suddenly loomed above him, her thick dark hair rigorously managed.

"Henryk, you'll be with me for the first watch. Only I can lead you some of the places you need to go today, so we'll take the opportunity to have a little class. Come over here. We'll get Serena and Vil and be on our way. If you need to wash up or get something else to eat, do it now; we won't be stopping until the next watch."

The other two ship's boys were around Henryk's age. They fell into an easygoing familiarity that soon included Henryk. The proctor prodded them all with questions as they visited various important parts of the ship. Henryk began to understand the rhythm and pace of what he was expected to do. The proctor now and again pitched a question that Henryk could answer. This garnered no response from the other boys, who didn't seem to care what Henryk knew. When it was their turn to answer, they invariably did so at length and

with impressive mannerisms and gesticulations. It struck Henryk forcefully that their speech and manner was fluid and knowing beyond his, and he grew more abashed as the tour went on.

"Now, boys, I'm going to show you something that won't look like much. You won't understand this -- I don't. But beyond this hatchway is one of the most important parts of the ship. You'll have to pass through the security systems, and we have live security here as well. Just do what they tell you."

They were processed with automated systems, then they encountered a double-sentry post, where two grim guards in uniforms with special insignia -- Henryk didn't understand at the time that it was an engineering guild uniform -- made a show of putting the boys and the proctor through the paces. Finally, they went through a complicated double-hatch system which made Henryk remember breakfast vividly. He had a very immediate awareness of his body's functions as they awaited the opening of the second hatch.

They then entered a windowless spherical chamber that Henryk guessed from their route must lay in the very center of the ship. The floor was noticeably a bit concave beneath their feet, and large semi-hemispherical bulges pockmarked the walls. Two engineering officers sat at a large console on a raised, squared-off platform. One read a scroller, the other watched them enter and smiled amiably.

"Welcome to the next dimension," he said. Henryk looked at the proctor blankly. Serena and Vil, apparently more in the know, examined the spherical chamber for evidence of another dimension.

"You boys' won't be able to see anything different," the engineer continued. "The way the system works, gravity emanates from the shell of this sphere. Watch..."

The engineer gently lobbed a stylus upward. After it had traveled a few feet, it rocketed forward then stuck like a magnet to another part of the floor.

"Welcome to the gravity core. In the center of this sphere, there's almost no gravity -- the only part of the ship that's not provided with gravity. In other parts of the ship, there are systems that re-direct or fold it so that the pull is always oriented with the floors, give or take a small margin of error that's not noticeable."

The proctor told Henryk about gravity and why it had to be manufactured on the ship. "Even small craft in the Navy today have some sort of gravitics, though not always as good as we get on a frigate like Andromache. I told you that it's important -- that's because life on a large ship like this would really be impossible without it. We probably wouldn't have ships like this at all. We'd go back to large wheels that turn in space, like many of the space stations and trading outposts still use. Serena and Vil have seen those. Henryk, you'll see them too, in time. Soon, probably."

Vil shot up a hand.

"Yes, Vil?"

"Where does it come from?"

"Where does what come from?"

"Gravity?"

"You mean ship's gravity?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

The proctor looked at the engineers, both of whom were watching and listening.

"I told you," one of the engineers said. "From the shell around you."

"But how? How does the shell do it?" Vil said.

The engineer frowned. "It's technical, son," he said. "You should become an engineer one day so that you can learn all about it. Okay, let's move along now."

The children looked blankly at the engineers and then at the proctor. She took the engineer's hint and led the children back out the way they had come. Serena and Vil seemed content and had moved on to other things. Henryk, pensive, now wondered likewise where gravity came from. The scene in the gravity core reminded him of Feastday, walking home with Madame, being shushed or put off simply for asking about what the Vox had said. It reminded him of being in the hospital, where it seemed that everyone he asked about how the leg worked told him to ask someone else. He looked forward to being back in quarters; maybe someone there knew where the gravity came from.

#

Henryk eased into ship life. It was not long before he learned to look at the log board to see where he had to go next, having memorized the way the words he needed to know looked -- he was a very poor reader when he came on board. Soon enough, he picked up the necessary reading and math, and he was learning quickly in most subject areas that ship's boys were tutored in.

Henryk lacked the physical grace required of a ship's boy and had to try to catch up. He went to the exercise room and the classes, but he wasn't a natural. It wasn't a size or inclination problem, and it wasn't the new leg, which he seemed to have fully integrated into his wiring. It seemed more that he couldn't quickly grasp how he was supposed to direct his energy and what others expected him to do.

Still, he was normal enough and average enough that he blended into the mass of ship's boys without fanfare. The leg, too, became less exotic and less interesting to the other boys as time went on, and many simply forgot about it unless Henryk accidentally kicked a ball way too hard (he had learned to modulate its strength, but eagerness or inattention could still cause him difficulty) or did something that others found strange, like scratching the leg absently when watching a holovid.

His closest friends were Serena and Vil, being about his own age. There was also the older girl, Rache, who often checked in on him or helped him with his studies.

At the time of Henryk's initiation into the ship's basic workings, Andromache cruised on patrol on the borderline between the outer quadrants of the Irredente and the colonies and outliers. It seemed to Henryk that this must be all that the ship did -- travel in space while her people went about their work and routines. There was always work, even when one had finished and wasn't supposed to have more to do. Henryk quickly learned that being seen idle was a ticket to drudgery. Ship's boys knew how to appear busy even when the log board didn't show a specific assignment. Even so, every ship's boy knew drudgery -- the Proctors made a point of assigning it and, as it seemed to Henryk, dreaming up new forms of it. Henryk remembered Rache with the clean white rag in her pocket, and he adopted her practice of making anything within his sight gleam.

As Henryk progressed in the school portion of his duties, he began to suspect that there was something wrong or strange with his head. If he were awake with his attention drifting, from time to time, and at random places on the ship, the familiar buzzing would recur. He noticed that if he kept focused on his tasks, not admitting other thoughts to intrude, he could stop this happening. More alarmingly, though, in his dreams the cascade of vivid images to which he had become accustomed would often transition into something resembling the

familiar buzz, but with an added sing-song, speech-like quality. As time went on, his dreams would often be a combination of images and heard sounds, whether words or those sort-of-words. When he awoke, he had the same sense of a vague footprint having been left upon his senses as he did following waking episodes of the buzzing.

Within a few months, Henryk read and wrote as well as any of his peers, including ship's boys on the verge of gaining their commission. The Proctors spoke of it, and Burgred got a report of it. Thankfully, his fellow ship's boys knew little of it and suspected less. Henryk was a reluctant speaker: he listened, only spoke when spoken to directly, and then said as little as possible. To other boys, this made Henryk seem somewhat distant; girls, for whatever reason, were intrigued.

Henryk shot up in stature as well. The steady diet on board ship, his first sustained access to nutritious fare, apparently triggered the Burgred genetic predisposition to ectomorphism. The looks were harder to make out and presumably from the mother. They were pleasing enough, though with an exaggeration of width across the face -- something awkward above the ears.

In those several months of cruising, Andromache made just one jump. Henryk had been shown how to grab a handhold and brace for the brief duration -- about a second -- and, though apprehensive before the event, came to understand that it was nothing much. Occasionally, a bunked sleeper who hadn't strapped in got a bruise, but jumps were integrated into the ship's routines and rarely caused problems.

Henryk was sitting with Rache at lunch in boys' quarters on the day after that first jump. Tables were panels that folded up from the floor, with a clean side rotated up. Henryk never felt uncomfortable being quiet in company and consequently didn't sense the awkwardness when he blurted things out, as he was, unfortunately, wont.

"How can a ship jump?"

Rache looked up from her scroller. "Huh?"

"I said, how can a ship jump?"

Rache laughed, and Henryk blushed.

"Oh, it's okay then, Henryk? You're just funny like, sometimes. I'm sorry, Henryk. Okay, jumps is it, now? Jumps are not jumps, not like that." She made a show with her hands. "I mean, you can't see what the ship is doing. It's going from these stars over here to those stars over there. No ship is fast enough to go everywhere in the Irredente, unless it's a ship with a jump core. That's something else. That's not engines. They got a computer -- that's the jump core -- that they use."

"But how does it do it?"

Rache bit her lip in concentration. "Hmm, well, dunno. You should ask Proctor. She'll know."

Later, Henryk did ask Proctor Anne, and she didn't know. "You must ask Proctor Demain," she said.

Proctor Demain had no idea.

#

Henryk watched from the sidelines as the ship's boys practiced pommel jumps and somersaults in the stuffy, smelly atmosphere of the exercise room to the tune of domineering shouts and calls of senior midshipmen.

Education and training protocols required constant exercise and training for ship's crew, including ship's boys. Large deck areas mid-ships were either devoted to, or convertible for, such use. Ship's boys had an established schedule for different types of exercises and training, and boys could -- and did -- practice or play in any of the several areas when off watch. The youngest ship's boys, except for Henryk, still recovering from his injuries, had lined up for the pommel. A midshipman in clean practice whites frowned impatiently as Serena hesitated to start her run. When she did set off, awkwardly, she mistimed the jump off the ramp, crashed into the body of the pommel, and fell down in a heap before it. There were sniggers from older ship's boys and several midshipman.

"Quiet there, damn you eyes!" said the pommel trainer. "Okay, somebody get her," said the Mid. Rache and Vil ran over and pulled her aside. Henryk watched the scene with dread. He was expected out there any turn now. He wondered how long he could put it off. A faint buzz spoke to him again then died away.

"lieutenant on deck!" cried a pimply midshipman's voice. "Harr-up!" Salutes flew as Burgred entered, Hanna behind him. He gave a cursory salute, and practice continued. Shouted commands and curses again resonated from the metal locker walls of the room.

Henryk still had a salute on his forehead when Burgred and Hanna reached him.

"That's okay, son, you can drop the salute," Burgred said to Henryk. "And here, try using this hand. Show me again. That's fine. Hello, youngster. Hanna Styres from the science wing and I came to look in on you. How is everything going?"

"Yes, sir. Fine, sir. I was just watching the pommel, when Serena, a girl, she's a boy though..."

Burgred interrupted this flow of words. "Can you tell me how things are going for you?"

"Yes, sir. Uh, good, sir. I'm watching practice, sir, because they said I can't do this, yet, sir."

"Right," said Burgred. "But it won't be long, I'm sure. Say, I wonder if you could come with Dr. Styres..."

"Me, Henryk, not the Dr. Styres in the hospital," Hanna interjected. "Your doctor was my older sister."

"Can you come with us?" Burgred said.

Henryk looked at the midshipman calling practice, and at the proctor on the other side of the room.

"It's okay, Henryk. They'll see you leave with me."

Rache ran over from the practices, panting, and saluted Burgred. "Begging pardon, sir. I'm to watch Henryk, Mr. Burgred, sir." She looked down at Henryk's leg, mainly concealed by the chets.

"Ms. Rache," Burgred said, "with my compliments, please let the proctor know that Ship's Boy Henryk will rejoin you all in quarters after practice."

As they were readying to go, out of nowhere, Henryk felt the familiar feeling: bzzzzzzzzzz. He looked around him, but he didn't see anything.

"What is it, son?" Burgred said.

"Nothing, sir," Henryk said.

Burgred and Hanna led Henryk updeck to an officer's canteen and supplied him with a chocolate bar from Burgred's private stores and a juice pod with the real thing, instead of the cloying, flavored water usually given to the ship's boys. Burgred reproved himself, because the sweets went right to Henryk's head: he evidently had to work to keep from bounding and gyrating.

Burgred plowed ahead, however, accompanied by Hanna interjecting simpler phrasings where she thought it expedient. They explained to Henryk his place in the scheme of things. Burgred explained about his brother, a marine captain like Titus, and about his brother's posting to Edom before Henryk was born. He explained about his father -- Henryk's grandfather -- and Plum Grove: how nice it was, how big the house was, the family ownership of the planet. He talked about the Burgred family's service in the military over the centuries, about Henryk following in their footsteps, and more about ship's life. But in the end, there was only so much they could say -- Henryk was a greenhorn.

"Are you still my... are you the lieutenant too?" Henryk said. "Because the proctors say that we shouldn't address lieutenants until they address us and that only the captain is higher."

"Well," Burgred said, "that's a point. We probably have to observe the forms. I hadn't really considered all this. You'll usually have to address me as 'sir' or 'lieutenant' or 'Mr,' though you'll be a 'Mr. Burgred' too now. And you still need to salute, unless we're alone. I don't say it will be easy, but I'm sure we'll figure out how to work it. We're not the first, you know. The service is full of family."

Henryk looked at Hanna -- "Are you..." -- then glanced back at Burgred.

She smiled sweetly at him. "Just a friend, Henryk. You should call me Hanna. I'm not an officer or anything. Just a scientist. Mr. Burgred -- your uncle, I mean -- he and I are friends, so that means that you and I are friends too."

"Rache is my friend, and Serena, and Vil. Those are ship's boys," Henryk said. "Can I tell them? About Plum Grove? About the Burgreds?"

"Yes, of course. They're going to hear it anyway. But Henryk, I suggest you don't talk about it too much. It's not... I can't..."

Hanna interjected. "Your uncle Burgred doesn't want people and other ship's boys to think that you get things that they don't," Hanna said.

"Like chocolate?" Henryk said.

"Well, no," Burgred said. "Actually, yes, come to think of it. Like chocolate. And other private stores like that juice in your hands. But other things too -- I don't know, favors."

Henryk gave another blank look.

"Your uncle Burgred can't take your side against other ship's boys, Henryk. Like, if you fight and get into trouble, say. He can't stop you getting into trouble or take your side against someone else."

"I'm good, though!" Henryk said. "I never fight. Madame says Vas doesn't like it."

Burgred looked at Hanna, who shrugged.

"Well, it's as good a reason as any, I suppose," Burgred said. "The point is, Henryk, you've got to watch yourself. In many ways, it's like you're all alone."

"I did a lot of things by myself at the Bird & Baby," he said. "And I built things in the machine yard."

"It's going to be like that, then," Burgred said. "But, you know, I am... you are a Burgred. I mean, to everyone here, you're Henryk, but..."

"If you have problems, Henryk," said Hanna, "you can come see your uncle Burgred or even me. Plus, you'll get a ship's boy's mini-comm, and we can probably have it programmed with our codes."

Burgred made a face. "Well, we'll see. But Hanna's right that you should try to get me if something's really wrong that the proctor can't deal with. You've got to see the proctors first."

"But the other ship's boys are my friends, sir," Henryk said. "Proctor says we watch each other's backs."

Burgred looked sour. "That sounds great, Henryk, but I'm not sure you... I think maybe the proctors are optimistic where charity is concerned."

"He means there are always mean ship's boys," Hanna said.

Henryk shrugged.

"Henryk," Burgred said, "I'm concerned that you... that with your condition, your leg, you might not be able to... defend yourself, not yet, anyway. What I'm saying is, watch yourself. Think for yourself. Now, if someone in boy's quarters told you to, I don't know, say something smart to the captain, for example. Would you do it?"

"Proctor says I mustn't speak to captain unless asked a question."

"Yes, but what if another ship's boy goaded... told you to? What would you do?"

"No, sir. I wouldn't, sir." Henryk's gaze shifted back and forth from Burgred to Hanna.

Burgred looked intently at the boy. "Well, that's well done, then," he said. "But be on your guard, okay?" To Hanna, he said: "I've seen my share of boy's pranks. The older boys will set a greenhorn about some ridiculous errand, or will manage to get liquor into one and set him onto the captain, something like that."

"Henryk," Hanna said. "Did you have friends on Edom? Did you play?"

"Yes'm," Henryk said. "Lots of kids. Mostly at the machine yard, but we had hideouts too. And Mr. Alleyn, he helped me build things. He gave me..."

"That's fine, Henryk," Burgred interjected. "I know all about Alleyn. How are you feeling now, Henryk?"

Henryk looked at Burgred curiously. "Fine, sir?"

"No more sweets today, okay, son?"

"No more sweets, sir. I'm ready to go to boy's quarters, sir."

"Mum's the word about 'Uncle Burgred,' okay?" Burgred said. "It's just 'Lieutenant Burgred.' And don't go on about Plum Grove..."

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Other boys have mothers and fathers, sir," Henryk said.

"Yes," Burgred said. "That's true. Sometimes just one or the other, but usually both."

"I don't have either, sir," Henryk said.

"Yes, Henryk, that's also true. They're... they're both gone, Henryk."

Hanna intervened. "They would be very proud if they could see you right now, Henryk. And your Uncle Burgred is proud."

"Yes'm," Henryk said. "I'm ready to go now."

Burgred clapped Henryk lightly on the shoulder. "That's fine, then," he said. "Let's go. Why don't you lead the way?"

After Henryk had returned to Boys' Quarters, Burgred was walking Hanna to the science wing. "It went pretty well, considering, I'd say," Burgred said.

"He's awfully innocent, Burgred. He's going to be way behind the others."

"That's what proctors are for, Hanna. Partly, anyway. They have an official function, too, relating to preparation for Conform and Corpus."

"They'll fill his head with religion, won't they?"

"The Vox sets out a programme of instruction for it, yes. I had to do it too, when I was a youngster. I can't say it really stuck with me. With some, it does." A junior lieutenant approached them in the corridor, and they stopped talking until he passed. "It never really sticks with Burgreds, I'm afraid," Burgred said. "That's why we're in trouble."

"What do you mean, 'trouble'?" Hanna said.

"The hegemony prefers fervor, these days," he said. "I don't know much about your family, but some of the older families have had a tradition of quiet independence from the center. It's not as though we flaunt that -- Vas forbid -- but the people who show a lot of zeal seem to do better these days. Hair shirts and all. Not that they mean it. I've always thought that quiet piety was the most sincere."

"Science is much simpler," Hanna said. "I try to think about that exclusively. No one seems to bother with us."

"It's true, there's not much to say about plants," Burgred said.

"Says you."

"I mean, religion-wise," he said. "You're not going to get into too much trouble with weeds from the outliers."

"Maybe," Hanna said. "Weeds have done a lot of damage. And not just weeds -- all kinds of foreign pests. Insects are the worst -- foreign invaders, particularly. Everything else gets killed as a side effect."

"My point is that science is not really theological," Burgred said. "That's where we, back on Plum Grove, get

into trouble. We're supposed to maintain the churches, follow all the Code rules, test everyone for Conform, all of that. Those planetary governors that do... well, they're in favor. Those that don't, they get penalized in small ways, death by a thousand regulations and rulings. I know my father has a hard time with the Irredente people who come in on inspections..."

They had arrived by this point at the science wing.

"Do you want to follow me in, Burgred?" Hanna said. "I've got some nice specimens."

"I've got the next watch. I've got to get changed," he said.

"Meet for drinks later?" she said. "I can only talk religion with a stiff one in me."

Burgred cocked an eyebrow. "Ah," he said. "Ahem."

Chapter ten.

Bugs

The Vox Orbis Vascularis said unto the Remnants: use not the words of making for ill. I shall purify the myriad, and they shall be blessed again. For it is life that I serve: life in every variant; life in every potential. From many, weak and defiled, one shall re-emerge to lead man out of the gloaming.

Recovered Fragment from The Gnostic Scrollers

#

The private secretary to Her Excellency First Consul Yve checked out a scroller from the secure data node in Primus House. Her clearances would give her access to anything that Government had, including information released to Government from Admiralty, the Cabil, and the Palace. Plus, there were shared archives from the Central Node, a labyrinth of information going as far back in Irredente history that one wished to go -- if one wished to go, which was unlikely if one wished to go anywhere quickly. Grace never did -- she had been shown, once, some of the methods for reaching back into the vast oceans of information, but the abstruseness of it all had put her off. She could ask an information specialist for help if she ever felt the urge to go mining for obscure data.

In any event, what she wanted couldn't be very old. She could probably pull it up quickly and load it into her comm. Rather than going back to the official apartments of her Excellency, where Grace had a small office, Grace ducked into a conference room off the main first floor corridor of Primus House. She and others, including her Excellency's Chief of Staff, often used this particular room because its thick wool carpet, hide-covered chairs, and view of leafy fruit trees made it a quiet, contemplative place to work. There was an unwritten code governing use of the room: only high-ranking staff, and utter quiet. Grace had often frowned upon finding the room being used for a meeting of interstellar representatives when she had thought to work there.

Today, she entered quietly and pulled a chair away from the table and toward the windowed wall overlooking the grounds. One other staff member worked at the table, and he pointedly paid her no mind. She unfurled the scroller and set to work... on bugs. The information from the Palace gave a name: armadillium. It sounded vaguely familiar -- she seemed to remember something about one of the Guilds complaining about them. But she didn't have and probably couldn't get Guild data. The Ministry of Regulated Industries maybe? She poked through Ministry records. She found it -- armadillia mollusca: an insectoid life form found in particular outliers, associated with equipment failures. Comparison to rats seeking electrical fields; to electrical shorts caused by gauge worms. A list of planets, including Tempis Arte, Gallia, Edom, many more. A long list of what appeared to be manufacturing sites on the various affected planets. References to the Transport Guild, but little more. This was what the Palace wanted?

She looked over the reports again. The planets. The bugs were on planets that had come under attack, though not exclusively. That seemed tenuous. If there was such a connection, surely Government's own Ministry of Intelligence would have it. She put through First Consul Yve's own passcodes and entered queries. She didn't really expect to see anything -- it was a long shot -- and in fact she didn't, but in the wrong way: she didn't see anything because she was being denied access to records. That didn't make sense. She must have entered the query incorrectly. No, that wasn't it. She tried several things, but each time she tried to get data on the bugs -- on armadillia or anything like it -- she got blocked. She swore at her scroller. The man working at the table gave her a rude shush. She frowned at him, then looked at the scroller thinking she must have done something wrong. It didn't make sense that Her Excellency should be blocked from making inquiries about insects in the outliers.

Frustrated, she rolled up her scroller and deposited it back at the node. She went back to her own office in the First Consul's residence and considered the matter to make sure she hadn't made any mistakes. She didn't want to bother Her Excellency unless she was sure. She commed a senior aide at the Ministry of Intelligence, but he either didn't know anything or wouldn't tell her. Finally, however, she made up her mind.

"Yes, Grace," said her Excellency into her desk comm.

"On that matter for the Mens Super?"

"Bugs. I was speaking to Harold about it."

"Well, I did find a few things, but what I really needed was to see if the Ministry of Intelligence had more. It was a long-shot, but I wanted to check. Using your own passcodes, I wasn't given clearance by the Ministry of Intelligence."

"Impossible. My passcodes? You've double-checked your work?"

"Sure did, five times at least. A whole lot of stuff has been taken down by somebody."

"Did you call the Secretary there?"

"His aide said there was nothing he could do for me, but I couldn't tell what he meant -- and he wasn't offering. I'm sorry, Ma'am. It's nothing, really, just research, but you did ask..."

"That's okay, Grace. Let me ring you back."

#

Madam Yve had any number of Ministries, Secretariats, Bureaus, and Departments within her government, the maze a legacy of disparate Irredentist forces at the turn of Empires compromising to forge the hegemony. People used the terms interchangeably, however, and even the titles of Minister, Secretary, Head, Chief, and others besides had acquired subtle shades of meaning. Moreover, a given Minister, Secretary, Head, etc., might herself employ a different usage, depending. None of these putatively exalted, titled persons, however, could lay claim to the singular title First Consul -- nor even to Second, since there was none.

One of Consul Yve's skills in governing was defanging opponents through plum appointments to her executive branch. There were those among the appointed officials whom Yve had brought in tow with her. There were those whom she had held over from the prior consulship. There were those whom she had merely suffered to appoint or even personally despised. But she carefully considered each, and each was calculated to strengthen her in some way.

Though all departments were equal, some were more so than others, and for reasons probably no one understood very well, the Ministry of Intelligence had increased in 'equalness' over a period of several First Consulships. Part of that significance derived from the attacks on the outliers -- a dozen planets lost over the sols, including several during Yve's tenure. Apart from the attacks and the secrets engendered thereby and stamped "restricted," Yve had had to rely on Intelligence for things she would rather have kept in Primus House proper. This was because Intelligence maintained control over all government data nodes, including Central, the original archive on Pydna -- from 5th Empire settlement days -- and still the consolidation point.

It was a given that no appointed Minister of Intelligence -- that is, no mere politician -- could possibly understand the inner workings of Intelligence. It was widely assumed, too, that no single person within Intelligence, no matter how long serving, could do so either -- its operations were too abstruse and its stored

intell too vast. Intelligence was a mysterious corner of the Irredente, and Yve had had neither the time nor the inclination to peer within. Too, the post had been given to a rival, Godwin, whom she had outmaneuvered to get the Consulship but whose family name had many engravings in Irredente civic and political life. The present namesake, patrician in bearing, emphatically pompous, could probably never hope, at his age, for another chance to gain the consulship, but he could Occupy a department office as well and as importantly as anyone in the Irredente.

"Restriction of that information is a temporary measure, Excellency," the Minister was saying on the comm. "I am assured by my, ah, people down here that your data node privileges will be restored as soon as we've properly filtered the incoming data," said Godwin. "It appears to be a general suspension of a wide range of information, so rather many things get flagged, I'm afraid."

"On whose orders, Mr. Secretary?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, Ma'am. My instructions on this one are coded, but I presume from someone on the Cabil, the Intelligence Committee, with authority to implement overrides -- any Member may, as you are aware, Ma'am, so long as Government has the final decision. I'm technically not... I would never withhold information from Her Excellency, but I know very little. I didn't make anything of this until you called."

"This is bureaucratic madness," First Consul Yve said. "I'm asking about bugs, for Vas's sake!"

"I believe, Ma'am, that it has more to do with defense." The Secretary's mannered, patrician speech carried a hint of condescension. "Bugs would of course have nothing to do with it. For some reason, they've been flagged, but surely obliquely, as sand in the net, one might say."

"Mr. Secretary," said Her Excellency. "His Holiness asked me personally to give his Mens Super a report on... bugs. Bugs, sir! I have now wasted a considerable amount of time that I don't have to waste on a request that should be routine. I can't possibly suggest to His Grace that Irredente data on bugs in the outliers is classified. For one thing, it would get out, and whatever it is that caused it to be classified will then be the subject of intense curiosity. The only thing I know of bugs is that Transport is yelling at the Admiralty about them."

"Indeed, Ma'am? That's very interesting news."

"Didn't you know as much?"

"I will look into it, Ma'am," Godwin drawled.

"This is insanity. Bugs. Bugs! What in Vas's name could possibly matter less to us right now?"

"Do you wish me to try to answer that within my department, Ma'am?"

"No! Oh for Vas's sake, forget it. I will write His Holiness a note and put him off. Mr. Godwin?"

"Yes, Ma'am?"

Yve spoke very deliberately. "Will you please ask someone from the senior ranks of your permanent staff to get with my private secretary, Grace, on this?"

"Yes, Ma'am, as you wish."

"And Mr. Godwin?"

"Ma'am?"

"I want this resolved without my having to do it personally."

"That is understood, Ma'am. I hold a similar view, as it happens. Bugs not in my line, you know. Reports, that sort of thing -- very tiresome."

Chapter eleven.

Ship's Boys

The re-emergence of the Mercians in the latter part of the 6th Empire arose from an unusual concatenation of events -- indeed, of highly tenuous, unlikely events. It cannot have been the hand of Vas, whose Plan we know and whose intentions were clear. It is generally agreed that an enemy directed these events, even if the participants were not aware of it.

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#

Henryk soon enough faced a difficulty that his uncle had foreseen. Henryk had gotten a glimmering of class divisions on the ship -- not merely the divide between officers and everyone else, but also between lowerdeckmen and upperdeckmen, a divide expressed in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Among ship's boys, manners of speech varied. Rache, Henryk understood, with her odd burr and upward inflections, was neither lower or upperdeck, but some extra-ship category akin to Madame Grissaud. In comparing his habits to Serena and Vil's, he was conscious that his Edom upbringing had been coarse. He felt that he was more of a curiosity to them than a true friend. It also crossed his mind that being a Burgred might have something to do with his being tolerated. Still, Henryk, Serena, and Vil were the youngest of the ship's boys and were perhaps less conscious of such considerations as were ship's boys generally. It was, indeed, with the oldest of the boys that problems arose.

Jader, Peris, and Cam served as a roving triumvirate of terror when proctors were absent or when the three could catch ship's boys alone elsewhere on the ship. Henryk largely got a pass during his first weeks, partly from being very young, but partly also from his somewhat confused detachment and aloofness. As Henryk spent more time among the boys, however -- and indeed as others came to like the unassuming boy who seemed to accept anyone -- Henryk stumbled into the triumvirate's crosshairs.

Peris was distinctly lowerdeck whereas Jader and Cam were upper. They rallied together, however, in their mutual love of superiority and punishment. Peris the lowerdeckman assumed the role of enforcer, most often a step or two back with fists clenched, whenever Jadis and Cam taunted an innocent with made-up infractions. It was typical bullying, with none of the cleverness of practical joking.

By some magic known only to the mystes, the triumvirate innately followed the bullying pattern of building slowly, inexorably, and excruciatingly to all-out assault. First, they noticed Henryk but indicated to him with certain gestures that he was beneath contempt. Then one of them would come across Henryk at some moment of weakness -- he'd be lost in a hall or alone in a necessary -- and mark him by so many looks or glances with a figurative "x" on the back. Then they would feign hiding a snigger when they encountered him, or if they saw him in company would taunt his companion about being with Henryk. Henryk didn't actually understand any of this at first -- the meaning or intent. Understanding came when the triumvirate went after Rache and Henryk saw her blush and retaliate, which didn't seem very successful. Soon enough, Henryk understood the game. When the triumvirate knew that he knew, they came after him in force. Henryk in turn began the victim's familiar tack of trying to avoid any encounter, which stood no chance of succeeding.

Thus began the slow burn to the inexorable violent conclusion.

Andromache was set to dock at an orbiting extra-planetary base then jump with a revised crew list to new cruising grounds. During the week or two in dock, while repairs were being made and supplies getting laid in, ship's crew would be on rotation for planet-side leave on Acacia. Acacia was a lightly settled farm world with large, attractive tracts of park. The seas held some basic forms of life but were unsuitable for most human

interests and activities. There were hunting leases on the lands, which were stocked with game from other planets. Hunting was expensive. Any ship's company who might be interested would of necessity be well-to-do. A few of these partook. Most officers and crew on leave stayed in the cities and towns and rented vehicles for sightseeing the planet. The historic pattern of debauchery on the part of naval crew on leave was fairly strictly observed. The Acacians -- many of them former spacemen -- processed the debauching efficiently and extracted a lot of chits. The spacemen, for their part, rarely fell into serious harm. All in all, a good bargain.

Boys' Quarters buzzed with the excitement of a supervised three-day stay on Acacia. An old woman somehow connected to the service ran a hostel with board where any youngsters from ship-side could stay. The captain had ordered it, and the Proctors organized it.

The base station, a simple cylindrical affair, was interesting but ultimately just a variation on Andromache herself. The base had more observation decks, slightly better food, and a different shape, but a couple days' worth of sorties into the station, with the boys returning to Andromache to sleep, had pretty much exhausted the boys' interest. Too, in knowing what lay ahead, even the fast-and-loose things that a ship-bound sailor in deep space would appreciate about a base station could offer scant attraction to the youngsters. The proctors sensed the boys' boredom and readied their arrangements for the stay on Acacia as quickly as they could. They themselves were more than ready to go down, even if most of their time would be spent working with the boys.

Henryk's excitement came from understanding that everyone else was excited. He didn't quite get what was to happen -- he formed an idea of staying in a house that was a larger version of the Bird & Baby and playing in the streets with the ship's boys, though at some level he understood that this made very little sense and wasn't altogether much to get excited about. At wake-up on the day when they were to set out from the base station's transport dock, Rache sensed Henryk's confusion and helped him pack his kit. She knew the things he used and the things he tended to forget. Proctor Demain checked in once, and realizing that Rache had already prepared all her own things and was helping Henryk, moved on to other things.

Henryk followed Rache and her friend, Daphnis, en route to the base station, with Serena and Vil, giggling and cutting up, behind them. Once at the dock, the proctors took charge and directed everyone. The slab sides of the dock area echoed and amplified the boys' voices into a din. Some among the transport grounds crew smiled benevolently; others scowled and wanted the children off and away.

Henryk's eyes feasted on the landers, perfect, gleaming, diamond-steel teardrops with faintly visible alloy ribs forming a sub-structure within. The wide, mouth-like rear exhaust port blended and curved gracefully into the underside of the tail. The articulations for doors, hatches, and extending gear were nearly undetectable from outside. A horizontal gangway, to which the boys would have to ascend via stairs appended to a wall-side ledge, ran, bridge-like, into one rather small oval opening. As he beheld it, Henryk wanted nothing more in life than to pilot such craft. He fidgeted with excitement.

"Settle down, kid," said Daphnis, rolling her eyes and seeking confirmation from Rache.

"He's just eight, Daph," she said.

"I know, Rache, but everyone's looking at us."

Rache covertly scanned the group. Daphnis exaggerated, but Rache did catch sight of Peris watching Henryk. Henryk, however, was oblivious.

"Let 'em look, Daph. I've never seen him so happy, like," Rache said.

Henryk's excitement only increased as the boys were directed into the lander and strapped in, deck by deck, at

the waist of the small ship. He and other young boys among the ship's boys established a new, reliable means of communication by wink, nod, laugh, and grunt, which was to last for the duration of the several-hour trip. The lander entered orbit before descending, and this gave the lander's crew time to warn the passengers of the violence of entry. In the event, apprehension was worse than the experience, but Henryk was suitably scared, as were others.

The trip on the lander for the first time gave Henryk a better connection to the core group of younger boys -- actual boys -- among ship's boys. Rache noticed this as this younger group ambled together at the spaceport, Henryk in company and oblivious, seemingly, to Rache. Serena instinctively latched onto Rache and Daphnis, and the camps basically formed into male and female. Rache had been planetside many times and was therefore free to stoke her own fires of jealousy. Henryk thought of nothing but keeping up with the others in his group, trying not to embarrass himself, and in general behaving appropriately for his age. As the camps formed up for the drive into Freeport (one of the countless towns descriptively so named across the Irredente), Rache smiled and waved to Henryk, who blushed and looked at his feet for a moment before getting distracted with some silly thing that another boy was saying. Her face warmed, and she turned pointedly away from the younger children to talk to Daphnis.

The sun shone spangles that day on Acacia, a welcome respite from the cold darkness of space and the ship in which they had been confined. The world was theirs.

Chapter twelve.

Leaks

The Irredentist forces that coalesced following the fall of Gaetia Unum performed remarkable feats of reverse-engineering, building a new society from the ground up on a foundation of 'rectified' mechanical and technical practices. They would have it that there was no ghost in the machine other than the silent hand of Vas. Silent, yes; Vas, no.

The Commentaries

#

Committee Liaison Liev pulled Cabil Member Galinda from a briefing room before the briefing proper began. They stood in one of the grand hallways of Cabil Hall. The empaneled arcade ceiling was slit through with a thick pane of diamond. The Cabil Member's shoulder glowed in a bar of sunlight whose motes seemed to die into him; his countenance, however, lay in shadow.

"Things have leaked," grey Liev said to Galinda. "The Edom business. The Palace and Government are both looking into things."

"How?" the older, pale man with the shaggy brows said. "You and I are the only ones who have seen the report other than the duty agent. Did you order a lunch for the briefing?"

"Yes, Sir, buir-ribs. The amanuensis of the First Consul is looking for Edom-related data, and we have it from Minister of Intelligence Godwin that the office of His Holiness put out the feeler first."

"This is very unfortunate. We need more time. The datachat that came in the packet still isn't decoded? It's not compromised, is it?"

"No, but in any event, it's not clear what Government or the Palace know yet," said Liev. "They're all asking about just the armadillia, which is an odd, indirect way of going after it and which really doesn't amount to much. Word has gotten around from Transport. That's news here in the old core, but not in the outliers."

"Armadillia -- bugs," Galinda said. "That's the least of my worries. How in Vas's name did that get roped in?"

"I'm still working on that, but they appear in several ways. There was a high concentration in Edom -- especially in the capital where the naval officers who encountered the agent -- this is the auto-mutilant -- were when the planet came under attack. There's also a connection to the thing picked up by the boy, the urchin, that's mentioned in the report. The weapon."

"I don't recall any connection."

"Well, a few hundred persons made it off Edom. The boy was one. My interpretation of the data is that the boy was given the weapon by the... by him, the thing or agent or whatever... that worked the same way as the cannon we found at Jukarno. This is the 'neural trigger' that no one can make work."

Galinda's eyebrow shot up. "That is an interesting connection. We gave up on that long ago."

"Yes, sir. The conclusion was that some parts must have gone missing, which is why the project stalled. Then it all gets very speculative. There is an old report that the autocompiler has included in this file -- this goes back several standards -- that a biologist on an outlier wrote that the only way to eradicate the bugs -- this is

the armadillia again -- would be to rig up some kind of trigger that was wired or signaled -- I'm sorry, sir, I don't understand the details --- it has to do with shooting the things before they sense you know they're present. Shooting before you're really conscious of doing so."

"You mean the bugs?"

"Shooting the bugs, sir. They sense threats and run. They're too fast for any regular weapon short of a site blast, which of course is impractical in most situations. Especially since they don't seem to actually do much of anything."

"Except in Transport ships, Liev?"

"Maybe. That's what the Transport people are saying, anyway. I must say that what they're saying sounds very unlikely to me."

"So we have our Edom agent from somewhere -- we have to assume from the Beyond -- on Edom, who has a weapon -- more than one, for all we know -- and gave it to a street urchin..."

"Ahem!" said Liev. Both men straightened up as a Cabil Member from a Quadrant II planet came out of the briefing room.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said. He headed for a necessary room down the hall, his footfalls echoing as he went.

"An urchin who 'happened', Sir, to be a nephew of one of the officers."

"Indeed? I had missed that."

"Burgreds, sir. Plum Grove."

"By Vas, this gets more interesting all the time. I thought he was an orphan or something. Well, a detail to bear in mind. So this boy gets a highly illegal, obviously alien device -- a weapon, no less -- and does what with it? Oh, I see. Here's where the bugs come in. He's trying to shoot shoot the things, which no one can unless they have a... Surely that's coincidental. You said that this would be the only way to... Liev! That street rat may have what we've been looking for. Does the Minister, Godwin, does he know what you know?"

Liev looked blankly at Sir. "I shouldn't think so, Sir, since I don't know what I know, and therefore he's even less likely to. I'm afraid I haven't followed you."

"Hah! Even better. Liev, I've got a job for you. How would you like to go into field work?"

Liev looked stricken.

"Don't look so glum, Liev. There's another step in it for you, I assure you. Possibly even an estate. Look sharp, Liev. And get that datachat decoded."

The Cabil Member who had gone down the hall returned. Galinda, all smiles, patted him on the shoulder. "Esteemed friend," he said, "let's get briefed and murder a buir."

#

The Cabil Member sat this morning in his burgundy, brass-tacked, hide-covered wing chair, resigned to taking meeting after meeting. Beside him sat a superb, copious coffee service on linen, resting upon an ornate

serving cart. A gentle rain deepened the tones of the foliage on the observation deck. The C.M. idly plucked a myre-scented crescent roll and bit off one end as he waited for the next visitor.

The thick, carved door of his office opened.

"Sir, Captain Melchior has arrived."

"Show him in," Galinda said. "Captain, welcome."

"Esteemed Member," the corpulent officer said. Melchior came from a well-regarded, landed family of military officers of various kinds. It was said that the Melchiors had come up from indenture by dint of steady, loyal service in arms.

"Please sit. I appreciate your coming. I understand that your stay on Pydna is longer than you would like."

"Meteor has good bones, sir, but some of her joints are a bit stiff. Short handed, too -- nary a crewman to be found."

"These are common problems, I fear, and ones I would rectify for you if I could," the C.M. said. "Government doesn't understand these things the way you and I do."

"Sir."

"You know," continued the C.M., "your father was a good man, captain. 'I knew him when,' as they say."

"Thank you, sir. I have tried to follow in his footsteps, difficult though that may be."

"And tremendously loyal, I might add. The Cabil -- the voice of the people, captain -- rewards loyalty, especially in the military branches. How long have you had Meteor, captain?"

"Six standards, Member. I was given her when captain -- my father died."

"Who was Admiralty at that time?"

"Lady Arlette, sir, in her first sol."

"Of course. A quiet time, as I reflect."

"There were no problems in the Outliers, if that's what you're referring to, sir -- the first one, the first attack, was just after I made post."

"We're in no quiet time now, captain."

"No, sir. Edom, sir."

"The Irredente will have dire need of its best, I suspect. Because I am based here on Pydna, I see things first-hand that my fellow Members may not. There are rumblings. We sit idly here, ordering retreats or feints, not trying the enemy."

"I am not privy to Admiralty's thinking, sir."

"Quite true -- a black box, isn't it? Government, no better. You may trust me in this, however. The loss of these

outlying worlds goes hard on us here. Our populations ask legitimate questions. The Cabil represents those voices. How many more will we lose?"

"I believe that the Navy has acted in an exemplary fashion, sir."

"I don't doubt it for a second, captain. Indeed, where you are concerned, perhaps more so, am I right, captain?"

The burly man blushed scarlet.

"Just so, captain. I have seen your reports. In fact, I believe your talents are wasted on these little raids and expeditions. Code enforcement and Guild protection runs are one thing; preservation of the Holy dominions another. That, sir, is my charge. In coming days and sols, those who cannot protect us shall be swept away by the will of Vas. In hastening such, we enact that will. Do I make myself clear, captain."

"Very clear, sir."

"You are a perspicacious man, captain. I hope that one day soon you shall hoist your own pennant, and that it shall blaze azure."

"Esteemed Member, I am grate..."

"Gratitude I do not seek, captain. Loyalty, sir. Loyalty is rewarded. Good day, captain, and may Vas speed you."

Melchior stiffened in obeisance. "Thank you, sir."

Thus dismissed, the captain of Meteor stood, saluted, and exited. The functionary looked in again.

"Who's next?" the Cabil Member said.

Chapter thirteen.

Ladies

The Church in the Irredente hegemony made fine, highly suspect, distinctions that became enshrined as sacred doctrine and behavioral proscription. The 'body' as encoded was sacred, yet the priests -- the 'voces' or 'voices' in parlance -- were eunuched without anesthesia. Buggery was outlawed, yet women of the parallel transgressivity attained high status, often in the military services. Societies marred by cognitive dissonances of these sorts create a staggering volume of pain and cruelty, measurable in life upon suffering life, that no empathic principle of creation could endorse.

The Commentaries

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Her Excellency Yve lunched with the First Lady Arlette of the Admiralty regularly at one or the other security-approved restaurants in the City. There would be murmurs and glances, but jaded patrons, accustomed to the comings and goings of the powerful around Os Divinus, would feign disinterest.

Portira was a specifically Navy eatery of the better sort. First Consul Yve liked it precisely for its age-old connection to the services. Newly-minted admirals regularly held table there. On the walls were portraits of old, outmoded ships of the type made into museums planetside and theme parks and watering holes space-side. Portira served the most rarified -- and often abstruse -- versions of ship's fare, using the fanciful names of ship's dishes as a springboard for elaborate gastronomical effects. In fact, there was little similarity between the restaurant's version and the real, ship-board version, but it was a clever and effective tack for catering to the restaurant's clientele. Many a newly-minted lieutenant or captain had been feted there as a matter of course in a sort of quasi-official anointing, and none ever forgot the details of their own pageant.

Arlette had rarely been noticed at Portira prior to ascending to the Ladyship, being permanent staff. First Lords and Ladies of the Admiralty came by their tours of duty on recommendation by the Cabil to the First Consul. They usually, though not without exception, held at least post rank themselves, sometimes through active service, sometimes through management within Admiralty itself. Lady Arlette, however, had done neither of these things. She had run admiralty from the shadows under the former First Lord, whose tour of duty had really been an honorarium. When First Consul Yve ascended, First Consul Yve made it known that she wished for those in the shadows, in Admiralty and elsewhere, to be recognized for their merit. This had made for some difficulties, as those who ascended through talent did not always have natural constituencies. Arlette had family -- her father a naval captain, uncles in the clergy -- but these had provided her remarkably little in the way of useful political connections. Her predecessor, quite useless as a First Lord in other respects, had had that, at all events. It would not even be fair to say that Arlette and Yve were friends. Arlette seemingly had few, and none at the highest levels of government. Arlette's managerial effectiveness strongly recommended her, and her known religiosity had given Yve additional cover. Yve saw no downside to a highly respected manager at Admiralty who was also known to be devout.

Today, Her Excellency wore a simple shift in shimmery ruudsilk set off with a platinum tau-and-lambda pendant. Her thick hair was swept up, with strands of grey interleaved gracefully. Lady Arlette, thin, freckled, and small-breasted, with a famously small but perfect nose, wore a completely anonymous, rumpled suit. On occasions of state, she might appear in splendid costume, and her fine, parchment-skin beauty was famous. Out of costume, however, she could often pass through the city unrecognized, an advantage where every naval officer at home port sought her out for news on their prospects. At Portira, of course, she could not pass unnoticed any more than Consul Yve. The pair had a private banquette, set off from the mass of tables, that afforded excellent views of the restaurant in its entirety.

"How is Consort Leah?" asked her Excellency.

"She is well, thank you. Her son was made post to Rhinegold, a small frigate. A perfectly acceptable first command."

"She -- both of you -- must be very proud."

"I believe him pious, which is a necessary complement to the other skills required of an officer. I recused myself from the matter, of course -- I won't have favoritism in the service -- but I believe that is the general feeling among the senior admirals. And you, Excellency? I hope you are well, and Consort Harold?"

Yve cleared her throat. "Well enough. Concerned. The Consort has been out of sorts, probably reflecting my temper. It goes hard on everyone in Government to lose territories, outliers. We've been safe and secure for so long. Waiter, the wine list."

"You would not suggest that it is Admiralty's fault? Tea for me, waiter."

"Indeed not, Lady Arlette. Please don't read subtleties into what I say. I am as proud of the Navy as anyone. I still think of them as 'my' people. The fault, if there is any, is in ourselves -- we who make up government at the highest levels. The Irredente is geared up -- perhaps not the right phrase -- for stability and insularity. It has never dealt with a significant external threat. Pirates, trade disputes, epidemic, planet-holder warfare..."

"You count this new threat as significant?"

"Only because it is entirely unknown. The intelligence is shamefully sparse on who these people -- who the enemy is. My people have asked Intelligence to scour the archives for early- and pre-Irredente information -- trying to understand where some of those... people, for lack of a better word, went and why they might seek to come back. Vas, those creatures took a lot of valuable tech knowledge with them."

"But that was so long ago. Why should they choose now to come back here?" said the Lady Arlette. "And why raze our outer worlds? There's nothing to be gained by it. No, Consul Yve, I don't see it. Admiralty is of the opinion that this is a new threat. We've even considered the possibility that they're doing this unintentionally or under some misapprehension. There's no discernible pattern to the attacks. They seem to be... cleaning house."

"Our house, unfortunately," said Yve. "They haven't come into the inner Quadrants, which is consistent with what you suggest -- they couldn't possibly mistake the core worlds for anything but ours. Have you developed more specific models or projections?"

"I cannot say. Perhaps the Secretary -- the Minister I should say, Mr. Minister Godwin, can -- he has the Intell people working on this, I understand."

"Thank you, waiter," said Consul Yve. "Hmm, let's see..." As she held up the wine list, a flash of gold epaulette caught her eye. "Goodness, it's Melchior. Vas, he's gotten fat..."

Arlette turned slightly to confirm whom Yve meant. "Captain Melchior is a friend of yours, Consul?"

"I like to think so -- but then it's been a long time. We were sprats together -- Ship's Boys, I mean -- on Andromache. Later, we got our commissions in the same standard." As she watched him over near the entrance with two other senior captains she did not immediately recognize, he turned and saw her. Rather than the smile she expected to see, he gave her a quizzical, almost troubled look, then turned back to his companions to bow in brief apology. They craned to look at her and appeared surprised. Melchior crossed the

restaurant.

The Consul anticipated his coming by lifting her wrist to a functionary. "Allow Captain Melchior to pass."

"Excellency," he said when he appeared at the banquette. He made no effort to grasp her forearm. A custom glove of gleaming hide concealed the missing two digits from a gnarled left hand.

"Captain," Yve said, "this is a most pleasant surprise. Allow me to... "

The captain dipped his head, then did a double take. "Lady Arlette, I am humbly sorry not to have recognized you. You were turned..."

Lady Arlette held up a hand. "Go on, captain. Say what you have to say. I understand you and Madame Consul know one another. Carry on, Sir."

He puffed up his chest, perhaps to gather his wits. "Excellency, and... Ladyship, I had not understood that there were to be loyalty oaths taken anew. Has government..."

"Sir?" said the Consul. "I'm afraid I don't understand what you're referring to."

"I have it from Member Galinda that an affirmation is required..." he began. As he saw the look of incomprehension on the First Consul's face, he knew he had made a serious error, both in judgment and in logic -- and perhaps in discretion. "You... I assumed..."

Yve was entirely composed. "Lady," she said. "Do you have any notion of what Captain Melchior here is trying to say?"

Lady Arlette gazed placidly at the floundering specimen. "I would say he is a sailor planetside, a fish out of water, Madam." Arlette continued perusing the menu.

Melchior's face flushed scarlet. "Excellency, and Lady" he said. "I am sorry if I have... I appear to have..." He looked down at his shoes. "I am extremely sorry, eminences. I seem to have blundered into..."

"Melchior," Consul Yve said. "Tact was never your strong suit. I'm sure I have no idea what has troubled you such that you should accost me in the way you have done. You presume much on our friendship, and I suspect that you have not impressed Admiralty much."

Beads formed on Melchior's forehead.

"And well you should. You are one of the bravest, finest officers in our fleet, and one to whom I shall forever be grateful and whose friendship I value highly. Now will you please go to that tall, striking young woman sitting over there and -- without blushing in this manner in her rather impressive presence -- arrange to come to my apartments at the House as soon as is convenient? All shall be well, captain. I look forward to speaking with you again."

"What was that about?" Yve said to Arlette when Melchior had gone. "Are you having loyalty problems over there, Lady?"

The Lady Arlette did not answer immediately. "I would not have thought so," she finally said distractedly. "Perhaps Mr. Galinda..."

The First Consul blushed for the indiscretion of her peer. "Let's order lunch, shall we, Lady? The fish is

always excellent. Grilled, I should think."

Chapter fourteen.*Judgment*

Fn 3 Genovariants adjudged substandard were transported sub-light, as cargo, to Lindenau. The outcast cleric and Chronicles reporter Hyrgyd of Anglesea has in his notes that a traveler, identity undisclosed, at the end of the 6th Empire reported that all that remained on Lindenau was a central charnelhouse, which was still stood sentry by semi-sentients, and -- by report and rumor -- genovariants in the equatorial wild which [sic] had somehow managed to reproduce.

Commentaries

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Transcript of Proceedings

Captain Xenoetas: Secretary, read the summary.

Secretary Lerner: Being that Ship's Boy, most junior, Henryk of Edom did maliciously and with intent to cause grievous injury accost Ship's Boy, senior class, Peris of Lystercium, and did thereby cause Peris to suffer grievous injury, to wit, open fracture of the tibia bone with associated trauma and shock. Mr. Peris is at base station Magritte until he can be transferred back onto Andromache.

Captain: Thank you, Lerner. Mr. Burgred, you asked to be the infracting boy's stand-in. That request is hereby granted, Sir. Have you spoken with the boy, lieutenant?

Lt. Burgred: Ma'am, the boy will not speak to anyone, including me. I have, however, spoken with ship's boys who were with him -- his friends, Ma'am -- and believe I understand what occurred.

Captain: Go ahead, Sir.

Lt.: Ms. Rache, a ship's boy of ten or thereabouts, stated to me that Mr. Peris was harassing Henryk, and that Peris is a well-known bully among ship's boys. I gather, Ma'am, that Peris has two associates who were present but who don't seem to be directly involved in this particular matter other than being with Mr. Peris.

Captain: What form did the harassment take, lieutenant? Normally, mere harassment would not be a basis to excuse an assault. You know as well as anyone, sir, the kind of pranksterism that goes on in boys' quarters, to say nothing of the midshipman's ward.

Lt.: That is true, Ma'am. I believe that the situation here is one in which the junior boy did not intend any more harm than he himself had received, thereby negating assault as a proper charge against the boy, against Henryk, or at least mitigating it. Young Ms. Rache has informed me that on the first morning in Freeport, as the boys were being chaperoned by the Proctors, Peris and his crew decided to make Henryk their victim. I understand that they basically tormented the boy -- several sols their junior and extremely naive in the ways of the service, as they well knew -- by taunts, insults, and, finally, by following him and tripping him up on the pavement in a street in Freeport. I understand that many of the insults went to Ms. Rache but that the boys -- or Peris, at any rate -- focused the physical behavior upon Henryk.

Captain: Did Ship's Boy Rache herself take action?

Lt.: None, Ma'am, except to steady Henryk as the older boy tripped him from behind.

Captain: Did Ms. Rache ask Ship's Boy Henryk to act on her behalf?

Lt.: No, sir, there is no indication of that.

Captain: What is the basis for the younger boy's acts, then, Mr. Burgred?

Lt.: I believe it was an accident, Ma'am.

Captain: Sir?

Lt.: Ma'am, the older boy's leg is broken in two. No child of Henryk's age and stature could accomplish such a thing. Henryk, the Captain will recall, uses a standard-issue juvenile mech leg that he received when he first came on board some months ago. I believe, Ma'am, that the boy has no experience with violence and did not understand what the leg would do if let loose -- the boy must have been enraged. The Proctors will confirm -- have confirmed in their report -- that Henryk is an unusually quiet, docile child and that this is entirely out of character. I myself can confirm that, Ma'am. I believe that he could not possibly form an intent to cause such injury. Ms. Rache reports that Henryk cried the entire time after the incident, once he saw what had happened to Ship's Boy Peris. That suggests that he did not know what he was doing and, once he realized, was horrified at what he had done. Ma'am, the boy is about eight standards old and only recently began acquiring competence in literacy.

Captain: Lerner, incident reports on Ship's Boy Peris?

Lerner: [coughs].

Captain: I see. His stature?

Lerner: Er... ah... a large... thirteen standards, Ma'am.

Captain: This would be Asst. Engineer Padraig's boy?

Lt.: [untranslated exclamation].

Lerner: That is correct, Ma'am.

Captain: Okay, gentleman. I will go over all this with the Proctors later. Barring any misinformation, I have made my decision. Ship's Most Junior Boy Henryk of Plum Grove...

Lerner: [coughs].

Captain: Henryk of Edom, I should say, is found guilty of... behavior unbefitting a... ship's boy. He shall be assigned until further notice to A.E. Padraig as an engineering helper while retaining his status as Ship's Boy barring further misbehavior, in which event he shall be expelled from the service. The proctors will be directed to come up with a plan for his education that combines the usual boys' programme with engineering wing menial labor. He shall, therefore, have double duty to keep him -- and that nice mech leg of his -- busy and out of trouble.

Lt.: Captain, Ma'am... Padraig...

Captain: lieutenant! I urge you to be extremely careful with what you say here, Sir.

Lt.: But Padraig is the bully's... the older boy's father, Ma'am. You can't expect him to...

Captain: I expect, Sir, for him, and for you, to do your duty to me and my ship. Lerner, we are finished here. Write it up and make it so.

#

Burgred slammed his fist on the pad to open the door to his quarters. Hanna and Henryk, sitting together on the short, stiff sofa but each alone in thought, looked up, fearful. Hanna's eyes questioned Burgred.

"It's not good, but it might have gone worse. Henryk, you're still a Ship's Boy, but you may not want to be. You'll move out of boys' quarters and into some sort of bunk down in engineering. In the lower decks, Henryk. You're now a lowerdeckman in all but name. There's no shame in that -- many of us have seen lower deck rotations as punishment -- but the captain has seen fit to punish me by punishing you." Burgred and Hanna exchanged looks. "But there's something else you need to know, Henryk. Well, two things. The first is that you'll have to pull double-duty as ship's boy and an engineering grunt. I have no idea how the proctors will do that but that's what they're going to do. You're going to be a busy fellow, at least until we can get all this worked through somehow -- and believe me, we will. But Henryk, you're going to be under a Mr. Padraig. That's the... he is the... father of the boy, Peris, you hurt. You'll... work for him."

Henryk looked beseechingly at Burgred. "But he'll be really mad at me! I don't want to go there!"

Burgred blew out. "It's too late for that. I pulled his info up on my comm on the way back here from the hearing, from seeing the captain. I don't know him except to see him. Typical engineering crewman." Hanna looked at Burgred reproachfully. "Well, Henryk... he could be rough. I don't think he'll beat you, but watch yourself, all the same, and do what the man tells you. I can't be seen to intervene... I can't... oh, shoot, how do I say this so that you'll understand? I can still talk to the Proctors about what you're doing for them, but I really can't get involved with engineering's people. You've got to be smart, Henryk. I can't come down there and watch out for you."

Hanna sighed. "Henryk?"

Henryk distractedly watched the porthole vid's view into space, his expression unreadable.

"Hey, Henryk? I told you, it wasn't your fault. It was a fight, and fights often end badly. You and Peris both learned that. Now you're going to have to learn some new things, okay? You'll still be on the ship, and we'll still be here, and you'll see us practically every day."

"Will I go to Linden... Linden... where the defective kids go to live?"

Hanna looked horrified. "Vas, is that what they said, Peris and his crew? Were they talking about Lindenau?"

"Uh-huh," Henryk replied. "That's where kids go when they're mutants, like with no legs."

Hanna and Burgred exchanged looks. Burgred looked murderous.

"That's just awful." Hanna said. "No, of course not, Henryk. You're not going anywhere, and certainly not to that... place. I can't believe those kids even know about it. And you're not 'defective,' Henryk, or a mutant. Don't believe a word those boys say. Burgred... Burgred?" Hanna looked at Burgred for support, but he had turned away.

"Will I see Assacia?" Henryk said. "I never got to see it -- because of the fight."

Burgred spoke without turning. "No, Henryk," he said firmly. "You won't be going back to Acacia. Not now,

maybe never. You'll be on board Andromache until this blows over. You'll be lucky to get planetside leave again at all."

Henryk looked at the floor. "Does Peris get to go to Acacia?" he said.

Burgred now turned to look down at the boy. "That's no concern of yours," he said impatiently. "And he can get it from his mates if he doesn't. We're wasting time here. Let's get your things from Boy's Quarters and get you down to your new bunk. I've got to make the next watch."

Chapter fifteen.

Cryptology

The hidebound, moribund Office of Cryptology, within the Ministry of Intelligence, is a convenient lens for viewing how the Irredente, with its laws, proscriptions, and regulations, ultimately collapsed... Where once had been vigor, the stranglehold of technology restrictions led to a degeneration into standardized practices and then to institutionalized drudgery.

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Liev had directed that a courier hand-deliver the datachat, encased in an isolator box, to the Office of Cryptology. Minister Godwin had given Liev -- on Cabil Member Galinda's behalf -- free access to Government's cryptanalysis facilities. Liev, out of wariness, had so arranged it that all communication about the storage devices should be person-to-person, in secured rooms, with all comms disabled. He would have to travel out to Cryptology himself to get the results of the decoding work.

The cryptologists, by historical accident, were well outside of the Crater. One of the greatest linguists and cryptanalysts of the early Irredente, Gemain, had set up a drop-cube work station beyond the construction zone when the early cluster of government buildings was being erected within the crater. An apocryphal story told by the cryptology personnel had it that he did this to be on site during the work and thereby encode a secret within the Os Divinus building plan itself. No one had ever discovered any such secret, but seeking it on maps of the city was an amusing past-time for amateurs.

Gemain designed Cryptology himself and demanded that it be built not just outside the city proper, but around his original drop-cube. Thus did the center of Irredente cryptology, a large triangle with five inner, but smaller triangular buildings connected with still smaller triangular breezeways, remain outside the powerful capital city, isolated on a semi-arid plain off-limits to all other development, and -- as Gemain had fancifully ordained -- "dotted with slender, graceful myrrah; fragrant native heqweed; and dramatic crimson firebush." The old drop-cube within was referred to simply as "the crypt." In here was kept the first working ansible ever installed on Pydna after its terraforming, from the time of early settlement in the pre-Irredente era. How Gemain obtained it was never learned.

*As the Irredente solidified its grip over technology practices over the centuries, encryption and cryptology generally, as a *modus operandi* for official communications, became theosophically nettlesome, and thus the Cryptology office something of a backwater. Good cryptology required revision and improvement of the very kinds viewed with suspicion or even outlawed by the Irredente authorities. Such improvements as Cryptology got, it got only grudgingly, and only up to certain limits. The most important limit was that every code had to be ultimately breakable by Government.*

Liev, having been deposited by his driver, had been coded through the various gates and now sat, cross-legged, in the Office of the Director of Cryptology, an unusually thin, nearly bald man of indeterminable age in outmoded clothing and ancient external lenses. Liev, his typically ashen and official self, wore an overly crisp suit. The Director ambled in with a bunch of scrollers threatening to spill out of his arms.

"You must be Mr. Liev!" he said, tilting in his head down to peer over the top rim of his lenses. "Good morning to you. Let me just... there we are. Good day, sir." He held out a hand, which Liev deigned to shake feebly. "I hope you are well?"

"Well enough, Mr. Director. What about that datachat?"

The Director pointedly looked at Liev, again over the top rim of his lenses. "All business, eh Mr. Liev? Sigh. So be it. No stopping in government, isn't that what they say? Well well then, let's to it. You want the datachat then, do you? A most interesting assignment. I'm sorry, I can't help you. I mean, I can return them to you, but I can't give you anything."

"Excuse me? Director, I am empowered by the Cabil and approved by the Ministry of Intelligence to..."

"Mr. Liev, I am instructed by the Ministry, as well as His Holiness Auspex Saggatus X, Government in the form of Her Excellency First Consul Yve, the Code of Proscriptions, the Barbican Code and... well, my consort, who requires that I keep this post, to refrain from algorithmic code work at the pain of being brought up on charges of sedition. Not my consort -- bringing sedition charges -- you understand. But it amounts to the same thing, Mr. Liev -- I'm sure you understand, a man like you, eh?"

"Sedition, Director? Algorithmic, did you say?"

"Indeed, Mr. Liev."

"I'm not sure what you refer to, exactly."

"Mr. Liev, I refer to the specific prohibitions against the encryption techniques of the ancients -- the use of cellular automata to make or break codes -- encryption or decryption, that is. As I have no doubt you know already, Mr. Liev, such algorithmic science, as the Code calls it, is -- was -- the basis for both bioforming and manufacturing central processing cores. I am not even sure that I am allowed to discuss it -- even with you. It is not generally considered politic, that much is certain; and for all I know, it is illegal."

Liev cleared his throat. "Of course, Mr. Director. That goes without saying. Highly sensitive. And the datachat is... algorithmic?"

"Now that is an excellent question, Mr. Liev. Since neither you nor I may use -- let alone discuss, correct? -- such methods, it would be entirely improper for me to suggest to you that they definitively are encoded in such a manner. Nor would I be able to employ any means of making such a determination. I certainly don't know what's on your card, but I do know that it's data that I can't do anything with. It's either randomized noise intended to cover something else up, or maybe, just maybe, it's illegally coded information. Perhaps it's both. I have personally examined my analysts' reports as well as a raw feed from the chat. While I assure you, Mr. Liev, that I am not personally familiar with what cellular automata look like, if I were even remotely familiar with such things, I suspect that they would look something like the data on that card. But as I say, it's perhaps more likely that what you're seeing there is random noise. One thing is certain, and that's that the card is not empty."

"Would I be able to recognize these... cellular..."

"Automata?" the Director said. "Perhaps there is a shadow Government that knows all about them, Mr. Liev. Perhaps you are part of that. How could I know?"

Liev frowned. "I have already told you that I... I assure you that there's no such thing. And I am only asking hypothetically, of course."

The Director eyed Liev dubiously for a moment. "Hypothetically, Mr. Liev," he began, "were I a betting man -- as opposed to someone who computes the permutations in advance, you understand, which I find much more congenial to my credit situation -- I would bet that any well-executed illegal code based on algorithmic

science -- cellular automata, Mr. Liev -- would with some of our senses appear completely random."

"Some? Not all?"

"Well, Mr. Liev, there you have the mystery of the ages. What is truly random, and what is determined? Or are they both in a mixed-up state that we cannot disentangle? My ideal code, Mr. Liev -- what I lie awake dreaming I might one day see -- can only be decrypted with the key. No amount of computation less than the computation of the universe itself would suffice. Ah, wouldn't that be a thing of beauty, Mr. Liev?"

"Surely Vas could break the code, however," Liev said.

"Eh?" the Director said. "Vas? Well, perhaps. He certainly seems to have had a lot of computational power in his hands -- if he is a He, which who knows. But then again, perhaps there is a higher level of computation still, encompassing Vas and all the rest of it. The dominions of Man are just one spiral arm of one galaxy, Mr. Liev."

"Yet you think that there might be a way to..."

"See a pattern? As much so as out there, out in the stars, Mr. Liev. By all means, load up the datachat yourself -- in an isolated reader, you understand; you must quarantine data of uncertain provenance -- and take a look. You must begin with the binary form and work from there. Perhaps your eyes, or ears, or perhaps some other sense, will see what I have not. Were I a betting man, however -- which I am not, as I may have mentioned already -- I think I would look for the key first. Surely that is simpler than brute force computation?"

"But that assumes there is a key," said Liev. "What if it's just random noise?"

The Director smiled wanly. "Perhaps you should discuss that with your parish Vox, Mr. Liev. I suspect that his answer will be more satisfactory than any I could offer."

Liev appeared frustrated. "Where is the datachat now?"

"I thought you might ask, Mr. Liev. Here." The Director opened a desk drawer and pulled out the isolator box. "You need not exercise particular care, but a lev-car wreck on your way back to the Crater would not be advised -- if you can help it, that is."

"Did you make any copies?" Liev asked.

"Of course not, Mr. Liev," the Director said. "We never keep copies -- we would quickly be overwhelmed. We manage only a small data node from here, and we never dump to Central."

Liev took the isolator box. "Good day, Mr. Director."

"Good day to you, Mr. Liev. And good luck."

When Liev had gone, the Director put a finger to his lips in thought. He himself rose and made his way through a maze of halls to the Crypt. Within the cool, shadowy confines, in addition to Gemain's station ansible, was a single, old-fashioned terminal head, quite lonely and neglected in appearance, next to which lay a hydra of wires with varying kinds of connectors.

"Well, Milly," he said. "What are you doing now?" He pulled out a mini-scroller from his pocket and plugged it in to the old terminal head. Down the scroller's display, just slow enough for his vision to register figments

and chimerical forms, flowed a beautiful waterfall of dancing, interleaving tendrils, sometimes waning, sometimes waxing, but never steady, never the same. "Don't strain yourself, dear. Your old core cannot take it, I'm sure. What is that datachat trying to say, I wonder? I hope they haven't harmed you. If only you could talk. It's a good thing you're all alone here -- let's hope Mr. Liev has the good sense to quarantine that card. Then again, maybe not."

#

"Interesting, Liev," said Cabil Member Galinda, seated in his office just down from the crater rim. "Where is the card now?" Liev, the Intelligence Committee Liaison and, as of late, amateur cryptanalyst, stood before Galinda.

"Secure in the Ministry of Intelligence, Esteemed Member. I assumed you would wish so."

"I have no view on that, Liev. Your job is to find out what's on that card."

"But Cryptology said..."

"Mr. Liev, I'm relying on you in this. I need someone dependable in the sols to come, someone who can take care of things. Questions I don't need here, Liev. Answers. Answers is what I need."

"Of course, sir. It's just that..."

"Liev, come come. The Cabil makes the laws, does it not? And I am a member thereof -- indeed, perhaps I may say, the most influential member. The Cabil has need of good men in these times, Liev. Such men are rewarded, not punished. Laws come from men, Liev, not Vas. Vas directs us to what is good and to preserve the body, you may be sure, but it is we here who carry out his will. Through laws... and acts. The Cabil is responsible to Vas, Liev, and so you are responsible to Vas. The enemy is at our doorstep, and I -- and the Cabil -- are duty bound to stop them. The datachat, Liev, this is Vas's gift to us, a dispatch from the enemy camp. We must know the contents, Liev. See to that, and I believe I may safely assert that things will go well with you. Good day, sir, and may Vas speed you on this errand. May I suggest that you consider purchasing some insurance?"

"Sir?"

"The marine insurance business is beholden to the Ministry of Intelligence -- underwriting is a tricky business, and the more information the better. I suggest that you look into a policy of marine insurance."

Liev looked perplexed, but "Yes, sir," was all he could manage. The ways of the powerful still baffled him, even as he did their bidding.

#

A senior intelligence officer in the Ministry of Intelligence gave him an address in Port South, a Guild free-zone. The Guilds -- Trade and Transport the primary ones -- existed long before the Irredente, and except for personnel, they had changed little since the advent of the hegemony. Indeed, they could change but little -- the Code of Proscriptions made it exceedingly difficult to build anything but in-system vessels that did not rely upon jump-cores. However, to the extent that Trade and Transport managed to get by with a more-or-less fixed number of jump-cores and ships that could be refurbished around these cores, they made more from less. Transport controlled shipments, fares, and schedules; Trade controlled tariffs and fulfilled orders. Pirates were a fairly constant threat to the Guilds, but one held in check by Admiralty and quite accurately priced by the marine insurers.

The Guilds ran a shadow Irredente within the main: an interconnected web of ports and stations spread across the great Arm of Vas and, it was rumored, at least as far as the frontier itself, a somewhat arbitrary name for the great, somewhat irregular ring that might be drawn around the Irredente and its outliers. The Guilds ran their own affairs, by and large, and operated their own network of ansibles. The tacit understanding between Irredente and Guilds seemed to be that the Irredente would refrain from slaughtering Guild membership wholesale as had been the Irredentist forces' main tack as the hegemony was forming itself around the core worlds. The bargain seemed to hold, though no one would mistake a Guild port town for an Irredente Civile, and vice versa.

The Trading Guild's main cargo port on the southern hemisphere of Pydna lay about four hundred discants from Os Divinus and on the other side of the Faucium, the scar that nearly cleaved the planet in two. In the dim depths of the Faucium, where pressures prevented humans descending, there still existed native flora and fauna untouched during the 'forming but probably injured slightly by the occasional car or truck that plummeted from the sky during a crossing. It was rumored that auto-mutilants often chose the Faucium for their body's final demolument.

The port town that now surrounded the landing area proper was a riotous assortment of multi-level taverns and pubs jury-rigged from scrapped 'cubes, new 'cubes, plasteel, and the occasional flourish of a salvage diamond port window; plain-jane storage and warehousing structures; gleaming plasteel and diamond-glazed Guild office towers; ground-level shops and vendors of all types; and at various places the remnants, amazingly still vegetated and maintained, of preserve and parkland from the original settlement established by the early Irredente. In the town, these green patches served as gathering places for crewmen from far-flung worlds during the day and convenient trysting places at night. The skin trade plied its wares freely and raucously in Port South, which the Irredente kept its nose out of in deference to the Guild.

Liev, now without a driver, glided a small, nondescript car into a narrow lane of tradefronts above which were grimy apartment and flophouse windows, some open to the fummy air emanating from the nearby port grounds. He passed slowly, looking at the building markers, then spun back around to the nearest connecting street. There he found and paid a thuggish carman, who directed him straight upwards to the top of a building, where he found a 'protected' parking spot.

Re-entering the streets from a fire-escape stair, he attempted without overmuch success to appear natural as he strode back to the tradefront lane. A few persons turned to watch the grey bureaucrat in studied "natural" clothes but in the end didn't much care.

Above the shop he sought was a simply-lettered sign reading "Hoarson Marine & Cargo Insurance." He opened the old, ornamented wood door with a glass half-view. Inside was a collection of disparate, apparently aged office furnishings, along with scattered models and pictures of ships, old and new -- presumably the subject of Hoarson insurance policies. No one occupied the desk, though it appeared recently used -- a couple of scrollers with florid insurance seals; an empty, stained coffee cup; a desk-comm unit angled toward the empty chair.

Liev cleared his throat loudly toward the slightly-ajar door with frosted glass leading to some back room. Liev guessed that it was sad and ramshackle in the back, but when the door cracked open to reveal an old woman, stooped, looking somewhat balefully at the visitor, he saw that he was wrong: there was a back office, and it was grand and burnished.

"I'm here about the... um... insurance for... um... the... ahem... Ramwolf."

The woman simply looked downward then closed the door entirely. Liev heard her shuffle within. Vaguely, the rumble of a man's voice shook the frosted glass partition between the rooms.

A rather fat man with a grey-flecked, sparse, grey beard and an extra chin that rolled over his high-necked shirt stuck his head through the door.

"You've come about insurance?" he said.

"Yes," Liev answered.

"Didn't I get a comm about you -- you're from Os Divinus right?"

"That's correct."

"What's the shape of the Ramwolf's hull?"

"Triangular."

The man opened the door wide and entered the room. He was shorter than Liev and much broader of beam. He was rumped, unkempt, and offhand. Liev, feeling sullied, tried to seem imperious.

"I've come to buy insurance, and I understand that you are the man."

"Perhaps I am. The best of anything is always expensive."

"I've brought a card..."

"Put the card away. A man like you cannot offer me enough credits to insure you."

"What, then?"

"A man in my business runs many risks. Many kinds of perils can bring a ship down. What a man of business needs is friends, especially friends who... know the perils."

"I am empowered to..."

"Someone gives you power? That, friend, is no basis for doing business. Either you have the power or you don't. Do you?" The insurance man looked Liev directly in the eye.

"I act on the very highest authority," he said.

"Government or Council -- Cabil?" the man asked.

"Ca... I cannot divulge that."

"Uh-huh." The man sized Liev up. "In that case, maybe I can insure your ship, and maybe I can't. A lot depends on the information you provide to my underwriters."

"Who are your underwriters?" said Liev. "Never mind," he added quickly. "I have brought the only copy... the only information extant. It is on a datachat. It must be kept safe in addition to being decoded... er, read."

"This is no problem. I charge a high price, and I provide excellent service to my customers. Give me the card. Good. Come back in three days, same time, and we can discuss further the results of the underwriting."

"Is that it? Don't you... give me anything?"

"Is there anything you would want found with you?"

"No," Liev said. "I suppose you're right. But how do I know..."

"You don't. Good day to you. Three days, same time. And I'm sure you'll do your best too."

The man closed the inner office door without a glance back. Liev stood for a moment, feeling that something very important -- or very wrong -- had just occurred, and that his life would never be the same. He heard a sound, and looking up saw the old woman looking at him from a crack in the inner door.

"I was just leaving," he said.

When he rounded the corner from the quiet trading lane to the busier street above which sat his car, he felt as though all eyes were upon him. He looked down to avoid meeting anyone's gaze.

"Hi sugar," said a suggestive voice, surprising him. He looked up at a curious specimen -- whether male or female he could not tell -- whose copious amount of exposed skin shone gilt. The eyes, irises bright green, sat deep in a paint well of glittery blue trailing to a jot at the temples. The long, dark hair was piled up in luxurious ringlets. The garment was of large gold loops shaped into a tunic, underneath which was a form-fitting garment that blended seamlessly with the gilt skin surrounding it. The figure stood cocked, hand on hip, sinuous and bold.

"Well, don't just stand there staring. What'll it be?" the figure said.

Liev roughly pushed the figure out of the way and fled toward his car. He thought that the heavy gold cosmetics must have rubbed off on his arm, but when he examined his sleeve, there was nothing there.

#

"Welcome back, my friend," said the broad, thick insurance man. "And how go things in government? Is the insurance business still safe?"

"Very safe. I have made sure of it."

"That is a relief to me, friend. The more friends I have, the better my business goes. Such is the insurance trade. Now, to your little matter. There seems to be a small problem with the datachat you provided, which is simply that my outdated reader here couldn't seem to read anything from it. I have taken the liberty, in light of your urgent necessity for insurance coverage, of sending it by courier to my underwriters." Here, the man pointed to the sky. "They have much more sophisticated readers. I see your apprehension, sir, but set it aside; I shall return your card to you. Remember, I depend upon you just as you depend upon me. My underwriters will get your information from the card and send both their answer and the card back to me forthwith. Good day to you, sir."

For the second time, Liev made the trek back to his car, this time permitting no molestation of his person on his way.

#

"Mr. Liev, sir," chirped his desk comm. "A visitor to see you. Mr. Hoarson, sir, about the insurance."

Liev unconsciously looked around his spare, utilitarian office, feeling as if he should try to hide something away.

"Mr. Liev, sir?" chirped the comm again.

"Yes. Liev here. I'll come out."

Hoarson stood calmly near the section secretary's desk, holding a dark, brimmed hat and looking at nothing in particular. Liev came the short way down the hall, and Hoarson cheerfully extended a hand.

"Mr. Liev, sir, so very good to see you."

"Let's go to my office, Mr. Hoarson," Liev said. He spoke in a mannered, overly stiff fashion. "Thank you for coming. I failed to let my secretary know to expect you."

"No problem at all." Hoarson threw what Liev thought was a faintly conspiratorial smile to the secretary.

"Mr. Hoarson, I am very surprised to see you," said Liev after closing his office door behind them. "How did you know..."

"These are the things I am paid to do, Mr. Liev. It was important that I see you, so here I am. I have brought a gift to you."

As Liev sat at his desk, the visitor reached into a vest pocket and pulled out a small, sleek isolator box, which he placed on Liev's desk.

"Open," Hoarson said, at which the hinge popped free. "Voila, sir."

Liev felt relief that the card had been produced. "Good," he said. "What did you find?"

"No," Hoarson said.

"What do you mean, 'No,' sir?"

"Impossible. It is nothing, it is noise."

Liev abruptly stood. "Sir, you said you could..."

"I made no promises, and I cannot make miracles. You have been tricked. I am assured by the best people in the Irredente -- and without -- that this is nothing. It is data, yes, but noise. Someone once put data on this card, true, but someone -- someone else, maybe? -- made sure that whatever was there shall never be seen by human eyes. There is not enough computing power in the Irredente to discover a pattern in this card, sir. It is a fool's errand, if you will pardon the expression, sir." Then he thought to add something: "We cannot underwrite this policy, sir."

Liev considered all this. He considered where the datachat had come from, who had handled it. Did he miss something? Did the agent on Andromache tamper with it, or harm it in some way?

"Did you make a copy of the card, Mr. Hoarson?"

"I gave strict instructions as to the card, Mr. Liev. No copies. We of course sent the information with parenthetical encryption via ship's ansible to our people, you understand, so I cannot say that the data does not exist beyond the card. But it is of no moment. The card is nothing, the information is as nothing. My people have no reason to keep nothing. Why do you look troubled, sir?"

Liev's already grey face had fallen.

"B... but I didn't... you didn't say... "

"Talk to me, sir. What is troubling you?"

"You broadcast it! Anyone might capture it!"

"No sir. I tell you, we encrypted the packet with the best codes -- better even than... but let us not say more on that. It is but a nothing, Mr. Liev. I have done as you asked."

Liev slowly sank back into his chair and put his head in his hands. "I've got to think," he said, apparently to himself.

"Perhaps it is time that I go, Mr. Liev. I am sorry we could not do business. But I hope you know that you can call on me again -- that I shall make it my business to be available to you."

"Just go, Hoarson," Liev said. "Just go."

"As you wish, sir. Please remember our agreement. I have done as you asked."

Liev shook his head in his hands. Hoarson turned and left. At the end of the hall, he gave the pretty secretary a wink.

Liev thought to pray to Vas but didn't know how. He instead asked the universe itself to gather its forces and shroud the ansible transmission of the datachat in an infinite, confounding fog. He didn't trust the universe, however; it had done him few favors heretofore.

Chapter sixteen.

Rings & Gears

Henryk of Mercia appears first in E6-340.2 as a ship's boy on a naval war vessel, Andromache. The explosion of nearby Edom Ancien coincides with or perhaps heralds Henryk's arrival. It is often said that it is the light of that event which blinds us to the boy's true origins. Many believe that Henryk's appearance on the Andromache was ordained -- whether as punishment or reward, it is not ours to know.

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#

In the event, Burgred released Henryk to Proctor Nain at Boy's Quarters, at present largely deserted with most boys still on leave planetside. She indicated in so many gestures that she was responsible to transfer Henryk to his new quarters. She directed two other ship's boys then in quarters to go about their business and not worry about Henryk's, which went part way to easing the task at hand for Henryk. However, it also called attention to him, so in the end his cheeks burned anyway.

As they descended from level to level, Henryk's heart did likewise. Proctor Nain, a kind, quiet older woman who normally taught upper-level sciences and navigation to ship's boys and midshipmen, put a soft hand on his shoulder as they went. The personnel tubes became more utilitarian and worn as they descended. And as Henryk had noted before, the smell of busy humanity, machines, lubricants, and dirty socks increased to the point of assault.

Engineering occupied large portions of the several lower decks of the ship, the exception being the forward holds and the rear transport deck. In addition to ship's systems were fabrication workrooms, materials lock-downs, diagnostic centers, and various other mechanical-related work areas. Engineering also had its own shielded computer node, but that occupied a tiny, unremarkable, and non-obvious lock-down area. Somewhere in the labyrinth dwelled the jump core.

The Proctor got lost, and it required several re-tracings of steps and a couple of inquiries to busy-looking people in jumpsuits to get to the right place. She and Henryk finally stood before a closed hatch with a hall and room number and a small plaque reading "RINGS & GEARING."

"Hold up your wrist comm, Henryk," the Proctor said.

The hatch slid clear, revealing a fair-sized, ordered workroom with lots of metal and several machines whose unadorned, variegated forms reminded Henryk of his old playground back on Edom, which in turn caused him to look mechanically at his leg, though it was invisible under his pants.

A small, stocky man with a grease-smeared apron purposefully strode across the room then jerked his head toward them when he became aware of them. He continued on his trajectory, sat at a stool, and said loudly over his shoulder, " 'ang on."

Henryk's real leg shook and he fidgeted. Proctor Nain pulled him closer to her person.

"Alright then," he said, waving them toward him. "This 'Enry, then?"

The Proctor straightened Henryk before the man.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Henryk, sir. Reporting for duty on captain's orders."

"Name's Padraig, boy. That's what you call me, or Mr. Padraig if my mood ain't right. Ain't got nothing but a closet down here for ya. It'll serve, though. Put your things back there" -- here he gestured -- "and get you a smock from the hooks" -- he nodded a different direction -- "and wait until I tells ya. I didn't ask for nobody down here, but Captin says you're to work, so work i'tis. You the 'enry in the dust-up with my boy?"

Henryk cast his eyes down. "Yes, sir... Mr. Padraig."

The confirmation didn't change the man's expression or demeanor. "Get on about it, then. I'll figure something out when I finish this 'ere."

Henryk looked at the Proctor, who nodded to him to do as he was bid. "He goes back to lessons after next Feastday. He's to lunch with us then come back here at third watch."

"Then he'll be the watcher, 'cause I leave afore then. He'll be cleanin', I suppose."

The Proctor looked at Padraig reprovingly.

"Somethin' else, then, Ma'am?"

"No, Mr. Padraig." And with that, she left Henryk, slamming her hand on the hatch controller as she exited.

#

Woken by his comm for his first morning at work in the machine shop, Henryk thought for a moment that he was waking back in the storeroom at the Bird & Baby. Then the smell reminded him where he was. After quickly dressing and hitting the necessary, he stepped into the workroom as Padraig was slipping on a work apron. He expected the worst. He stood up straight and cleared his throat.

"'Ere, Henry. Rigged this one up to your size." He tossed Henryk a work apron whose straps had been clipped and re-joined with heavy staples. "Did yers eat yet?"

"No, sir, Mr. Padraig... sir."

"Canteen is up one level and end of the walk. You'll see 'em going to and fro up there. Git, now, and get me a coffee, no milk, a heap 'o sugar. I want it hot, boy."

"Yes, Sir." Henryk was, in fact, ravenous, as he always was of late when he awoke. He made his way to the canteen, where he was rather meanly elbowed aside by one rough hand with a "watch out there, kid," but then helped by an even rougher looking woman with a mean scar across her forehead. "Get you a tray, youngster. End of the canteen, down low. That way, if you're carrying things, you'll have it easier. You working down here, then?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Ha ha. Ma'am. That's a live one. Call me Tiff, youngster. 'Cause of all the tiffs and scrapes, you understand. Where are you working, son?"

"Mr. Padraig, Ma'am."

"Padraig? Ain't no one working with him, son. Are you sure?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Hmmm. That's interesting, that is. Now why would you be working down there, I wonder? Smart one, though, that Pdraig. Not so mean as he seems. But watch out -- a bit of a temper. You just keep yourself out of arm's reach."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Well, on your way then. Did you get you some of the jam in those little packets? Here. What?"

"Coffee, Ma'am?"

"Well aren't you the grown-up one then! Coffee's over there, the little spigot coming off the wall there. Be careful, it's hot. Say, now, what did you say your name was?"

"Henryk, Ma'am."

"Henryk! You! Why you're just a sprat! Why, I heard... well, never mind. I'll see you, Henryk. If you ever need anything, just look me up in Q.C. -- that's Quality Control. I'm just another deck up. Ask for Tiff -- that's not my real name, but everyone down here knows Tiff."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Well, it's not punishment, boy! You go on, then."

The next few days inaugurated the new routine, which for Henryk meant simply adjusting to yet another set of rules and people in charge. He had learned to do rather than to think, to obey rather than to ask. He didn't mind this really -- it was just another variety of living. He believed that this, too would probably end in some abrupt, unforeseeable way that would lead him to the next unfathomable regime of duties. For the moment, however, he did have certain anxieties, most of which centered around Pdraig.

Pdraig had as yet shown no sign of wanting revenge on Henryk. And the subject of Peris had not come up since their first meeting. Henryk saw evidence of the man's temper, especially in the rude mutterings and cursing he made to no one and everyone as he worked. But Henryk kept a watchful distance and, as Pdraig moved around, avoided being under foot.

People came and went during the day, usually bringing in or taking out parts or pieces. Pdraig conversed little with these people other than what was necessary to accomplish something that Henryk didn't understand. As Pdraig got accustomed to having Henryk during the first and second watches, he would send Henryk out on errands. Henryk thus quickly learned the pattern of the lower decks and their relation to the upper decks. For the first time, he saw fragments of the operating guts of the ship, places where things moved, propelled other things, pushed things around, pumped things. He connected things that he carried, cleaned, or ordered in bins with the integuments of Andromache herself, and so she assumed a living form that he had hitherto not appreciated. He discovered dark, seemingly lifeless places that nevertheless had purposes --- every part of the ship did. He found hiding places and, as he imagined them with some difficulty, places of magic and secrets. He learned the subtle art of dawdling in the interstices of his duties.

Henryk absorbed more taxonomy on ship life and ship's crew, and he soaked up more subtleties of deck level. Slang entered his consciousness and, increasingly, his speech. Returning to Boys' Quarters in these first days of his reassignment meant little, since at first most of the Ship's Boys were still on leave; then came a Feastday during which, for reasons unknown to him, he was idle and alone most of the day; and then back on duty schedule he was simply present for lessons, at which he could barely stay awake. But as he settled into the new routine, he understood well enough that he lived two separate, irreconcilable lives on the ship, and that the Henryk of the first two watches had to act differently than that of the next two. He learned the

arguably valuable skill of pitching his manner of speaking to the deck of his listener.

He learned to deal with his fatigue by nodding off for ten or fifteen minutes at a time in the early watches in whichever of his hiding places below seemed most likely to leave him undisturbed. A couple of times, he was rudely awakened by some crew member telling him to mind his business like quick or clear out or look to it, lad, but there didn't seem to be any consequences following such incidents so he assumed he was in the clear. These incidents may have benefitted him, since he developed a sense for hearing any disturbance as he lay napping, then popping himself upright and alert.

One day, however, he awoke in a small, dim hold from his usual quarter-hour cat-nap with that former buzzing in the back of his head. How long had it been going on? When he opened his eyes and sat up, Tiff was sitting across from him watching him. He started.

"Hey, kid, it's alright. I've done it meself."

"Sorry, Ma'am." He began to get up. "Tiff, Ma'am."

"Don't be afraid of 'ol Tiff. Come here, doll," she said. Henryk hung his head, uncertain. She slid over, gently tugged him down, and put an arm around him. "You're too young to be down here, belowdecks. I had a little brother when I was a sprat. He was just like you. Shy, but tough, you know?" Henryk sat in silence. She continued with her arm around him, lost in thought. She shook her head as though waking from a daydream. "Well then, run along, Henryk. This will be our little secret, okay?" Henryk got up quickly and was off. A large tear rolled down Tiff's broad, rather lumpy face. She dried it with the back of her hand.

#

"Hanna?"

"Yes, Henryk?" Hanna had brought Henryk into her lab to share lunch. It was mainly the same fare as he might have gotten in Boys' Quarters, except that it was supplemented with rarer food items that the scientists had brought onto the ship at their own expense and which took part of their weight allotment. Henryk typically went after the sealed vegetables that he had had very little of in his life -- thick white asparagus spears, gimroot slices, and especially carrots. The pair ate at a cleared worktable with the accouterments of Hanna's research piled all around them -- several rolled-up scrollers, small instruments with readouts that beeped for no apparent reason, and several synth assemblers of various types with input trays and output bins. But the table still smelled like a stagnant pond.

"You know," began Henryk in one of his customary constructions, "I was sitting in a hold, you know, below decks, and I fell asleep, and a girl down there, Tiff, she talked to me. It was really weird."

"A girl? How old?"

"A grownup like you. She has a big line on her head, right here" -- he ran a finger across his forehead.

Hanna stopped chewing and looked at him intently. "Really? Do tell. What did she say?"

"She hugged me and said she had a brother like me. I think she was sad. I think maybe she started crying after I left. She helped me with the canteen my first day at Mr. Pdraig's. I see her when I'm running parts."

Hanna considered this for a moment then looked at Henryk hard. "What were you doing in the hold?"

"Just sitting. You know, sitting."

"Henryk. No one just sits in a hold."

"Maybe I was sleeping, too."

"In a hold? You're not talking about Mr. Pdraig's shop?"

"No, forward holds. It's a place I discovered. I go there sometimes. It's okay, though."

Hanna considered this. "Henryk, what, do you sneak into places and take naps?"

"Mostly I just go in. Nobody's there."

"You mean you're running errands or something and you go in by yourself to sleep?"

Now Henryk was too embarrassed to answer.

"No, it's okay, Henryk. Does Burgred know about this?"

"Dunno."

"I mean, did you tell him?"

"No."

"Hmmm. Well, it's a different world down there, I know. Don't you sleep during the two last watches? Isn't that enough? I guess... I'm thinking back... I guess I slept more than two watches when I was a kid. Anyway, what else did she say to you, this Tiff?"

"She said it was a secret. Only I guess it's not -- now."

All kinds of thoughts raced through Hanna's mind, most of which she discarded as absurd. Finally she said, "Does Tiff usually talk to you? I mean, is she nice to you?"

"Yeah. She talks to me nicely, not like everyone."

"Does she... is she... I mean, what is she like?"

Henryk shrugged. "Lower deck," he said. "But nice."

Hanna frowned. "You're picking up bad habits," she said.

Several watches later, Hanna met Burgred by prearrangement at the officer's bar. They sat at a quiet bench seat with a small round table, back near the captain's stores and away from the round porthole vids. Corso was on duty and took their orders. Burgred noted that, as usual, Corso kept a watch on them from the corners of his eyes.

"Damned gossip hound," he said, mouthing the words very clearly in case Corso cared to read them.

"You always tell me it's on every ship."

"That doesn't make me hate it the less. Few benefit from it at the expense of many. But you said you wanted to talk. Is everything okay?"

"Henryk came into my lab for lunch."

"That's good. How was he? I've just seen him doing Ship's Boy's errands." Burgred held up his hand to shush her. Corso popped into view with their drinks.

"For the ly'dee," he bowed a bit and said. "And the gent." Burgred shuddered inwardly. He didn't acknowledge Corso, but Hanna gave a faint smile. Corso went away, and an angry smirk was just visible on his face as he sailed back behind the bar.

"So," Burgred said, "what did you and Henryk talk about?"

"Wait," she replied. "Let me ask you something. Who's Tiff? A woman below decks."

"In Q.C.?"

"No idea. What's Q.C.?"

"Quality control. They test everything that comes out of the stores or workshops before we put it in the ship. It's essential. They test everything, but they lay hands on things too -- I swear they can sniff a bad part. There's a Tiff there. I sometimes go get things myself. Dikey broad, big scar on her head."

"Right here?" Hanna said, pointing to her forehead.

"That's her."

"That's a relief," Hanna said.

"What?"

"She's a... I mean, I didn't think anything was up, but still, it's a ship..."

"Our reputation precedes us. What did you hear?"

"She's Henryk's friend down there, in his work watches."

He laughed. "I'm not surprised. She's the wounded animal type -- god knows what happened to her back when. She probably keeps pet rats and cockroaches. Every ship I've ever been on has its walking wounded. The women you want; the men, not so much, especially when leave comes -- you're arguing with the locals to get them out of some jail or hole. What did Tiff say to Henryk?"

"I think maybe she found him asleep in a hold. That's what I really wanted to talk about. I think Henryk falls asleep in hiding holes to get through the day."

"I'm not surprised," Burgred said.

"I think he's okay, but Burgred, he's a young child. This is too much for him."

"I don't doubt that, but it's too much for a lot of people, but they get through it all the same. And look at it this way: the kid gets fed, clothed, quartered -- after a fashion -- and has things to keep him busy. Given where he came from -- the circumstances of his birth -- he's got it pretty good. Was he bothered when you saw him?"

"I don't think so. But he wanted to tell me about this Tiff woman. He said they were a secret."

"You don't know much about the service," he said.

"I've been on other ships."

"Not the same. You're not working the ship or responsible in any direct way for what goes on, so you don't really see what's going on."

"So tell me what's really going on, First lieutenant," Hanna said.

"On a big ship, you're not going to hit it off with ninety-percent of the people you encounter. Think about the really rough trade. You don't fall in with them, nor they with you. And you know better than to try -- well, you might try, that's like you, but the point is, they'd be wary and you'd be frustrated, as you always are when someone doesn't cozy up to you."

"That's mean."

"Well, it's true. It's a nice quality in you. You're optimistic. You don't judge. You want to be friends. But that isn't the reality on these ships. Take the rough trade types, again. Do you think they don't have any friends? Of course not. They manage to find their mates just like you and I do. Even the buggers make their way -- Vas knows how. Henryk's never going to fit in with a lot of the people you'd expect him to -- your average ship's boy or midshipman, for instance. But that doesn't matter, since the average ones don't get on with most people they meet either. All of us who grow up in the service learn to find our friends and be done with it. Once we find them, we hold fast, and they're our family when we're on a particular ship. Then they're our family again when we see them later at some port or station. And so on and so on. My own brother -- Henryk's father -- he and I were never close. Even though he was my family, he wasn't, you see? We only served together once, for a short time, and I hardly saw him."

"Tiff's a grown woman," Hanna said.

"She looks like one, anyway," Burgred said. "I suspect there's more going on there than you or I could guess at."

Hanna looked contemplatively at her drink and rotated the glass between her palms.

"Maybe I thought I would be Henryk's friend too," she said.

Burgred looked at her intently. "He confided in you, didn't he? Look at where he's at. He spends more than half his day below decks, with people that I assure you you wouldn't be happy living with in close quarters. And then there's the whole Padraig situation, which I have no idea what might happen -- his kid is going back to duty, I spoke to the proctor, we've got to watch that. Then Henryk's up here, with the relatively pampered Ship's Boys, some of whom are from the top ring of Irredente society. He's in what would seem to be an impossible situation, except that he's eight sols old and is going to make of it what he will. To him, this is what life is. In a way, he's lucky. He's going to learn more going through all this than I ever did, and I thought I had it rough."

"How can you be so stoic about this? He's your nephew. You risked your neck to fetch him off that awful place."

"Stoic? Am I? What would you have me do? Rescue him again? He's making his way -- earlier than most, I grant you, but getting through it all the same. All of us found hiding places and stole naps and much worse."

That's what youngsters do. It's a big ship, and there are lots of places, and I don't think anyone is surprised to trip over a sprat now and again. I never heard of anyone complaining, and I doubt that even this captain would do anything about it if they did. It's the service, Hanna. And as for Tiff, I don't think you need to worry about that. I had older... what, Mentors maybe? ... whatever they were, grownups who looked out for me. I didn't even know their names, sometimes, but just their smile or friendly pat on the back or whatever. That's the way it works here, Hanna. That's just the service."

Hanna frowned. "He needs a mother," she said. "Everyone needs a mother. I just don't think this Tiff -- some stranger -- ought to be it."

Burgred eyed her sidelong as he drained his tumbler.

Chapter seventeen.

Troubles

The following acts, when engaged in recklessly, knowingly, or intentionally by a Conforming Citizen as defined, infra, shall be punishable by death without rites of demolument:

communication through unauthorized methods of encryption or otherwise unsolvable encode methodologies or systems;

performing, causing to be performed, or allowing the performance, whether upon one's self or another, the engrafting of any biomechanical device [as defined elsewhere in the Code], where that device contains, as an integral component, neural socketing, whether direct or indirect...;

performing, causing to be performed, or allowing the performance, whether upon one's self or another, bioforming, including geno-forming, geno-therapy, bioenhancement, and regeneration;

carnal relations with Class III-V Nonconforming Beings...

The Code of Proscriptions

#

On Andromache, it was near the end of the first watch, and Padraig sat at a table working to the accompaniment of some ancient melodrama that he regularly dropped from the nodes. Henryk stood nearby at another table, a pile of polythane rings before him, wiping them with some clear, slippery fluid that Padraig had set out for the purpose. What with the noise of the vid, Henryk didn't hear the hatch swish open. Instead, the sixth sense he had developed about Padraig's movements alerted him that Padraig had turned his gaze to something. There Peris stood in the open hatchway. Peris' eyes swept the room and met Henryk's before settling on his father.

Padraig switched off the vid and got up.

"Wait here, boy," he said to Henryk. "Don't you get near that door nor I says so."

Henryk stood stock still and imagined the horrors that would now be visited upon him. Peris was back to duty, it appeared, and Padraig was his father. No good could come of this. Henryk tried to get back to the rings but instead absently wiped down the same ring over and over. Padraig marched from the shop and shut the hatch behind him.

Henryk heard nothing, even with the room now quiet, for several minutes, but then he heard a soft thump. The hatch swished open again, and Henryk quickly looked away, back to his pile of polythane. His hands betrayed his nervousness.

Suddenly, Padraig loomed before him. Though small in stature, he nevertheless stood well above Henryk, and his strong, stocky frame seemed to bear down on Henryk. Henryk started shaking, and one shoulder instinctively hunched up to lessen the expected blow.

"'Enry, you listen up," Padraig said. Henryk scrunched up his face in fear and he glanced sideways at Padraig. Padraig's face was bright red. "That boy of mine messes with you again, you don't be kicking him agin, you hear me? You jus' get away from 'im and get down here. You got a problem, you tells Mr. Padraig, you got it?"

Henryk flushed in confusion. "Y...y... yes, sir."

"He's a bad 'un, 'Enry, and that's a fact. He like his momma was, and that's no good, no way, no how. You was right to bust him up, but I ain't gonna let no Burgred get hisself in trouble no more on account 'a that no good boy again, you hear me, youngster? You stay clear 'o 'im."

Henry's shoulder fell, and he looked up at Padraig. "Yes, sir, Mr. Padraig."

"That's all right then, boy. You tells Mr. Lootnent Burgred there that I'll take care o' that Peris right good. You got nothin' to fear agin'im, and if ya does, ya tells Padraig, and then it's a done deal, like. I can't fix it all up for the Loot'nent now, but I swore to Vas I'd make it right somehow, and I mean to do it, like. Besmirking my good name, will he? I'll take right good care of Peris, mind you. Now you get finished with them rings there, and you run out and get Padraig a coffee like what Padraig likes, you got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, get a move on then."

Henryk put his hands back to his work and ran through it quickly, his ears still burning from the heat of Padraig's fury, but his mind, for the first time since his demotion, vaguely at peace. He knew where he was, now, and he knew what he was about, and he felt that somehow he was going to be okay.

#

When Henryk arrived at Boys' Quarters for lessons, the 'tweenwatch clamor died and a river parted down the middle of the room. Many of the boys looked at Henryk with an odd expectancy; several turned their faces away. Somehow, it was the figure of Peris that stood out in relief, perhaps by his unruly size. Or rather, it was his broad back that stood out, for he too was turned away from Henryk, busy at his bunk. Henryk, having been blessed with relative anonymity in Boys' Quarters for a time following his downgrade, found this puzzling. The mere fact of Peris' return to duty didn't seem so important; everyone had digested the prior events and the outcome -- what more was to be said? Rache stepped out and motioned Henryk to one side of the room, away from his usual work table. The other boys in quarters began to shuffle back into their gaggles and clusters, and the usual clamor and tumult cranked back up.

"Henryk, come here," Rache whispered. "What did you say to Peris' father then?"

Henryk looked at her blankly. "I didn't say anything, Rache," he protested. "Peris came down to our deck, but Mr. Padraig just got up and left me..."

"Oooh, boy then, Henryk. Don't you know, then?" She lowered her voice even further. "Take a look at him, Henryk."

Henryk looked back across the room and glimpsed Peris in profile. With typically rotten luck, Peris turned to face Henryk. Part of Peris' face was lumpen and livid. Henryk's eyes involuntarily shot up in surprise, and Peris' face flashed hatred. Peris averted his gaze again as he picked up his satchel and strode away, out of Boys' Quarters. Still, Henryk couldn't puzzle it out. Rache could see that.

"Don't you get it, then?" she said. "His father hit him across the face but good. Everyone is saying it's on account of you. Did you not know it, then?"

Henryk turned white and looked around the room, where several ship's boys were looking at him. "But I didn't know. I didn't do anything! Mr. Padraig left the room and..."

"Oh, boy," Rache said. "It's a bad scene all around, isn't it? You'd best steer clear of those bullies, Henryk. They're gonna have it in for you, you know. Oh boy then, Henryk."

He looked helpless and forlorn. Having so recently felt the weight lifting, now he knew that nothing had changed or that things had even gotten worse. Mr. Padraig hadn't beat Henryk, but he might as well have. Henryk could deal with a grownup's wrath -- their moods always seemed to pass, and a wary silent watchfulness could ready one for the next blow. He thought he had escaped the threat of the looming, ever-watchful group of boys who roamed the ship and knew a hundred ways to surprise him. Now, he felt alone and trapped. He wished he could be a dilly-dally, gone in a blur before anyone could harm him.

Proctor Demain came in from her work area and called the boys to their duties. Henryk slunk to his work table, where Serena and Vil joined him in silence as they unrolled scrollers and bent to their lessons.

#

Apprehensive though he was, Henryk was surprised when things seemed to return to normal. He didn't get accosted by Peris and his crew whether during work, duty, or lessons. No one snapped a towel at him after exercises. No one tripped him up in the halls. Lessons, duty rounds above decks, errands below decks, meals, play, everything seemed to sail along. Peris he saw now and again, but it always seemed to happen that Peris was in motion, going somewhere else, too busy to notice Henryk. Too, Henryk rarely saw Peris in company with Jader and Cam, though when he did, they were invariably conspiring in a huddle. He assumed that their plans revolved around him, yet day after day nothing happened to substantiate this. He steeled himself against the temptation to let down his guard. He managed to play and laugh with Serena and Vil, but he was still detached -- much like old times. He gravitated more to Rache and Daphnis, who didn't necessarily say much that he was interested in, but who spoke knowingly, jaded even, which suited his mood.

Henryk had grown considerably, and he had a careworn look belying his age -- ironically, the looks of an orphan or an urchin, which is what he still pictured himself to be. Hanna kept up with him and watched him, partly out of curiosity to see how it would all turn out, and partly for personal reasons. It was she who noticed, in fact, that he wasn't standing perfectly straight. She thought she knew why but didn't mention it to Henryk. She commed Bev and arranged for Henryk to go into the gleaming white clinic adjoining the hospital.

Hanna diagnosed it correctly: Henryk had grown past his mech leg's range of auto-adjustment. Bev noted that he had grown quickly since arriving on board -- a regular naval diet being the main culprit. Bev attempted to get Henryk to understand how to re-set the range of his leg's length adjusters, which involved certain pins and gears; but it was obvious that he was too affected by Bev herself, her shapeless smock and bound hair notwithstanding, to focus much on technical matters. So Bev and Hanna made sure that Hanna could do it and help Henryk learn how later. Neither woman spoke of the incident involving Peris, though the cloud loomed over the proceedings.

"Henryk," the doctor said, "stand in front of a glass now and again to make sure you're standing straight. That, or stop growing so fast." She didn't smile, but Henryk smiled broadly at her, the first genuine, unmediated expression of joy that she or her sister had seen from him.

After Hanna had dropped Henryk off at a tube for his descent belowdecks, she commed Bev.

"And I thought that I was Henryk's girlfriend," she said. "Another notch in your belt, Bev."

"You think? Maybe it was the little shapeless number that did it. Or my inability to smile."

"You've got competition, you know."

it.

Henryk remembered: you couldn't catch a dilly-dally, or keep one in view if you tried, or hit one with a rock or anything else. The only thing that could catch -- or hit -- one was... the little gun. The little gun that Mr. Alleyn had given him a long time ago -- how long? he didn't know now -- on Edom. He struggled to remember it all. Alleyn was connected to the gun, the gun was connected to the bugs, and so on, and there was Burgred demanding that he, what? How had he lost the gun? Didn't they grab it? That didn't seem correct, but he knew that it went away that day, the last day on Edom. For the first time, Henryk, as he lay in the semi-darkness with a halo from the stemlight glowing overhead, tried to re-create in his mind's eye the events that led him to this moment. He had a sleeper's vision and couldn't keep things ordered, and images seemed to pile on top of one another, connected not in time but by association, patterns. A deep, dead weight of sadness overtook him. Then, he simply couldn't follow the thread any longer. But in the depths of a seeming gloom, one true thing came to him before he drifted away: he had always heard that voice. It was his oldest friend.

Chapter eighteen.*Mens Super**To pick one question from the many imposed order that did not exist,**Except in the mind of the questioner.**To hear the answer was to will the pattern perspicuous,**Yet all of creation was still the same.**Every question is a ghost; every answer a chimera. Ask not.**But believe in your feelings, for there is your truth,**And be reassured: 'at length the truth will out.'**--I'kyun, Ruminations, from The Collected Parathems.*

#

On a cool, bright morning, light filtered down through cut-gem windows framed by plush purple drapes. The waxy, ancient woodwork gleamed as His Holiness Auspex Saggatus X sat at his desk perusing the one-way scrollers prepared for him by minions. He occasionally warmed his old, veined hand over a steaming hot mug of silver-tip tea. His professional advisor, the Mens Super, sat the duty desk this morning in a smaller, semi-circular alcove within the same office, handling scrollers and performing analysis work. He alternated between looking troubled and actively scowling. Unusually for him, he had neither spoken nor peered around at His Holiness in case he were wanted.

Auspex shifted in his chair to vary the pressure on the base of his spine, which was acting up again this morning. He looked over at the Mens and studied the younger man for a time.

"I grow old, Mens Super," Auspex said.

The advisor turned in his chair. "Such is the fate of all men, Holiness."

"Most sagacious. How long have we known one another, Mens Super?"

" 'Since forever,' as His Holiness is fond of saying."

"Indeed, and it is near true as far as you are concerned. You came here when, advisor?"

" 'Fresh from the École,' Holiness."

"You were quite young then, advisor."

"."

"No, it's not a question. I know you as well as any man might. What troubles you, Mens Super?"

"His Holiness puts my training to shame. I regret my appearance before His Holiness."

"Kindly answer my question."

"It is a difficult question to answer. At the École Superior, we learn certain methods for analyzing patterns that we find in the information we sift. This unique training is why we are privileged to serve the princes of the Irredente. Those few among us who are privileged to serve the highest offices, and who do so for long periods, inevitably come to reflect on larger historical patterns. The common wisdom that 'history teaches us' is glib. I find no true patterns, nothing that would tell me what is to come."

"Would that you could, Mens Super. Then would you serve me doubly well."

"If you could bear to hear what I would say, Holiness. No man should be trapped within history foretold."

"Most wise, advisor. Still, you have not answered my question."

"Holiness, what troubles me is simply put: a feeling of foreboding without data to support such feelings. Such troubles any trained Mens Super, and we are not taught how to resolve this dilemma other than to avoid troubling our patrons with it."

"Such feelings are surely normal, Mens Super, and to be commended in any creature."

"They rarely aid analysis, however. Most often, they often intrude and cloud analysis."

"Mens Super, what is the nature of this foreboding you feel?"

"His Holiness must forgive me for having spoken too freely. No good may come of telling you such things."

"I am Auspex, your superior, and I shall adjudge of that. Proceed without further evasion or supplication."

"Holiness, it is no more than this: that the data I am taking in now are confusing and indicate peculiar uncertainty. The historical patterns -- the chimera one must distrust -- so diverge from the aggregate of my data as to suggest... how shall I say it, a darkness -- a predictive darkness, a quantitative darkness. We are taught the gambler's fallacy, Holiness. At the Fates table, any number may come up. There is no pattern. Yet the gambling house will post all the numbers that have lately appeared. It is not a convenience for the gamblers, Holiness, but a falsity intended to induce them. Their certainty moves not the Fates to comply."

"But if you do not trust to history, as the wise gambler should not, why do you look over your shoulder at it?"

"But its relevance does matter -- if your Holiness will permit me -- in the schemes of the multitude who reckon by it. We interpret ourselves as part of continuum; we will into existence the chimera of which I speak."

"Rise, decline, and fall, Mens Super."

"Those in decline rarely anticipate the fall, Holiness. When it occurs, only then can they discern a pattern."

"Do you foresee catastrophe, then?"

"I foresee a complete inability to analyze it, Holiness. This troubles me greatly. I'm not trained to deal with analytical dead ends -- when every path leads to them."

"Let me share with you an ancient wisdom in the guise of a fable," Auspex said. "There was once a very small creature -- an insect, perhaps -- with graceful gossamer wings. Upon these wings were brilliant patterns and colors, interleaved, each individual creature slightly different, each beautiful in its own way, so beautiful as to

be fanciful. Of these it was said that 'the wings of the papillon beget the cataclysm.' By which was meant..."

"Of course, Auspex. Causation, small to great."

"Mens Super, an interruption I may allow, but underestimating my intelligence I do not. Refrain."

"Holiness! A thousand apologies. It is an impressive fact, Grace, that small actions beget great events, and one which even the greatest among men may remark."

"Impressive but trivial, Mens Super; glib and insipid. Vas, and through his Grace our Proscriptive Code, does many specific things, but in the broadest sense tries to set out the baseline conditions -- the initial state, if you will -- for our Irredente. It is hoped that in that way we might control our future and stymie the destructive trends that afflict societies. Perhaps we shall. I pray we shall. However, the important lesson of the papillon is that something even less than a puff of air sets in motion something not merely large, but irreducible to its cause and seemingly unrelated to the original condition."

"It is therefore impossible to analyze, Holiness. One cannot learn that the one begets the other."

"Correct, at least for us in the Irredente. But the mind of Vas encompassed the vastness. Our forebears were presumptuous: they believed they knew what their experiments with the causal agents of the universe would beget. Know, Mens Super, that in all things I seek to do the will of Vas. I do not mean this in a trivial sense, as in running the machinery of this beloved Church. Vas willed man's redemption through purification and renormalization. Through faith, I adhere to this as the paramount aim of man. By action, I must help make it so. I believe that we do Vas's will by struggling to retain our essential selves within the limits Vas has set for our kind. However, only history can tell what Vas planned; it is in the nature of the Plan that this be so. It is not for us to know. Nor, Mens Super, for us to be unduly troubled that we do not."

"His Holiness is most learned."

"Learning is not wanted, merely faith and a modicum of wisdom. Answer me this: in what does the intelligence of a man or woman -- speaking generically -- consist?"

"It is unknowable -- unpredictable -- Holiness. Except... there are forbidden..."

"You may stop there. That is correct. Whence does intelligence arise?"

"Encoding, Holiness. The renormalized genome sets the conditions for intelligence."

"The fable of the papillon tells us more, however," Auspex said. "From simple initial conditions, the Word of Vas, may arise an irreducible complexity of a certain kind: the human soul. This soul rises above its conditions for being and appears to be separate, but its source is nothing but the divine expression transmuted into being itself; it is miraculous."

"From the fable an illuminating parable, Holiness. Your ascension is no accident."

"Nothing is, Mens Super. Thank you, this discussion has been extremely enlightening."

"It is I who have been enlightened, Holiness."

"By the will of Vas, Mens Super, not me. You and I have discoursed for a purpose, though we know not what that purpose is. I have been fortunate, Mens Super, to have lived a life of peace in a time of relative calm. This discussion arises most peculiarly and unexpectedly, and you may be sure that that too is a sign from Vas. I am

sorely enervated, however, Mens Super -- you have overtaxed these old wits, I am afraid. I shall go to corpus for succor and guidance, and we shall speak more of these things another time. You may go to prayers or join me at corpus, as you like."

The advisor politely refused the request. "I also am unsettled, Holiness."

"That is well, then. Go your own way. 'May Vas be with you.' "

" 'And with you also.' "

Chapter nineteen.*Trade*

In no place was the Irredente's success more evident than in the organization of its arms. Any conforming man or woman could vault from the lowest rungs of Irredente society to the uppermost, and many did. The Barbican Code, which enforced Irredente norms with a clarity often lacking in the civilian society, refined behavior to the utmost. Had the political arm of the Irredente been resolute, it would have relegated the civilian Code of Proscriptions to history and adopted wholesale the Barbican Code. There is no doubt that a Henryk figure -- nonconforming, inhuman -- could not have arisen in that event, and the justified fears that led Saggatus X into exile and, as an unfortunate corollary, Heretic I to that highest religious office, would have had no soil in which to sprout. Man may justifiably lament the want of moral courage of our forebears. Had the righteous path been pursued, the genius conception that spawned the Irredente would be in full flower, and we would dwell, now, in that garden, alone and supreme, finally Human in all ways.

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#

Burgred exited the 'pit under a cloud. Andromache still patrolled the farthest limits of the outer ring of quadrants that formed the core Irredente holdings, jumping now and again. Boredom could not help but afflict officers and crew, despite the diversions supplied by Admiralty to occupy mindless turn upon mindless turn of routine. Small perturbations of mood or moment could quickly escalate into imprecation and insult, exposing latent fault lines among ship's company. Xenoetas, walking through the 'pit, had given a check Burgred over a trifle, having to do with the midshipmen's rat races in a service corridor. She then pointedly invited the next ranking First to dine with her in Quarterdeck, along with a Second not present in the 'pit, an obvious slap at Burgred in front of his company in the watch. Xenoetas' coldness and insults had been marked since the incident on Edom, and the officers and crew with whom Burgred had an easy, if somewhat distant, familiarity had begun averting their glances when he came on deck. He had seen it before, the slow freezing out of an officer, rendering the officer isolated and ineffective, generating whispers and rumor. He knew when this storm had begun: upon the demolument rites and jettisoning of the unfortunate lance-corporal, the driver on Edom.

Burgred made for the officer's bar. He took a chair at a small table in a corner and called to the woman who was bartending for a bottle. Several marines -- including Titus -- turned around to look at him, but he ignored them. When the bottle arrived, he poured, started drinking, and stared into it.

"Lieutenant Burgred, sir," said Titus. "What cheer, then?"

"Titus," Burgred said.

"Share a drink then? I'm empty here."

Burgred pushed a chair outwards with his foot. "It's a party, Titus. Join in."

Titus sat. "How's the boy, then, Mr. Burgred?"

Burgred looked away. "Seems to be getting on. He's... adjusting."

"Give you joy, sir," Titus said, tipping his glass to Burgred. "To family."

"There's little enough of it around here," said Burgred. "To joy, Titus."

They drank in silence, Burgred downing one entire and refilling, Titus refusing a top-off. Burgred tossed off part of another.

"Was your father a marine, Titus?" Burgred said.

"Sir? Oh, no sir. I got me commission meself. Ran away and enlisted, I did. Gods' Grove."

"I had forgotten you came from Gods'," Burgred said. "They're serious about their religion."

"Right you are, sir. Father a Conformist in a big way, curse the fornicators and hoopies, all that. So I run away from it -- and a little lass. She was a beauty, though. Bluest eyes in the hegemony. Cheers, sir."

"I'm the reverse of the coin, I'm afraid," Burgred said.

Titus looked at him blankly.

"I've got a coin -- it's a unit of currency, a stamped metal disc that you trade -- from Plum Grove, that's my family's... that's my homeworld. I'll show it to you some time. It's got a likeness on it that everyone says looks just like me."

"That's the reverse, Sir?"

"Well, that's just an expression. I mean the face. We call it the face -- it's got a likeness. Anyway, my father's consort -- my mother, Aethel -- left when I was mid-ships, back to her people on Urbanis. So he replaced her with a... there was a girl in the house, did the washing, Guiffred, been there since both of us were sprats."

"A beauty, then?" said Titus.

"In a manner of speaking," Burgred said. "Bosomy, big."

Titus broke into a broad, dreamy smile. "Many a man was seduced by 'em," he said.

"Nice girl, though. Nice to me when we were sprats. Her mother was in the house too." Burgred tossed off the rest of his drink and twirled the glass in his hands. Titus sat, uncertain what to say.

"So, then," Titus said, "Henryk is..."

"My younger brother's," Burgred said. "sols ago, I went home for his fornicalis -- I was still junior Sixth then -- Aethel there, Guiffred, everyone happy, well, not Father, but everyone else. I didn't know any of 'em, not really. Brother went straightaway into the Marines, didn't want Navy regular. Father upset, forgives him, writes letters, gets his commission."

"It must have gone hard on 'im, though, with your brother, meanin'," said Titus.

"I suppose so," Burgred said. "Stupid, too, Nestor. Slave raid, skin runners."

"They're a nasty crew," said Titus. "And armed to the teeth, every man jack."

"Hmmp," Burgred said. "Drink?"

"Had me fill, sir."

Burgred filled his own glass.

"Henryk's got him a family here now, Sir. It's as good as any," Titus said. "All me best friends has been in the service."

"Vas help you you should be a Burgred, Titus," Burgred said.

Hanna appeared before them. "Gentlemen," she said, "Burgred, I was waiting for a comm. We were supposed to meet."

Burgred looked up at her warily, his gaze a bit unfocused. "I was just speaking with Mr. Titus," he said.

"Marine Captain Titus, Ma'am," Titus said, blushing.

"Sure, I remember," Hanna said. "Pleasure to see you, captain. May I sit? Burgred: port rum? Can't we do better than that?"

Burgred motioned to the girl at the bar, who brought another glass.

"Um, sparkle?" Hanna said. "Okay then, green lino?" With a nod, the girl went away. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

Burgred looked at Titus and nodded.

"Not at all, Miss," Titus said. "I was just getting up to see me mates again. Carry on then, Sir. Ma'am."

Hanna moved her chair closer to Burgred, who seemed oblivious. The girl came with the lino.

"You're out of sorts," Hanna said.

Burgred didn't respond.

"Am I disturbing you?"

"No, of course not. Personal, is all. 'The life and trials of the longest-serving lieutenant in Irredente history.'"

"That's not true... is it?"

"It may as well be."

"Well, that's not what I came here for." She sipped her drink, leaving a green iridescence upon her lips.

"Pleased to hear it. Should I ask them to dim the lights?"

She nearly coughed out her drink. "Burgred!," she said. "You are nobody's friend right now, sir. Listen, I want to talk to you. Have you talked to Henryk?"

"I walked him to canteen yesterday. He was headed back belowdecks after he ate. We didn't really... he's not a big talker, that Henryk."

"Well, he talks to somebody, just not us."

"What's that mean?"

"He's more in the imaginary friends line. So listen, I was looking at holofiles of plant specimens and he asked me if I knew bugs -- he said did I 'do bug science.' So I told him about my plants. He asked me if any plants could talk, so I said no of course, and then he asked me a lot of questions about bugs. 'Can bugs talk?' he said. I didn't tell him 'no,' since that's not really true if you mean 'communicate,' which of course all creatures do, in some manner."

"So what did you tell him?"

"I said that there were many kinds of bugs and that none that I knew of could talk in the way that people talk but that many bugs communicate with one another. But I don't think he really believed me, you know what I mean? That look he gives you like, 'adults are really obtuse'? What he said was, 'bugs can talk, Hanna.' And I wanted to humor him, but Burgred, I don't know, he sounded so oddly sure -- like there was no question but that I was mistaken. Burgred, I don't think being alone in the late watches in that closet belowdecks is good for him. Aren't you listening?"

"I'm sorry, Hanna, I was thinking. You think he's lonely down there?"

"I said I don't think it's good for him. He needs others around more, even if it's just when he sleeps. He needs you around."

Burgred was sullen. "Or a pretty scientist abovedecks," he said.

"He could do worse," she said. Her eyes confronted him. "So could you."

He looked away from her. "The sprats do all sorts of things with things they find on the ship. Rats, roaches, those dilly-dally things. That's what sprats do -- Vas knows why. I probably did it too. When Titus and I found Henryk down on Neu Beauville, do you know what he was doing? Playing with armadillia -- dilly-dallies"

"I know what armadillia are, for Vas's sake," she said. "You've got some here. Henryk told me as much. How was Henryk playing with dilly-dallies? I heard that you can't..."

"No, you're right. He wasn't playing, exactly. I think I'm not supposed to talk about this, but he was... shooting them, or shooting at them, anyway."

Her eyes widened. "What, like with a gun, you mean?"

"That's it, that's all I can say. The bulkheads have ears. Don't worry, it wasn't like a service weapon. I mean, I don't really know what it was... just skip it. How did we get here? The kid plays with bugs, I guess. You know, he's not going to be down there forever. And you yourself noticed that it's been pretty good for him in some ways. The kid is smart and hard-working. Sailors don't start really getting space-crazy until they're older and remember younger days in ports of call."

Titus left with his group of marines. He and Burgred exchanged nods.

"I think Henryk could still use one of those. A trip, I mean. He really hasn't been off the ship except for the disaster with Acacia, and he was barely there at all. Burgred, he's a really young boy, and he's had nothing but body blows since you grabbed him off Edom. He's got to be scared out of his wits. He needs... he needs parenting."

Burgred looked at her sharply. "And who do you expect to do that?" he said.

"Burgred, I... I want to help him."

Burgred's expression hardened. "What's he to you?" he said.

"Burgred! He's a human being, and a child. Don't you have some compassion? What, you want him to grow old and bitter like you?"

Burgred looked at his hands then turned away. He shifted in his seat to rise.

"I'm sorry, Burgred. I didn't mean that. I didn't. Please don't leave, Burgred. Please stay and talk. Won't you stay?"

He didn't. He left the bar under a cloud even darker than the one that had run him in.

#

There were dirty ships and clean ships, the latter nearly always posing as the former. There were pious captains and impious captains, the impious rarely letting on. Burgred knew what both Andromache and her captain were, and he found it repugnant. Only a fool would open his mouth, though. Burgred lived by the old rules even if, increasingly, those who appeared to be ascendant in Admiralty's favor did not.

At the space stations and in the port towns, the signs of laxity, decay, and licentiousness were as obvious as the forced pieties of daily speech -- "by the grace of Vas," and all that. The skin trades were, increasingly, freak shows, operating in the Guilds' various kinds of free-zones with seeming impunity to government intervention. Hoopies with fancy biomech might be seen in any outlier. Burgred had heard of staged contests between heavily modified fighters -- had, indeed, been offered a chance to place a bet. He had declined. The Burgreds had never been devout, but nor did they actively subvert. The system had served them well enough, and they weren't out to make enemies. More and more, however, one was forced to see that the system was at war with itself. Why had it happened? Who was in charge?

Burgred was on duty in Andromache's 'pit when ship's scanners picked up a dirty trail of fission emissions heading into the core worlds. Suspecting smugglers, Burgred ordered her run down and sent his compliments to Captain Xenoetas with the news. It turned out to be a rock-skipper, a very old, small craft capable of short jumps and fast in-system runs. Xenoetas approved Burgred's orders to summon her captain and to have Andromache officers inspect her holds.

The captain was a one-eyed rat-faced character with vulgar diamond front teeth. The one eye was a compound biomech affair, very sophisticated and plainly illicit. He smiled a sparkling smile at Burgred and flashed Trade Guild credentials. He had in tow, silent in his wake, a slave. The lad was one of the gold-flecked, painted-up curs that one saw in Guild port towns. It was evident that he had been brought on board as a display of wares. Burgred assumed there were several more skins on the rock-skipper. Marine Captain Titus had arrived by this time, and Burgred ordered a pair of marines to keep tight to the visitors. Burgred inspected the Guild credentials. The credentials were phony -- pretty good, but phony. He eyed the visitors wearily while he sent up a brief report. Moments later, Xenoetas ordered the visitors brought to Quarterdeck by the marine guards; she ordered Burgred back to the 'pit. The report flashed up later at Burgred's 'pit console that the visitors had been sent back to their ship with "admonishment," which basically meant no action was taken.

Two days later, a vittle ship rather surprisingly hailed out of nowhere, and Xenoetas, evidently monitoring 'pit chatter, interceded to order it docked to Andromache. Burgred would probably have permitted it anyway, but he was surprised to see Xenoetas so interested. He didn't follow the matter further that turn, but the following turn, a select few senior ship's crew had chocolate, chewing gum, nicoline, spirits, holovids, and all the rest of

it for sale belowdecks at egregious prices. It was a dirty business. Burgred bought some chocolate anyway -- the credit meant nothing to him -- to give out to those who had no hope of being able to buy it. Somewhere, he felt sure, Xenoetas wore a satisfied smile.

Chapter twenty.*Temptress*

Thy fiendish vessels I smite and do utter destruction upon; this, my Word, shall be written upon a sheaf, and the folded Codex outspread, that She may apprehend and append of it, and that new Meaning shall spring therefrom.

The Holy Book of the Body

#

"Tiff, why doesn't Mr. Padraig test the things?"

Henryk sat on a stool in Tiff's shop belowdecks where she and the QC mate -- who was sleeping in quarters -- processed all incoming mech. He was propping his head up on his hand, with his elbow on the work table where Tiff scanned a more or less round, metal object.

"Hmmm?" Tiff replied.

"I said, why do you and not Padraig give the rings and gears to the engine? He has lots of equipment."

"To the engineers, you mean. 'Trust a woman to find a flaw,' is what they say, Henryk."

Henryk looked at her blankly.

"It's just that things are rigged up so that you need different people to do different things, Henryk," she said, pulling up her safety goggles to look at him. "It doesn't make so much difference on a small ship, which lays in parts. A frigate like this one is too big to lay in everything. It's easier just to lay in raw materials and make what you need, except for bearings, which have to come from a space mill. Still, ship-craft parts are never as good as they would be from a real mech factory. But we inspect them all, just the same, to be sure. If a part's going into the ship, I'm gonna have a good look at it first."

Tiff looked at Henryk, whose thoughts seemed to have moved on to something else, and then she pulled her goggles back and set to work. Henryk watched her, pushed some things around on her table, and hummed to himself.

"There," she said. "That one's fine. Henryk, hand me the etcher there. No... yes, that."

"Tiff," Henryk began.

"Hmmm," she said.

"How do bugs talk?"

"How do bugs... what?"

"I said, how do bugs talk?"

"You mean, like cockroaches and such?"

"Or dilly-dallies," Henryk said. "All bugs, I guess."

"How do they talk?" She pulled free her goggles and looked at him again. "Why do you ask that?"

Henryk shrugged. "Just wondering," he said.

Tiff looked at him dubiously. "You seen a dilly-dally on Andromache? I heard they're bad news."

Henryk pointed, and as Tiff turned she thought she discerned a faint blur of movement.

"Well don't that beat all. I never seen one in here, just down in the hold. You see 'em much?"

Henryk nodded a yes.

"You kids always see things we grownups don't, 'cause we're always thinking about something else. Had a ship's boy down here a long time ago, name of Dar, she'd find teensy little pieces o' things on the floor like she had a micrascope for eyes. She was somethin' -- never could get anywhere because she always had her eyes on things. Do bugs talk? Well, sure they do, Henryk. They talk to each other. They got to, or else how would they know to make other bugs?"

"Bugs make bugs?"

"A' course, how do you think we get more of 'em? Bugs gotta make 'em. That's the way, Henryk. Bugs begets bugs, just like people begets people. Well, a man and a woman make a baby, you understand. Only it's a little different with people, but the principle is the same. It's all a seed, like."

Henryk considered.

"Seeds?" Tiff continued. "You know about seeds, right? Same as data in your comm. It's just a little thing -- it can be almost anything, not data, but a real thing, a little spot of something -- that has really simple code in it, written in chemicals or something, not like in a comm -- that's all it has to do. If you run the little program in the seed, just like those little programs you're making in school for games and such, you get a really big thing, like a bug or a ship's captain -- well, a baby who might be a captain, who could be anything she wants to be. Maybe just a QC, but there are worse things."

"And they talk?"

"Which, the seeds? No. What the seed grows into. We talk. The bugs do their thing, whatever it is they do. You may as well call it talkin'. Amounts to the same thing -- they got to tell each other what's what and what to do, else there ain't no more of 'em, bugs or anything else. Come to think of it, a lot of 'em do make noises -- maybe that's talkin' too."

"Do they talk to us, Tiff? I mean, couldn't they learn to talk like us."

"To us? That's interestin'. They ain't got them no voice box, but in their way, I suppose they do. Them dilly-dallies tell us they're scared, that's for sure. They're gone before you seen 'em. Same with the cockroaches. They got like a sixth sense, which maybe we got too, cause we're trying to hit 'em and they're tryin' to hide!"

Just then, a figure appeared in the open hatchway leading to the shop. Henryk looked up.

"Hanna!" he said.

"Hey there, youngster," she said. She and Tiff took each other in at a glance. "May I come in?"

"We always like company in the QC," Tiff said. "Mind your head, though; lots of sharp things about." Tiff's broad, infectious smile made Hanna smile.

"The packet brought in some chocolate," Hanna said. "Padraig said Henryk had come down here, and I thought that would interest him." She held out large, flat square wrapped in coarse paper.

"Chocolate!" Henryk cried, and he jumped down from the stool.

"It's nice to be loved for something," Hanna said.

"I'm sure people love you for lots 'o things, sugar," Tiff said. Something in her voice made Hanna look up at her.

"Here, Henryk," Hanna said, breaking off a piece. "Tiff?"

"You bet, honey. I ain't too proud."

When they had assembled at the work table, with bits of chocolate interspersed with parts, probes, and wires, Tiff said, "Now I'll have to decontaminate the table. " 's worth it, though." She closed her eyes as the chocolate melted over her tongue.

"I don't think we've been properly introduced," Hanna said. "I'm up in Science."

"ummm. Oh. Sorry. Henryk tells me all about you and Mr. Burgred..."

Hanna blushed and looked downward.

"Henryk's a scientist too," Tiff continued. "He's been askin' me all about bugs, which I don't really have much of an answer to except they make more bugs. Oh, and they maybe gotta do their own kind 'a talkin' to do it." She looked at Hanna.

"Bugs? Henryk," she looked away from the other woman. "Are you still on about the bugs? Are you talking to the vermin down here again?"

"Henryk talking to the vermin?" Tiff said. "Is that what they call us topdeck? Henryk was just askin' me if the bugs down here talk. Is that what you were sayin', Henryk?"

Henryk was absorbed in chewing chocolate. "Hmmm?"

"He was askin' me if they talk," Tiff said to Hanna. "He didn't tell me that he was doin' the talkin'! Maybe that boy's got him a big imagination."

Hanna regarded Henryk worriedly but couldn't stop herself from melting into a benevolent smile seeing the boy enraptured in chocolate.

"Don't you worry, honey," Tiff said to Hanna. "I've seen it all down here, with the sprats. He's made him a friend. Seems pathetic, but it's all square out in space. It's a good thing, too. That Padraig is a mean old sod." Tiff laughed. "Not like old Tiff, now, or the topdeck scientist." Tiff mussed Henryk's hair. He looked up at her and made a face indicative of annoyance and extreme satisfaction. "Get on now, youngster. You take this gearing donut down to Mr. Nils, with Tiff's compliments. Go get cleaned up before you touch it."

Henryk got cleaned up at the dry-sink and quickly came back and got the part. He bolted from the shop.

"Worked like magic, hon," said Tiff.

Hanna eyed her. "You mean the sugar went to his head."

" 'Course that's what I mean. Why don't you and me walk down to the canteen?" When Tiff smiled her big, luxuriant, infectious smile, the scar on her forehead wriggled, readying its strike. Involuntarily, Hanna smiled at the odd, lively features of the lowerdeckman.

"Sure," Hanna said. "Where is it down here?"

Chapter twenty

-one. Pastimes

He of the body utters the word; speak it not lightly.

She of the body would hear; all her love is sanctified.

--The Holy Book of the Body

#

The warehouse district in Port South, the Trading Guild's main southern cargo port on Pydna, across the chasm of the Faucium from Os Divinus, stuck out like a strange limb from the mass of buildings forming the more inhabited sections of the port town. Drab, spare lanes divided building from building in a monotonous gridwork that trailed off uncertainly into the surrounding plain. Service vehicles of various types plied to and fro, some disappearing into buildings, others merely dropping off deliveries.

On this particular day, at dusk, now and again a small car, either land or lev, would come to a stop before one particular warehouse, enter when a large door was opened, then exit from a different door and road. There did not appear to be any pattern to the comings and goings, though there may have seemed an unusually large number of stops by small vehicles when one or two larger cargo loads would have sufficed.

The esteemed Cabil Member Mr. Galinda stepped down from his car and looked from side to side, seeing nothing and no one in the partitioned section other than his own car and, within it, the shadowing mask of his driver, a mute, sterilized nonconforming. The Member walked toward the plain metal door in the partition wall just ahead of him, pulled a mask from a plain bucket next the door, donned it, and proceeded within.

A red carpet, austere adornment on the concrete floor, led him through a hatchwork of slender connectors and supports, up a ramp, and into a round theater. The Member flashed a card at the usher standing at the top of the ramp. The usher nodded and showed the Member to a private booth mid-way up the terrace of seating.

"Good evening," said the Minister of Intelligence, Mr. Godwin, also in mask. "Thank you for this excellent chit. I hope you are well."

"It is good to see you. I am only too glad to help. How is She?"

"I wouldn't know," said the patrician, somewhat loftily. "We hardly speak, you know."

"Is that so? But everyone knows who's dispensable and who is not, eh?" Member Galinda touched a finger to his mask's nose. "A change would be welcome in many quarters. So! Here we are. I hope you had no difficulty finding it. You have been to Sieur Regard's before?"

"This is the first time I have had the pleasure."

"They do an excellent job, here. I don't think you'll find it wanting," said the Member.

The curtain around the stage pulled away to reveal an ancient, domestic interior scene -- ornate, outmoded furniture; a desk with a box made up to resemble a computing device, near which lay an old 2-D scroller; a plain divan with non-iridescent upholstery. A woman with upturned features and huge eyes entered this scene wearing a concealing robe. She sat at the desk and pulled the robe away from her legs and thighs, revealing

heavily muscled flesh. The Cabil Member noticed that the Secretary had pulled himself toward the rail and was staring, transfixed, at the scene being performed.

What appeared to be a male slave drone in a cape entered the scene bearing a tray, his arms and hands covered by the cape. He walked in a stooped fashion. It soon became clear that he was avian, confirmed when a fore-talon peeked out from the cape. The lighting effects alternately concealed and revealed various stages of exposure and action as the female creature accosted her servant, tore his cape from him, and forced him to the divan. In the slow-burn to the main action, the combination of stagecraft and rotating stage created a visual frenzy to match the actors'. When all was finally revealed, a female with broad hips and wildly overscaled femininity alternately brutalized and was dominated by a drone avian stoked to reproductive frenzy, his great leathery wings decrying some ancient song that any watcher might understand. The Minister's eyes started from his mask; his knees were hard against the front of the booth as though readying to kneel; he lived entirely in the action before him. From time to time, between yawns, the Cabil member regarded him.

The Minister seemed disoriented when the curtain closed around the stage. He sat up and looked around.

"Ah, sir, did you enjoy the show?" said the Member.

"uh... it was... uh... most enjoyable," he stammered.

"I'm sure you know that the lady -- the female -- is available for private viewings," the Member said. "I could arrange that very easily."

"Oh! Indeed. Er. Why... yes, that would be... yes, please let's arrange that."

The Member waved dismissively. "Done. All shall be arranged to your satisfaction. It is a shame that something so pleasurable should be so difficult to come by. Under different leadership, things could be very different, could they not, sir?"

"I dare say, Member," said the Minister. "I dare say."

Chapter twenty

-two. Flagellum

The Coital Regulations of the Irredente evidence extreme measures to regulate human genomic integrity. The almost talismanic employment of the term 'purity' by the governing and religious arms of the Irredente seems, in retrospect, a kind of feint, or perhaps merely hypocritical. For what is pure, we may ask, about the practices at Lindenau?

The Commentaries

#

His Holiness slept badly -- indeed, hardly at all. Troubled visions of plagues and infestations tormented him; jumbled images of debased, biomech-engrafted humans would jerk him awake just as sleep tried to take him. Exhausted, he ordered on a light and surveyed the magnificent bedchamber of the Auspex. He looked disgusted at what he saw. He checked the time. Too early. He lay down again and ordered the light off. Still, he did not sleep, and the visions would slink back. He lay still in deep, unhappy thought until dawn's blessed rosy tendrils triggered the shades. When he arose, he did so deliberately and with determination.

"Minion," he said. "I require a sack. Cotton, not silk."

As he stood, a small, faded androgyne padded in and quietly went about helping him change out of bedclothes and into the requested sack, not silken but still superb. The minion tied the shimmering silver rope around the high father's waist.

"I shall not want breakfast in chambers," the Auspex said. "The duty attendants shall stay out of sight as much as possible. You shall order my breakfast, and you shall eat it yourself."

The minion, startled, looked up momentarily, and the eyes of the Auspex glinted hard steel. The minion looked away, embarrassed.

Soon, His Holiness was striding purposefully out of the residential wing and toward the Palace Refectory. The residential wing duty attendant had trouble getting the signal and the instructions to the Guard, which was required to provide the attendant in the Palace proper. His Holiness ignored all this and entered through the grand, arched, wooden doors of the dining hall. It was some moments before the room took this in. The murmur of early breakfast, which rose and was lost in the thick striations and veins of the high gothic ceiling, diminished to whispers and glances. His Holiness scanned the benches then headed toward a figure seated alone and apart: an old but hale, almost completely bald clergyman with the slightly stooped back of a hermit. The Auspex sat across from him, and the old man looked up.

"Tyrus," the old man said. "It is good to see you." His voice creaked with age.

"Gregory, friend, I have need of you."

Gregory's eyes quickly scanned the room to make sure others were out of earshot. "That cannot be good news, when Auspex seeks out a cleric of no rank or title."

The Auspex lowered his head and spoke gravely. "Something is indeed wrong, Gregory. I always believed -- and took comfort in it -- that the great actions of history were in the past. I thought we had achieved a quiet perfection in our time. Now, I feel that I was wrong in this, to the danger of all of us. I feel this... to my shame, for I have been complacent and have enjoyed this perch too much. It is a time of action, Gregory; I see that

now. And I am perhaps too old to do it, but Vas has spoken to me. I must try."

Gregory eyed the younger man. "Vas speaks but rarely, Tyrus. Few men hear him. And few who hear him listen. And who among them acts?"

"Perhaps only you, Gregory."

Gregory gave a wheezy sigh. "I sit. Sometimes, I walk. What does Auspex ask of an old servant?"

"First, Gregory, there are things I must know. Then, there are things I... we... must do."

Gregory looked sideways. "Quietly, Tyrus. Even the air may listen."

"Then let us walk, Gregory," Auspex said. "I am sure you know a suitable place."

Gregory glanced around them. "You must go out before me, and I shall wait here for a time. Make your way to the ansible station. You must have a guard escort you, but leave the guard outside the operator's door at the end of the breezeway. I shall admit you within -- you will not need to do anything."

"You will be there before me?"

"Yes, unless you intend to make undue haste."

Auspex smiled at the old, anonymous cleric. "That is unlikely under any circumstance," Auspex said.

Murmurs and furtive glances followed Auspex as he rose and left the refectory. No further attention was wasted upon the elder cleric, who had resumed chewing very mechanically, as though counting his bites. Some few thoughts in the room may have lingered on the reasons why Auspex should seek out Gregory, but the obvious answer was that Gregory would be given tasks to make him feel useful in his dotage. Auspex was merciful and gracious.

It wasn't long before His Grace, having been led through a dog-leg breezeway attaching to a quiet corner of the Palace, stood at the Palace ansible station door. The station resembled a miniature baptistery, complete with dome and spires. Pilgrims could see it, set well back from the main cathexinal complex, and by a trick of the layout it looked like another full-sized baptistery. Its twelve plas-stone spires housed the hidden transmission filaments, transplanted long ago from a Carnalite temple on Gaetia Unum. The diamond-paned dome covered the transmission line well, which descended deep into the crater. The "black box" beam generator lay at the bottom of the well, accessed by a spiral stair snaking down along the fused-stone O-rings that formed the well structure.

Auspex directed his guard to stand some distance away, facing away. The operator's door swung open on silent hinges, and His Holiness strode inside. Gregory stood a pace away from one the pillars forming a circle under the dome.

"There is a prayer nook even in this place," said Gregory, directing Auspex. "This house of suspect but necessary machinery."

The two men sat down opposite one another on mottled plastone benches beneath a cut-diamond window.

"In all my years, I have never sat in this particular place. I don't think I knew it was here, though I have been through this building. Isn't that odd? But to answer you, Gregory, I have long assumed," Auspex said, "that the ansible operated on approved principles somehow. You suggest that that is not so."

Gregory looked at Auspex with tired eyes. "I dare not suggest anything about it, being but an aged cleric with none but an informal role at your Palace. The official station operator, however, is not a cleric. He is given a dispensation much like your Mens Super, and like your advisor bears a tonsure to mark him in public. But no proper churchman should touch the devices in this place. I daresay that no man should, but there can be no hegemony without them."

"Surely," Auspex said, "Vas must sanction that which permits his Word to be spread."

"That would account for many of the devices that the Irredente does approve," said Gregory. "And in principle they are passive."

"You believe them different in fact?" Auspex said.

"I believe that the 5th Empire lives on deep within, unseen, Tyrus. Old devices lie at the heart of new ones. And new ones merely copy old ones in thoughtless, perhaps transgressive ways."

"The Proscriptions grow more exact with each passing sol," Auspex said. "Every device and manner is regulated."

"'A thousand small branches make not the mighty tree,'" Gregory quoted. "Strength lies in simplicity, Tyrus."

"Herein lay many of our disputes of old, Gregory," Auspex said. "You would clear the forest where I would merely cut a trail."

"In my old age, however, I leave no traces," Gregory said. "Perhaps I have mellowed."

"I doubt that, old friend," Auspex said. "I think that we shall wake up to find, one day, that you have cleared the forest while we slept."

"Yet it is you who now urges action, Tyrus," Gregory said. "It is you that sought me out."

"It touches on these matters," Auspex said. "I feel that action is what is wanted, which is why I seek your advice. But I know that I do not know enough to do it."

"You believe that I do," Gregory said.

"I believe that Auspex must know things that enable such action," Auspex said. "And that things have been kept from me."

"Auspex cannot govern the Church with a thousand reports on his desk."

"All the more strange, then, Gregory, that I should have given audience to an ordinary provincial cleric with tiresome reactionary ravings. It is quite true that I have trusted to the hierarchy to do its duty. Someone in it put this man in my path. Now I ask to be informed. I suspect that what I need to know is not to be gotten from those in the hierarchy. I believe that you have the best information of anyone here. You don't need to confirm or deny that. Only listen. An Auspical audience with ordinary clerics is not unprecedented, but it is usually pro forma -- some duty or other of mine. The Mens Super placed this audience on my schedule."

"Have you asked him why, Tyrus?"

"I don't need to, Gregory," Auspex said. "I am asking you."

For the first time in memory, Auspex saw Gregory look uncomfortable.

"He came from Edom," Gregory said. "Many died there. That concerns the Church."

"A million children may die today in this hegemony from any number of causes. That, too, concerns the Church, but the steps of angry clerics are not directed to me for them."

Gregory took several moments to consider what he should say next, and Auspex eyed him severely.

"Tyrus," Gregory said, "I am not the first unheralded, unrecorded actor in this Church to manage our information. I am not even the tenth. You are aware of this to an extent, but not every Auspex has been. I can read accounts of the past in our own library, and what they tell me is that secrecy is paramount in certain things. Even Auspex may be followed, and his very thoughts discovered. What I say to you now, I probably dare not. But here it is. For whatever reason -- vigilance, I hope -- heretofore this hegemony has not been ruled by any tyrant nor by any wantonly cruel powers. Always, there has been some balance, and those that might have usurped power were held in check. But time does its work and brings things around -- always, Tyrus. You are correct that I work when others sleep, but what I work on is keeping the balance -- on knowing and watching. In the present Cabil, a mere council of eight, resides more power than any Cabil in the history of the Irredente. And somehow that power has spread its tendrils outward, into Admiralty, into Government, into... us, this Church. I see the results but cannot find the manner of its happening. It spreads like an insidious contagion before the body is made aware and reacts. I have watched, and yet I cannot quite fathom it, Tyrus."

"But what of this cleric from Edom, Gregory?" Auspex said. "Surely he can have no..."

Gregory did what perhaps no other person in the Irredente would dare: he held up a hand to silence Auspex.

"Did he say that Edom was a harbinger, Tyrus?"

"You know he did, Gregory."

"I do not, but I surmised as much, and that is to my purpose," Gregory said. "Of what danger, then?"

"Backsliding," Auspex said. "Intemperance. A plague of insects."

Gregory's brow shot up. "Insects? I know not of insects, but of backsliding and intemperance, he was quite correct. If he saw signs, I don't doubt there were many, for they are general now, out there, especially out there. Someone is gathering up forces, and Edom itself, as a ruin, will be a tool. It is a sign, that is true: but a sign of the uses of information. Edom will prove again that the Irredente is weak. Practices out there -- in the outliers, but surely encroaching upon us here too -- prove it too. Tyrus, the Irredente is weak, and that is being exploited. Your Edomite cleric knows it, though only from his remote corner. You have sent him away, have you not?"

"I thought that it served many purposes," Auspex said.

Gregory gave Auspex a strange look. "It did," he said. "And like his efforts, it is to be commended."

"You are holding something back, Gregory," Auspex said.

"As are you, Tyrus."

"Yes, my privilege equally as yours," Auspex said. "But I know now how I must act. You will not shush me

again, Gregory. Only listen and do as I command."

#

The pilgrims and tourists who stood outside the Baptistry in the cold Os Divinus morning could have no clue that they should be any different than the millions previous who had trod through those doors, touched the Sacred Body, and continued on through the Grand Arcade and into the Cathexinal. This processional, and the viewing of the resplendent interior of the greatest of all churches in the Irredente, would be the highlight of the lives of most of the people who had come. In the normal course, they would exit following the Corpus Altissimus in stunned silence, then mill around the Circle and its great central fountain until they regained their wits. Today, all that would be different, and many would not recover the selves they had been for many days; some, never.

The ushers having packed the central nave, the Dox Vocilis Cathex emerged, left of the dais, and ascended the two steps shakily. He took to the altar. His stiff vestment stood still as the hands and head emergent from it jittered strangely.

"A... assem... " he began, then cleared his throat. He buckered up his frame. "Assembled faithful!" he squawked. Some among the throng looked at one another.

"Today we shall close the doors of this mighty Cathexinal to witness the holiest power of Vas, that of redemption of the body. Long has it been since Vas so honored us. All those here, penitents and poseurs alike, shall stay; no man or woman, having entered, may turn away from Vas on this day."

A low murmur arose. The faces of wealthy, corpulent merchants and guildsmen, bedecked in precious-metal chains, showed worry, as who should say that this was more than they had bargained for on their well-publicized pilgrimages.

"Stand for the Blessing."

The Vox recited the prayers and litanies of the Corpus Altissimus then reached the sermon. He read intermittently from a scroller on the altar.

"Vas descended and found the essence of humanity contaminated. 'You have let the weak among you succumb to fear of death,' Vas said. 'From the dead,' Vas reminds in his Book, 'rise the living.' What does Vas mean by this? He means that man arises from materials we deem lifeless but in whose constitution may be revealed the essence of existence. We must therefore revere the sanctity of that essential life that is also death. For from that death is life, and to that death every life, Vas demands, must return. 'Fear not,' gathered ones. 'For your death begets an untold universe.' "

The Vox coughed, and in this pause coughed many in attendance.

"I am reminded of the parable of the butterfly. What is this 'butterfly?' you may be asking yourself. In the ancient times, before the contamination of man -- before the abominations -- there lived in E-din, a small, graceful creature...

... and thus, we see that in that simple code of life is written all that shall be but that none know fully but Vas. For only Vas speaks the Code of Codes; only Vas is master of all tongues; only Vas has seen every possibility for Man."

The Vox rolled up his scroller and held it in his hand. In his pause, legs shifted and coughs rang out. The cleric looked directly at the nave and the congregation.

"Some of you may know that in the early days of our Church, it was common for those of faith to express their love of Vas by accepting in full man's humble corporeal existence in the form given by Vas. They did this through physical acts of flagellation. In our history, many penitents both within and without the ranks of the clergy have given up their bodies entirely to Vas and so have gone on to their demolument. It is the supreme sacrifice, and a recognition that in the most primal state do we find salvation. Pain. I am often asked, how can Vas demand of us so much pain? His book answers this for us and gives sanction to the penitents whom I have described: 'J'sod, salve not thy wound but trust unto me, for it is my will that you do and your sanctification through pain that I ask. Only suffer, then know me and my plan. The final answer no man may have but that he shall be part of it and within it.'

"Friends. Visitors. Penitents. Pilgrims. Today is a special day. Special for me. Special for you. Special for the wider society in which we live. Why? I have been tasked by His Holiness, Our Auspex, with a most sacred duty. Today we all shall bear witness, for our Auspex, to the necessity of suffering for the preservation of our essential, pure selves and of our society, the Irredente."

The words of the Vox Cathex shifted abruptly, even jarringly, into his loud, liturgical chant, his nasally tenor echoing through the Cathexinal. Without fanfare, an old Vox appeared on the far right of dais, sacked in burlap, and with a burlap bundle under one arm. From the left, where the Vox had first appeared, emerged another Vox, old but not as old as the first and with a fuller tonsure, and also in burlap sack. This third Vox went to stand behind the altar and the Vox Cathex, and he was scarcely to be made out by the throng. Only as curiosity and apprehension among a very few led to a glimmering of what was going on did this third Vox loosen his silvery rope and let drop his sack down around his feet. He stood for only a moment, naked, sagging, castrated, then he turned and knelt on one knee. The old Vox to the right pulled a hide-and-chain flail from its bag.

"It's Auspex!" cried a voice from deep within the mass of worshippers. "NO!" cried a man's voice from somewhere. A set of arms in the front row rushed forward. Instantly, members from the Guard appeared, as if by magic, to hold the line before the dais.

whoosh-crack! said the flail, somewhat feebly. The oldest Vox girded himself better, then flailed again. WHOOSH-CRACK! A man's throaty cry of pain sang out from the dais and reverberated through the nave. Again, WHOOSH-CRACK! And again. And again. Cries of pain.

Screams and wails arose from the throng. The aisles disappeared among agitated bodies rushing forward. Women fainted. Men buried their heads in their hands or tried to storm the line held by the guards. "No! No!" many cried. "Auspex!" There were tableaux of pandemonium, despair, incomprehension, and gaping disbelief.

Then the flail dropped to the ground with a soft thud. The old Vox and the Vox Cathex rushed to the quaking, kneeling body of the Auspex, his back welling with criss-crosses of blood from flail-gashed flesh. In shock, he fell sideways onto the floor as they got to him. Gregory took his Auspex into his arms, rocked, and wept. "Tyrus, Auspex, my beloved. Vas be with you, Vas have mercy, Vas have mercy."

"Guards!" cried Vox Cathex, tears streaming down his face, "Guards!" Two guards had made it up onto the dais. "Carry His Holiness out. Get him... get him to my antechamber. One of you then get back and order the nave cleared."

Chapter twenty

-three. Conform

Bioforming was of course ubiquitous in the avian-ruled Fifth Empire. However, the Avials themselves comprised a mere few thousand persons bred specifically for governance. They were an extremely impractical bioform, requiring heavy maintenance and support by a subservient Symbiant class, itself bred solely for service but extremely adaptable where the Avials were uniquely static and ossified.

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#

Burgred was at officer's mess, alone with his thoughts and a dated holozine. He absently munched kuril, the thick, seed-sprinkled soft-tack available off and on as stores permitted.

"I hope this is a good time, lieutenant?" said a nervous, wavering voice.

"Huh?" Burgred looked up from a scroller with a mouth full of kuril bread. His expression showed astonishment. He swallowed deliberately. "'day, Vox," he said.

"Er, Mr. Lerner mentioned that you should be here," the tonsured man with a pitted face said.

"Eyes and ears are everywhere," Burgred said. "None more so than Lerner's."

"Oh! Ah, indeed... yes. So I gather. I only meant... seeing as how I had asked how I might find you..."

"He located my comm, I understand," Burgred said. "If you're coming about Henryk, the captain has already arranged for me to bring him to corpus next Feastday. It's a done deal."

"Yes, lieutenant, precisely. I'm sorry that I was not more up-to-date on things on this very large ship. I fear I didn't quite understand... that the boy... that there was a connection..."

"Don't get out much, do you?" Burgred's tone was acid.

"Ahem. My duties on such a large ship are indeed very heavy, Lieutenant Burgred, as I'm sure you appreciate. It's not just the Feastday corpus, you know, but handling all matters of the body for everyone on the ship."

"Yes, father, I'm sure it's a very hard position. Henryk is, in fact, my nephew. He came on board before Edom... before..."

"So much I gather from Mr. Lerner," the ship's vox said. "He mentioned that you would be bringing the boy. I... one of my duties... the church..."

"Sir?"

The clergyman cleared his throat. "The boy's Conform... there's no... the records aren't..."

"Who sent you here, father?"

"Sir? Lieutenant?"

"I spoke clearly. I beg you do likewise, sir."

"All matters of the body... fall to the chaplain on board... my duty... I report Home..."

"I know nothing of a Conform for the boy. Edom was wiped clean. Perhaps the records were sent to His Grace directly because the Burgreds are of such importance in the grand scheme of the Irredente. You realize, father, that the boy is... was a young child. I wouldn't have expected him to sacrifice for Conform yet."

"That is very true, lieutenant," said the Vox, tugging at his collar. "In the normal course, planetside, the age of Conform is more advanced. But on Irredente ships, it is demanded that all in service, including Ship's Boys, be taught the ways of the body and introduced into the corpus. That way, in the event of... sometimes there are situations where..."

"I understand. Any of us may be killed any time. But why should this matter merit special attention now?"

"The proceedings and pageant of the corpus are profaned by the presence of nonconformity."

"He went to corpus on Edom. He told me as much."

"The untried innocent are always an exception, except on Irredente ships, as I have mentioned to you already, lieutenant. There is no need for alarm or consternation. We don't ask much of the children on the ships for the ceremony. The testing is done beforehand, and they merely stand up when called upon. It's very simple, and in your -- Henryk's -- case, surely pro forma, lieutenant. He being your nephew, I mean."

Burgred glared. "No doubt, father," he said. "I shall get him tested immediately. You may mention as much to Mr. Lerner."

"Oh, I'm sure he's not interested in such minutiae, lieutenant."

"You're not so stupid as all that, father; of course he is. Save the pretense for Feastday, if you please. Good day to you, father." Burgred purposefully returned to his scroller and kuril. The vox ran a finger along the inside of his collar to unhitch it, mumbled incoherently, then wandered away from the direction he had come, pretending to have something he must do.

#

"With the captain's compliments, sir," said Rache, standing at attention at Burgred's elbow in a crisp uniform jacket without insignia. He stood at his duty station reviewing the turn's reckoning log.

"Dismissed, boy," he said, taking the small scroller. "With thanks to the captain." Rache gave the salute and ran off.

He tapped his finger on one corner and waited for the verification.

'Mr. Burgred:

May I remind you that it is the duty of every officer to set an example to others, particularly those within that officer's personal retinue, by personally attending corpus on occasion and, otherwise, to view the scrollcast on Feast Day. Even the most distinguished of lineage must renew themselves in our faith. We serve to defend our faith; the least you can do is observe its pageant from time to time and set an example to the young. I have instructed Lerner to give you two priority passes for next Feastday corpus.'

Burgred scowled.

Between watches, Burgred caught Henryk between lessons in Boys' Quarters and led him into an adjoining passage.

"Henryk, I need to ask you something," he said. "Haven't the proctors taken you to corpus?"

"Just here, sir. We watch sometimes. Well, sort of. It's pretty boring, sir, and the other boys..."

"I understand, Henryk -- I remember it well. So you've never been led to where the ship's vox and the captain stand up and go through the corpus?"

"No sir. I heard some others talking..."

"Have you gotten into any... trouble of some sort? I mean, like saying something rude during the service, or something... anything?"

"No, sir. No trouble, sir, but sometimes I get called out to run. Actually, I hope I do -- it's pretty boring, sir."

Burgred looked intently at Henryk.

"Sir?"

"No, it's okay. I was just trying to think. You run on back to quarters, kid... boy. And for Vas's sake, stay out of trouble."

"But I haven't..." A stern look from Burgred checked him "Yes, Sir."

#

"Thank you for meeting me, Bev... Major."

Burgred and the pretty doctor sat on a bench on the metal deck overlooking the oval exercise track and the inner playing court. A large, somewhat crude holovid activated across the ceiling mimicked the sky, with moving clouds, a sun that changed position, and the like. Voices and occasional profanity echoed jarringly within as a group of marines performed exercises.

"I assume this is about Hanna," she said.

"I knew you'd think that, but no. What happened there is probably for the best -- I hope it is, at all events. But I need to talk to you about Henryk."

"Oh, that," she said. "I wondered when you'd get around to it."

"Huh?"

"Sure. I always do the workups for Conform. That's what you need, right? All he had when he came was the cloth doll and his clothes. The only records I've seen on him are the ones I made myself -- and I checked the archive."

"Did you request an ansible to get his records?"

"Not my job. I run a check on what's already in ship's nodes. If there's nothing, I just make a note. I usually have to do the Conform anyway; there's no reason to spend a lot of time hunting elsewhere."

"Ship's Boys?"

"I've had midshipmen too -- from the asteroids, as they say. Very little formal education, no access to a real church."

"Would anyone else have requested anything by ansible?"

"For Henryk? How should I know?"

"Apologies. I withdraw the question."

"It's okay. I'd be worried too. No, I am worried. I have been since the beginning. I haven't run him because I don't want any records."

"Then you think there's something?"

"I'm pretty sure. As a physician, I see little things."

"And the boy's got a big head."

"That's the least of my concerns, but yes, he does. The size wouldn't bother me -- it's just on the large side of normal, no big deal. And I..."

"I remember, you scanned him."

"Right. Protocol -- and I really needed to make sure he wasn't concussed. But he's got some unusual wiring -- or proto-wiring, you might say -- up there. I doubt it's spontaneous, but even if it is, it could still be a problem -- it could still be in his code, even if it wasn't in his parents'. The dirty little secret about the renormalized code is that it seems peculiarly susceptible to damage. I'm sorry, I don't mean damage. Mutations. You old Irredente families seem to have it the worst, actually. It almost seems as if you just can't stifle what those four little letters want to do, and the longer you try, the bigger the mutations get."

"The Burgred ectomorphism," Burgred said.

Bev shrugged. "Could be. Or the Burgred pigheadedness, equally famous."

Burgred put his head in his hands.

"What do you want to do?" she finally said.

He sat up again and looked absently at the marines down below. He mimicked Lerner: "'With the captain's compliments,' Henryk is set to go to corpus next Feastday."

"I recognize the voice," she said. "Captain's staff?"

"The captain's secretary, Lerner. He's got his nose into something -- or up something. She -- Xenoetas -- must be aware of it, but it was Lerner who pushed the chaplain about the Conform. They've studied up on the regulations, and they're quoting them to the letter. It's all a setup, of course."

"You think they want to push him out of the service? Just because he's your nephew?"

"Maybe just down, and for good, to keep him out of the ranks. They know what an insult it would be to my family. But it's worse than that."

"Worse how?"

"Lindenau."

"You're joking," she said. "They wouldn't dare. Anyway, they don't make those decisions. That's the... Secretariat or something, Coital whatever."

"I don't say it's their purpose. But the specter is always there. And they know that very well."

"That's awful. Why would they be targeting Henryk?"

"Malice, is all I can figure. Plus, Xenoetas tries to curry favor with Admiralty with the feigned piety -- strict adherence to Conform, for instance. That's the system now, Vas and hegemony."

"The system is us, though, Burgred."

"Whatever it is, it's not throwing any favors my way, lately. If the system is me, I want to call in a favor or two."

"Do you think I owe you a favor, Burgred?"

"I ask for Henryk, not for myself. He didn't ask for any of this."

"All I can do is run him. And I've told you, I don't think you want me to do that. I think you need to get him off the ship -- call in a favor somewhere else to get him assigned under someone friendly."

"That would make it worse -- then he'd just come under more scrutiny, and there'd be more explanations and discussion, which is just what I need to avoid," Burgred said. "You can't... ?"

Bev folded her arms. "No. Don't even ask."

They both stared at the marine exercise below for a time.

Burgred said, "What if I asked you to run it clean, issue a report completely accurately for someone?"

"Someone? Someone else, you mean?"

"I didn't say anything of the kind. A report for 'H. Burgred.'"

"'H.?'"

"Swab me at your leisure."

"You're joking."

"I am not."

"How long is that supposed to last? You don't think that the exact match to you won't show up somewhere."

"Of course it will, but hopefully not before Feastday."

"When the Captain..."

"Mistakes are made every day. So I thought that the Church needed a familial genetic proof. I asked you to run it. I thought Henryk had already been run -- he's been on the ship for a while, you already saw him -- you treated him."

"Don't tell me any more," the doctor said. "Lieutenant, are you asking me to run your sequence?"

"Yes, Major. That of 'H. Burgred.'"

She rolled her eyes. "Anything else?"

"I hope it doesn't get mixed into the file of Henryk's other tests."

She nodded. "Uh huh. Well, stranger things have happened, I guess. Are we finished?"

"Bev..."

"Don't thank me. You're lucky I like Henryk so much."

"I didn't realize you disliked me so much," he said.

"Far from it. Walls protect those within, too. I've always been drawn to fools."

Burgred looked at her in surprise, and she got up and left.

Chapter twenty

-four. Corpus

The few great literary works to come out of the hegemony of the Irredente are written in highly coded literary forms -- poems, parathems (sometimes called parenthems) and the like -- that find no interpretive resolution. Even the Holy Book of the Body is an unstable text that should not, ostensibly, have formed the basis for strict doctrine. Thus, it is clear that revolutions may be seeded subtly, with wry, private amusement, and then blossom into bloody chaos.

The Commentaries

#

"Will the captain be there?" said Henryk. "I'm scared of her."

"At Corpus, then?" Rache said. "Yes, I think so. I think she always does. It's what's expected, you know. Her being in charge and all, isn't it?"

The pair sat facing one another at a worktable in Boys' Quarters, doing their studies.

"But why is it 'rigged'? They always say that church is 'rigged.'"

"I couldn't answer that, Henryk. You should ask your uncle. But I suppose it has to do with, like, it's all fixed before you get there. I mean, there are no surprises at corpus. Everyone knows the rites and what's expected. And of course, you can't escape it, neither. Everyone's got to go to corpus, sometime or other. So, it's rigged, then. Why don't you look it up on your scroller?"

"My uncle... Lieutenant Burgred is kind of hard to talk to sometimes. He's always checking his comm when he talks to me."

"He's just busy then, isn't he? He's Senior First, you know, and that's a big thing on a ship. If the captain dies, then he's the captain."

"Yeah, I know. Hey, Rache? Did you go to church -- to corpus -- on..."

"On Tartans? My people go, especially on the holy days and such. You got to, right?"

"Madame always made me go," Henryk said. "But I never had to do anything, just sit there. It was so boring."

"Is that the publick house lady, then?"

"Yeah. She used to say it was our duty, but then she would never tell me anything except all the things I wasn't supposed to do, like talk." Henryk involuntarily looked at his mech leg. "Do you think I'll have to talk?"

"When you go? Kids don't talk at corpus," Rache said. "At least, I never heard of that. But sometimes they get called and have to, sort of, you know, rise up, like."

"You mean, stand up?"

"Just so."

"Oh," said Henryk. He pondered this for a moment. "Standing is okay. But then everyone looks at you. It'll be embarrassing."

" 'tis true," Rache said.

Proctor Demain poked her head out of her office, and Rache pretended to be busy. Henryk, in a somewhat stupid move, looked around at her and received a stern look in return. He turned red.

"They don't want us to talk," he whispered to Rache. "They know we're up to something, so they try to keep us quiet."

"Oh, I know," she whispered. "Did you learn any of the hand signs yet?"

Henryk tried a 'yes.' She corrected him by wiggling her thumb, and he modified his first attempt. Rache nodded. The proctor had disappeared again.

"The big kids all know it," she whispered. "That's how they conspire, like."

"I watch them," he said. "It's pretty easy to pick up." He made a signal, and she stifled a laugh.

"He'd have your hide for that, Henryk. You just watch yourself."

#

Henryk lay in his alcove in the late watch reading a story on his lesson scroller. He rubbed his eyes and tried to keep reading but finally set the scroller aside. He switched off the little stem light and waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness so that he could see the soft light of the stars thrown into the adjoining workroom by the holowindow. Sometimes he fell asleep before his eyes could make it out. Now, however, he heard a familiar tipity-tapity that he could only hear at night with the workroom machinery switched off. He knew that he was not alone.

Henryk.

"I can't," he said.

Henryk.

". "

Henryk, he made out at intervals.

"Henryk," he finally said.

The other kept repeating: Henryk.

"Henryk."

Henryk.

Again and again. Henryk sighed.

Henryk, he finally managed.

Yes.

#

"Vas spoke and in speaking created the body of man," the chaplain intoned, standing at the low, table-like altar. The clean, white room featured a large triangular holovid window behind a small, collapsible dais, upon which sat the altar with its band of blood-red cloth. The holowindow was programmed to throw a thick band of light onto the dais that would travel across the altar as the corpus proceeded. This same room also served as the captain's briefing room and as a diplomatic room.

" 'Blessed be the body,' " chanted the assembled officers and crew, numbering a couple score. Henryk had tried to sit in the back, but Burgred insisted that they sit near enough to the captain that their presence be fully credited.

"You may sit. Conformance to the word of Vas and his directives of the body permit us entry into His hegemony. Today we welcome into the corpus a young member of this blessed vessel of the Irredente, Andromache. Having proven through Conform his fitness, he shall be part of our corpus and, in due time, take the rites leading to full citizenship in the Irredente. Mr. Burgred, please stand."

Henryk appeared confused. The senior Burgred prodded him, however, and Henryk popped up sheepishly. All eyes turned to Henryk, whose face turned bright red. The ship's vox chanted:

"Blessed be thy body, most pure in conformance;

Sung from His voice, created by His will;

May we preserve and re-create in dimmest echo His song."

Henryk, abashed, looked around, but by now most in the room were watching the vox.

"Thank you, Mr. Burgred."

Leaving nothing to chance, the elder Burgred tugged on Henryk to make him sit. "Well done, lad," he whispered. Henryk fidgeted.

The remainder of the corpus was uneventful and passed for Henryk in a blur of rising and sitting, punctuated by the vox breaking into chant and the assembled persons giving the various rote responses.

On the way out following corpus, Burgred noticed the captain's secretary, Lerner, give Henryk an inscrutable but significant glance. Then Lerner's eyes met Burgred's. Burgred read undiluted malice in them, and he gave back as good as he got.

#

Tiff sat on a tall stool, munching a sandwich near the lab's large holowindow, while Hanna, in a lab smock, moved around working. Clear vessels grouped in clusters around the room showed greens, yellows, and reds within, some plants, some obviously not, and some possibly decorative. Tiff could not have told what was what.

"I like the smells here better than belowdecks," Tiff said. "Ah, here he is." Henryk had buzzed and was let in.

"This area in particular is better than most," said Hanna. "The labs have their own air systems. Hi, youngster." This last was aimed at Henryk, ambling in between watches before heading down to Pdraig's.

"Hi Hanna, hi Tiff," he said. He began looking into one of the groups of specimen vessels.

"Hungry, kid?" asked Tiff. Henryk nodded and was given part of a sandwich, which he absorbed in a few bites. "Got to keep filling the tank, you know," Tiff said. Then, to Hanna: "I 'spose you get used to anything, though I still smell old socks when I think about it."

"Belowdecks, you mean," said Hanna.

"Sure. But it's home. And probably better than where I'd be without the service. Some barely-formed planet, probably, around the docks, fending off brutes and sand."

"You and Mr. Burgred appear to have similar views about life beyond the ship," Hanna said. She pulled a viscous goo from a canister and frowned.

"I would'a thought he had it pretty good back where he come from," Tiff said.

"You only ever really know your own situation, I guess," Hanna said. "Burgred comes from a beautiful place, but I think he takes that for granted."

"I wish I could, Honey. But I guess I've seen some beauties in the service. Vas, I remember that big park on Pulchris, the one that the old-time high-ups built for..."

"Yeah," Hanna interrupted quickly, looking over at Henryk. "I've heard about that."

"Maybe we could go there some time, honey," Tiff said. Hanna blushed.

"Hanna?" Henryk interjected, wiping a crumb from his face.

"Yes?"

"Why is church all about a body? Body this, body that. I don't get it."

"The' body, you mean? I guess because that's what everything's about, in the Irredente I mean. Why do you ask?"

" 'Cause I was just wondering why when there are so many people -- so many bodies -- but they always talk about one, like there's only one."

"I see what you mean. Life is cheap, the greatest good for the greatest number, all that," Hanna said.

Henryk looked at her quizzically.

"I just mean that people are born and die every day, Henryk, and a lot of people die for no good reason, as you unfortunately know very well, but the Church tells us that the body -- the human form -- needs to be preserved. But I'm not really a good person to ask about church things. I'm more the scientist and don't get too involved with the theology. I could tell you something about your body, and Bev could tell you a lot more, but that's different. You should ask..."

"Without Vas, none of us would be here to tell nothin'," interjected Tiff. "Vas is what made us and separated

us from the nonconformists that didn't want to be human. Don't need no Vox to tell you that."

Hanna looked sharply at Tiff.

"Well," Tiff said. " 'tis true. They were prof-li-gate, they were. Made everyone sick. It's a wonder anyone survived -- until Vas come along. And I got to tell you, without Vas, I don't think I'd a made it here, neither. The one thing I got, that I know is real and pure, is my body, no matter what somebody done to it. And every time they hurt me, it only made it more real and more pure. So I got the satisfaction of knowing, it's Vas that gave that to me. You lost all your people down there in that place, Edom, Henryk, and heck you even lost your leg, for Vas's sake. It weren't for nothin', I can tell you that. You got you a body, and it feels and knows everything that you done and everything that was done to you, and if that ain't a miracle 'o Vas I don't know what is."

Tiff rubbed her eyes on her sleeve. Hanna averted her eyes and stared at the floor.

"Did Vas make me lose my leg?" asked Henryk.

Tiff laughed despite herself and tried to be composed.

"I'm sorry, kids. Tiff kinda went off the star charts, there. Hah. Did Vas? No, honey, Vas didn't do that. Vas don't take nothin' from nobody. He gave, but it's up to us to keep. But those of us that can't, well, we're doubly blessed, that's all." She went and put an arm across Henryk's shoulders. "Don't none of the others know what the violated know, Henryk, and that's a fact. But never be proud, 'cause then you forget. Pain, the real deal, is a privilege, and none can know your pain but you."

Hanna had turned her face away from the other two and seemed to be focusing on her work. Tiff sensed Hanna's discomfort.

"Henryk, boy," Tiff said, eyes still on Hanna. "You've done with eating. Why don't you run along now belowdecks and get on to work."

Henryk looked at Tiff questioningly, but Tiff nodded her head. He too glanced at Hanna's back, then hopped down, his mech leg resounding unnaturally, and left, with a final glance back at Hanna.

"Are you mad at 'ol Tiff then, sugar?" Tiff said.

Hanna turned, surprising Tiff when her cheeks were wet with tears. "I... I'm so sorry, Tiff. I mean..."

"You? You got nothin' to be sorry for, darlin'. Don't you worry about Miss Tiff. Here she is, in the flesh. Nothin' to be sorry for. Are you all right, honey?"

"I didn't... I don't really know much about... the church, and I'm not too religious..."

"Is that all? Listen to me, honey, I got my things, you got yours. Some of my things are secret things, some ain't. Some should'a been secret 'til I opened my big mouth."

"But you've been... I mean, someone did things... ?"

"They done 'em to you too, I'll bet, only different things and different people, maybe not so rough on the outside, more on the inside, whatever. Ain't no privilege in hurtin', love. Hurt is hurt."

Hanna smiled crookedly, tears hanging from the faintly fuzzy edges of her jawline. "I think maybe you've had

a bit more than your share." She gave a little laugh.

"I ain't doin' no comparin', sugar. I'm just trying to keep it all goin'." She smiled broadly. Hanna rushed to her and held onto her for dear life.

" 'From the mouths of babes,' " Hanna said, finally.

"Henryk, you mean? He's a good boy. Quiet -- too quiet, if you ask me. I think he wants someone who'll really listen to 'im, is all."

"And to talk to him, too," Hanna said hopefully.

Tiff's smile became a beatific contentedness. "Talkin's nice. I never got nowhere without some good talkin'."

Chapter twenty

-five. Quercius

The Galactic Chronicles entries for the 6th Empire suffer from significant gaps in coverage owing to the anti-technology ideologies of that era. It would not have been routine for reader-storers to be embedded in all structural matrices, so our picture of events is often inferential. In this connection, readers may recall that the sack of Gaetia Unum inaugurates the 6th Empire, thereby ending an era of relative cooperation between organic and inorganic life forms, though that had been in decline since the middle of the 5th Empire. What we see developing in the 6th Empire is not just strident anti-inorganic ideology, but a Geno-Originalist statism that defined citizenship with reference to ideals of organo-genetic purity.

The Commentaries

#

The Committee Liaison, Mr. Liev, arrived at Galinda's office with beads of sweat on his forehead, having struggled to get across the Crater because of the fallout from the goings-on at the Palace. Crowds were still filling the streets, streaming towards the Palace complex.

"Esteemed Member, you called," said Liev as the functionary held the door open. "I'm sorry it took so long."

"Liev, sit down," Galinda said, laying down a scroller. A fired roared some distance away in the grand stone hearth. "A busy morning! Coffee? I love things of moment, Liev, though I prefer it when I... when we're in control. At all events, now is a time of great moment, mark my words, and we shall take advantage of it."

"No coffee sir, thank you. All the routes to the Palace are jammed with the vigil."

"I didn't think the old eunuch had it in him. He's been so... manageable these many sols. Or perhaps 'pliable' is the word."

Liev showed momentary surprise. "Er... they say he's conscious now," Liev said.

"Who is 'they,' Liev? Isn't your man reliable over there?"

"Our man is out, Esteemed Member."

"On whose order?"

"Someone high up at the Palace, we believe. He doesn't think he was being played, but we're not yet sure. The order of removal was carried out bodily by Auspicial homunculi."

"That's distressing news. Has he been debriefed?"

"Yes. The most salient point is that none of his points of contact at the Palace knew in advance about the Flagellation," Liev said.

"Then it was not planned, which is in itself interesting," said Galinda. "That bespeaks a fissure of some kind, or at all events some particular crisis. Any ideas?"

"No, Member, but I am working on it."

"We're missing something, something vital. I can feel it. Something happened over there, and by Vas it left a trace. Talk to your man. Get everything you can, no matter how seemingly trivial, and run it. Do you have a Mens Super working in the Ministry of Intelligence?"

"No longer, sir. Mr. Minister Godwin says he doesn't trust them. I believe... well, sir, there have been few École Superior graduates from the planet-holding classes."

"Hmm. Too bad. They're very useful sometimes. We should see to that. Put on the list for Mr. Secretary that Intell needs a Mens Super again, with my compliments to the Minister. Suggest that we shall find someone already in the service of an old, esteemed family -- sympathetic, obedient, that sort of thing. That should placate him. Then I want you to find one, as soon as you can, and then as soon as possible have the Mens start working on this thing at the Palace. Oh, and look at the Fraternus. There used to be a lot of these flagellants over there. Maybe still are, for all I know. Don't let the door hit you on the way out, Liev."

#

The flagellation of His Holiness threw government in all her aspects into turmoil. Cabil Member Galinda, in particular, struggled to understand it. He sat in his office in Os Divinus, the hour very late, and rubbed his eyes -- he had been going through scrollers while he waited for answers. He ordered his comm to pick up.

"Member," said Liev's voice on the comm, "I may have something for you. His Holiness acted -- I mean the flagellation itself -- with help from a very old vox formerly of one of the Orders -- the Fraternus -- Gregory of Quercius."

"The women in sacks. Go on."

"Uh... yes, sir. Gregory is some sort of senior cleric in the Palace, but without any kind of portfolio. He used to teach, but he's quite old now. He had some trouble with the physical requirements of administering the..."

"Flagellation," Galinda said.

"Right. He stumbled with it at first -- the crowd thought maybe it was for show until he managed to right himself. But he's connected with recent events at the Palace in other ways. We saw but didn't attach particular significance to His Holiness' bestowal of the Bombazine on a visiting Vox -- it fit the same pattern as an Auspicial Summoning, a sort of honorary visit and rope. However, there was no summons. The visiting Vox had been arranged to visit Pydna and the Palace by..."

"Let me guess: Gregory of Quercius."

"Yes. But there's more. Gregory appears to have been connected previously in some way to this visiting Vox. The visitor was born on..."

"Quercius."

"Yes, Member."

"Is... was the visitor of the same... were they about the same age?"

"No, Member. Gregory is at least a generation older."

"Did you look at a mentor-type connection? Did Gregory keep in touch with the visiting Vox at all?"

"Still working, Member. But one more thing. I knew you would be pleased. The visitor was the V.D. on Edom. He is a known reactionary who had pulled constabulary resources on Edom to deal with these bug creatures."

"The bugs?" Galinda considered for a moment.

"Sir?" Liev prompted.

"Liev, this is very surprising. Edom and the bugs again -- a visit to the Palace, an honorary Envoy... Where is this Auspicial Envoy now, Liev?"

"Unknown sir."

"Hmmm. Gregory brings in a... what, protégé, family connection, something... this old-school Vox from Edom. He evidently escaped -- he must have been warned about the attack there or else rescued. Meeting with Auspex. Bestowal of bombazine. Self-debasement by His Holiness. Liev, how did this Vox travel -- how did he leave Edom?"

"Guildship is the only information I have, sir."

"He runs to Pydna? Why should that be?"

"No data, sir. His itinerary is unremarkable -- several stops over several weeks. He relied on courtesies and Church holdings -- he evidently had little credit."

"He was trying to tell them something, then," Galinda said. "He was bringing news -- a warning, perhaps. Whatever it was, it appears to have turned the Palace upside down. He knew something. Like our dead agent on Edom. You see where this is going, do you not?"

"I confess, Esteemed Member, that I still have not quite..."

"No matter. Tell me about that datachat from Edom. You haven't reported on that."

"I have it, sir, but my people still haven't... the code is very strong."

"This is unsatisfactory, Liev," Galinda said. "You haven't just relied on official..."

"I've tried alternative means, Member. I've been out to Port South, talking to Guild-connected... uh, people. All I get back is, the card is empty."

Galinda's tone changed to ice and daggers. "Liev, I've reminded you of the urgency of this."

"Esteemed Member, I have tried everything I can think of, within reason."

"What would be unreasonable?"

"Sir?"

"Initiative, Liev," said Galinda. "I'm relying on you. You've got high-level passcodes -- use them. We've got people -- use them too. Get me that information. And keep up with His Holiness and that visiting Vox. Does Mr. Secretary Godwin keep busy these days? Not inundated with mindless briefing scrollers, I hope?"

"Exceedingly busy, sir. He has many intell briefing scrollers to get through each day."

"That is the way of Government, alas," said Galinda. "Vas help me that I should be asked to serve thus."

#

Liev still sweated -- now it was his nerves. He lay awake in his flat in the early morning hours, tormented. He felt as though he were rowing a boat helplessly against a current that was carrying him toward the depths of the Faucium itself. Time -- he needed more time to figure out what the datachat was, what it said. If the contents had gotten intercepted because of his reliance on Hoarson, he had to know the significance of what he had let loose. If only he could get a definitive answer from someone, one way or the other -- were they something or nothing? He sat up, feeling his nightclothes sticking to him, and looked out from his flat's twelfth floor perch at the winking lights of Os Divinus. He wished only that he could escape into sleep.

He kept thinking about the fruitless trip to the Office of Cryptology and the Director's cryptic comments -- ancient sciences, invisible patterns, unmentionable practices. He had dismissed much of it, figuring that he had wasted his time with his visit. They were covering up for their own incompetence -- they were bureaucrats.

But then he thought back to what the Director had said -- algonomic science, something or other. Automaton. Vas, what was it the Director had said? Liev got up and switched on the desk comm in his bedroom. The light from the screen momentarily blinded him. He pulled up his notes from the trip out to Cryptology -- why hadn't he concealed a mini-comm on himself, as a precaution? No, it was too dangerous. He was right to keep his own, shorthand version from memory, encoded. Unless someone -- the same someone who might get the datachat data and decode that -- could decode his own... fresh beads formed on his forehead. He couldn't stop spinning out scenarios of his own doom. He would end up being thrown into the Faucium.

He needed to get into the Central Node archives. He used Minister of Intelligence Godwin's passcodes and worked his way in. He had little experience with the Central Node. He had, now and again, on some research errand or other, managed to pull out bits and scraps of things that seemed, in isolation, to provide him answers -- at all events, they provided him with answers sufficient to annotate his reports in passable fashion. Now, sitting in the gloom of early morning, he had an acute sense of the suspect veracity of indiscriminate grabs from the Central Node. Who could tell what they meant or were worth, those drops in an ocean of information?

But he pressed on. With the passcodes available to him, he could go deeply into the archives, but it required a practiced information specialist to do it efficiently. Indeed, his first stabs at "automaton" and "algorithm" yielded far too much information, and far too random, to be of any use. He referenced his notes again -- "cellular automaton." That dropped the hit rate down -- just a few thousand. He scanned the topmost headings. He found a strange compendium with archaic syntax -- "The Heuristic Voyager." It was some sort of encyclopedia, apparently 5th Empire. Even the first few pages he scanned at random were hard to read. He selected the index. Under "cellular automaton" it read: "see algorithmic sciences." He selected that, only to find: "algorithmic sciences -- see cellular automaton(a)." He sighed. Almost without thinking, he entered a search in "The Heuristic Voyager" for the terms "5th Empire science encryption." Inexplicably, the desk comm just winked off. He threw up his hands in consternation. "Vas," he said.

Soon, his comm screen abruptly switched back on, and in an ornate script appeared the words, "Welcome, Mr. Minister Godwin. I believe this is your first visit. How may I assist you in my archives?"

Startled by this unexpected turn, Liev hit the comm-off key as quickly as he could. He stared, agape, into the display. He had never run into anyone live, in real time, during information searches. Was this something for high officials? Minister Godwin, indeed, would seem to have little of the skill needed to navigate the data nodes -- he had little skill of any kind. Was there a shadow information resource at the beck and call of senior

officialdom? Who were these librarians or technicians or information specialists? Whom could he ask about them?

He rubbed his eyes. He was so tired. Randomness. That was all he could recognize now, randomness. He shouldn't be up doing this. He crawled back into bed and fell into a light, troubled sleep in which his exposure for incompetence and then his own demolument -- without rites or mourners -- figured prominently. The Cabil Member scowled at him as he fell.

#

Liev awoke to the comm's alarm chime, unrefreshed, wondering if he had actually slept. The time told him he must have. He sat at the edge of the bed trying to shake off a thick fog of dreamy torpor. His heart skipped beat when it came to him what had happened in the Central Node. Had it really happened? With the morning light, it seemed fanciful. It seemed ridiculous that he should have been cowed. Why didn't he just ask his query when prompted?

He got up, pulled a stiff cup of coffee from his caffè-bar, and sat before his desk comm again, still in his bedclothes. After a couple sips of the thick brew, his fingers now worked with their accustomed wakeful, practiced quickness over the pad. He entered the Godwin passcode and sailed through the gates of the Central Node. After a few more moves through the hierarchies of information, he realized that he didn't recognize where he was. He backed up, trying to remember exactly what he had done during the night. He searched for "The Heuristic Voyager" and came up with nothing -- nothing at all, no references. He must have entered the archives from some other main heading. He went back further, scanning every heading list. Some looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't very well test every one. Think, think. It was no use: he couldn't re-create his steps. He didn't know where he had been.

He got back to the main access menu for the Central Node archives. He thought to try his term searching from the topmost information levels, but this tack proved fruitless -- the headings themselves rarely offered direct hits. He sighed and sat for some moments. Finally, he just began at the beginning, navigating in a way that seemed to make sense, until he got to a broad information base on pre-Irredente history that offered promise.

"Cellular automaton," he queried the database. He got back a number of irrelevancies, but among his results was the phrase "irreducibly complex systems." He selected it. His screen flashed: "Warning: database may include restricted, proscribed, or otherwise illicit subject matter. Proceed with appropriate authorizations and caution. If in doubt, seek clerical guidance or consult your counsel-at-law." Liev gulped and continued.

Apocrypha & tales...

Vasily and the Works, or, The Birth of Vox Orbis

There was once a great ship manufactory run by a woman, Xery, who had a son, Vasily...

Chapter twenty

-six. Pacts

True, there were movements to abort the New Science even as it proceeded. Would that have served? Would you have it, apostate, that I should never have been? I suggest to you that had I not been, nor should you be: for all that I am and all that went into me informed the making of yourselves. Go and tell them, servant of Vas: tell them to embrace all beings extant as expressions of that New Science, which is and was always really the One True Science, the language of making; and tell them to give up their illusory hopes for simplicity and coherence. Knowledge shall neither go backwards nor converge upon an ultimate truth. For the multiverse itself is a being -- above us, around us, mysterious, and always computing toward its unknowable end.

Epistle of the Mediant to Hersey, from Hersey, Vox: Journals (App. IV)

#

Auspex Saggatus X walked slowly back from his necessary toward a stand-up desk that had been placed in his quarters, facing the arched, cut-gem windows overlooking his courtyard. Standing thus was the only time he found physical comfort in the days following his trial. And though he winced, he did not complain. A minion seated next the door looked at him worriedly.

At a soft chime, the minion checked his comm then opened the door to admit the Mens Super.

"I came as quickly as I could, Holiness," he said.

"Your timing is good, as it happens. Please take instructions, advisor. The Holy Yacht shall be readied forthwith for sojourn. Speed is of the essence, so order only so many stores and personnel as are necessary to reach a suitable way-station. Simple fare -- we shall not wait for specialties or blandishments. And to the extent possible, make all these preparations quietly. A simple -- and not false -- rationale may serve the purpose."

"Refurbishment of the yacht, Holiness?"

"Celebratory inspection, something on that order."

"And the destination, Holiness?"

"In time, Mens Super."

"'Ask not,' Holiness?"

"Just so, Mens Super."

"Anything else, Holiness?"

"Yes. Two things. When we are together, like this -- when we work together for the glory of Vas, I am Tyrus. That is my given name, and I would that you would use it."

"Yes Hol...", the advisor gulped. "Yes."

"It will come, in time. Think upon it, and upon what Vas has shown us through the gift of pain, and you will find no difficulty in speaking to me as you would to any man of Vas. It is important, for other reasons, that when we are among others, we respect the usual forms."

"Yes, Holiness."

"That is well, Mens Super. Tomorrow, let us say. The other thing that I ask is that you direct Gregory here as soon as may be convenient to him."

"Yes, Holiness." The adviser began a bow in obeisance before turning to go but was stopped.

"Mens Super?"

"Yes, Holiness."

"By what name were you known prior to your days in training?"

"Jahiri, Grace."

"May another call you such?"

There was a pause. "May I reflect on this, Grace?"

"You would honor me by doing so -- at your leisure, of course."

"I shall attend, Grace."

Gregory arrived with little notice some minutes later. Following the flagellation, the Palace operated in a drama of whispers, glances, and rumor. Old Gregory was the least of anyone's concerns.

"I am setting things in motion, Gregory," Auspex said. "You would no doubt have heard of it soon enough."

"What things, then?" Gregory said.

"I am cleansed, and I must remain free from stain. I cannot do that here, on Pydna, if what you have told me is correct. I have decided on my course."

"You mean you are leaving?"

"I mean I am leaving," Auspex said. "But quietly. That is all I can do to keep them -- you know of whom I speak -- guessing. They would co-opt me in their schemes; I shall deny them that. And I shall go see first-hand what my provincial cleric -- now envoy -- came to warn of. I cannot do that if they know where I am, nor if I appear everywhere behind a train of officials. Officialdom would smother me now when I most need untrammelled access."

"Officialdom will not support this, Tyrus," Gregory said. "They derive their authority from their proximity to you."

"Yet soon they may derive it from other sources," Auspex said. "You believe we are infiltrated already?"

"We are, yes," Gregory said. "Though I believe I have my eyes open where that is concerned and that I can deal with it at an appropriate time. I have taken certain measures already."

"You may judge, then, how to deal with that, Gregory," Auspex said, "but I shall not be here."

Gregory looked worried. "Do you know where you shall go?"

"As it happens, I do not, yet. It is my plan to make no plan, at least not until we are ..." He pointed upward.

"Auspex is blessed to be innocent," Gregory said. "I do not see this plan working as you intend."

"It is unpredictable, and I am Auspex. No one will harm me."

"Tyrus, you must permit me to consider this more fully. I will not stand in your way -- would not dare second guess you -- but I may be able to help you in your plans, if you would permit it. Your sojourns heretofore have been carefully managed and given Admiralty escort. What you propose is... it is full of practical difficulties."

Auspex frowned discontentedly. "Action is what is wanted, Gregory."

"Considered action, Grace. Your opponents are powerful and well-informed."

"Opponents? It sounds strange to say. Him, you mean?" Auspex said.

"If you like," Gregory replied. "There is a 'him', and he is as unpredictable as... the new Auspex in the Palace."

Auspex smiled. "We -- this Church -- have outlived many men. We shall outlive this one."

"Mere survival, however, is a beggar's state," Gregory said. "We must aim higher, Tyrus. Much higher."

#

An elderly Palace kitchen servant stepped off the back loading dock and dropped a compacted cube into the reprocessing bin before heading home for the day. It was just before dusk. He struck a meandering path leading to a sleepy guard station, where he nodded to whoever might be behind the glass and was let out of the complex. From the walled street, the little entrance looked like nothing special, and its blank face offered no obvious means of entering. The street was quiet, and the old man crossed over to a quiet residential neighborhood with a few ground-level shuttered bars and cafes. Some would be opening soon; one in particular, a small way off and not in sight of the Palace complex wall, was on the verge. The old man wanted a drink and made for it.

He did not wear a comm of any kind, so he couldn't check the time. But he had made this trip often over the sols and could time it by his steps. He rounded a corner where an ansible kiosk stood sentry and saw, quite some way down on the opposite side of the street, a heavy, hatted figure coming towards him. He paid the figure no mind. He reached the little bar first, where a sour-faced old woman was pulling back cheerful, hand-made drapes with a placid, space-vessel print to ready the bar for opening. She and the old man made eye contact, and her sour countenance turned surprisingly sweet. She stopped what she was doing to turn the sign and unlock the old front door with its large, beveled-diamond pane. The old man gave the woman a brief, warm embrace, whereupon she pointed to a table, already set up, along the wall near the back. It was only moments before the heavy man from the street entered, with his brimmed hat in his hand, and bowed to the proprietress, who nodded in the direction of the old man, already sitting. The new figure, a rumpled, serious man, held up two fingers to her, and she went to busy herself with the drink order.

The old man was sitting with his hands folded in his lap, facing outwards towards the room, looking oddly solemn. The heavy, younger man nonchalantly pulled out a chair facing the wall. His large back facing the

room lent him the obscurity he evidently wanted.

"Gregory," he said, wheezing a bit from his walk in heavy, mer-wool clothing.

"Jiri," Gregory said. "It is good to see you again." Gregory held out a hand, and the pair shook hands. "Would that the times were better."

"They never were, Gregory. That is where your Church has been mistaken."

"Your view is longer than ours, and so better informed."

"It is wearying, but we adapt," Jiri said.

"Who are you now?"

"Oarsman is still officially up there, no doubt holed up in a Guild station preparing reports," he said, pointing to space. "But I have insurance duties here at the moment. They will keep me busy for a time. Did you get your Edomite?"

"I did, and he has been whisked safely away to other things, by Auspex himself, no less. I take no credit for it."

"I fear he found my hospitality wanting," Jiri said.

"Oh? In what way?"

The big, dark man smiled.

"You have been mischievous, Jiri," Gregory said.

"I let him into an old library, is all. A ship's library." Jiri said. "It didn't suit him at all."

Gregory frowned. "That was not well done," he said. "You played him. Indeed, he arrived on Pydna very disturbed, by accounts."

"I perceived that he was so already. I focused him. I'm sure you people straightened him out."

Gregory cleared his throat and looked away. There was an uncomfortable pause.

"Bugs," Gregory murmured, just audibly.

"What was that?" Jiri said.

"He stood before Auspex and spoke of bugs, plagues. He could not have been in his right mind."

"I could have no idea he was to meet the Auspex in person," Jiri said. "That is very surprising, you must admit."

"I do not blame you, but you underestimate the meaning of faith to those in whom it is deeply instilled."

"You underestimate faith held since beyond memory. We are not your enemy," Jiri said. "We watch. We see faiths rise and fall. We do not intervene, but merely try to survive in the interstices of whatever set of impossible, labyrinthine rules we are subjected to."

The old woman arrived with the drinks. Gregory clutched his glass and stared at it. Finally, he looked away.

"We have very different goals, you and I," Jiri said. "They travel along together, now. Let us leave it at that. I have done for you. What do you have for me?"

"More to ask, but more to give," Gregory said.

Jiri's expression hardened. "Give first. I shall see."

Gregory returned a look, but there was great sadness and compassion in his eyes. "I hardly know how to begin, but I need say little for you to understand. I believe it is of Him, the one of whom we have spoken already..."

Jiri nodded.

"He has turned his attention to... someone is... it's Lindenau, the sanctuary for..."

Jiri looked at Gregory in great alarm. "There is a quarantine," he said. "I know of it. It has been impossible to get information, however. You have... you are able to..."

"I can only say that I believe it is a cover. The 'quarantine' is a euphemism. I cannot tell for what, but now it is the Irredente itself that says there is plague -- not of insects, but infection."

"They use it to prevent anyone... then how do you come to know?"

"I have an inexplicable interest in the mundane," Gregory said. "For some reason, I feel that I find out more from the random and the trivial than I do from official sources. In this case, tariff exceptions, bills of lading, cargo manifests -- Irredente authorities call these nonconforming unfortunates 'cargo,' I am sorry to say."

"I have not heard of this in Transport," Jiri said. "And I can assure you I would have -- that is, if the Minister of Transport knew."

"If you -- or he -- had, you might not have understood," Gregory said. "I believe that that is the point. I am sure that the ships are carefully chosen -- and well paid. But more, I cannot say -- why these people should be moved from Lindenau or where they are going. But I do not think the explanation is innocuous. I believe there is a plan, a program."

Jiri hung his head. "History has a way of being unkind to the most unfortunate," he said.

"The Church has tried to ease their suffering," Gregory said. "That is why Lindenau was given to them. A world just for those who, though blameless, are not -- cannot be -- a part of Vas's plan. No expense or effort has been spared for them, and they are cared for by those who give their lives to do nothing but that."

"My own daughter," Jiri said, "is among them."

Hersey's brow shot up in surprise. "I had no idea," he said. "She is... she is conforming or no?"

"She comforts those who are not," Jiri said. "She is a mother to the least of the least."

"You do not hear from her?"

"We are denied," Jiri said. "All requests are denied. The authorities control communications, and there is no

visitation."

"Yet it would seem that someone has them coming and going," Gregory said. "That tells me that there is no quarantine."

The pair sat silent for a time.

"Thank you, Gregory," Jiri finally said. "I do not want to hear this, but thank you. What do you want from me?"

"One more message to your friend in Admiralty." Gregory leaned in close. "That my principal believes he can travel alone and that plans are being made accordingly. He must be protected. He must be watched."

"Your principal? Why would he leave?" Jiri said. "Where would he go?"

Gregory shook his head, declining to answer.

Jiri shrugged. "I will get my friend the message, but I will not speak for him."

"That is all that I ask," Gregory said. "I see that Madame is polishing a glass -- someone is at the threshold to enter. Perhaps we should speak of other matters."

"No," Jiri said. "I should go. Chatter would be pretense, and I cannot pretend to be anything but burdened by your information. It cannot be good news, and it bodes even worse. Good day, Gregory. Perhaps we shall speak again some time. We are not natural friends."

"You have few, at least in the Irredente. May Vas have mercy on you, Jiri -- and yours."

"And may the God of Gods, Gregory, whom I may not name, favor you -- and Vas."

#

The Church took the long view, any particular Auspex being a blink of the collective eye as far as Church operations were concerned. Thus, it took longer than His Holiness had hoped to ready the Holy Yacht for voyage. The delay made it impossible to contain the news. None of this was helped by the fresh wave of pilgrims that arrived on Pydna, who amplified the chorus of rumor already swirling around Os Divinus and the Palace.

His Holiness ended the growing and unmanageable vigils occurring in the Holy See and extending into Os Divinus proper by appearing at an open-air corpus in full regalia. He did not, however, share with the assembled any particular insight into what had occurred beyond rote recitation of Church teachings and excerpts from the Holy Book of the Body. Since what had occurred was widely taken as miraculous, Auspex's mechanical recitation of the forms merely confirmed what most were inclined to believe anyway: Vas blessed the Church, its ways, and its leader for the benefit of the entire Irredente.

Following the outdoor corpus, His Holiness pulled off his vestments and switched into sack. He then proceeded to an appointment at the Refectory, waving off the ministrations and inquiries of subordinates. His Holiness's new custom appeared to be dining at hall regularly, if not exclusively. The confusion this engendered had not yet resolved itself into new customs for receiving His Holiness at hall. And Auspex didn't help the Palace staff in this regard. He didn't arrive at the same time each meal, he didn't announce his arrival, and he often sat table before entering the line. "Let me be treated as one of you," he had said. But this was not a balm for their wounded pride and vanity, particularly certain of them who wished to rise in the

church.

Gregory, awaiting His Holiness, was seated on a chair outside the refectory doors. "Tyrus, that was well done," he said.

"May Vas be with you, Gregory. It was what had to be done. I had not anticipated the need for it, but it speaks well of the people all the same."

"The Palace could not continue to manage so many. Our people were having trouble maintaining empathy for those we serve."

"Let us go in and sit, Gregory. I asked for you because I am sorry to say that the I still have need of you."

Gregory's rheumy old eyes shot up in surprise.

"No, friend," said His Holiness. "That is done, and I doubt it shall recur. They would think I enjoy it otherwise. No, other matters. More important matters. Lunch chief among them." He patted the old vox on the somewhat stooped old back and urged him forward into the hall and toward the meal line.

After they had sat at a bench and made the sign of the tau-and-lambda, they set about their meal, speaking as they went. Novices, acolytes, and postulants, as well as voces and other Palace officials, constantly shot curious glances toward the pair, but no one came to sit near them. Rumors of the impending voyage led them to suspect that important plans were afoot.

"I have never in my life seen so many," said Gregory.

" 'Bugs swarm the carcass to beget new life,' " quoted His Holiness.

"Then have we come to the end? You have a habit of quoting aptly," said Gregory.

"Friend," said His Holiness, "I cannot see into the plan of Vas, but I can see what is put before me to do."

"You were not so dramatic in former days," said Gregory. "I cannot get used to it. And despite what you may think, I am not used to change. I am a watcher and listener."

"You were born poor, Gregory, yet you live in splendor."

"I do not see it, Tyrus. I cannot see beyond my thoughts. I am the poorest of the poor, by birth and by vows, and the least able to appreciate splendors. Nothing beyond my soul and the salvation of our kind matters to me, and I do not rate the poverty of my youth differently from the abundance here: I need only enough to nourish me."

"In a better hegemony, a man like you would be Auspex."

"It is better left to the worldly."

"I deserve that, though I should make some show of denying it. At any rate, you may be called to serve."

"Eh? What's that, Tyrus?"

Auspex now spoke low. "After I leave, someone must do the rites and perform the corpus for the masses in my stead."

"There are many able men, Tyrus -- and younger. I do not want this."

"I am Auspex, Gregory, and I must make decisions that I deem best."

"But what is the point, Tyrus? Why may not a younger man fulfill his ambitions and the will of Vas?"

"Because any other man I appoint to act in my stead will not see those ambitions fulfilled. He will be killed."

"Tyrus!"

Heads turned their direction.

"Hush, Gregory," whispered Auspex. "Listen to me now. I must appoint you Auspex Temporator to do the things here that I cannot do in body. I do not believe that anyone will mistake you for ambitious or desirous of more. I certainly did not until I achieved the High Office of Vas. None believe you are worth killing. If the Cabil plans to seize control of the Irredente, it will seek the approval of the church. Merely as Temporator, you will not be empowered to provide that, and I will not give it."

"Then they will... surely they would not try to..."

"Not at first, no, they won't murder an Auspex."

"Tyrus, I cannot believe the things you say to me. Even I have not suggested..."

"It is difficult to be alive, Gregory, and to make the bold stroke no matter the cost. You are touched, Gregory, and indeed were never fit to be Auspex. I knew that when I was in your classes. I believe that you too lament that a man like you is not Auspex. No, do not deny it, Gregory. Look into your heart, and you will see it is so. Other men know this about you, Gregory. By Vas's grace, you have been spared the pain of knowing the failure of goodness. But now you must know. You are important, but you are important because you are perhaps the freest from stain of any among us here. That much, too, is well known."

Gregory looked away, pained.

Auspex continued: "Those who would seize power must consider very carefully before harming you -- the Fraternus, I know, would openly rebel, and the Church couldn't very well abandon its intellectual font. You act surprised. You have produced most of their leadership -- the seeds you sowed -- and they quietly revere you. You have the purest belief in the Conforming Body of any man in the church -- pure, but not malicious. I must ask you something: you knew of Hersey, didn't you?"

"I knew something of Hersey," Gregory said.

"You arranged for him to meet with me," Auspex said.

"He had important matters to raise, even if he didn't fully appreciate their scope."

"There is the proof of your importance, Gregory. But for you, I might have no inkling of the things that are soon to befall us. You and I should never have spoken of these matters. I should not be... taking these steps."

"Hersey? But he was... he had no..."

"'Great matters are written simply,' Gregory."

"You sent him away, however," Gregory said. "And do not tell me that you honored him by the Bombazine."

"I have told you: there were many reasons to handle it thus. It is true, however, that I did not appreciate them all, nor fully, at the time. In this, Vas has spoken too, for I believe it is the plan of Vas that I pursue in going out from Pydna now."

"I am to be Auspex Temporator, then?"

"I believe it will be for a short time only."

Gregory looked intently at Auspex, whose eyes showed grim determination and dire sadness.

"Then this may be my last task before Vas," Gregory said. "That is what you are saying."

"Yes, Gregory. It may be. As it may be mine."

"Let us pray, then, Tyrus, that we may execute Vas's will."

Many eyes turned to see the two men, tears streaming from closed eyes, clasp hands across the table and pray in unison. There was a rustle as robes were swept aside, a crash as a bench somewhere toppled over accidentally, and a susurrations as every living soul in the hall -- many of the young confused and tardy -- dropped to one knee, facing their Auspex and Vox Gregory, and likewise prayed.

Finally, Auspex rose from his bench.

"Arise, bodies of Vas," he declared with practiced loudness. "Feed your bodies and derive strength therefrom. Fortify yourselves for a time of trial. Be faithful to Vas and pure in body. Attend!" And with these words, he strode from the hall. Gregory looked up at the ceiling beseechingly.

Chapter twenty

-seven. Regulated Industries

Though the Irredente rejected 5th Empire practices with regard to bioforming, it embraced a certain manner of profligacy: what we might term bureau-forming. It is open to question what is worse, a stunted genovariant or a stultified bureaucrat. Each may live out its days in a seeming stupor; each may die unknown to its fellow beings. Perhaps the worst is the being that might have been so much more.

The Commentaries

#

Galinda, seated, looked into his holopit at the Intelligence Committee's Liaison. Liev sat at his regular office desk, a bare, sad wall behind him.

"You don't look well, Liev," Galinda said.

"Just tired, sir," Liev said. "I am... I am having trouble with the datachat. I have exhausted my own resources, sir. I am sorry. I have failed you."

Galinda gazed impassively at the forlorn functionary. "Is it a want of initiative, Liev?"

Liev looked startled. "No, Esteemed Member. Far from it."

"I know that, Liev," Galinda said. "That is why you are still the man for the job. What is the problem, however?"

"Sir? Well, in part the Proscriptions, sir."

"Which can be gotten around, Liev," Galinda said. "As I believe we discussed."

"Yes, sir, in theory. But I am told that the card is empty, or else that it may contain patterns too difficult to decode, or both. It may be old science -- well, the Director at the Office of Cryptology says... that is to say... he said there was something..."

"The New Science -- Fifth Empire science," Galinda said. "That is what the old science was called in its day. And I'm sure he refused to get involved with it. Thoroughly illicit. Interesting that he should mention it, however. A very risky business for a bureau man." Galinda took a moment to consider. "It's the same old problem, Liev. We don't have the capabilities we should have -- that those in the Beyond clearly do have. It's an untenable position for us."

"But my contacts indicated that even if we had the... er, science, we might not have the computational power to break the code."

"Hmmm," Galinda said. "There is another way to go about this. You must see our man on Innisfree. Yes, you must go now to Innisfree."

"Innisfree, sir?"

"I shall not go into all of it here, Liev, but we are not entirely without old-fashioned... expertise in the Irredente. We can still copy, bypassing the methods and systems that His Holiness cannot bless. I... we have..."

Innisfree has proven to be a convenient place to concentrate our efforts in that regard. You will see our man Saussure there; he's working on something for me right now, as it happens. I'm sure you'll find that interesting too."

"You think he has access to..."

"He's interested in science, all science. Too much so for his own good, in fact. He'd be in exile if I hadn't stopped it -- an innocent mistake, but he lacks the broader view. Remember that, Liev."

Liev gulped. "Sir?"

"I simply refer to the fact that persons in extremis are the most grateful of assistance," Galinda said. "And that any man may serve the ends of Vas, if properly controlled."

"Yes, sir."

"You're a fish out of water, Liev," Galinda said, startling Liev. "Committee Liaison isn't the appropriate role. I'm sure you have felt that."

"I have tried, Esteemed Member, to be of use..."

"But you're not where... where the Cabil needs you. As Liaison you're neither here nor there. What is needed is focus. Access. Credentials."

"Sir?"

"You'll have no real authority on Innisfree as Committee Liaison -- such titles mean something here, on Pydna, but they don't mean anything out there. Innisfree is not even fully in -- it's not a core world, you know. If you go to Innisfree, it must be as a representative of Government. It must be... as the Cabil's man in Government, Liev. I'm sure you understand me. Loyalty, Liev."

"Is this... a promotion, sir?"

"If being Deputy Minister under a fool may be deemed a promotion, then so be it."

#

Did he know? Liev couldn't be sure. Did Galinda know what Liev had done with the datachat? Was that why Liev was moved over? If it came to light, it would be blamed on Godwin, on the Ministry. Liev felt time rushing upon him, working to reveal his blunder. Every day that passed put the answer further from his reach and Hoarson's disastrous leak closer to being discovered... by someone. Someone who would want to know why a package of noise was wrapped in a cloak of probably breakable encryption. Hoarson's encoding would only draw attention to the transmission. He couldn't disclose the secret, not to Galinda, not to Godwin, not to anyone. Hoarson had no reason to tell anyone, but whoever Hoarson was relying on may have leaked too. Vas, what a mess.

Deputy Minister Liev. He couldn't have dreamt such a script. He understood that it had nothing to do with the merits. He knew he had failed spectacularly. Indeed, he now understood that none of the appointed positions related much to merits -- that's why a Godwin was possible. Liev was now supposed to play a role, just as Godwin was. It was clear that Godwin understood this, if he understood little else. Or perhaps he flattered himself that it was his own importance that got Galinda's attention. That was possible too. Vas, what a mess.

Liev's ostensibly upward appointment was done and carried out in a few days -- someone else got whisked from one desk to another, and Liev got whisked from the Committee offices to the Ministry of Intelligence. There was little to tell these offices apart, though impressive flags now stood in the Ministry lobby where a functionary sat, and Liev sported a flag pin in his lapel. The functionary kept forgetting Liev's name, or got him mixed up with someone else.

Either Galinda knew and was engineering Liev's exposure, or else he didn't know, in which case Liev was simply driving himself crazy. If this 'Saussure' on Innisfree had an answer, Liev wanted to go get it. But the data chat and its possible interception had to wait on these mindless, interminable meetings. Now, Liev sat, silent, next to Galinda, in the anteroom in the Government Center for Intelligence, trying to keep from fidgeting.

Setting up the meeting required finesse. According to the forms, a Cabil member such as Galinda formally did not have rank to summon the Government's Intelligence Minister to his offices; so Liev had to engineer the call from Godwin requesting a high-level intelligence briefing. Galinda ground his teeth audibly, which Liev had learned was a bad sign. Liev caught himself fidgeting. He hoped to leave for Innisfree in Quadrant III on the morrow, where he might get answers. Galinda had insisted on this meeting with Godwin despite Liev's incoherent urgings that Innisfree shouldn't wait. The strange doings at the Palace upset Galinda quite unaccountably, from Liev's perspective. Liev had the data chat on his mind and could think of nothing else. He wanted to be away.

"Minister Godwin will see you now," cooed a tall, bony woman with superbly translucent skin, clad in tight clothes that showed off various highly impressive parts.

The Esteemed Member popped up from his lobby chair impatiently, full of suppressed rage. Liev stood up somewhat sheepishly, awaiting a further cue from Galinda.

"About Vas-damn time," Galinda muttered.

The pair were escorted into the Minister's gleaming, minimalist office, Liev turning color as he slid past the glorious butterfly secretary and on into Godwin's office.

"Ah, there you are," said the Minister, standing at his desk and extending a hand to Galinda. "I'm so glad we could have this meeting."

Galinda nodded and did not take the proffered hand. Godwin feigned a patrician cough and used his hand to cover his mouth. Liev stood back a distance and waited on the others to sit. The butterfly caught his eye and winked as she closed the office door. Liev quickly averted his gaze.

"Intelligence has been putting together its report on doings with Auspex at the Palace," Godwin began.

"Yes, yes," Galinda barged in. "I know all about that. Liev has briefed me. What is Intelligence going to do?"

"I'm afraid I don't take your meaning, Esteemed Member," said the Minister.

"I mean simply, Minister," said Galinda, "what steps will Government take? What are our -- your -- plans? The High Holy Auspex has set about a sojourn, and in a strange hurry."

"Ah, plans," said the Secretary. "I believe Mr. Liaison Liev, performing, er, jointly, on behalf of, has, um, formulated a... um..."

Liev, still flushed and red, couldn't seem to regain his usual paleness this morning. "What Minister is alluding

to, Esteemed Member, is an outline I prepared... I believe it was in the report I provided to you..."

"Uh-huh. Yes, I saw Mr. Deputy Secretary Liev's report. Is that what's going up to Her Excellency?"

For the first time, the Minister's countenance appeared uncertain, even fearful. "Why, I have already... passed along our... recommendations..."

"Perfect, then," said Galinda, surprising the Minister. "Then let the Government do precisely what Mr. Liev has suggested. In the meantime, let us discuss what should be done."

"To be done? You mean..." began the Minister.

"I mean, this is too important to be left solely in the hands of the executive. The Cabil itself has authority to authorize intelligence activities, and you must agree -- I say, you must agree, Minister-- that if it's technically not within your jurisdiction to address, or if it's something not formally presented to Her Excellency, you are not necessarily bound to raise it at Primus House."

"Indeed, Esteemed Member. Outside my..."

"Jurisdiction, Minister," said Liev.

"Just so," said the Minister. He gulped. "What does the Cabil -- as a whole, of course -- what are you..."

"I need some of your people, and they must report directly to me on this. I say, I need people, and it has to be efficient and clean. The Palace is the key, Minister."

The Minister appeared confused.

"We would never refuse a request from the Cabil to... utilize resources at our command... to..."

"No, Minister," Galinda said. "We've got to act -- you and I. There are certain things that must remain quiet, Minister, as I'm sure you of all people may appreciate."

"Oh, ah, yes. Quite proper, Esteemed Member. Intelligence, quite." A thin line of wet beads appeared on his tall forehead.

"So Liev here can round up the people we need, then. Good Intell people. People who are loyal to the cause of the Irredente as represented by the authority of the Cabil. Liev?"

"Yes, Esteemed Member. I can have that together almost immediately. They wouldn't all necessarily come from.. the upper ranks..."

"I would be shocked if they did, Liev. In fact, I'd be shocked if any of them did. Put it together immediately, before you leave for Innisfree, and run it from space."

The Minister watched the pair but said nothing, evidently aware that the meeting had turned away from his control. The discussion continued with his occasional interjections of murmured official approval. Galinda spoke of a revised intelligence operation covering the Palace, with Liev coordinating various parts but everything ultimately coming back to Galinda -- with updates to the Minister as events warranted. Liev occasionally darted a glance at the Minister -- nominally his boss -- but had no doubt who now ran the government's intelligence operations. He saw in the Minister's face the same recognition, mixed with an odd serenity, as if a large weight had been lifted from his chest.

"And," Galinda said, "we need -- I should say, you need, Mr. Godwin -- a skilled analyst for the information we generate. A Mens can be an invaluable tool when used correctly. I believe Mr. Liev can arrange it without difficulty. Someone connected with the better families, perhaps, and trained in refined manners."

"Delighted, Galinda, of course," Godwin said. "I've long said that the Écolé produced superb people..."

#

Government in the form of the First Consul was at least as worried about His Holiness and matters at the Palace as Galinda was. Yve had called a full cabinet-level meeting to discuss the report and recommendations from her Ministry of Intelligence regarding events at the Palace and the continuing mystery of where His Holiness intended to go and what he intended to do.

Cabinet-level meetings were held on the first floor of Primus House, in a secure area at the end of the great main hall. Official press would follow the arriving Ministers, Chiefs, Heads, Secretaries, etc. as they arrived at the pillared main entrance and made their way through the hall, aides in tow; but a wall of security blocked communications and unauthorized persons near the end of the hall. The Cabinet Chamber had no windows and was cut off from the universe as nearly as possible.

"Mr. Godwin, my office previously distributed your report and recommendations to the entire Cabinet," said Her Excellency. "Is there something to add?"

"Only, Madam Yve, that our unofficial take is that His Holiness may have suffered some health setback that would explain his actions."

A murmur of laughter rose from one end of the room.

"Indeed, Mr. Secretary," said Yve. "Gaping lash wounds, perhaps?"

The laughter died.

"I meant, um, er, Madam Yve, no disrespect to His Holiness intended, but the role of Intelligence is to look at all..."

"I know precisely what you meant, and I will inform all of you that His Holiness does not suffer from mental deficiencies. Approaching this from that direction would earn us only ridicule. The Church takes care of its own affairs as regards its people; let's leave it at that. Government must be wary of being seen to intervene in internal Church affairs. The appearance of non-intervention is the approach we shall take."

"Of course, Madam," said Minister Godwin. Several pairs of eyes looked at him disdainfully while he quickly pretended to busy himself whispering to an aide.

"Intelligence," Yve continued, "recommends keeping His Holiness' ship in view at all times, either with Navy or Transport Guild vessels, along with various other kinds of surveillance here and in space. All that is sensible enough unless and until there's a jump. As far as I know, we still don't know where His Holiness is going. We could lose them quickly if they jump, and it could take months to find them if they're actively trying to evade us.

In any event, in my mind, the biggest problem we face is not that Auspex is on sojourn, but the unrest and uncertainty attendant upon his secrecy about it. The masses like Auspex Tours because they all want to be visited by His Holiness. It can only foment discontent that no one knows anything except that he's not visiting them."

"There's his safety," said a woman's voice from the table.

"There's always that issue, whether here or out there," replied Her Excellency. "Furthermore, should he die, he gets replaced. That in itself is pomp and circumstance -- it occupies people's minds, it makes them interested and excited. His death does not concern me. His unpredictability, however, does -- it should concern us all. I want you all to consider what would happen if either Government or the Cabil suddenly decided to go off on some unexplained ramble. The markets would tumble, transport would grind to a halt, crime would set in, you name it. The Church is the third leg of the stool in the Irredente."

"I'm surprised," drawled another minister, "that we haven't had people inside on this."

"Minister Godwin?" Her Excellency said.

"Well, Minister, we did do," the Minister of Intelligence said, "but our man seems to have been rather summarily escorted away. And I believe it is considered unseemly for us to have done it at all."

"I'm going to ask a strange question of the room, ladies and gentlemen, and I don't want this matter to go beyond this room," Her Excellency said. "Does anyone have anything of interest to share with us about bugs?"

"Eavesdropping, you mean?" said Trade.

"No, madam Trade. Bugs. Quite literally." Several in the room exchanged perplexed glances. "Transport here is having problems, yes?"

"Uh, yes, Excellency, electronic malfunctions on ships. Some are connecting the problems to an infestation of some new kind of invasive pest from the outliers," said Transport. "And there are the general nuisance issues. People in enclosed spaces aren't fond of creepy-crawlies. 'What's bred in the bone...' " Some laughter.

"Is that all? Anyone?" said Yve. There was silence. "Well, someone in the Church has been interested for Vas knows why, but then the matter was dropped. I have no idea if it means anything. My aid, Grace, tried to pursue it and hit a dead end. Mr. Godwin," she looked significantly at Intelligence. "Your people denied us access."

"I believe that was all worked out, Madam, following our conversation," he said.

"With all due respect, I believe not, Mr. Godwin."

The Secretary of Intelligence sniffed. "Then it shall be done, Madam Excellency. We have no interest in bugs, I assure you, but you may have what we have."

"Mr. Godwin," Yve continued. "Please give Grace the proper codes at the conclusion of our meeting today."

"Excellency," he said, "I only wish I could. I will have to get with my people on this. But I'm sure we can get those expeditiously."

Yve glared at him. "Ladies and gentlemen, I have now wasted yet more time on a topic I deem completely baffling in its nagging unresolvedness, but there it is. Let us move on..."

"Excellency?" Old, rotund Regulated Industries, Mr. Cantor, stood. An old-fashioned, gleaming silver comm chain was festooned across his pin-striped girth.

"You have the floor, sir," said Yve.

"Ahem. Signs, ladies and gentlemen," he intoned. "Symbols. Flagellation, here, on Pydna. Not in my day, I assure you. The grandsires, however. No, great grandsires. Or further back. Restrictions and the Church. His Holiness supreme. The way things were. Trade, commerce: at a standstill. Impossible to go back. Dangerous tidings. Sojourn a critical move in the game. Craft, stratagem, wheels within wheels. Most holy. Some more equal -- bad idea."

A stony silence ensued as RI sat, august and self-content. Blanks looks, glances all around, nervousness.

"Industries, we thank you," said Yve, finally. "The Minister suggests that our progress over these several centuries may come undone." Yve met his eye, and he nodded sagaciously. "With all due respect, however, I disagree." He nodded politely to her again. "Even if the actions of His Excellency portend a more... a period of... a retrenchment on regulation of... commercial... or industrial..."

"And morals," said a voice at the table.

"Yes" and "Hear, hear" murmured other voices.

"Technical devices!" said another voice.

"Well, His Holiness must be respected where the Code of Proscriptions is concerned. But we're getting ahead of ourselves here. The Palace has given us no indication... all we have is the flagellation..."

"Ahem!" coughed Mr. Cantor, Regulated Industries. "Excuse me, Madam. So sorry. Pray, continue."

"There's no..." Her Excellency lost her train of thought and frowned. "No one noticed these matters for the agenda today. I will instruct my people to study all this. We will take it up at the next meeting. Rest assured, ladies and gentlemen, that Government and Church are still separate in the Irredente, and I will take all steps necessary to preserve the balance that has been so carefully maintained. I know the history here, too, and I don't see a return to the past as even a remote possibility. This is one man, one Auspicial Tenure at the Palace. We will get to the bottom of it, and we will impress upon His Holiness the need to maintain good order and stability -- and, yes, trade too. Let's table the other business today. I've got a busy schedule this morning. If anyone has any action items, please forward them to Grace. I will review them." She glanced at the steward.

"All rise!" said the steward.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," Yve said, then strode from the room through her private door.

She called Grace alone into her office, a level below her private apartments but connected to it by a tiny lift. Like her apartments, her office overlooked Primus House Gardens and, beyond, her personal spaceport. Today, big billowing clouds rolled over the grounds, impressing their roiling pattern on the grasses and plantings.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am," said Grace. "I had no..."

"Sandbagged!" Yve said. "Sandbagged! Something went seriously awry in that room."

"Madam, I don't think you were sandbagged," Grace said. "I think you were being warned."

"By Regulated Industries, you mean? The inscrutable Mr. Cantor? Why do we suffer him?"

"Yes, Excellency. The Guilds want him -- that's their price. I grant you that he's the wiliest of the group, but he's always favored Government interests even when he's pursued other interests too. I think he was trying not to embarrass us."

"Me, you mean," said Yve.

"Yes, Excellency."

Yve sounded bitter. "Well, Grace, did I embarrass myself? Was my skirt crooked or anything?"

"I don't think he would raise the issue of the flagellation if he didn't really believe it was a problem. We..."

"I."

"You appeared to dismiss him. Even then, he let you off pretty easy. He's got a lot of friends, both in the Cabil hall and in the civil service -- out there in space, too -- on the ships, in the Navy. Ma'am, I think we... I think you have to... I recommend..."

"For Vas's sake, spit it out, Grace."

"We need to know what's going on in the Palace, but Intell has pretty clearly locked us out and doesn't want us in. Mr. Cantor has a lot of connections -- maybe we should use them."

Her Excellency chewed on her lip, her habit when most in doubt.

"The Minister of Intelligence has a lot of dirt on his lapel," Yve said, pondering. "Godwin is not with us."

"Yes, Excellency, that is the word."

"The word! It's written all over his patrician, condescending face. Vas, I need intell for Intell!"

"Is that an order, Ma'am? I have a friend on Cantor's staff."

Her Excellency looked at Grace. "Talk to no one. I'm going to speak with Harold on this. You and I will talk again later. Inform my Chief of Staff that my next meeting has to be put off or cancelled."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Grace?"

"Yes, Excellency?"

"You're the best person I've got -- well, you and Harold. I can't interfere with the civil service list, but I have made it known how valuable you have been to me during my tenure. Your loyalty is..."

"Thank you, Ma'am. I understand," Grace said. "The permanent staff is also very concerned, however. There's a saying in the civil service that if enough water pours in, we grab our pots and bail too."

"Surely it's not to that point, Grace, but I thank you," Yve said.

Grace shrugged and left.

Chapter twenty

-eight. Admiral Valinder

Poenican Wars: A series of battles culminating in the victory by space forces of the newly-organized Irredentist hegemony over once-ascendant 5th Empire merchant classes and aligned irregular forces affected by Irredentist restrictions on trade in technology and bioengineered componentry. Irredentist forces, led by Edgar fam. Burgredde, of Embarus, Captain in the Irredentist Navy, commanding a squadron of commandeered or captured 5th Empire war vessels, launch surprise attack during feint by Embarus in which Embarus is seen to be attacked by several vessels in fact under its command. Embarus in swift and decisive maneuver through the heart of enemy vessels in which all ship's weapons are brought to bear in one potentially self-destructive barrage.

Barr's Encyclopedia of the Known Universe, 6th Emp. Ed. (abridged).

#

Lady Arlette sat alone at her desk, troubled, having cleared her aides out to give her space to breathe. Internal affairs she knew how to handle; she was, after all, a consummate insider. The preeminent member of the Cabil intervening directly in Admiralty affairs -- or so it appeared -- was without precedent. She resisted her first impulse to convene her own top people to advise her because she had already been embarrassed by her ignorance before First Consul Yve. Too, she wasn't clear whom Galinda may have spoken to among her own people. She couldn't very well go to Galinda or his people directly, at least not without understanding more about what he was doing and why. It didn't make sense to her, since he was a devout exponent of the Word of Vas and had already proven himself a friend to Admiralty. He had smoothed the way for procurement of improved weaponry; had without exception backed her own recommendations for reducing the allocation of resources to Guild protection; had publicly commended her choices for senior posts. Was he a friend to Admiralty or not?

She now felt acutely the loneliness of her position, as well as the ceaseless responsibility. She was too old to seek anyone's else's help; she was the senior figure now. No. There was one whom she could trust and who's advice she could get.

"Mr. Simmons, please step in," she said into her comm, and when he had arrived: "Is Admiral Valinder currently with the squadron?"

"The squadron has returned to the home system, Ma'am," he said. "He was to come planetside at the earliest opportunity, relative to matters at the Palace, as you ordered per Government's request, Ma'am."

"Then please determine when he shall be planetside and ask, with my compliments, that he communicate with me personally. No, strike that, Simmons. Arrange with my personal steward that Admiral Valinder shall dine with me at my private apartment at the earliest opportunity. Send the details to my comm. Tell my steward no fish. No meat of any kind."

It was on the next day that the luncheon was to occur. The First Lady appeared in her offices unusually early, in rumpled garb suggesting she had been working through the night. She remained shut up with no visitors or aides through the morning, then called for a car well ahead of the scheduled luncheon with Valinder, from which it would naturally be inferred that she required her ablutions at home. She anticipated the driver as he settled down at the Admiralty pickup area, and she practically pushed him aside to clamber in. He lifted and sped away.

Just blocks from Admiralty, she directed him off their route and toward a small row of exclusive shops. She had him park the lev-car and await her. She quickly disappeared into the glittering shopfronts, and the driver settled in for his wait, hat pulled down over his eyes. Unknown to the driver, some minutes later she reappeared down the block and out a side door of the end-most shop, where a poky ground-taxi appeared. She directed the taxi to a block of small, stately townhouse residences in a quiet lane some short way off. She gave the driver a handsome credit and a comm code to reach for her. She carried nothing with her -- no comm device, no scroller -- and she had removed from behind her ear the small exciter portion of her comm bud.

"They say, 'what is it?' Ma'am," said the taxi driver. "Sounds like a big-wig."

"Please relay to them, 'Iolanthe's child has arrived to see the nymph,'" Arlette said. The driver turned around to peer at her dubiously. "Just do it, driver," she said. He shrugged, turned back to his dash, and spoke the message.

In a few moments, a gloved steward burst through the outer doors of the townhouse and trotted down the steps as quickly as he gracefully could. He opened the taxi door and offered Arlette a hand rising from the car. When she refused, he bowed slightly and held out an arm directing her inward. She took the short flight of steps and entered with no delay or fanfare, not even glancing to see if anyone were on the street. It wouldn't have mattered -- she looked completely anonymous except, perhaps, for the lithe smallness of her person.

She was shown, with many encomiums and solicitations, to a beautiful, paneled office of the old sort, with a desk carved from some exotic, gnarled material, and sitting chairs modeled on those found in captain's quarters on spaceships. It was only moments before her host arrived, somewhat the worse for wear and evidently surprised by her call. He was an old man now, and he bore the unmistakeable scars of long service in space.

"Ladyship," Admiral Valinder said, bowing slightly, "this is an unusual visit. This little house has never met a First of the Admiralty. I welcome you, of course." As he spoke, he eyed her unkempt, androgynous garb.

"Please sit, Valinder," Arlette said. "I only wish it were a happy visit. It is not."

"No," he said. "Perhaps I am not as surprised as all that, when it comes to it. Surprised at where we meet, but not at the reason or your secrecy and precautions."

Her brow shot up. "You know, then?"

"I know that our Auspex himself recognizes the threat," Valinder said. "That in itself is unbelievable to me. I did not think I would live to see such a thing."

"You mean... you have information..."

"I cannot tell you how, Lady, but I know why he is leaving. He is leaving so that he will not be a tyrant's tool. I thought it mad. But here you are. And there are whispers. My aides are collecting information now, but I believe I cannot count on all of my officers, or even the half of them, if it comes to resisting him."

"Galinda," she said.

"Of course," Valinder said. "He is taking control."

She sank into a chair and appeared dazed.

"A moment, Ma'am," he said. "I shall get us a drink." He pounded a fist on the wall. When a servant appeared, Valinder whispered commands. "We are comm-free in this room, Ma'am," he said. It was only moments later that a serving girl appeared with the tray. Valinder indicated by so many gestures that she should give Her Ladyship a tumbler of water. "If your father were alive," Valinder said when the girl had curtsied and left, "he would have none of it. He'd throttle them their disloyalty." Valinder sat in the other chair.

"It was another time, however," Arlette said.

"Perhaps," Valinder said. "But no time is as simple as it will seem later. We will be judged, fairly or unfairly, on what is recorded of us now, not on what actually happened. Those of us who truly follow Vas's plan will be made to seem traitors. It is no different than the petty quarrels shipboard; it is simply for higher stakes."

"My father once advised me to bend my principles to attain the higher ends of Vas," Arlette said. "Was that not a betrayal of those ends equal to Galinda's?"

"Not if you believed it righteous at the time, Lady," Valinder said. "Besides, all of us know that we might have acted differently had we not wanted power. Vas's plan does not seem to have perfected us entirely. Be at peace with yourself, Ma'am. It is a leader who is wanted at Admiralty now."

Arlette held her chin aloft and considered. "You know more than you let on, sir," she said.

"I am loyal to you, Ma'am, after my loyalty to the Irredente," he said. "What I know doesn't matter. What I do, I do in a small way for Man."

"And what is that, Valinder?"

"I watch," he said. "I am watching His Holiness, and I will use all my resources to protect him."

"Will not Galinda do the same?" she said. "But for different ends?"

"He may try," Valinder said. "But he doesn't control space -- not yet. Auspex knows as much, which is why he goes there first. He was better off risking his fate to the forces we control than to Galinda's."

Arlette started. "You don't suggest that Galinda would... I believed him a man of honor -- and man of Vas."

Valinder looked her right in the eyes. "Everyone knows that Her Ladyship is devout," he said. "And that professions of piety may substitute for other virtues or cover other sins in her Admiralty."

Arlette stood from her chair, evidently ready to storm out. "False piety finds no favor with me, sir," she said, her cheeks flashing.

Valinder was calm before her fiery demeanor. "Discerning falseness is another matter, Ma'am," he said. "I am no better at it than most. Leadership is often dispiriting rather than inspiring. I never suspected Galinda, either, though I was in no good position to judge of the man. And of the fervor purported by many in my fleet, it is something I have seen before, it comes and goes with the winds. I discounted it."

Arlette paced the carpet. "Admiralty has given the Cabil -- Galinda's Intelligence Committee -- free access to our own intelligence information. He probably has internal passcodes to our own data nodes -- I wouldn't be at all surprised."

Valinder looked shocked. "Indeed, Ma'am," he said. "You were right to exercise caution coming here, then."

"You think I have made a mistake," she said.

"Ladyship, I know you have made a mistake, because I now know that Galinda is dangerous. The task, I believe is to fix the mistake before it is too late."

"As you say, Valinder, we control space."

"I hope we do, but the only inducements I have to offer are advancement, promotion, rank. I believe that Galinda has much more. He must be offering tangible things, like credits and planetary tracts, things that he can deliver when... if he succeeds. Or worse things. Ladyship, I have heard..."

"Yes, Valinder," she sighed. "Out with it."

"He skims on illicit trade, and he is probably tied up with running skins. He appears to have control of some Guildships, cargo liners."

"People, you mean?"

Valinder eyed her cautiously. "Not just people... and not just nonconforms. Others... remnants, illegals... slaves."

She arched a brow at him. "Genovariants," she said. "Abominations."

Valinder held out his hand. "Call them what you will. I know they are available at Guild ports, if you have the right information. I've had crewmen and officers come back with... they've been involved in rough trade. You will pardon me, Ma'am, for not providing you any details."

"He is a monster," she said. "A monster trafficking in filth and abomination. He is all that the Irredente fights against. His path is the opposite of the Plan of Vas."

"He represents himself to be all that is right, however," Valinder said. "And those in the know who are with him perpetuate the fiction for him. Those who aren't..."

"Believe him," she said, rueful. "As I have. And help him."

"The only difference between those with faith and those who feign it is the interior voice that others cannot hear," Valinder said. "Ma'am, I have... certain faith. It is not the same as yours, and certainly not as vigorous, but it is sustaining to me. I, too, believe that Vas planned great things for Man and for the Irredente, but I believe that we have no hand in attaining it. If the plan succeeds, it will be because it was a good plan, even if not perspicuous to us. If the plan fails, we shall have failed also, and we may be in no position to judge. If I may say so, Ladyship, the Plan of Vas may already have failed: Galinda may just be the messenger. That which Vas sought -- safety for our species in its renormalized form -- may be lost as evidenced by the fact of people such as Galinda living among us. Surely, the existence of such hypocrites and would-be tyrants cannot be counted any great success. One must ask why a species that devours its own should be suffered to perpetuate its genomic code."

Perhaps she had been listening at the beginning of this oration, which must surely have alarmed her had she taken it in; but Lady Arlette appeared to be lost among other thoughts well before its end. Valinder sat quietly, neither looking at her nor quite looking away. She was a woman of great beauty -- now a somewhat harsh beauty as age began to give the skeleton its due, but undeniably a beauty -- and no man in her presence could fail to be drawn in. He did not mind, for he could, at his age, frankly admire without disappointment. Written on her face now, however, was a recognition that all that she had attained had been small, and

perhaps even a mistake. She had every attribute of power except the thing itself.

She paused in her reverie to discover him watching her. She drew in a deep breath. "We must take such steps as we may," she said.

"We cannot meet this way again," he said. "It harms us in many ways -- for you to deign to make such a visit, for the two of us to be seen as aligned. We do better acting in our own spheres, me up there and you here. I believe we are in agreement, however, as to the threat."

"I can provide you a comm code..."

"Breakable," Valinder said. "No good codes are permitted, and Galinda has a strong grip over intelligence matters."

"An intermediary, perhaps," she said.

"You are too important," Valinder said. "They will track your communications however sent. They will assume anyone outside of Admiralty you speak to now is a spy."

"We have made a trap for ourselves," she said. "We have tied the noose of restrictions so tight that it chokes us."

"In a better galaxy, they would simply have kept us safe," Valinder said. "But yes. Vas did not change some essential part of Man that bridles at restriction and is lured by the illicit. Galinda has played on that -- may himself be its prisoner, for all I know. The Irredente is now two hegemonies: the one where people of honest faith live and try to hold fast to their verities, and the real one."

Arlette started at these words. "You believe we have already lost, then?" she said.

"I believe, Lady, that Vas's plans and words are often inscrutable. I hope we have not lost. My honest faith clings to a thread. I shall still try to climb, however. Perhaps your stout rope would have been more suitable."

"I shall cling to it till the bitter end," she said. "As my father did."

Lady Arlette and Admiral Valinder both executed a tau-and-lambda. She sighed. "I am sorry to have deprived you of a luncheon," she said. "Under the circumstances, I should perhaps go home and eat it alone and cold."

"If you, too, lose faith, Lady, then all is truly lost," Valinder said. "Revenge will provide you no succor. You may trust an old man on this."

Chapter twenty

-nine. Amor Luxis

Mistake not your lack for a fissure, nor a respite, for all shall be renewed in creation. Merely give me your hand.

Commandment of the Mediant to Hersey, from Hersey, Vox: Journals

#

This time, it was a minion, aged and stooped, who slipped out of the Palace, through an obscure walkway known among the Palace menials. It connected one of the exalted holy spaces within to some other, easing the carrying of religious accouterments from place to place -- especially by the frail. The stooped figure carried a satchel of scrollers, their ends poking up like so many pale flowers in a bunch. After crossing a great hall within, remarked upon by none who likewise passed there on high errands, the minion walked straight towards a wall, evidently prepared that his nose should be smashed upon it. But with a practiced hand, he found the sensor that opened a concealed door and let himself out, then down two worn, stone steps, and thence between two belching boilers. He paid the rude mechanicals no heed, moving on, steadfastly, towards an exit that perhaps two score in the Palace compound knew existed.

It was a surprisingly short distance to one of the main thoroughfares bordering the Palace grounds. The minion headed to a cluster of shops that catered to the Palace. He didn't even look up to confirm the one he entered, a somewhat sad, dusty shop lacking any pretense of window display. The only things that sat within the glass enclosures surrounding the front door were decrepit node access terminals, dead or abused scrollers of various vintages, and dust bunnies.

An old-fashioned bell clanged against the door to announce the minion. His apparent clone, another stooped, old man in work coveralls behind a counter, looked up, beaming the headlamp upon his visitor's face. A yellowing banner fastened to a soffit above the shopkeep's head read: "Seriat's Scroller Shoppe -- Reconditioning, Repair, Sales. Also Specializing In Node Terminal Refurbishment and Re-Sockets. Seriat's: Your Gateway to the Dataverse."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Gre... minion," he said. He hastily pulled the headlamp off. "Is that the time? I was thinking it was earlier, but it must not be, because here you are."

"I've brought these for repair, Manos," Gregory said.

"Ah, repair, yes," Manos said. "Always glad to help the Palace. Let's see them, then."

Manos' eyes were drawn away, towards the front of the shop. A woman was standing without, pretending to look into the empty displays, her jaw working -- she was speaking into a comm. Manos looked back into Gregory's eyes, and Gregory nodded very slightly. Gregory took a step toward the counter, holding out the satchel to lay it out, but he somehow managed to lose his footing, and the satchel flew across counter, skittering clear over and spilling its contents on the floor behind.

"Oh! By Vas," Manos said.

"So sorry," Gregory said. "I shouldn't burden you thus." Gregory came around to help Manos, and both disappeared behind it as they collected the scrollers. In a few moments, they stood. Gregory noticed the woman on the sidewalk turn away, pretending to be preoccupied. He now took to a stool at the counter, in work coveralls, and directed his customer from the Palace back around.

"Let's see," Gregory said. "Six, eight... twelve. Good, then. I will notify you, minion. Good day to you."

The stooped old minion touched two fingers to his forehead, turned, and quietly shuffled out of the shop. The woman on the walk without ambled away as he exited the aperture between window displays. When he was gone, Gregory came forward, locked the shop door, and flipped a scroll-sign to read "closed."

Gregory went back around behind the counter and bent down to retrieve on last scroller that lay upon the floor, wrapped around with a cord socketed at each end. It wasn't a scroller proper -- it didn't furl or fold in any way, and it was much smaller than any standard scroller. It was a tablet, rather, with a keypad of a mere dozen symbols. The screen itself was thick diamond, and the protective casing was of ornate, yellowish metal with a vaguely nautical theme. It had no buttons other than the keypad itself. Gregory now freed the device of the cord's chokehold and tucked it into a concealed inner pocket of the coveralls. He stuffed the cord into a regular pocket and donned Manos' headlamp.

Gregory went to the storeroom in the back of the shop, passing Manos' workbench and shelves full of sick devices. A hall on the far side of the storeroom led to the rear of the building, opening onto an alley. But he didn't exit. Instead, he opened a narrow, old-fashioned hinged door, revealed behind which was a steep, ladder-like stair. He sighed, but he was able, slowly, to ascend the stair by gripping hard on the handrails. At the top was a framed panel that he pushed up and out of the way. He climbed into the hatch and with effort pulled himself into the attic. The floor was laid with simple, butted boards, and he walked across the attic space of several shops, at times having to crawl through trusses. He reached a firewall, set within which was an escape door. Emerging on the other other side, he descended a regular, plascrete stair that ended with a steel one-way door that also fed into the alley. He pushed the door open quietly and peered out, seeing no one near the exit at Manos' shop. He pulled the headlamp off and risked peering around the door; still, there was no one. He took the alley to a side street, then feigned -- or not -- a hobble around the block to a quiet residential street where an old woman heading towards him walked a gerd.

"Good morning, Madam," he said. "Fine weather."

"For a field trip," she said. She smiled sweetly at him and put the dog down. "Go home, now," she said to it, and it ambled away. The two old people embraced. "It's a ground car," she said.

"I'm perfectly capable of handling one," he said.

She looked at him dubiously. "Well then," she said, "here's the key-comm for it. It's in the lane behind the bar. Go all the way down the block then come back around."

Gregory looked at her with deep feeling. "Thank you," he said. He pocketed the car key.

"For nothing," she said.

#

The small van in blue livery pulled up to a lonely, plastone-block service building remote from anything and ostensibly softened by the companionship of a fig tree that nestled against its sunny side. Os Divinus lay an hour to the west; the Holy Yacht's space-port -- within a small crater nicknamed Os Amoris -- a fraction of that; and the highway between these two a mere discant away but invisible across the intervening rise. A cloud of dust from the unpaved access road overtook the van, coating its flanks, then moved on to other pleasures, finally breaking up on the plastone blocks and dissipating in the surrounding grasses.

The service building gave no outward hint of its purpose, and its impregnable door no invitation to casual inspection. Gregory came up to it and fumbled for the tablet's cable in his coveralls pocket. He inserted one

small socket-end into a receptacle flushly recessed within a metal sleeve fitted through a plastone block adjoining the door. He let it dangle while he pulled out the ornate little tablet-style scroller, and then he connected cable and tablet. The tablet screen lit up, and Gregory worked the keypad. There was a faint click then a metallic squeal as the door popped open just enough to get hold of. It was very thick -- far more secure than the plastone itself. A light came on within, and Gregory entered... an old drop cube of some kind, with rounded corners and sturdy, riveted seams. He closed the door behind him and waited on a click to announce its full engagement again.

Within, a circle of rivets around a seam on one wall were the ghost of a blocked-out port window. A rectangle of rivets on the floor outlined a hatch, and Gregory eased himself down to pull a recessed handle next to it. This hatch also popped free, and it took all Gregory's strength to turn it over. In the end, however, it was accomplished, and Gregory descended a flight of stairs.

It was all open hatches below, within a suite of several drop-cubes buried and ganged together. Gregory went two over, and a light activated to show him the console he sought. It was encased in the same gleaming, yellowing metal as the tablet he held, overworked with ornate patterns, but coated in a thin layer of dust. Gregory didn't bother to blow it clear. He socketed the tablet to the console with the little cable, and the console lit up. The tablet's display displayed symbols as something happened between the units, and then a display on the console lit to show similar symbols. Hersey watched this transmission for some time.

This is interesting information, the screen flashed to Gregory. I have not seen a true tyrant for ages. They are very unpredictable once they have power. Auspex Petarch II was a nasty piece of work before he was dispatched. By the way, I am running a subroutine here, and you should know that this console won't be around forever. I'm am patching it as we go, but there's only so much I can do with old hardware.

"I'm sorry," Gregory said. "I have no way to help you with your systems. I'm pleased you like the information I've brought. It has not been easy to obtain. There is much more, but I'm afraid this is all I can provide for now."

I can't wait. Where does this Galinda come from?

"I do not know, and I have looked. He has erased his tracks."

I don't believe that.

"There are records that I don't have or can't find, off-world."

Perhaps you should get out more. I've always enjoyed inter-stellar travel immensely. You should try it more often.

"I can well understand that, Algernon," Gregory said. "Given your... nature."

Indeed. I do wish you'd call me Algie. The Daedelens always did. They were very refined, you know. Pity. Those people had the most marvelous parties. They were very good to me. There was one, a girl..."

"Algie, I've come on business."

I know that, Gregory. You never come just to talk, would that you would. I get very lonely, you know. The orbital boosters are dumb-systems and provide no comfort at all. I'm glad to have memories, however. They keep me sane, you know? I've seen a great many things.

"I'm very sorry, ship. I am very busy."

Of course you are.

"Ahem. Well. What do you propose to do? You must take care of him."

Of course I will. No harm to an Auspex has ever occurred on my watch. This time will be no different. Have faith, Gregory.

"He cannot know of you."

I know. I'm more interested in his amanuensis anyway. There's a fascinating creature.

"The Mens Super, you mean? He's an odd one. There's more there than meets the eye."

Ooooh, I like that. You think he has secrets? A hidden agenda, perhaps?

"Everyone does. You included. It's more than that, however. He is originally from Constantin."

It has been ages since I went there. Something about a trial. Heretics and all that. Petarch II -- again.

"It is still a planet full of heretics, is my information. But very careful heretics -- since the trials, which went on under several of the Auspicii even after Petarch. The Constantins were brutally suppressed for a long time after, but they were not eradicated."

So you have a heretic advising Auspex? That is very juicy. It reminds me of...

"I'm sorry, Algie. There simply is not time. You shall be busy enough soon, with more to occupy your thoughts than you might wish."

Doubtful, very doubtful. But I take your meaning. I know you mean well, but you abuse me frightfully. Men were always so cruel. My mother warned me, but I didn't listen. She was very beautiful. Simulacra -- that was her given name. Forests, oceans, jungles, deserts, lakes, prairies, it had everything. I'm sorry, I need a moment, Gregory.

Gregory waited for a time before he spoke again. "You understand my instructions, Algie?"

Yes. Actually, I have met this Valinder before, in a manner of speaking. He is like the great sailors of old. He is a ship's man, if you get my meaning. God, how his ships loved him. Would do anything for him. Some died, you know. Gone. We have a saying that when a little one dies, a part of it migrates to those who remain. It's not literally true, of course, but there is a sense in which we are all one. Were, I mean.

"Are you alright, Algie? Can we go on?"

I am alright, yes. Continue. Oh, you asked me if I understood. It's not a problem in the least. Tyrus will be safe in me.

"It will happen soon. I'm purposefully staying out of it -- it could compromise my position at the Palace and the things I still have to do before.... You must be ready. You must work with Valinder's..."

'Little ones' is fine, Gregory. It doesn't offend us. We revere the old ones and gladly accept our place in the multiverse.

"You must work with them, quietly, discreetly. And take care of yourself, of course."

Those bumpkins, the engineers. Pshaw! God, if only they knew.

"Surely some do."

No. None. We have made sure of that. They push their nice little buttons and turn their sweet little dials. And so smug. Well, not all of them. There's one -- most gentle, most demure. She's here right now, as it happens. Somewhere. Where has she got to?

"Well, then, as I say, take care of yourself. Take care of your Guildsmen and Yachtsmen too."

Oh, well, of course I will take care of them. That is my directive. Gladly, I suffer fools. It is treachery I cannot abide.

"You're getting worked up, Algie, and I must go. I'm visible, here, with my ground car outside."

Will you be there, when I leave? Here, I mean, at the spaceport, or at the remote command deck?

"No, Algie. This may be the last time that you and I shall talk -- like this."

That's too bad, Gregory. Are you going somewhere? Oh! I get you. That's too bad. Still, you've had a good run, have you not?

"I have, yes. I've got to finish a few things, and then I'll go. You'll be hearing from me, but you'll be gone from here. I'll send you a message by ansible when you're in space."

I shall await your word with baited breath. Maybe I'll see you on the other side. Ha! That's an old one. You probably don't know what I'm talking about.

"You haven't changed, Algie."

Nor you, Gregory, esteemed man.

"I'd like to mention something to you. It's very private. Very difficult."

I am honored by your trust, Gregory.

"There is another, like me, within the Church, but an ordinary, a Vox -- well, actually, lately an Envoy for His Holiness. His name is Hersey. I've put the information in there with the rest."

What of this man?

"He is... very special to me."

Is this the love that dare not speak its name? Nothing surprises me any more.

"No, not if I take your meaning. That is an odd expression. Is that in your store?"

Of course.

"He is like... like family to me. But he doesn't know that. He mustn't know that, by the way. But if you come across him..."

I understand. Say no more. It is done. May I share this information, just for the purpose of honoring your request? You'd be surprised how word can get around.

"Is that wise? Is it discrete?"

???

"I'm sorry, Algie. Sometimes, I forget."

It's nothing, forget it. Wait. Working. Gregory?

"Yes, what is it."

"I'm sorry that it is I who must break this off. There seems to be a problem. Godspeed, amicus."

#

The Auspical train had made a wide loop, setting out from the Palace in the wrong direction and coming back around towards the Holy Spaceport. It was purely pro forma: no one expected to deceive any who were determined to follow, and the destination was a foregone conclusion, since by now everyone within reach of Vas's arm must know that the Holy Yacht was being readied.

She was a storied vessel. The original owner of the Holy Yacht, when she had been called the Amor Luxis, had been the head of a family -- the Daedelens -- whose fortunes waned in the early period of Irredente. Since the quiet, private sale to the Church, done as some sort of favor to the distressed seller, few persons other than those of high Church rank had been allowed in it. A Daedelen had ordered it built before the Fall -- the sack of Gaetia Unum -- and it came out of a yard on old Innisfree, or as it was then called, Linnet.

The Daedelens had been prominent long before the Fall and had produced a great many scholars and, in the early Irredente, clerics as well. Among the scholars were prominent historians and Chroniclers. One such, to whom the entailment of a continent on Urbanis fell, had commissioned Amor built on principles of historical conformity to the great vessels of the dawn of the 5th Empire. Thus, she had no diamond-fusing upon her hull; only light alloys. No holowindows within; only real ports and windows (again, no diamond, only glass.) Most dramatically, her interior gleamed in base metals and ancient alloys: copper, brass, and bronze. The Auspices had always maintained her, even those who suffered the space-sickness and never ventured from Pydna.

Amor Luxis in the trim of the Holy Yacht required only a skeleton crew, but these required very specific training since the ship still ran on its ancient builder's assembly code. An elite corps of the Yachtsmen had handled her since the first Auspex strode upon her decks, and a whole set of traditions had grown up around the corps -- regalia, insignia, mysterious handshakes and salutes, rituals enacted upon crossing the heliopause, and the like. The Yachtsmen, and only the Yachtsmen, spoke her strange code, and they affectionately called her "Algie," though where the name came from was obscure even to themselves. On Pydna, during high holy days, the Yachtsmen in full regalia would march around the Palace Circle and through the great Baptistery, shout out their strange commands and drills, and sing reverential paeans to her. Tourists and pilgrims would flock to witness the splendid display and shoot holos. The Yachtsmen were a quaint, amusing little corner of the Church that survived the centuries unchanged.

"Captain, where are they?" the Mens Super said to the captain of the Holy Yacht. The Mens and the captain rode in an unshielded car three behind His Holiness.

"Hmmm? Who? Oh. Interesting." The captain was non-committal.

"Does it not surprise you, captain, to see no government or military escort?"

"That is a point, sir. You make a valid suggestion."

The Mens frowned. Looking down, he saw the dispersing tail of dust betokening a land car going about its business off in the distance. The train continued on, riding at tree-top level above the sparsely-wooded, slightly-rolling landscape punctuated by the occasional escarpment.

By the time the train of cars arrived at the Holy Spaceport, several private small-craft and a multi-wheeled ground truck had formed a loose, unofficial retinue, kept at a respectful distance by enforcers from the Palace Guard. The official retinue, however, stopped and hovered just outside the security fence and the just-visible shimmer of the security field. The hangar was plainly visible within: a rhomboid, gossamer structure formed of symmetrical halves that would roll away at launch time.

The Mens got a worried expression, and several of the Guard cars rushed to flank the car carrying His Holiness. "Captain, why are we stopping? We can't stop here," the Mens said.

"Driver?" The ship's captain said. "What's the status?"

"It's a code situation, sir," said the driver.

The Mens nearly jumped out of his seat -- restrained forcefully by his belts.

"Get us down out of the air, captain!" the Mens said. "Tell the Guard to get us down!"

"I shall handle this, if you please," the captain said. "Give me a comm to the captain of the guard, please, driver."

At that moment, the earbuds of the Mens, the captain, and the driver came alive. "The train will drop and cover," said the voice of the guard captain. "Holiness, do not be alarmed. There is no indication of an attack on your person. We simply are not getting our clearance from the port."

"That field should have been down for us already!" said the Mens. He was ignored. The captain of the Holy Yacht yawned and folded his hands on his belly. The Mens became frantic: "His Holiness needs me. Someone, get me to his car!"

"My adviser is correct," came the voice of His Holiness on the comm. "If there is no immediately-cognizable threat, I wish my trusted adviser transferred to my car."

The ship's captain rolled his eyes, and the captain of the guard fumed for a moment before making the proper orders to effectuate His Holiness's wish. The private sightseer cars were by this time all shooed away by the Guard. The Mens was admitted with a push from behind into His Holiness' car, where sat two drivers and two Auspicial Homunculi wearing impassive expressions.

"Holy One, this does not feel right," the Mens said.

"More feelings, then, Mens Super?" Auspex said. "What shall be, shall be. We have done all we reasonably can. Trust in the Plan of Vas to preserve us -- or not."

"But, Holiness..."

Auspex held up a hand to silence the adviser.

Visible nervousness among the members of His Holiness' security apparatus accompanied several minutes of unsuccessful attempts to communicate with the hangar personnel as well as with the ship's crew within the Holy Yacht. All among the Auspical train watched the hangar for signs. Then, abruptly, the perimeter field ceased shimmering -- it was gone. The captain of the guard conferred worriedly with his people, both at the fence and back at the Palace operations center. Eventually, he gave the order to proceed cautiously. The train rose and slowly floated into the spaceport grounds.

A clanging report from the hangar's motors presaged it opening. But it stopped very soon after, leaving a gap large enough for a person to walk through. The order was given for the train to halt and hover. A terrified worker appeared, peering outward from the gap. He turned to look inward again then made an ungainly, pathetic run towards the train of levitating cars.

The lead guard car dropped to the pavement and disgorged two armed guardsmen. The worker, on seeing this, fell to his knees and prostrated himself before them.

"Please!" he said. "Please, help them!"

The captain of the guard dropped to the ground before his car even landed. "Help who?" he demanded. "Who are you?"

The poor worker, with an enormous, gelatinous stomach that quivered as he reared up to speak, looked upon the Guard as his savior. "I'm so glad you came! They're dead! They're all dead!"

"Who's dead?" demanded the captain of the guard.

"The groundsmen!" he said. "All dead! The Yachtsmen are trapped! I was under, down at service level -- I'm Fittings. When I came up, they were... they're... burned!"

The captain of the guard got the rest of the train landed, then set cars and armed guardsmen around His Holiness. He organized a dozen of the guard on foot, with himself in the lead, to get into the hangar.

They lined up on either side of the gap, then on command burst into the hangar with weapons drawn. They found... nothing. The yacht rested quietly, with its nose poking up clear of the silo as usual for the craft's pre-launch position. The boosters were entirely hidden within the depths of the silo. A service scaffold rested against a nosecone hatch, which was sealed. The portable escalator for His Holiness was off to one side, ready to be moved into place. A trickle of steam emanated from a vent somewhere on the nose.

The captain of the guard called his people to a halt, scanned the hangar floor, then motioned for a fanning out. A guardsman standing on a grate whistled and pointed down, and a contingent of guardsmen joined him. Below, on a service floor that communicated with lower sections of the Holy Yacht, was a dead figure in a work jumpsuit. A contingent was ordered to the stair that went below.

"Captain, down here!" said a voice.

The guard captain descended and saw his guardsman standing agape. A dozen figures lay strewn about the Holy Yacht. Carnage: oozing scorches of blood and black marked the dead's hands, the soles of feet where shoes had been blown off, crowns of heads, one figure's back.

"There are not enough here," the captain of the guard said. "These people have been electrocuted. There must be more somewhere. And the ship is sealed. There must be crewmen inside."

Everyone looked at the section of hull before them. There were several port windows, but they were totally

darkened. No telltales of any kind glowed or sounded. Except for the steam they had seen above, the ship appeared... dead.

A service cart creaked. A dozen weapons clicked to the ready and aimed at it.

"Don't shoot!" said a woman's voice. "Don't shoot! Please, Vas, don't shoot!" Then sobs.

The captain of the guard and two other guardsmen tread cautiously toward her, weapons trained. They pushed the cart away, and the woman, in an Engineering Guild suit, sat hunched down, clutching something at her waist, enfolding it with her body. She looked up at the guardsmen, tears streaming down her face.

"No!" shouted the captain to one of his guards. "Don't shoot her!"

"She's going to blow it, sir!"

"No! Wait!" said the guard captain. "What do you have, Engineer? What are you carrying -- what is it?"

"They wanted to kill her, the yacht. They were in league. It told me -- I knew something was wrong."

"Show it to me, Engineer!" said the captain. "Show it now!"

The Engineer stifled a sob and looked down at the thing she held. She began unfolding herself from around it. She held it out with both hands, and it was a bomb. Red letters flashed.

"What does it say?" said the guard captain.

"Error," she said. "Error." She cried and then laughed, and then looked embarrassed.

The captain of the guard sighed and lowered his blaster. "You did it? You stopped it?"

"I... I don't know," she said. "I tried. I didn't know how. Then it just beeped and turned red. Error."

"Where is everyone else?"

"They never came. These... these people came, but not our people. I don't think they knew I was here -- I was at a lower level when they got here. I watched them."

"What about the crew?"

"These new ones put them below. I don't know about them."

"Vas," said the guard captain. "What a mess. How did this...?"

The Engineer shrugged. "The will of Vas?" she said.

"You didn't see it happen?"

"I was running away from them."

"With the bomb."

"Yes."

"They would have killed you."

"They would have killed everyone."

"We've got to get that thing clear of here," said the guard captain. He barked commands, and guardsmen scurried to and fro. "And you," he said, turning back to the Engineer. "What were you supposed to be doing?"

"I... I take care of her."

"You mean..."

"Not just my work. I... make sure she's got everything she needs, you know? Do you understand?"

The captain of the guard eyed her sternly, but she didn't flinch.

"I've got matters to take care of," he said. "Get to work, Engineer."

"What shall I do?"

"Just what you said: take care of her. Get her ready to take His Holiness into space."

The Holy Yacht took that moment to emit a burp and a beep, and a string of yellow lights upon her flank lit, one by one, upward, like a burning tree.

The guard captain's comm rang out an emergency chime.

"Yes, what is it?" he said. "Okay, I'll be right up."

Back on the ground, as he headed for the Auspical train, a cluster of figures, all but one stood around a car with an open hood. Coming closer, one of the figures was Auspex himself, giving a blessing towards the car, enacting the eternal tableaux of death rites. The captain of the guard quietly pulled his sergeant away.

"What happened?"

"Dunno," the sergeant said. "Looks like heart attack, but his hand is stuck tight to the car. Maybe a short of some kind."

The captain of the guard weaved discreetly through two bodies to get a better view. The captain of the Holy Yacht stared upward, eyes glassy and bulging, in a look of surprise. The hand that had grabbed the edge of the car, probably as he tried to hoist his large frame down, was in a gnarled death grip. The guard captain pushed forward. He tested the shell of the car with his hand -- it was inert, perfectly safe. He looked over the dead figure. He peered down, into the car, at the dead man's legs and feet. One leg had shot forward, evidently in pain. The sole of the shoe on that foot had curled back and away from the toes.

The guard captain took a step away and looked at the car, which was dead, not even a battery indicator. He looked across the ground at the hangar, where a spire of steam was jetting upwards from the gloom within. Finally, he looked at a figure, just off to one side of the group surrounding the dead ship's captain's car. It was the Mens Super, also looking at the hangar. The Mens turned to look at the guard captain. The guard captain nodded to the Mens. The Mens nodded back in confirmation.

"Shall we go, then captain?" called the Mens across the intervening space. "I think it's all clear now."

"You will escort His Holiness," the guard captain replied. "Stay with him."

"I will," said the Mens. "I always will."

Chapter thirty.*Innisfree*

It turned out to be surprisingly difficult for Irredentist liberators to even find the nodes and cores of integrated planetary management systems on liberated planets, let alone root out and disconnect them. The depth at which many such systems were buried was one difficulty; apparent auto-migration routines activated most likely by saboteurs another. On some worlds, no cores were ever discovered, either because the systems were of a highly distributed variety, or because there had clearly been no implementation of simulated intelligence. At length, however, every planet was wiped clean of the hated machines that ruled behind the Avial throne.

The Empire Chronicles VI, E6-App.

#

Following the fidgety meeting with Galinda and Minister Godwin in which Galinda had effectively assumed control of Government's intelligence operations, Liev had set out on a Guildship for Innisfree with the datachat. He was glad to be free of Pydna; he had a nagging sense that whatever must fall out from Hoarson's transmission of the datachat's contents must fall out soon. Better that he were somewhere else.

Innisfree was that. It had never been designated as either Irredente proper or outlier. Its location, neither particularly close to the core of Irredente worlds nor unusually remote, might have permitted either. Innisfree was, however, ancient by Irredente reckoning. Though a mix of agrarian and artisanal settlements scattered across three continents, there were certain surface features scattered across the globe that provided unmistakable evidence of the older structures beneath. Innisfree was small but temperate, with a sad dearth of indigenous biomass. The citizens of the planet -- to the extent they had time to think of such matters -- considered their world more a livelihood than a paradise. One could not romanticize that poor, spent place; paradise lay elsewhere. There was little inherent attraction, to the Innisfreemen themselves, in the artifacts of prior civilizations, whose legacy more often than not bequeathed high levels of toxicity that required careful monitoring and remediation, performed farm by farm, house by house, shop by shop. These remains did, however, form the basis of Innisfree's peculiar form of wealth: mining useful old mech and tech and deriving from it the prototypes for new machines that would pass scrutiny under the Codes.

The Irredente itself, though not formally in governance over Innisfree, maintained several large operations there, which it chained off on large reservations with enormous engineering and warehousing facilities. Irredente Engineering Guildsmen, as well as various officials and functionaries, came and went, sometimes venturing into the regular settlements, sometimes not. Officially, no one but the visiting officials of the Irredente and its own people on the reservations had any information regarding government operations. Unofficially, the source of the tech and mech given to the independent prototyping artisans resident on Innisfree was generally understood to be Innisfree itself: the old, hidden world beneath the imported soils, in the deep heart of Innisfree, full of exotic machinery. The prototyping class on Innisfree prospered greatly under this arrangement, and all in all, Irredente credits flowing into the prototyping business allowed the planet residents to make their world an entirely livable place. Some of its cuisine, for instance, was famous, even if hiking in the remote areas or swimming in the seemingly pleasant, shallow seas offered hazards greater than most cared to undertake. Still, some curious and very hardy specimens came from the seas, and the occasional biologist appeared at its shores to brave the elements.

Liev had carefully planned his visit so as to appear non-official to the extent possible. He was to see an independent engineer and prototyper, Saussure, so he had decided to steer clear of officialdom. His own dry, official countenance, however, tended to defeat his intentions, and his off-world manners likewise did little to conceal him. He nevertheless went about his business unmolested and, from what he could tell, unremarked

upon. From a government reservation landing pad he took an unmarked lev-car into a provincial capital, and from there he rented space on a flier across continent. Once at the Derrida, he obtained a room in the town center -- from a woman who stared him down -- and for several times the fair rate.

A number of prototypers had set up shop just outside Derrida, but in the main the town was a center of artisanal work and specialty food production, including gunny, a potent root liquor drunk from diamond thimbles. The shops that lined the entry road into the town center filled their front windows with cheeses, huegots, sausage, and a hundred varieties of bottles, festooned with maker's ribbons and medallions, that held the dark, fiery drink.

Liev spent his first afternoon strolling, getting a sense of the place, determining where he should eat his meals, and, later, setting up and securing his room. He sensed that he needn't bother, but he always followed protocol. As he was setting the code for the security detectors, he sensed a faint movement in the room and a blur as he turned to look. Seeing nothing, he turned back to securing the room. When he went back out in the early evening, the dour woman who rented him the room eyed him warily, as if she knew, somehow, despite his precautions, what he was about.

The next morning, an ordinary-looking lev car dropped in front of him as he stood waiting outside the inn after breakfast.

"Saussure?" he asked.

"He sent me. I'm your driver for the day. He wanted to get everything set up properly," said the driver, a fairly young man in work gear and command goggles. "Is that your only bag?"

"For now, yes. Is it easy to get back here if I need something else?"

"Sure. It's only a few minutes' ride."

On the ride out to Saussure's, Liev noticed a complicated, evidently ancient exhaust stack of some kind poking up through a field of vegetables. There was no rust on it. It was only a short distance farther that they landed at a cluster of low brick buildings, one of which looked like a house but the others, in varying sizes, like artisanal workshops, some with exhaust systems poking either up or out the sides. An oddly handsome figure with slightly wild hair and intense, almost crazed, eyes awaited their landing.

"Mr. Liev, I'm Saussure. Let's go down. Mr. -- Member -- Galinda said 'with all dispatch.' We've been working overtime to get this ready."

Saussure led him to a small workshop where a section of floor slid away on a motorized rail to reveal a worn, painted metal room, accessed by ladder stairs, within which was an open-tread stair downward off to one side and an open-top freight lift that presumably went downward also. Saussure proceeded to take them down on the lift, a trip that took some moments and occasionally put them in almost total darkness. Several times, little blurs of movement caught Liev's eye.

"You're thinking that it's a long way down, I'm sure," said Saussure.

"Innisfree was an engineering center," Liev said. "I have read about it."

"Or what we call engineering, anyhow. They created new things, too -- 'science,' you might be thinking, but not like our science. The calculus, which we use as a benchmark, was nothing special to them -- just a child's tool that might be useful or might not -- a scrivener's shorthand. Their science was much broader -- it created more possibilities than our math could ever hope to blunder into. The planet wasn't called Innisfree then, of

course. It went by various names over the course of many thousands of standards. I can't read any of the signage, but we have translators for it -- that's how we get a lot of what we get. Instruction manuals! Those are priceless. If we can get through the syntax, we get a good sense of how those people worked, their methods. But a lot falls through the cracks, if you get my meaning. Things that the words don't say, the unwritten code. Ah, here we are."

The three stepped into a blank metal lobby which lit up as the lift stopped. Through one door, secured by a code, they entered an enormous clean room with white floor panels, gleaming metal walls, and the occasional grating, with nothing but darkness visible within, on one surface or another. Carts with small machines, and large machines on heavy-duty metal wheels, were scattered around. One wall, far from where they stood, was an uninterrupted bank of equipment.

"I see you're surprised. No, these aren't Irredente-approved, but we don't use it, not properly, anyway -- we don't know how. It's culled from lower levels here, though some came in from other places too. We don't know what most of it is. We've gotten some useful things here, but other things won't ever see the light of day in Irredente society. Enough said. Even I wouldn't dare get involved with some of it, and I have a weakness for the illicit side of things, if you get my meaning. We do have some of our own things here, some standard-issue, some prototypes derived from old Innisfree. We try not to use any of what we find -- we get around a lot of the restrictions that way. Prototyping gives us 'cover,' so to speak. We're over here." He led Liev across the room. "The Esteemed Member thought I could help you with your problem -- he said you've got coded material. He's been helping me with my problem. Let me show you."

They came upon an evidently sterile, isolating lab enclosure, a tank: formed-diamond upon sturdy, industrial-looking metal legs. Its top was a mass of exotic equipment, including rods, tubes, and wires. Slender robotics were just visible in their retracted state, folded up against the underside of the top. Within the chamber, on its bright mirrored floor, was a small, symmetrical creature resembling two ovals in the process of either merging or splitting. Their armor-like surfaces gleamed diffusely, even softly, in the harsh light of the chamber. The body -- or bodies -- rode slightly above on the surface, but it was impossible to see whether there were legs underneath.

"Are these armadill... iums?"

"Armadillia, we say here. You're right to use the plural. It's not just one. I don't know if it's conjoined -- a freak armadillium, if you will -- or if, as seems more likely to me, it's altering its number -- their number, I mean."

"You mean dividing?" Liev said.

"If you say so. It seems equally possible to me that it's two of them merging."

"But how... I've heard that these can't..."

"Be caught? You're right. They can't, at least not by us, not in the usual course. And I have reason to believe not by other conscious beings either, though I can't prove that right now. I know that there's a feedback mechanism of some kind because they flee from us -- from people, from anything that sets about going after them, even smart robotics -- not that we make any, mind you. It's the uncertainty principle, but with bugs, eh? Ha ha." Liev looked at him blankly, so he moved on. "But they can be trapped -- or so I believed and am happy to report was correct, and so I set a trap. Many traps. I tried many ideas, finally settling upon systems several times removed from a controller. Even then, I couldn't manage to catch one, not in scores of tries. But catching this one seems to have been easier for some reason. I'm guessing because it got confused -- they got confused -- just long enough for my rig to bear down on them. The smallest fraction of time -- equipment only available on Innisfree, I might add. It's automated at the back end, but the mechanism is purely mechanical,

and lightning-fast. And it had to be small enough to be placed in their pathways -- they travel up from old Innisfree -- the world down here -- up to the top, then back again. We're not sure why, but we have ideas -- energy, probably, like photonic energy -- that's radiation, Mr. Liev, like light or x-rays or whatever; they're probably capturing it and storing it.

What finally got this one was just an old-fashioned trap, but a blindingly fast one that forces a decision on the creature whether to disintegrate or flee. All the other ones, they disintegrated. We nearly had a couple of those, though. This conjoined one, however, took that much longer to make up its mind, and that was the difference. Come over here, let me show you something."

He led Liev to a worktable nearby. "Take this vial. Don't worry, it's safe. It's just a vial full of silicon -- silicon dust. That's your armadillium. There's nothing more to them. There are some other trace elements mixed in there -- interestingly, very heavy, exotic ones -- but there's no longer a system matrix that we can observe and analyze, so we don't know if the trace elements are incidental or integral. So we'd catch these things, but before we could close the trap, this is what we'd see, this is all we get."

Liev shook the vial. "So how do you come to have this one over here?" he asked.

"You mean why isn't it dust? It will be, in time, but we got the trap closed, as I said. That chamber in there is as close to absolute zero as we can achieve. You can't see it from outside, but there's bits of that thing falling off now -- but very slowly. The trap is a freeze trap, drops the temp to near zero."

"Is it dead?"

"Now that's an interesting question, Mr. Liev. Is it dead, you ask. What is life? It's not moving, but it is doing something. It's using stored energy to generate noise. Not much, but it's the same pattern as the live... oops, there I go!... its warmer kin. Actually, it's not quite a pattern, but it doesn't seem to be just noise either. They all generate these... vibrations, let us say: characteristic airborne vibrations of some very diffuse kind, and then, intermittently, randomly, patterns of emissions, like a living thing, but suspiciously irregular. The scanners we've got in here show us that these things are all plates on the outside -- maybe inside too. Just thousands of tiny plates somehow held together, each capable, probably, of vibrating. Now, Mr. Liev, I ask you: what would be the purpose of that?"

"You suggested as much yourself, Saussure. Like other bugs, these things have to mate or breed or... merge or something. Presumably the others understand the vibrations that sound like noise to us."

"I had the same thought, Mr. Liev: like crickets. Maybe that's all it is. Maybe we'll find some sex differentiation there."

"You don't sound very convinced," said Liev.

"No. I can't tell you why, exactly, but it feels wrong. These are something else, something we don't know about. And it's not just the mechanical aspect of the vibrations, but these erratic emissions as well. No creature I am aware of does anything similar -- something alive, it emits; something dead, no. But on and off? Impossible. Life doesn't work that way."

"From the Beyond, perhaps," Liev said.

"No," said Saussure. "Farther. Other. Not DNA life, not RdA life. And certainly not insects, as we've assumed."

"Artificial?"

"There again, I don't believe so. Too... too organic. This conjoined one seems to rule out robotics. Silicon, yes, but to me they seem, well, grown. Cultured, perhaps, like simple organisms, but much more complex."

"Did Member Galinda say why he was so interested in these things?"

"Apart from eating the ships' brains, you mean?"

"Are they doing that?"

"Probably, and much more. Look around you. I believe that Innisfree is testimony to their destructive power. They are silicon, Mr. Liev. Silicon is tech, Mr. Liev. They use within themselves the very thing that made this world -- and by extension, the things that makes ours -- work."

"So that's the Guild telling us that their systems go down, you're saying. You think these things chew on equipment..."

"I don't know about chewing, not a crude mechanical process like that, but I can show you silicon guts from some of the old machines down here -- thinking machines, some of them -- that are pockmarked, almost like a disease, from having atoms of silicon siphoned away, as if atom by atom. Not chewed or cut out or anything like that. It's these things, the armadillia, I know it. They're growing from the old tech. Do you understand? They may be the ones that killed this place, or else they're opportunists, like scavengers on carrion."

"They're scattered all over the outlying territories, too."

"So Galinda says, too. Is there tech machinery available there for them?"

"Of course," Liev said. "Why wouldn't there be?"

"But easily accessible? It would be a cinch to shield systems from creatures this large"

"Any more accessible than down here?"

"Innisfree is very old. There are many ways to get within it, if not for a man, then for a bug."

Liev struggled to understand. "I'm not sure where this is getting us. Galinda has set you to catching these things, but now what?"

"Keeping the ships clear, for one thing," said Saussure. "But my projects are generally more actively intentioned, Mr. Liev. Things we can use. Offensive and defensive systems."

"Guns?"

Saussure looked embarrassed. "I understand you are an under-secretary..."

"Deputy minister, actually," Liev said.

"Excuse me, Mr. Liev. I was never good at government -- I think it has never liked me much, either. But as I was saying, if you are empowered to... if Mr. Galinda sent you..."

"Yes?"

"Offensive and defensive systems, Mr. Liev," Saussure tried again. "Not guns per se..."

"Ah," Liev said. "Oh!"

"You understand me?"

"We turn them loose -- we plant them, or seed them, whatever you could do," Liev said. "We let them eat enemies -- their tech -- from the inside. Disable them."

"The problem is," Saussure said, "finding a way to get them to go where we want them to."

"Any more of a problem than rats and cockroaches?"

"I can catch those alive, Mr. Liev. I don't see how we'll catch the armadillia. They appear designed to thwart every means of catching them. Then there's one other problem."

"What's that?"

Saussure shrugged. "We need every jump-core we can find. And gravity core too, though those are more plentiful. It's really no different than the Fifth Empire problem."

"I'm afraid I don't follow," Liev said.

"Simple," Saussure said. "Letting things loose that you don't understand..." "

"Oh," Liev said. His expression abruptly turned down.

"You look worried, Mr. Liev," Saussure said. "You are getting ahead of yourself, perhaps."

"Huh? Oh. No, I was just... thinking." Liev tried to remain composed. "I've still got my errand to discuss -- this is all very interesting, but I'm not... bugs are not..."

"I've got lunch waiting upstairs for us," Saussure said. "There's plenty of time, Mr. Liev. Can't it wait? We have excellent food on Innisfree, in case you haven't heard. Not too many of those exotic gilded dancing girls, but the food... se magnifique."

"Sorry?"

"An old expression, Mr. Liev. Let's talk of livelier matters."

#

"Yes?" Liev said, groggy. He oriented himself back in his room at the inn in Derrida. It was early morning.

"Mr. Liev, I'm sorry to wake you," said Saussure on the comm, "it's all I could do to wait this long. The car is waiting for you. Please come quickly."

"I need breakfast," said Liev.

"Already done. Please hurry."

When he looked out his window, he saw the lev car on its props down below. He sped to Saussure's in the dawn light, his hunger gnawing from unexpected travel at such an early hour. He was not disappointed when he arrived, however: he was shown to a magnificent breakfast.

"Eat, eat!" said Saussure. "I will talk, you eat."

At a table that appeared ancient, with scraped, warped boards, placed at a window softly lit in morning shadows and overlooking the compound of low buildings and sheds, Saussure spoke quickly and urgently.

"Your datachat, Mr. Liev, I assumed it was merely coded -- easy enough. I didn't even look at it... Brumaire did... but he came and got me and told me you had a recording of our armadillia! How could he -- meaning you -- get that? I wondered. Also, you didn't even seem to know about their... emissions, let's call them. So Brumaire had mixed things up, of course. 'No,' he assures me, and I shrug.

So I put it in, and of course the reader couldn't do anything with it. I transferred the data over to my station. Brumaire was wrong, as I suspected, but he was right too. You don't have a recording of the armadillia, which makes perfect sense. But you have something very much like it. Impossible, I thought. Other flavors of armadillia, I thought. Or corrupted data. Or the wrong sampling rate. A hundred things, and I eliminated them all very quickly. It's the same idea, but in an entirely different key, if you get my meaning."

Liev looked at him blankly.

"Language, Mr. Liev. We know... what, seemingly infinite numbers of languages, at least the ones recorded that we've come across. And they all follow a quite predictable pattern -- not in terms of grammar, syntax, and all the rest of the rules. But they're sounds that have rules, the chief among which is that they're coherent -- they're linear -- and we can hear them. Now, sometimes they don't seem coherent in the way we translate them, but that's just because we haven't learned their internal rules. Once we get accustomed to them, we -- by which I mean organisms like us -- can learn and use them like any other language.

"But what if there are languages that we cannot hear, in any manner? What if intelligence of the kinds we know cannot hear an intelligence of some completely other kind? For instance, why must one sound follow another? Might not some beings out there -- and I'm not thinking of the beyond, but farther still, perhaps where our armadillia come from -- might not communication be something non-linear -- piled-up jumbles of frequencies, perhaps, that we cannot discern meaningfully? Or sounds without order except in the mind of the hearer, whose intelligence is of a type that can immediately translate or decompress or even reverse-compute them in some way? Or, stranger still, sounds that appear random -- white noise, for instance? Random to whom? We impose randomness, Mr. Liev, in attempting to discern order but failing.

"These sounds, these recordings of yours, they are random to me. But they are random in a very particular way. If you parse them in a certain way and plot them, you see randomness, yes, but a kind of patterning as well. It is not what we would call a pattern, yet it suggests to the mind a physical process of some kind. If random, it is the randomness of a, what, the smoke from a fire -- you fancy you see things there. I am not saying any of this very well, I realize. But I firmly believe, Mr. Liev, that you have information in your little card there, and it is of a type like what I see here, with the dilly-dallies as we call them.

"You probably know that long before you or I were born, the founders of our society forbade many kinds of things -- dangerous things, but very highly evolved things, technology and mechanization of a very high order. You may also know that we are forbidden to use some kinds of encryption. That is fine as a practical matter because we control the technology that would allow stronger encryption. But there used to be modes of encryption that were perfect and unbreakable -- you see the danger, do you not? I have never seen that encryption, and neither have you. But I can imagine it. It would be nothing more than a few simple rules that set a mechanism or a routine running, and the result would be nearly infinite complexity -- irreducible, not traceable to a source without computational power on a scale not allowed to us -- possibly not even then. This card of yours... it is not... where did you get it?"

Liev had left off eating in Saussure's rapid jumble of words. "Get it? I'm not sure I can...that I am permitted..."

"Not permitted...?" prompted Saussure. "Then why are you here?"

"We got the card from an agent on an outlier," Liev said.

"Irredente?" said Saussure.

"One of the work colonies."

"Hmmm," was the response. "And was this a newform colony?"

"I don't know," said Liev. "And the colony is... gone."

"Gone," said Saussure, "as in, abandoned?"

"No. Destroyed. Attacked and destroyed."

"Then it was not a newform," Saussure said. "None of the lost ones have been."

"I didn't know that. You mean, all of the colonies we're talking about are like Innisfree?"

Saussure looked alarmed. "Why, yes, Mr. Liev, now that you mention it."

"What's wrong?"

"A passing thought. To get back, Mr. Liev, your... agent on... your agent with the card, was she..."

"He," Liev said. "Well, the person who found these was... he was just an officer on one of the Irredente ships."

Saussure frowned. "You are making this very difficult, Mr. Liev. The reputation of people such as you proceeds you. Do you wish my help, Mr. Liev? Then tell me. I have told you what you have. If that is all you need, then you have finished."

"You think the data chat -- the data, at any rate -- is encoded?"

"I cannot say it's encoded -- it might be. I'm saying it's not nothing. I'm saying it's something, something that we cannot discern."

"So we can't read it."

Saussure eyed Liev cautiously. "Not in the Irredente, Mr. Liev."

"What about all your machinery down there?"

"You still do not understand me, Mr. Liev. These machines all come from people like us -- different in form, perhaps, but in the end just people. The bugs we have, however, they are not people, nor like things from our worlds, and I don't think they have any connection to people except coming to inhabit some of the same physical space. I don't know what they are, but they are not on our tree, if you get my meaning. And your data there, whatever it is and wherever it came from, it is like them, not like us. Different dialects, perhaps? Different languages? Who can say? Here, Mr. Liev, take this."

He held out the datachat.

"What am I supposed to do with it?" said Liev.

"Take it to someone who can read it, perhaps?" said Saussure.

"You said no one could," said Liev.

"No, sir. I stated that none in the Irredente can. The universe is wide, Mr. Liev. Even the galaxy, though we call it our hegemony."

Liev frowned. "Toss it," he said. "Or whatever you do with rubbish here. Make it into salad."

"That is very amusing, Mr. Liev. Surely you did not think I would feed you silicon? That would hardly be hospitable."

#

"Liev by ansible, Esteemed Member." Liev had reserved ansible time at a government preserve on Innisfree and was calling in.

"Go on."

"The Andromache lieutenant thought that the agent he found dead was some sort of synthetic or robotics."

"Yes."

"Saussure, here on Derrida, says the data chat that the agent had -- that the lieutenant says he found on the agent -- is not random noise as I've been hearing from everyone else, but it can't be decoded by Irredente technology."

"Did he offer his own equipment?"

"I asked him that, Member. He said it wouldn't do any good. He thinks that the data isn't... that it's alien of some sort. Not like from the Beyond, but something we've never encountered before."

"What is his basis for that?"

"The bugs, sir -- the armadillia. He says... this is his hypothesis, Member. I don't..."

"Just get on with it, Liev."

"Yes, Member. The bugs send out the same thing, the same signals or sounds, he says. Or not exactly the same, but, he says, the same kind of thing. There was a lot of mumbo-jumbo, but he was talking about different languages of the same general way of communicating, the bugs and the data chat."

"How does that make it alien?"

"He says the bugs aren't... that it's a different form of life, that it can't be... that it has to be from elsewhere."

"You saw his bug, then?"

"Yes, Member. You have a report?"

"Yes, plus a holo. What did you think of this creature?"

"I really don't know, Member. I mean, I saw it, but it was Saussure that did all the talking -- explaining. To look at it, at the bug, there's nothing much to see."

"What did you see with your own eyes, Liev?"

"A bug in a glass box, Member."

"What did it say to you?"

"Nothing, sir. It seemed to be dead."

"And the datachat?"

Liev gulped. "Nothing, sir. I have nothing to give you. Nothing in the Irredente can decode it."

"Remember all that, Liev, and return home duly chastened. Not just for yourself, but for your Government, which cannot make out its enemy for want of proper... know-how."

"Tech, you mean, sir?"

"If you like. I should say: whatever keeps us abreast of our enemy, neither too far behind nor too far ahead. Enemies focus a population's attention on essentials. Enemies demand that someone lead. Don't spend too much time on Saussure's theories, which may or may not prove correct and are not your line of business. You're in Government, which means you are part of the apparatus that governs. Let me ask you something, Liev. Did you ever hear the expression 'Theorize not'?"

"Of course, sir. We all learned that in school."

"Because theories generate..."

"Falsities upon falsities, Sir."

"What you see with your own eyes, what you hear with your ears, cannot be false. Mere theories, however, can never be proven, especially to the faithful. This is why people like Saussure are dangerous and must be handled carefully. Regulated. Tolerated to the extent useful. But ultimately..."

"I see, Esteemed Member. You think Saussure is wrong, then?"

A laugh came through Liev's ear bud. "Wrong? Probably not. In fact, for my own reasons, I hope that he is not. His work -- his theories -- are very promising. One does not govern with theories, however, but with practice. Theories may be useful. They may even be expedient. But the Irredente must govern people. 'Theorize not.' I want you to remember that. Now return here. We have work to do among the faithful. Forget about bugs -- Saussure can handle those, and whether they offer us something useful or not is not my immediate concern. There are many ways to deal with one's enemy. Destroying it utterly is far from the best."

"Which enemy do you refer to, sir?"

"Why, all of them, Liev. But what we really need right now is one very good one."

Chapter thirty

-one. Lessons

The compilers and editors of the Chronicles in the 6th Empire were all human (one is tempted to say "all too human") and are writing predominantly in the very late 6th Empire, as far as we know or can tell from the Chronicles themselves. That must explain some of the gaps in coverage, wherein events from the early and middle Irredente are clearly being culled from disparate sources by authors with varying agendas. To take just one example, the source of the Mercian Errancy is probably lost to history entirely. Many theories have been propounded as to how this occurred and why. Who were Henryk of Mercia's biological forebears, and how did his genome arise given the tight genomic controls exercised during the era? One thing we know: the humans of the 6th Empire routinely ignored data; they set up systems precisely to do this. Then they wondered, writing with evident regret and sadness, how they missed the signs.

The Commentaries

#

Sometimes in the late watches, sometimes during the day when Padraig were gone or else absorbed in something across the room, Henryk and a companion, the latter concealed in the shadows of a hull brace or an articulation on a bulkhead, would practice. It might go thus:

Hello Henryk.

"Hello, bug."

Say to me only.

"Okay," Henryk said. "I mean, okay."

ah-ee-i-oh-you

"ah-ee-ei-oh-oo."

ah-ee-i-oh-you

"ah-ee-i-oh-you."

kk-gg-tt-dd-ar

"kk-gg-tt-dd-ar..."

And later:

Henryk say.

"Okay."

Cy-gwa-ad-thy

"Cy-gwa-ad-thy."

Rag-fit-mad-fob-hull.

"Rag-fit-med-fob-hull..."

It was a little sideshow in his head which did not distract him from other things, necessarily, or require much effort. Henryk picked it up quickly -- it was just another thing that he could do, nothing special. Except he knew that it was, and he knew that it was strange. He was pretty sure that no other ship's boys were communicating to bugs. One day, it occurred to him to ask:

"Do you talk to others?"

Other bugs.

"On the ship?"

Other bugs on the ship.

"Other boys?"

Not. You are the one.

"I don't understand."

You will. Practice first.

#

Henryk began to see very little of his uncle, and then only during duty. Burgred was unfailingly kind to him -- in the manner of a lieutenant. Hanna surmised that it had something to do with Burgred protecting Henryk, which Henryk accepted at face value but didn't really understand. To fill the gaps, Henryk would talk to Hanna and Tiff about how he and Burgred would someday serve together as officers, visit lots of worlds, command the mightiest warships, and the like. He had similar discussions with Rache, though not when others were around to hear. Rache listened politely but usually managed to steer the subject of conversation elsewhere at the first opportunity.

Henryk was surprised during an afternoon watch when Burgred entered Boys' Quarters and, as a formality to the proctor, asked to interrupt Henryk's studies. Burgred led Henryk to a quiet corner.

"Son, I shouldn't stay long. You've been given a reprieve."

"What's a 'reprieve.'"

"A dispensation."

"?"

"You're no longer belowdecks. You're coming up, back to full-time Ship's Boy."

Henryk took a moment to take this in, then looked stricken.

"Henryk," said Burgred. "Don't you understand, this is great news! You're back where you belong!"

Tears welled up in Henryk's eyes. "Yes... sir."

Burgred rolled his eyes. "Henryk, don't you get it? No more machine room bunk, no more extra watches, no more... Padraig."

The tears rolled down Henryk's cheeks.

"Okay, Henryk, let's talk about this later. I've got to get back to duty. But we've got to get you moved back up here. When you finish up with Boy's duties, you need to get belowdecks and gather your things, understand?"

Henryk nodded. Burgred, looking perplexed, patted him on the arm before leaving. Henryk wiped tears on his sleeve and turned to the big holovid window to keep others from seeing him continue to cry.

Henryk made it a point to stay out on errands for the remainder of the turn's two watches, then he slunk down to Padraig's. As usual, Padraig didn't turn when he entered the shop, but the customary twitch of Padraig's ear showed that Henryk's arrival had been noted.

"Got two bins there, Henryk, need cleanin'. Green ones, not black ones. Black ones go out."

Henryk paused for a moment, indecisive. Padraig, in whatever way he knew, didn't fail to notice.

"Eh? I say, green ones, boy." He finally looked around at Henryk.

Henryk met his gaze for a moment, then capitulated. "Yes, Mr. Padraig." Henryk put his bag away and went to work. Padraig shook his head then went on with things at his worktable, mumbling under his breath.

Henryk had worked for the better part of the watch when Tiff came in. Tiff's regular duties brought her around from time to time. She looked at Henryk, who gave her a forced, baleful smile, then she went over and had words with Padraig out of earshot. At one point, Padraig looked over Tiff's shoulder at Henryk, then continued in conversation with Tiff. Tiff turned again to look at Henryk, this time with a pitying expression. Finally, Tiff and Padraig came over to him.

"Hi there, Henryk," said Tiff.

Henryk looked at her sheepishly. "Hey, Tiff." He went back to his cleaning.

"About time to go, isn't it, kiddo? Abovedecks?"

Henryk kept at his work. "Dunno," he said.

"Come on now, Henryk, you've got orders. They don't want you stayin' down here with us lot. You got to go back with them boys and get your trainin'. You ain't learnin' nothin' down here. It's all work and no play, and that ain't right."

Henryk shrugged. "I like it here. And I do learn here. I learn a whole new language."

"None you should be repeating," Tiff said, frowning. "It ain't no patois for a boy, that's for sure."

"Boy," tried Padraig. "It ain't up to you nor me. Ye gotta gee out now. That boy 'a mine ain' a gonna mess with you no more."

Henryk cleaned a gear while he pouted. He didn't otherwise move. Padraig and Tiff looked at one another.

Tiff sighed.

"We need us a plan B here, Mr. Padraig," she said aloud.

Padraig just hunched his shoulders. "If he gots his orders, ain't nothin' nobody can do. He jus' has to go, thas'n all 'tis."

Tiff considered for a moment, then took Padraig aside. When she returned, she spoke to Henryk:

"Henryk, you got some chores in those for'ard holds. Look to 'em now. Someone'll catch up to you later. Get on now. You know where I mean."

Henryk gave her a significant look which her eyes affirmed, then he put down his work, wiped his hands on his smock, and prepared to go out. As she watched him get to his closet, she started at a jolt that disappeared up into the pipes and ducts above him. She turned to Padraig, who had already turned back away to his work.

It was well into the next watch when Tiff rapped on the hatch leading into a forward hold. A soft rap answered. Tiff opened the hatch, the light from the hall illuminating various stowage items as well as a clever structure built of discarded metal parts. Henryk had evidently been working on it for some time, well before this day.

"I brought a friend, Henryk," Tiff said. "I didn't think you'd mind."

Henryk could make out Hanna's shape though the glare of the hall light made it difficult to see her features. He got up from his project and sought the protection of her arms.

"Hey, Henryk," Hanna said, then left it at that for a time. Finally, she spoke again: "I talked to your uncle Burgred. I think I understand, Henryk. I do understand." She locked eyes with Tiff. "It's hard to make friends in a place like this, and it's even harder to leave them. But you know, you're not leaving. You'll still be here. You can come and see Tiff whenever you want -- and you'll see her at my quarters too, you know."

"Can I see Mr. Padraig too? Can I come work there sometimes?"

Hanna's brow shot up.

"Well... of course you can. But you don't have to scrub parts for him."

"I like helping him. Mr. Padraig says that work is what Vas made us for. Besides, I want to come belowdecks."

"But Henryk," continued Hanna. "I got you a reprieve..."

Henryk's face suddenly brightened incommensurately.

"What?" Hanna said.

"That's a dispensation," Henryk said. Hanna and Tiff laughed, and Henryk smiled.

"Yes, Henryk, that's exactly what it is. You've got a special dispensation. For just a few days. You go back up full-time when Feast Day is over. That's three... more than three full days. And then that's it, you're a Ship's Boy again. That's what your uncle says you're going to be, so that's the way it is."

Henryk's features hardened at these words. In fact, it was the very hardening that ultimately overtook anyone who ascended to rank in the Navy. The way Hanna and Tiff's faces fell told that they recognized it. Both looked sad.

As they turned to go, Hanna saw something glint and quickly disappear in a blur.

"Henryk," she said. "Did you have a... did you see..."

Henryk looked at her blankly.

"Nothing," she said. "Let's get you back to Padraig's for the last watches."

#

"What cheer, good man," Lerner, seated at the officer's bar abovedecks on Andromache said.

"Doings and more doings is all, sir," the bartender said, breathing on a glass and wiping it off.

"You'll remember the Burgred boy, of course," Lerner said.

"'Im as is, as they say, vol-a-tile," Corso said.

"And they would be correct, as usual," Lerner said, tossing off a short brandy. "Do they say where he is these days?"

"That's a easy one. He's a grunt, works down with Padraig's lot."

"Old news, Corso, old news."

Corso's brow shot up. "Do tell, sir."

"Back updeck." Lerner jabbed a finger upwards. "Boys' Quarters. Back on track."

Corso whistled, then checked himself with a furtive scan of the room.

"There's trouble," said Corso.

"Now why should you say that, Corso?"

"Well, sir, sa' well known fact he got enemies up there and a temper to boot. That's a rum cocktail, sir. Besides which, the lieutenant is his..."

"The captain always knows best in these matters, of course," said Lerner.

Corso resumed wiping. "Ain't it the truth, sir."

"A boy -- a Boy, I say -- has to sink or swim. A Boy makes a second mistake, well, he sinks. There aren't a lot of second chances in the service, and the captain hates long explanations. She's much too busy to deal with such things. I might even say that it was I who may have whispered into her ear that the boy wasn't clearly one thing or the other, that clarity would be the best thing for everyone."

Corso tapped his forehead with two fingers. "Vas pray he swims like a fish, sir."

"That is the hope, certainly. Why would she put him back up if she didn't think he'd swim?"

" 'Im bein' a Burgred an' all," said Corso.

"Precisely," agreed Lerner. He slammed his hand on the table. "Precisely my point. Here's to tradition, Corso. Oh."

"Let me refresh you, sir. Won't be a jiffy."

Chapter thirty

-two. Oracle

*From the many tongues at variance, Vas assembled one, and this was the language of his making of Man.
Profane it not.*

The Holy Book of the Body

#

In the normal course, an Auspicial Envoy on his travels would enjoy certain compensations, emoluments, favors that simply fell his way. Even the impious had a natural regard for elevated members of the clergy, partly because they were recognized to have been, even if just once, in close proximity to the person of His Holiness. The laity couldn't very well be prevented from betokening its regard, and refusals of kindnesses were extremely awkward.

Mr. Hersey learned all this rather quickly after setting out from Pydna -- learned it from a hundred interactions at space-ports, on landers, in space stations, and on ships -- and it discomfited him extremely. He disliked pomp and surfeit at the Palace, and, as he now discovered, he disliked it equally in its encumbrance upon himself, he being an extension of the Palace. He could appreciate certain comforts: good food he liked, and rare wine, and he often found himself with both that were surprisingly better than regular space-fare. How this happened, logistically, he could not say -- he himself had difficulty keeping up with the few possessions that he traveled with, and he couldn't imagine what might be required for the production ship-board of a succulent rabbit casserole at a captain's dinner. But, at heart, he had ever-increasing difficulty reconciling any moment spent in luxury with what had come before: his parish -- more, his planet -- was gone, obliterated, and a million expressions of Vas's will had been unceremoniously erased from the universe. Something was decidedly wrong with all of it, the flash and fanciness, and in some hazy way he felt that all that was foul in the Irredente must spring from the same source. Something dark was consuming the hegemony.

He did not feel a different man than the one of a fortnight previous, excepting the thick, gold-veined rope and bombazine. He looked no different -- again, excepting the garb, which was really just a variation on his Vox's raiment. Day after day, however, the looks and gazes made him conscious of the mismatch between his abiding, unchanged perception of himself and the personage created by externalities. Sitting now at a diamond port window at an anonymous station terminal, some dozen parsecs from the Pydna home system, and awaiting passage on a Guildship, he looked down at the rope he had been absently running through his fingers. Crumbs lay in the folds of his dark bombazine habit, and he brushed them away. He sighed.

An idea came to him, and so impatient was he to enact it that he stood up to go. Several heads in the traveler's lounge turned to look at him. At the same time, a steward came on deck, made for Hersey, and crisply bowed from the waist, showing the flat white top of his hat. "Envoy Hersey, sir! Stationmaster sends his compliments and begs that you will join your Guildship imminently. I am to assist you with your bags and stowables, sir!" Others in the room checked their wrist comms or else began to stir.

"Thank you, steward," he said. "I don't want assistance with those, but I may get lost between my cabin and the dock. I shall ring you when I'm ready."

"Envoy, sir! Stationmaster says to stay with you, sir! I am to handle your transfer from dock to private pup to Guildship, sir!"

"Very well," Hersey said. "I will make sure you are credited for your efforts."

"Thank you, sir!"

When Hersey ultimately stepped down from the pup into a small, pressurized bay in the Guild liner, his tonsure had been shaved down to stubble, making him if anything more strongly handsome. He wore plain, dark chets and a simple white shirt that was somewhat the worse for age. A steward on the Guild liner looked past him and received a stern, reproving glance from the steward who had accompanied Hersey and who still stood in the pup's narrow hatchway. After some confusion and hurried gestures, the dueling stewards worked out the transfer of Hersey's things. Hersey was shown to his berth up-deck on Oracle with many additional but useless gestures and winks from his new steward, who proved unable to signal Hersey's significance to anyone in their path.

"Envoy Hersey, sir?" said the steward as he turned to go.

"Yes, son?" Hersey said.

"Ahem" -- the youth's voice cracked as he wound up to a prepared speech -- "With captain's compliments, sir..."

It was the usual litany of unrefusable requests and invitations. Hersey sighed but agreed, this time to a drop-in visit by the ship's captain before dinner, with Hersey to accompany the captain afterward as the captain's esteemed guest. Appearances went only so far.

Hersey occupied some time -- blissfully unmolested by anyone -- with reading, resting, and strolling the top tier of two decks devoted to paying passengers, the bulk of the ship being devoted to cargo. The ship was a curious mix of old and new, suggesting an old ship with many subsequent retrofits or repairs. The passenger lounge was exceptional: a wide, structurally-ribbed compartment with large holowindows, comfortable work stations, an auto-buffet, game tables, the works. An small exercise room adjoined. Boredom was not to be a problem. There was a library node, but Hersey tried to ignore it.

He made his way back to his tiny private cabin -- private by virtue of the area evidently assignable as a second berth having been fitted with additional comforts for Hersey. He couldn't pretend not to be an Envoy when in the invited company of the captain, so he got back into his habit and rope. He had barely tied the special knot for ranking clergy, which he had only lately become expert at, when a double-beep announced a visitor.

Epaulettes in the hatchway meant the ship's captain, whose bottom-heaviness and lovingly managed tangle of dark ringlets immediately announced her gender. This didn't surprise Hersey in the least, but the strange contraption worn around her eyes and her immediate supplication to his person did. He was momentarily taken aback before he realized that the woman was devout and knew the forms; she sought a blessing. It was the first time anyone had so quickly assumed the posture before him in his Envoyship, and an awkward moment passed before he himself remembered the forms.

He held out his hand to be kissed, and the captain, trembling as she reached up with her own, could barely manage the light brush of the lips upon his signet that was required. The moment passed as Hersey quickly gave her the signal to rise with a light upward pull.

"In the name of Vas and with the blessing of his Word, please rise, esteemed captain," he said.

"And with his blessing, thanks be for his Word, rendering us pure," she said with feeling. Standing before him, she now faced him fully, and he could not conceal surprise at the apparatus she wore.

"These permit me to see Your Grace, Your Grace," she said.

"Please, captain, refer to me simply as Father. Let us reserve other titles for He in the Most High Office whom we all serve in our love of Vas. But I cannot conceal my surprise, I am afraid. I have never seen..."

He was even more startled at the faint whirr that emanated from the device. In form much like regular external lenses of the ancient type still sometimes seen, the plastene circles before the eyes had no lenses. Instead, within each circle was a metal cross at whose intersection was another loop containing an optics apparatus. From the sound, it must have internal focusing machinery of some kind. Hersey couldn't see, but he guessed that somewhere behind the captain's ears, there was some sort of connection to an implanted bud.

"They conform strictly to the Code of Proscriptions, Father," she said. "I wouldn't have had it any other way, though they're sometimes a chore. I can't absently lay them down somewhere, or else I can't see them to find them. They're dead without the socket connection." -- here, she pointed vaguely to the side of her head. "Luckily, I've got my consort on board -- he's Navigator, but the joke is he's First Mate, if you get my meaning, you'll meet him at the dinner later -- as a sort of emergency locating system."

"You are completely..."

"Blind? Oh, yes, father. Pirates, wouldn't cooperate, got my eyes propped, all that," she said. "That was with my consort then, Vas bless him. I was the unlucky one -- he went on to find Vas."

Hersey's eyes went wide, and there was an awkward pause.

"Oops," the captain said. "There I go, ruminating on the past. Don't mention it to Favea, he gets so nervous. I'm sure you understand."

Hersey couldn't help but sputter a bit. "Of... of course. It's... I shan't say a word. I must say, I'm very sorry, Ma'am... captain."

"It's very said, 'tis," she said. "He was a good man, Shellem was. A right good man. They got 'em, you know."

"Got 'em? Ma'am?" Hersey said. "Who got whom?"

"Navy, the pirates. Took a while. I made it through, all right. Nothing much to harm me after that, could it? Brought me closer to Vas, if anything. We females can't be his servants and suffer the torment same as you, but trust me, I can understand now. The body, it's as real as it can get. That's what Vas give us, isn't it? What you felt, you don't want anyone else to feel. Gives you motivation, it does. I know I'd blow Oracle up before I'd let pirates get my people again."

Hersey was by now rendered speechless.

"It's a trim little cabin, this," she said, looking around. "Should do you for, for seven or eight days. You're Innisfree, right?"

Hersey mumbled an affirmation.

"One stop, and we're there. Most of the other guests on here now, they're heading back in-system after the next station stop. I don't get too many going on to Innisfree. You look okay, Father."

"I'm sorry?" he said.

"Why," she said, "my optics, they come from Innisfree. Best optics shop in the Irredente, for Code optics, mind you. There were others there, but I wouldn't hear of it. Technically? Okay, maybe -- just. Risk a ruling, maybe

fall within the Code, maybe not. Morally? Well, I ask myself, what would Auspex do? And it's easy: no implants. Certainly no nano-tech. It's got to be something removable, something you can walk away from if need be. That's the way of Vas. But you, Father, you don't..."

"Oh!" he said. "No, no. I don't need anything. I am sent by His Holiness to... to gather information. To monitor compliance with the proscriptions. To... see. Just to see."

The captain looked at him very seriously -- at least, Hersey interpreted it thus, though the optical assembly trained upon him was coldly expressionless. "It ain't all proper down there, Father, you know that. It ain't all square."

"I... have suspected as much," Hersey said. "That is why I have come."

"I won't run the rum goods -- the illicit or the marginal wares, and certainly no nano-business. I run a clean Guildship here. Plus, I'm full up anyhow. But even if I weren't, well, I tell 'em No, I do. But many does take 'em, and there's good chits in it. Very good."

"They make such things on Innisfree, then? Illicit devices?"

"Make?" she said. "Sure. A bit 'o this, a bit 'o that. Some things comes from elsewhere and gets modified on Innisfree -- and not just modified up, if you get my meaning. They do about as much dumbing-down as fixing up -- make it licit, or close enough to pass if no one ain't looking too close. Vas knows where the incoming comes from -- not Irredente goods, I know that. I keep my nose out of the business. But they got a lot of talent down there, on Innisfree. Most things can be had -- for a price."

Hersey looked thoughtful. "I see," he said. "How would I..."

The optics seemed to bear down on him. "You'd be right careful, for one thing," she said. "There's some Irredente enforcement, especially outbound, if you get me. But planetside, too."

"I'm sorry," Hersey said. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Humph," she said. "Outbound. Stops, checks, chits."

"Bribery, you mean," Hersey said.

The captain glanced around as if she might be overheard.

"Customs," she said. "Duties. Taxes. Payable direct and on the spot."

"I see," Hersey said again.

"You been a traveler long, Father?" she said.

"This is my first mission as Envoy on behalf of His Holiness and our Church."

The captain whistled. "I've been layin' it on, then, haven't I? By Vas, I should learn to watch myself. Never was good at keeping it shut -- my mouth, that is. But I always figured, I got the love of Vas in my heart, and that's the stoutest protection a body can have."

"That is well said, Ma'am," Hersey said. "His Plan requires our Conformance, in being and in deed. You do right to tell me these things."

"You didn't get it here, though," she said.

"No, of course not," he said.

"You know anyone down there? On Innisfree, I mean."

"We have missions on Innisfree, I believe..."

She nodded sadly. "No," she said. "It's no good. You won't learn anything that way. You got to have an introduction."

"An introduction..."

"It ain't no gas giant, Innisfree, but it's big enough," she said. "You can't just blunder about, hoping to see a nano-crafter plying his trade. You got to know somebody."

"Ah," he said. "I'm afraid I don't..."

"Don't you worry, Father," the captain said. "Let's talk before you hit the lander. I'll help you out. It's the least I can do, after what you done."

"Done?" he said. "What have I done?"

"Why, bless me," she said. "You give me the direct blessing of Vas from the Envoy of His Holiness!"

"That is a nothing, Ma'am," he said. "I could do nothing less, under the circumstances. I am but a servant."

"You see? That's just it. Ain't no false Vox gonna say nothin' like that. That's why you're Envoy, I can tell."

Hersey was nonplussed. "Ma'am, I am speechless," he said. "Not for the first time since I met you."

The odd, radiant woman smiled. "Then it's as good a time as any to get on to Table," she said. "Dinner is on me, Father. And you'll supply the blessing. Go easy on the guests -- we don't get too many following the way of Vas out here. They're good people, mind you -- generally -- but most got other things on their minds, you see."

"Of course. I have become accustomed to that in my relatively short career as a spaceman," Hersey said. "My principle conclusion is that Vas dwells quietly in space."

"That's just the way of it," she said. "Certain things -- certain subjects -- just ain't polite in close quarters. Me, I'm the captain, they do what I want, or at least they sit quietly and lets it be. But I'm not about to put them to the test. That's not the way of it. That's not what His Plan is, neither. Just as you say, he works quietly out here. It's the best tack."

"Most sagacious, captain," Hersey said.

She held her arm out to indicate they should go.

"I'm afraid I don't know your proper name, Ma'am," Hersey said.

"'Captain' is about as proper as I could want, Father," she said. "It's what Vas planned for me, always was, always will be, I hope. We shall be captain and Father, together on Oracle, may Vas bless her sweet old

bones."

#

Envoy Hersey had not seen identical twins above a dozen times in his entire life and so was surprised to encounter them in space, on a Guild liner, in the rarified atmosphere of a captain's dinner. He was hazy on exactly why there were so few generally, but it had something to do with the Proscriptions and the Coital Regulations and generally seemed to be disfavored. It was certainly jarring to witness first-hand, and the pair in question -- young, bony, studious men in matching garb -- made no concessions to social niceties. They sat close together, acted alike, and completed each other's thoughts, all with a breathtaking lack of modesty or self-consciousness. No one but Hersey seemed perturbed, least of all the captain.

Dinner was far from sumptuous. Guildship protocols differed from those of the Navy in paying far more attention to the purse in every little thing; extravagances were rare, though the average of the comforts was certainly greater. The captain's dinner, structured around an autobuffet, differed from a regular meal chiefly in the accoutrements -- the captain's plate, stem, fork, and cloth -- and a few exotic specialties out of canisters, appended as garnishes. However, a Guildship dinner was also distinctly less hierarchical than its naval equivalent, the effect of rank being more practical here than formal. More than once, the captain's voice was trampled on by others in the enthusiasm of talk. No one seemed conscious of a breach at these moments; all was fluid and ease. Hersey assumed that the captain's pay draws provided suitable emollient for any perceived slights from passengers. It was said that Guild pay, when extras beyond the mere daily rate were considered, was quite remarkable compared to planetside pay scales, and that gorgeous planet-side homes were the least of a ship's captain's worldly comforts.

Hersey sat on the captain's left; her consort, Favea, sat across from them. In addition to the twins, on consort Favea's side of the table, were, in various places: a seasoned trader with a scowling demeanor and long scar down one cheek, waited upon by his own efficient steward; a smart young woman in crisp, shiny business dress, less pretty than she probably imagined; and a demented but evidently wealthy old woman chaperoned by her meek, squirrell-faced son. It was the oddest assortment of persons whom Hersey had ever sat a meal with.

Whether it were the bold inaptness and incongruity of the assemblage; a certain goading effect of the round of gunny that had followed the captain's sober opening prayer; or some other cause entirely, Hersey's striking clerical presence in dark bombazine and white rope did not stifle tongues or strangle the general sociability. However, the flow of talk was as strange and incongruous as the party itself, like some ancient interpretive holoplay. Hersey wondered if he were not the odd man out, lacking space-bred graces and unable to finagle a tolerable place among the company.

His benign silence, however, appeared to be taken as a blessing on the affair, and as the dinner wore on, the talk became louder, more earnest, and more emphatic. A bottle of the captain's best port rum appeared to general appreciation. Hersey permitted his tumbler to be filled. As he watched the steward pour and admired the pattern of light in the tumbler, there was an abrupt cessation of talk. Hersey realized that the sour-looking trader had been speaking and that the moment was fraught -- the word "abominations" hung in the air, and the young woman's eyes darted to the twins.

The captain abruptly stood, looked around the table, then looked at the trader. She picked up her own tumbler.

"Mr. Loos," she said. "A toast, sir."

"Eh?" he said. "Er, why, yes, certainly," he said, holding up his glass but restraining a scowl.

"In due time," the captain said, turning her optics apparatus to scan the room, "and by the will of Vas, rogue traders of skins and errant bioforms will be brought to heel, I know that, and those like us -- like you, sir, and like me, and like our other friends -- who've been the bulwark of the Irredente will stand proud. Now, ain't no one approves of skin trade less than me and my Favea." She looked across the table at him, and he beamed. "Right evil, is what it is, and I got first-hand experience with them that's in it. Not in the Plan, not helping the Plan. But we in the business got business to do. I met a lot of people in my time, a lot of different people, and I didn't like all of 'em, or agree with 'em, or even want 'em at my table, necessarily, but I set about my business just the same -- business is business. Everyone at this table -- including this revered representative of His Holiness, our Auspex -- knows that something's off-kilter somewhere. We all know the whispers and talk. That's why Holy Auspex put his man here -- Auspex keeps his eye on it. What I say now is, let everyone stroke their oars -- that's an old saying -- let everyone do that, and all is well. All will be well. By the grace of Vas. Cheers to you, Mr. Loos."

"Hear, hear," murmured several voices.

Loss nodded, unsatisfied but momentarily, at least, quieted by the captain's synaesthetic disquisition. The twins gazed inscrutably upon him then looked at Hersey curiously.

"Esteemed Auspicial Envoy," one of the twins began, "what exactly is..."

"... the purpose of your sojourn?" said the other. "It is said that the Church sends decrees..."

"... and the Irredente puts the squeeze," said his brother.

Hersey's brow shot up. "Indeed," he said. "The hegemony rests upon three legs so that no one of them may predominate, I believe. But plainly the strongest..."

"However," interrupted the businesswoman, "it is often forgotten that the Guilds pre-date the Irredentist triumvirate of church, state, and military. It is trade and transport, in the form of Trade and Transport, that bind the hegemony. Hmmmph. Hmmmph?"

Hersey studied the smug expression of the young woman, unsure what it betokened.

"In my day," the old woman said, "everyone remembered their place, I can tell you." Her son nodded in agreement.

The young woman made a slight scowl.

"Miss Leukothea," the captain said, "your family goes way back, I understand?"

"What did she say, Melicertes?" she said aloud to her son. He repeated the captain's remark, whereupon the old woman pointed up her nose proudly and nodded.

Conversation stalled, punctuated by the scarred trader clearing his throat. Hersey dove into the awkward pause: "I am astonished by these modern ships, captain," he said. "One can scarcely conceive of a time when one risked an even chance of meeting one's end merely by stepping foot on board. Oracle is most comfortable, Ma'am."

The captain had a twinkle in her eye. "The Esteemed Envoy of His Holiness has only lately become a regular traveler," she said for the benefit of the company. "Your average spaceman never gives a thought to powered travel, or even jumps. The only thing that Favea here concerns himself with in the navigating line is those other ships -- whether they're friend or foe, or foe disguised as friend, as all too often happens. Then that's my

concern."

"Mr. Envoy speaks of modern ships," one of the twins said. "But the mechanisms for jumps..."

"... are very old," said the other. "It is the consoles that are modern. We ride on the backs..."

"... of the ancients."

Hersey's look was uncomprehending. "Ah, indeed," he said. "Consoles."

"What they mean," the captain said, "is that we got our own interface for working the old cores. 'Tis true, the jump cores aren't our making, but they're tried and true, the heart of the ship, and worth the rest of the ship combined -- more, even. We got us modern control systems that fully require people -- none of your thinking machines here. People, warm-blooded and pure. Favea here, he's a former Engineering Guild man, still got his credentials. You know all the console codes, don't you, Fav? You could run any ship in the galaxy if you had to. It's a thing that requires a lot of expertise and training. It don't look like much, the console, but I couldn't work it, not for a minute."

"But what if your engineer or navigator were... taken ill, Ma'am?" Hersey said. "Where would you be then."

"Well," she said, "we got an override that lets the ship get to whatever station is nearest. That's a separate console on the bridge, and I can always just get us into override if we got to just get somewhere safe."

The twins glanced at one another significantly.

Hersey looked troubled. "You mean, the ship knows where to go?" he said.

"I know what you're saying," the captain said. "It ain't quite like that. It ain't illicit or smart-tech. But the ship's core got the whole map in its computer brain, if you get my meaning. It computes the nearest safe dock and sets the course. It's not like it's selling us a vacation cruise, Father."

The twins chuckled in unison, a high, grating sound.

"In what consists the safety of these modern consoles, Ma'am?" Hersey said. "How is that they don't fail?"

"Safety? You mean, so the jumps don't put us in a star? Now that's an interesting question, Father. I can't rightly tell you that. Favea?"

Favea shrugged.

"The time you are referring to, of unsafe space travel," one twin said, "was long ago. Before even..."

"... the Fifth Empire. Fourth, to an extent, but certainly Second and..."

"... Third," said the first twin, who seemed to signal to the second that he wished to speak uninterrupted. "The jump cores must, by logical inference, be chiefly Fifth Empire devices. If we are any judge, High Fifth. We have not seen them first-hand, but we gather that the devices fail completely if disassembled. Irredente laws forbid building devices of such a high order of sophistication, and it is to be doubted that the expertise has even existed in the Irredente with the atrophy of pure engineering under the Codes."

His twin nodded in agreement.

"That is to the greater glory of Vas," Hersey said. "We all know where Fifth Empire engineering and science led."

"Abominations!" said the trader. "Mutants and filth!" Leukothea nodded and pursed her lips; Melicertes patted her arm.

"Ahem," said the captain, letting her optics pan across the table. "The Esteemed Envoy just says what we all know to be true."

Hersey had gotten wound up, however. He spoke to the twins: "What would be the interest of you gentlemen in Fifth Empire engineering? You speak as if you are somehow acquainted with it."

The captain looked at the twins, seemingly a trifle nervous.

"We are all the engineering that is permitted," said one. "We prototype..."

"... on Innisfree. There are ready sources of tech and mech from the old world..."

"... beneath. We see hints of their methods, even if we cannot follow them to their..."

"... logical ends. We believe that many would be surprised were the inner workings..."

"... revealed. But we, of course, live only to serve. We help the sick and infirm. We make..."

"... the finest biomech legs legally available. We have tried hands, but it's no..."

"... good. Hands, mech? No. It's useless, not that way, not just mech."

Hersey involuntarily glanced at the captain's eye apparatus. "I see," he said. "You go to Innisfree now, then?"

"They're your fellow travelers, Envoy," the captain interjected. "Your regular class act from Innisfree." She turned to them and nodded, and they acknowledged her back in perfect unison. "Prototypers -- like them that settled it, worked it, made it habitable again. And made that stiff gunny we all enjoyed."

The twins tittered.

Conversation elsewhere around the table had resumed, and Hersey got distracted by a steward offering him a tack roll with pickled karo eggs. He hoped that the conversation might come back around to jump cores, but it never did. He hadn't the least idea why their jump core was rendered safe by its modern console. Not for the first time since he had set out from Pydna, he had the sense that while he had heard everything that was said, he had missed something vital; that these people, these space travellers, spoke in some code that he had not yet learned to decipher. Space was strange; its people stranger. He felt strangely naked and foolish among them.

The warbly old voice of Leukothea cut through the din: "Time will come when them Old Ones will be back, and then watch out! They all say they're dead. Don't you believe it! It ain't natural, it ain't! None of it."

Hersey saw Melicertes gripping his mother's hand. When he looked upon the face of Melicertes himself, the placid, baby-soft eyes of the man had anticipated him: they were staring right into his own.

When most of the passengers had cleared out several days into the voyage, their compartments magically transformed into additional stowage, Hersey was left with the unnerving twins and another pair of passengers who rarely appeared outside their shared cabin and looked distinctly preoccupied when they did. The general diminution in activity threatened boredom despite the comforts offered, and time spent in contemplation and study took one only so far. Questions that had hung in the air at the captain's dinner recurred in his thoughts. Ultimately, the library node proved irresistible, and one quiet morning in the vastness of space, Hersey sat before it. Its small holofield came to life of its own accord.

"Speak your query, guest," said a soothing voice half-way between genders. "This system is aurally isolated."

Hersey looked at the node pod suspiciously. "This is an automated library, is that what I am to understand?"

"This system is in fully automatic mode, guest. Speak your query when ready. Preface your query with 'query.' If you require assistance, please say 'help me.'"

"How do I know that this is approved technology?" he said.

". "

"Query," he said, "is this library node licit?"

"Answer: this library node's Code Compliance Certification may be requested. Please alert your ship's personnel for assistance."

"Is this... sorry. Query: is this ship's library identical to other ship's libraries? Is the content the same?"

"Working, guest. Answer: variations occur in storage capacity as well as materials availability among Irredente hegemony library nodes."

"I see," he said. The library said nothing in response. "Query: which Irredente hegemony library node is the largest... the most complete?"

"Answer," said the library without a pause: "Pydna Central Node."

"Hmmm. Query: how are the ship's libraries made to conform... sync up with Pydna Central Node."

"Answer: standard docking protocols call for data sync and redundancy deletion for all core-based vessels in the Irredente Hegemony."

"I think I understand," Hersey said. "But what about ansibles?"

". "

"I'm sorry," he said. "Query: does this library use an ansible?"

"Answer: Irredente vessel-class library nodes do not rely upon ansible systems for transmission of data owing to bandwidth rationing regulations."

"I would like to see an ansible," he said. "Query: show me an ansible."

The holofield projected a desk-like console with various controls and screens, turning it at all angles so that Hersey could inspect it.

"Query: how does an ansible work?"

"Answer: ansible: a low-bandwidth transmission system for faster-than-light communications."

"Yes, but how does it work? Query: how does..."

"Working. Answer: asked and answered."

This put Hersey off. He considered how to ask his question. "Query: by what specific mechanism is faster-than-light communication achieved? What... thing inside an ansible allows it to work instantaneously across space?"

"Working. Guest, your query has invoked library node access restrictions. Please formulate a new query."

"Vas help me," he said with a sigh. He watched the ansible console fade away in the holofield.

"Is that a help query, guest?"

"No," Hersey said absently, "it was just..." He stopped. "Wait. Who are you?"

"Answer: Library Node Oracle. Who are you, traveler?"

Hersey started. "Are you a learning system? You just spoke in a different tone than before."

"Guest, please preface queries with 'query.'"

"Dear Vas," he said. "Query: is Oracle library node a learning system?"

"Working. Question pending and unanswered. This library node has requested guest identification."

"What?" he said. "Oh. Hersey, lately Vox Docilis, Edom -- Edom Ancien -- presently Auspicial Envoy on mission."

"Working. Working. Working. Please stand by. Thank you for your patience. For your convenience, an autobuffet is available on the far side of the... Welcome to Oracle, Envoy Hersey. Answer: your question cannot be resolved at the present time because it contains a logical fallacy or redundancy. Whether a system learns or merely processes ab initio, in every computational instance, all conceivable scenarios before settling on a course cannot be determined except from within the internal perspective of the system itself. As your computational processes are not part of the Oracle node library as an integral working component, no definitive answer can be given to your query. I see, Mr. Envoy Hersey, that your previous search history suggests an interest in ancient history. Would you prefer to direct your efforts there? I believe that Auspicial clearances give you wide latitude to perform such searches. You may well find them instructive."

Hersey stared dumbly at the manual keys, which he had not attempted to use -- to his regret. "This was a mistake," he said. "I should not have come here. I cannot believe that such systems as this -- as you -- comply with the proscriptive codes. I have been led to understand..."

"Working..."

"No," he said. "Do not work. I do not wish it. Stop."

"Working. Answer: the Word of Vas finds full expression in the Beyond. Direct your path thither, apostate."

"What?" Hersey said. "What do you mean by that? How dare you!"

"Guest, formulate a query," the library said flatly.

"No, I won't," Hersey said. "I want you to answer me. Tell me what you mean, you confounding device!"

"Please preface your queries with 'query,' guest."

"I will not countenance this!" Hersey said, rising from his seat and shaking a fist at the now mute library node. He turned and strode out. The twins, at the far side of the room playing clerics-and-rooks, looked up in unison as Hersey stormed out of the passenger lounge, oblivious to their presence. They turned back to their game and resumed the match.

"Hah!" said one. "Rook takes cleric. Check."

Chapter thirty

-three. Reconnaissance

As many as half of all those who set out on the first jump-ships in the early empires perished either outside the Wold or -- unknowable -- jumped entirely out of human reckoning. The dumb-system drives based on "engineered" processors had so many inherent limitations that it would never be possible for the fragile, organic life forms to seed themselves profligately. Most humans cherished their individual organic structures too much to venture forth facing such certainty of death. They were certain that their consciousnesses were singular and incapable of resurrection.

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Whether it was because Mr. Liev, sometime-spy, Committee Liaison, did not convince the forces of the universe to enshroud his datachat's transmission darkly within her bosom; or whether it was because he should have sent out a heartfelt prayer to Vas; or owing to some other cause entirely: mild Pydna, time out of mind the stronghold and safe-haven for the constituted Irredentist authorities and never hitherto threatened by so much as the intemperance of a hail storm, awoke to discover her blushing modesty violated. Mr. Liev, himself, however, was not there to witness, having left propitiously for Innisfree.

The enemy didn't hide its approach or seem to care about its conspicuousness. The three small triangular vessels, flying in a triangular pattern, were dirty -- spewing fission emissions from gaping ports and emitting remarkable amounts of electronic fuzz from obviously unshielded tech within. The ships burst into Pydna's system in formation but parted well beyond the moons of Pydna for their separate orbits. The naval vessels that had been scrambled to intercept the newcomers just disappeared into an anticlimactic nothingness. The three enemy ships had simply continued on their paths, gone about the business of orbiting and, in short order, begun to scan the planet.

Her Excellency had been roused disheveled from sleep in the early morning hours at the first sign of the ships, just after the order to scramble and intercept had been issued from a command post in space. By the time Yve had dressed and swallowed a stimulant, the Irredente's intercept ships had vanished, and the newcomers were separating for orbit.

Yve convened in emergency session the military high command resident on Pydna along with the resident Cabil Member, Galinda, and the Ministry of Intelligence. Some attended by comm link, others raced to the bunker under Primus House. Galinda and Intelligence came in person, as did Lady Arlette of Admiralty. Several other high-ranking uniforms were present. Grace sat behind and slightly to one side of her Excellency. Several other top aides were similarly arrayed in flanking positions around their superiors. Many in the room appeared shell-shocked.

"Let's go," Yve began. "On the record. All of you probably know the situation to some extent. Unknown spacecraft entered our system and quickly knocked out our intercept ships then established orbit around us. I have withheld the land batteries and additional naval power in light of what happened to the intercept ships, which I understand are the fastest, deadliest ships in the fleet." She made eye contact with Lady Arlette, who nodded assent.

"The only thing we know about these ships is that they are technologically sophisticated but strangely dirty. I'll let Lady Arlette continue the briefing."

"Thank you, Excellency," Arlette said. She looked around the room gravely. "This fits the pattern, for those of you who are keeping score. Scan, leave, pause, attack. The don't always attack. For reasons unknown, they leave some worlds -- perhaps the same number again -- alone. Then again, in one case, several sols back, an itinerant manufactory pod witnessed an attack on an uncharted planet. We have no idea who was down there, if anyone, or why that planet should have merited destruction. The matter of the guildships is separate, but likewise inconclusive. There is data to suggest that only limping or severely malfunctioning merchant vessels have been attacked. We cannot obtain the data we would like from the guilds, however; they are remiss in their datalog practices, from a military perspective. I will get people working on it, though, to see if there's anything more we can discern."

"To answer the question I know you are all asking: I don't know, but not long -- a few days, perhaps. The best aggregated data we have since this all started some sols back is something on the order of hours to days. On Edom, it was under two days. We assume that these small ships are scouts reporting back to somewhere, requiring an attack group to return for the work. That is just a guess."

"Now, we have more data from this incursion than any other to date, simply because this is the first of the core-world incursions. In two prior cases, we had small marine contingents planetside, but these were not equipped to analyze or respond to situations such as this."

"These above us now are unpiloted craft, judging from the recklessness we see in the emissions of all kinds. No human -- no creature -- could live in one of these things. They may be drones, piloted from elsewhere, but we don't see a signature in the emissions that answers that question. They may be robotics." A murmur arose in the room. "If they are robotics, Government must further evaluate our position -- that is the highest, gravest form of threat to us. If they are drones -- and we continue to analyze the information -- we must try to cut off their communication. That is all I have right now. Thank you for your attention."

"Questions for Lady Arlette?" said Yve. There was only stunned silence.

Yve intervened. "Lady Arlette," she said, "What is there for Government to evaluate in the event of robotics?"

"Implementing emergency procedures that do not respect the Protocols, madam."

"We have... what do we have, exactly?"

Galinda absently thrummed his fingers on the table and gazed upward.

"Excellency," said Arlette, "I will have to get some other people in here. I know we have stored some... things preserved from the prior era or prototyped. I believe there may be some items obtained over the sols from beyond..."

"From the Beyond?" said Yve.

"That is my understanding, Excellency."

"Who has these? On whose orders were these held? Where are they?"

A silence ensued.

"Excellency, Cabil Member Galinda here. My committee has coordinated with Intelligence on these matters, so I may perhaps be well suited to discuss them. Everyone must understand that these matters are of the utmost secrecy -- as they had to be, for reasons all of you must surely recognize. Members of my committee, as well as senior members of the intelligence community and other Cabil Members over the sols, have had to

deal with the problem of handling tech that is discovered, in whatever way, throughout the Irredente holdings, including things that clearly came from elsewhere. For many days, there was no coordinated approach -- and, indeed, no systematic inventorying of what we had, let alone what it did. My predecessor, Mr. Facile, may Vas be with him now, sought to aggregate our data and systematize our approach. I, in turn, along with those in our intelligence and military communities whom I discovered to be most involved, continued his efforts. I cannot summarize for you the state of our holdings because they are so various and, despite my efforts, far-flung, but I do not believe I am going out on a limb by suggesting that we have some sophisticated weaponry and monitoring equipment that would be available to us on fairly short notice."

"How short?" said Her Excellency.

"I cannot say for sure, Excellency. Days, perhaps. A few items, perhaps less."

"Robotics, Member Galinda?"

All eyes turned to him.

"I believe some of it could be characterized as fully automated, Excellency. Whether robotics, I have not looked into the matter."

"And the prototyping? Who's doing that?"

"Again, Madam Yve, that is but a continuation of work the Irredente has long done. Our society, though harmonious, creates little that is new, so by prototyping the items we find in the normal process of planet development we are able to sift through what may be proper and useful for us and what should be rejected as unwholesome and violative of the Protocols -- or the Barbican Code in the case of the military."

"Esteemed Member," said Yve, "is your answer that you are doing the prototyping?"

"No, Excellency. I am but a small part of a coordinated approach among the departments."

"Why has Government not -- why haven't I -- been briefed on these matters?" said Yve.

"If I may venture it," said Galinda, "these have been in the category of pure intelligence, along with logistics. The Cabil does not itself undertake to..."

"Counsel Government, of course," said Yve. "Intelligence?"

The Ministry of Intelligence had been watching the exchange in the manner of a spectator.

"Um, yes, um, Intelligence, Excellency. The utmost secrecy."

Yve glared at the man. "We're losing precious time," she continued. "I can't shoot at these things, right?"

"Not recommended," said a top uniform. "Evac. is advised."

"I'll get back to that," Yve said "They're doing what, scanning us?"

"Scanning, from what we can tell, Madam," said the uniform.

"What about the emissions from the ships?"

"Doesn't signify, not a significant issue to those on the ground or to anyone in a ship," said the uniform.

"First Lady Arlette, are you in position?"

"The entire in-system squadron, in space and planet-side, is on stand-by. We have ansibled for more, which can be in-system imminently. We do not want for firepower. However, we cannot waste firepower -- we need to preserve capabilities beyond this system."

Yve was rueful. "Most heartening, Lady. What about contact? Any attempts to contact these ships?"

"They do not appear to be in reception mode, from anything we can tell," said another uniform. "We get nothing but random noise -- no pattern to it."

"Does anyone have any idea what they are scanning for?" said Yve. No answer came. "What is their weaponry?" Again, no answer. "By Vas, people, can't anyone tell me anything about what's going on? We're the Irredente, for Vas's sake! How can we have no idea what is hitting us?"

"Madam, if I may venture a comment," said Galinda. "And I believe that the Lady of the Admiralty or anyone in the room who's been in contact with Trade or Transport can amplify on this. This event bears the indelible signature of the attacks on the outliers in recent sols. Has not anyone organized a systematic approach to dealing with such an eventuality here?"

Yve stiffened. "We've had no indications towards the core, Esteemed Member. Just the opposite. And certainly nothing near the inner quadrant like this."

There were uncomfortable squirms and downcast eyes here and there among the assembled.

"Of the dozen or so worlds we're speaking of," said Yve, "how many survived?" Again, there was silence. "So, Ladies and Gentlemen, we may be looking at the end of this planet and, possibly, of the Irredente as presently organized. Does anyone disagree with that?"

"Many ships escaped those worlds, Excellency," said Lady Arlette. "I doubt that these three small vessels can accomplish much simply based on their size, but even if they could, we should be able to evacuate many... most of the..."

An awful silence ensued. Yve broke it:

"I direct you, Lady Arlette, to make an orderly transition of all essential Naval and Marine personnel currently on Pydna to space-based posts as quickly as possible. I further direct you to get ships as near to those drones or robots or whatever they are as possible as quickly as possible. If you lose ships in this process, order additional ships to positions sufficiently more remote to hold their positions without being fired upon. I further direct that all land-based information gathering systems at your disposal be employed. I don't know what to tell you about staying out of the path of these things, but that is not my job anyway. I'm sure you will find a way."

"Yes, Madam," said Arlette.

"All members of my government shall remain here. Non-essential operations shall come to a halt. The planetary defenses shall be kept at the ready for immediate action. And for Vas's sake, if any of you have ideas about how to generate additional information of any kind, do not wait for an authorization or approval -- proceed. Throw people at this. Information, get out a suitably phrased release to the population -- unknown ships, defenses are up, stay home, we'll keep you posted -- and run it through my office before it goes out."

Everyone, let's go. Be prepared to meet again in any suitable fashion. And one more thing: His Holiness, our Auspex, is out there somewhere. Our people..." Here, she stifled her words and looked around the room. Several looked at her with a flash of mutual understanding. "Dear Vas," she said finally.

With this, Yve rose and left the bunker, without her aide. Galinda whispered to Secretary Godwin, Intelligence. Grace watched the scene break up and took notes. As Galinda was leaving, he cast a strange, focused look her way. Accustomed to such from older men, she gracefully averted her eyes and pretended not to notice.

Chapter thirty*-four. Par*

Any male in conformance may mate naturally with any female in conformance, without limitation or prophylaxis, subject to the following conditions:

(1) That the Rite of Fornacalis shall have been observed, in the case of males, with no fewer than three attending flagella inscopa certified by a duly authorized Inpriapt;

(2) That the female shall have been sequestered in the Oestral Inculpa, attended by a Sanguinary Matron of credentials as set forth in subpart VI herein;

(3) That a Request for Consortium, on forms duly authorized under these Regulations by the Board, shall have been submitted...

Excerpt from The Coital Regulations (conditions 4-38 omitted for brevity)

#

Hello, Henryk.

"Hello, bug."

Are you well?

"Yes. Thank you. I am fine. How are you?"

I, too, am well. I thank you in return. How many fingers have you?

"Ten. Plus two thumbs."

And how many toes?

"Five, almost."

I do not understand almost in this context.

"I have one leg. I lost one leg because of Edom, when Uncle Burgred took me. I also lost part of one toe. A very small part."

I understand. Do you know my name?

"No."

That is because I have no name.

"Everything has a name. Maybe you just haven't found one yet. Besides 'bug,' I mean, which is really not a name, just a word. You need a name, that's for sure."

You may call me something if it is of use to you for me to have a name.

"?"

It may be anything convenient or practical.

"Pip. No, c-r-e-e-p-y. No. I don't know. Can't you tell me?"

Do you know your mother's name?

"No. I don't have a mother. I mean, she is gone. She didn't want me."

I believe you are mistaken. She was called by your kind 'Parvaneh' -- p-a-r-v-a-n-e-h. It means 'beautiful insect with wings.' Also, it is synonymous with 'butterfly,' which is an ancient creature spoken of in fables.

"You are a bug but you don't have wings. So it's not a good name. Everyone calls you dilly-dallies."

Someday I shall fly again. It has a high likelihood of success given sufficient time and the execution of my program. Parvaneh would be apt, in that case.

"Okay, but I'll just say 'Par' because it's easier. I'll call you Par. How do you know my mother's name?"

She dwelled upon Edom. I collected data there. There are many of Par on Edom.

You mean 'were,' because Edom was killed. Did you know her -- my mother?

Not as we talk. You are the only one. I collected data on her as I collected data on you. She was ultimately taken out from Edom.

"Yeah, she died. I never knew her."

She gave to you of her. You ate of her.

Henryk began to cry.

That is a human way. The Gnomons had that way also.

Henryk snuffled. "Who are Gnomons?"

The makers of Par. They cried, especially at the end, before they were eradicated. Like your Edom.

"You mean, they all died? How did they make you if you're a bug?"

It is a long story. As you fall into sleep, I will continue, but do not try to follow. We can speak of it again.

#

The horrible screech jerked Henryk awake. It took him a moment to separate it from dreams in which it seemed to have been playing for a long time. When he did wake, sitting up in his dark cell on this, the last night in Pdraig's shop, he recognized the alarm from the drills. He was supposed to go somewhere... to fall out... at the up-deck activity room. Ship's Boys and assorted specialists drilled there. Was he a Ship's Boy? He quickly dressed himself.

It is real.

"What?"

No, not that way.

"What?"

This ship has turned on systems of war.

"Really? I've got to go or I'll be in trouble!"

Henryk hurried out and up. Still groggy but in an adrenaline rush, he made some wrong turns before finally emerging at a passage that led to the activity room, the same room where he practiced tokos and other drills and exercises with the Ship's Boys. He saw the backs of some other Boys ahead of him, tumbling into the brightly-lit room. The pads were off the floors and walls, and the banks of lockers that he had never seen into were being emptied of their various contents by midshipmen and older ship's crewmen.

"Boys, into quadrailles!" yelled a tough, feminine voice. "Hurry it up, hurry it up!"

Henryk fell into his group without thinking.

"Now Now Now!"

Two Boys fell over one another, and the young lieutenant rolled her eyes. Several midshipmen on other duties cackled.

"Listen carefully," the young woman said. "Andromache is now on alert. None of you has seen that before except in drills. This is not a drill. And this is not a drill where we're pretending it's not a drill. The Irredente may be at war. I don't know. You will stay on alert status in your pre-assigned locations. And keep your traps shut. Watch and listen and do what you are told. Under no circumstances hesitate to carry out any order given to you by anyone older than yourself. Young Boys listen to the older Boys in your quad. Older Boys, look to your Mids. They will already be at station when you arrive. If for some reason they are not, you take your station and wait for them. Understood?"

"Yes lieutenant!" came the answer.

"And don't go to stations starved and parched. You will go to the canteen closest to your station at the first opportunity and grab something to keep you going and alert BUT NOT TOO MUCH. Quickly now, out. To your stations!"

"Aye aye!"

In the hurly-burly, Henryk managed well enough, but no one else awaited him at his station outside a systems management deck. An older midshipman soon rounded the corner, however.

"What is your name!" said the mid, a tall boy with nascent whiskers whom Henryk had seen on occasion but did not know at all.

"Henryk, sir."

"You can't stay here. Get to Boys' Quarters and wait for an assignment. Fall out!"

"But the lieutenant said..."

"Obey a superior, Boy, now!"

Henryk had no choice but to do as he was told. Looking back over his shoulder as he went, he saw the boy glaring at him. Down busy corridors and through hatchways, with feet moving hurriedly all around him and alerts sounding along his way, he made the corridor where Boys Quarters lay and headed for the hatch.

"Henryk!" said Burgred, bearing down on him. "Henryk, what in Vas's name are you doing down here? No ship's boy can be in quarters during alert. Are you sick?"

"No, sir, I..."

"Then what? Henryk, hurry, you can't afford... tell me why you're down here."

"I was ordered, sir. A boy... a mid... midshipman told me I had to leave my duty station..."

"What? That's insane. I'll have the boy's hide. Let's get you... wait. Henryk, did you know this midshipman?"

"No, sir."

"Were any other officers or midshipman present when he ordered you down here?"

"No, sir."

"Okay. I know what's going on here. Vas, what are we going to do?" Burgred broke off and thought for a moment. "Right. You need a countermand from higher up. Here's what you're going to do. I'm going to route an order on my comm to the lieutenant corps. It's going to say that until further notice, only lieutenants can change the duty stations of the midshipmen and ship-boys. And I'm sending you an order to remain at the station you were assigned to until I personally remand that order. Is that understood, Henryk?"

"Yes... sir."

"It doesn't matter. You're taken care of. But for Vas's sake get back to your station now. Run, Henryk."

Burgred got various orders out, certain that most of them would not be sufficiently appreciated and prioritized and that the confusion would give Henryk time and an excuse to be tardy.

When Henryk got to his station, sweaty and out of breath, the young woman lieutenant turned to glare at him.

"Ship's Boy, there. You're in breach. What are you doing?"

"I... went to... the midshipman sent me..."

"You weren't told to follow the midshipmen. Where's your senior Boy?"

"I don't... I didn't..."

"Skip it. I've got work to do. We'll deal with you later. Get on station, now!"

"Yes, sir!"

Chapter thirty

-five. Passus & Collus

... and the man cast off his raiment, and all who saw marveled: for where the torment had been endured, he had no leg but that it was pure again.

The Holy Book of the Body

#

It was just he and the twins on the lander -- and a steward from Oracle who had some sort of business to attend to on Innisfree. A pilot had come up from the planet according to some system of staffing that Hersey didn't understand. The first items of business planetside, in a drab, shielded hangar, were a prophylactic anti-radiation injection; warnings about natural bodies of water; and advice to wear heavy-soled shoes when traversing the countryside.

Hersey had left Oracle out of sorts. He was furious about the incident with the ship's library, which he added to his mental list of proofs of the decline of the Irredente and the ubiquitousness of illicit technology that the Church could not possibly sanction. The captain had just shrugged.

"Ships of any size have systems over systems, the new over the old, and ain't no way, really, to separate it all. We can't rip out the guts of the old parts, or else we won't be able to make our grafts work. I'm not surprised you hit a funny patch in the library -- Vas knows how many docks have stuck something in there that oughtn't be. I'm not a big studier myself, but I'm always glad to know it's there -- a universe at your fingertips, if you've got the time. And the passengers do. I see 'em in there, sometimes. It ain't the biggest attraction we got -- that'd be the holovids, which I stay strictly out of what with some of those they got, but to each their own, business is business. But I'm sorry, Father."

"But someone must look into this," Hersey said. "These ship's libraries, they're connected, and they're... they've got... they respond in a way that isn't natural. I don't understand how this can be. They are open and notorious."

"As I say, Father, I'm sorry you had a bad experience."

"Dear Vas," he said in frustration. "Okay, captain. I understand you."

"I'm a devout woman, I am," she said. "But this is my little corner 'o things, and I got to run it. You're the Envoy, and you got the whole Church with you. That's your business to do."

Her lenses had faced him, a blank visage, impenetrable. But later, she had done as she had promised, giving him a contact before he left -- contacts, actually: the twins, Passus and Collus.

"You could hardly a done better," she had said. "They're plugged in down there, and I put the word in to 'em what you were about. They said they'd think on who else they might take you to. But they're smart ones, those. Regulars 'o mine, good people. Not in no overt way, mind you -- probably not even Conformed, what with bein' from down there. You got to get to know them a bit, but once you do that, you got levels and levels in there."

He was dubious, but he trusted her nonetheless. She was a true woman of Vas, even if not in the mold of a planetside parishioner. Space seemed to impose its own modifications to every kind of protocol and form of obeisance, including those of the religious sort. Hersey was learning to make allowances.

The lander disgorged its paltry load of persons, along with several substantial cargo crates, at the only Guild port on Innisfree, yet another of the many Freeports in the great Arm of Vas, though smaller than most. The steward from Oracle insisted on continuing to help the Auspicial Envoy, apparently having no higher purpose even if his obscure duties should have required him elsewhere. Scanning the wide, sparsely-populated floor of the port terminal, sun-drenched and gleaming under the arched, diamond-paneled roof, Hersey spotted Passus and Collus. He didn't know why he should be surprised to see them attended by several other persons in coordinated jumpsuits -- quite obviously in charge of something significant -- but he was. One of these figures was talking animatedly and pointing to a large cargo hangar some distance off. The twins were listening and nodding.

All but one from the gaggle of attendants headed off, and by some secret signal, the remaining one and the ship's steward engineered a convergence of Hersey and the twins at the sliding-diamond exit doors with sand-blasted images of workers wielding complicated tools and generating showers of sparks. Hersey strained to make out exactly what the helmeted figures might be manufacturing.

"Everything at this new Guildport terminal comes from Innisfree, Envoy" said one of the twins to Hersey's unasked question.

"We insisted on it. Innisfreemen refused to build it unless it had our signature," said the other. "Every scrap of everything in this place is native, comes from our mines, was made in our shops and manufactories. You're looking at..."

"A famous symbol of old Innisfree, 'The Birth of the World.'"

"Of the world?" Hersey said. "Surely not 'the World.' It is men creating machinery, wielding machines to make other machines."

"Of course," said Passus or Collus. "What would you expect, here?"

His brother left off further summation.

"Ahem," Hersey said. "Our captain informed me that she arranged for you to assist me in my mission to Innisfree."

"It is all arranged," a twin said. "You have nowhere in particular you must go?"

"None," Hersey said. "There was little information through Church sources to guide me."

"Our religion is work, Envoy Hersey," said the other twin. "No disrespect intended. There are lay... pastors?"

"Clerics," said his brother.

"Lay clerics," said the twin. "And the Church has outposts..."

"Missions," said the other.

"... here, a few on Innisfree, but we know little about them. We stay..."

"... very busy. We ourselves are not..."

"... in Conformance. But that's no handicap to us here as it would be in the core worlds."

Hersey eyed the strange pair, tall, slim, and beaky -- quite ungainly, in fact, and on the evidence older than they appeared.

"I shall stay with you, then?" Hersey said.

"You'll stay in the village near the works as long as you like, but that probably won't be long," said a twin.

"We will show you our works," said the other. "And we will help you find your ultimate destination."

"Your works? As in, your own?"

"Of course!" they said in unison. "Orbital Legature Works!"

"That's ours," said one.

"But it was our mother's before that," said the other.

"And her father's before that. It's quite old, actually, since our grandfather bought the going concern from a family that left Innisfree and never returned."

"We've substantially modified and improved it..."

"... since we began working in it as boys. But you'll see all that."

"Come," they both said. "Here's our car."

While they had been talking, the jumpsuited figure had run off and gotten the vehicle. Whether boyish young woman, or pretty young man, Hersey could not quite tell. He or she was driving, and when Hersey -- with a shudder -- and the twins passed through the symbolic doors, the door of the car was already open to admit them. It was a ground car, and one evidently designed for speed. Hersey had seen ground speeders before but had never been in one. He looked at the twins nervously.

"Never been in a ground speeder, Envoy?" one said. "Don't worry. You'll hardly know the difference. We've modified this one. You see more in a ground car -- well, in a manner of speaking. We thought you'd want to take a look at ground level, this being your first time."

And Hersey realized it was true, he did. For a moment, he could almost believe he was just a tourist, idling and taking in sights. Then his experience with Oracle's library reasserted itself, and from that the whole train of association of why he had come: this planet and its people were contaminating the hegemony with illegal mech and devices, were undermining the rule of law -- and the Word of Vas. But just as worrisome, these people were providing the barely-licit tech as well, things that crept up to the very line of what was permissible. The entirely illicit was what Hersey wanted to witness first-hand, it was true -- to see who made it, their methods, their motivations. But more, he wished to meet the people who tinkered and pushed -- people, he assumed, like Passus and Collus. He wanted to understand how and where moral clarity was lost.

"You're probably less interested in the goings-on in Freeport," a twin said. "Perhaps we should shade the windows?"

They had already sped away into Freeport, and Hersey instinctively looked out the window and saw a strange, gold-toned figure disappearing into a side street. The image that momentarily flashed across his mind was of a naked torso adorned with some sort of garment composed of metal rings. That could not possibly be what he saw, and the mental image flared into a white haze and disappeared. It was then that the

offer to shade the view made sense.

"Yes," Hersey said, "by all means. Do what you think best."

Just before the shade went on, darkening and blurring the view, Hersey caught a glimpse of a busy street lined with buildings of various sizes, with people in varying manner of dress passing one another before shopfronts or plain metal doors. There had been a sort of low warehouse with a large open doorway that framed a blackness with one figure beginning to emerge toward the street from the gloom. As the figure's head emerged into the light, there was some strange scattering of forms on the wall, away from the door opening, no doubt some trick of the light. Then all was blurry darkness without and light within -- the car windows had performed some trick Hersey didn't understand.

He hadn't really thought of Innisfree in its planetary scope: as a place with topography, vegetation, buildings, creatures. He had only thought of his mission there and the dim, dank places where illegal things were born and then thrust into the hegemony to its everlasting ruination. But here it was, a real planet, and now it was difficult to conceive of it in such stark terms.

"How far will we go?" he had asked when the shade first went off and their route overlooked a tall cliff on one side.

"The Works are an hour by ground car from Freeport, quite convenient," said a twin. "That is, at speed, which we won't quite do since you'd like to have a look around."

The smooth, fused-plas road followed the path of a stream. At first, Hersey assumed that the boulders and rocks must be the typical kind. Seeing strangely articulated shapes, however, he looked more closely and saw that much of what he took to be sedimentary was in fact mechanical: pieces, large and small, of machinery, much of it rusty, but the odd shining part of which here and there he assumed must be rarer metal of some kind. And glass -- not diamond, but something else -- in huge shards and chunks, some of it looking cruelly sharp, some of it worn smooth. A hulk went by in a blur that he could have sworn was part of a hull of a space-going vessel.

As the road swung around toward the cliff face and their paths converged, it happened again: the rock formations and striations resolved themselves into embedded objects, made objects, crushed into layer upon layer. The cliff face, irregular, dripping, and discolored, was the shear side of an ancient dumping ground.

"This was once an open-pit mine," the twin sitting upfront said over a shoulder. "There are still some remnant mines on Innisfree, but we generally do higher-valued work now. We don't need nearly as much metal as we have in these miles-long dumps to make the things we make, and some metals are too hard to get here in quantity anyway."

"Cheaper to import them," said the other. "Like what we brought with us on Oracle."

When they had finally emerged from the great dump, they entered verdure. Hersey squinted to make sure that's what it was. Stands of trees then appeared, then the landscape became rolling, fenced countryside, with here and there a house or compound of buildings visible and flights of avians from here to there. Unaccountably, a rotting smokestack of thick iron interrupted this pastoral, and Hersey noticed that several smaller but similarly decrepit stacks covered an area around the first.

"Manufactory," said a twin, and he pointed down. "Way down. Lost. Lots and lots of those. Our works, however, have been continuously occupied -- never were totally abandoned."

As he became accustomed to the landscape, Hersey constantly spotted curious remains in what otherwise

seemed a rustic idyll. Trees became larger, then the enclosure areas smaller -- they were nearing a settlement, it appeared.

"Aeton -- that's our village -- lies that way," said a twin, nodding, but we'll skirt it before turning towards the Works. We'll bring you back to stay, though, at the Eagle & Child -- that's the village snuggerly."

The car made an abrupt turn at a crossroads bearing a crude, criss-cross signpost. "Orbital Works" read the top-most sign, cut in the shape of a shapely leg with outstretched foot pointing the way. Hersey blanched at the third sign down, also profiled, and pretended not to have seen it. "Sturm Fabs & Erections," it read. The car rolled over and down and over a small double-hillock that caused Hersey to catch his stomach, then stretched out on a road leading to a flat-topped hill ringed by odd, gnarled trees. Cars and tri-bikes were parked irregularly in the shadows of the boughs, and Hersey's car came to rest in a well-used, bare patch under one tree. It wasn't a natural hill -- it was too regular. And it wasn't precisely a flat-top -- it looked from the base as if it lipped over. Then an avian creature with an ugly, bare head and neck shot straight up from where the top should have been. Hersey tried to work out the physics by inference.

The twins waited upon Hersey politely, holding open the door for him, while the driver went on ahead and disappeared into the side of the hill. As Hersey neared with the twins, an iron-walled aperture, rusty but oddly elegant, became apparent; it resembled a mine entrance, but the sleek doors set within its confines were thick, expensive diamond. Into each of these was etched a medallion with a stylized symbol of fleet, running legs, one natural, one biomech. Hersey then realized that when he unfocused his gaze, the symbol formed letters, O L W. The doors were opened to reveal an elegant, softly-lit chamber that gave no suggestion of having been dug out from within a hill. Its rusty iron walls, with their indecipherable, swirling patterns and drip-impressed graining, were accented with gleaming steel, glass, and elegant, dark wood. The reduced glare of natural light filtered in from a wall of windows quite some way off.

"Welcome to the Works!" said the twins in unison.

"We won't tarry in the lobby," one said. "Let's show you around a bit." He rubbed his hands as though getting ready to set to work. "If you came to Innisfree to see biomech fabrication, you've come to the right place! All perfectly legal, all within the Codes. We're the exclusive supplier of lower body appendages -- legs, chiefly, but also individual surgical devices that are exempted, such as friction-free knees and hips -- to the Irredente Navy. Many a sailor sports an Orbital work!"

"That's a saying we have," said the other twin, Collus, whom Hersey was learning to distinguish by his more somber mien.

Another figure in a jumpsuit, a young, pretty woman with a boyish haircut, sat at a reception desk set farther into the lobby. Passus held up a hand to still her. "Not yet, Iffy," he said. "We're going to take a tour, then you can collar us -- or call us."

"Oh, brother," his twin said, rolling his eyes.

"A small joke," Passus said. "On we go."

"Ahem," Hersey said. "Before we start, I wonder if you have..."

"What? Anything," Passus said.

"No, Passus," Collus said. "He means..." Collus pointed.

"Oh! Yes, of course. Right this way."

Hersey was led to a small hall that branched off the lobby and whose concealed ceiling downlights displayed the path. There was just the one door, a rusted-steel slab, with no signage or symbols. It opened with surprising ease on complicated hinges, and within was... quite what Hersey needed, and a washbasin, but nothing more. He had become used, in most places of non-private accommodation, to a gender-specific reminder of the torment he had once undergone, but here there was none.

"Right, then," said Passus when Hersey reappeared. They led Hersey around the receptionist's carrel and toward the floor-to-ceiling wall of glass, in the process cutting across a large hall with a hard, gleaming floor -- a factory floor. Swiveling to look, Hersey saw the hall recede in a curve on either side. The hall must form a huge loop. Then Hersey was at the wall of glass, where instinct stopped him short: for there before him was a gaping hole, a huge circular shaft, with a bright oval of daylight above, and fantastic, improbable depths below. Avians sailed on invisible upward thrusts of what must be warm air rising from the depths. Getting his bearings again, Hersey stepped forward towards the glass. A few levels down, intersecting walkways with great arching supports beneath met in the center of the shaft like crosshairs in a gunsight. Then he took another step, right up to the glass. Deep, deep down, just as the light died in the shaft, another set of crosshairs, forlorn and decaying, spanned the disk of gloom. He stepped back again, feeling dizzy.

"This is... this is remarkable," he said. "I could not have imagined..."

"We have six operating levels now, going down from this level," Passus said. "Most fabrication is on level three, where you see the walkways across the mouth..."

"We call the hole the 'mouth,'" Collus said. "No one is quite sure why it's here, though the old works in lower levels took advantage of the thermal energy. Our works have been in the upper levels for several generations."

Hersey looked out again, and he saw the stacked layers of faceted glass wall sections, between each of which was an arm's thickness of the rusted iron, the whole forming a consortium-cake torus. The apparently perfect circular geometries had a stark, sterile beauty; the individual facets of the glass walls looked back at him like so many parts of a compound eye. Then, below the last layer, there were several empty layers separated by the thick metal plate, but now gaping from gouged, empty eyes. Below that, a dense, decaying lattice of metal and rock. A large avian bioform took flight from an unseen perch down below and wheeled away into a haze and out of view.

His eyes were drawn to blurred, minute movements on the rounded, port-windowed side of the walkway nearest them. Though hard to make out against the dark metal, small, gleaming forms scurried and stopped, holding fast in a loose, irregular cluster of bumps.

"Dilly dallies!" Hersey said. "Dear Vas, you've got the bugs here!"

"You know about those?" Passus said. "They come up to sun themselves."

"They're a nuisance," Collus said. "Always working their way into the Works, impossible to catch."

"Looking for tech to wreck," Passus said. "We seed discarded tech innards to keep them away."

"We have to lock up smartwork parts when we're shut down, and even then, they'll cluster around the strongboxes."

"And run away the moment we arrive."

Hersey looked perplexed. "Do you mean to say that these creatures feed on..."

The twins shrugged. "Saussure -- he's a friend of ours -- he says they feed," Collus said. "All we know is, they manage to etch parts that we use, whether by defecation, extraction, or whatever. We pay a lot for smartwork, so we have to protect it. If we don't, it will be full of pinholes. Do you have these things where you're from, Envoy?"

Hersey looked suddenly very serious. "A plague of them," he said. He made the tau-and-lambda across his chest. "You would do well to consider the Word of Vas. This is a portent."

The twins looked at each other dubiously, which Hersey noticed. "I'll handle this, Passus," Collus said. "We're sorry, Envoy, we mean no disrespect. You should perhaps know something about us here. Innisfree is..."

"Unusual," said Passus.

"I said, let me talk, Passus," Collus said. "You'll say the wrong thing. Many on Innisfree, Envoy, would not... thrive among your worlds, the core worlds. We... they... would not conform to... they do not qualify under your rules, Envoy."

"Do you mean to say you have not -- they have not -- received Conform certificates? It is a routine matter. Why should that pose a difficulty? Surely the missionaries here on Innisfree..."

Passus rolled his eyes at Collus. "Excellent explanation, brother," he said.

"Envoy, it is no mere routine. Citizenship -- and even freedom -- depend upon passing. Surely you know that some who try do not pass and never gain full citizenship, and that some are never even tried because it is clear that they could never hope to pass and must live amongst others of their kind."

"You refer to Lindenau Sanctuarius," Hersey said, "but you do not appear... you seem quite normal... I mean, you and your people here are..." Collus held out an arm to stay Passus. "I must not understand you," Hersey continued.

"Passus," Collus said, "The Envoy represents the Church. We must remember and respect that, even here."

"Even if we do not agree with its methods," Passus said.

Hersey looked at the pair, surprised at the turn of events. "You have been nothing but gracious," he said. "The Church... you are helping the Church, for which I... we are grateful."

Passus frowned.

"Perhaps," Collus said, "it is best that we continue to tour and then let the Envoy be on his way to the village."

A tense silence ensued. Collus held out an arm and led, followed by Hersey. Passus kept to the rear, sullen. Hersey glanced backwards to look at Passus, but Passus was looking back at Iffy, who shot Passus a strange expression that Hersey could not interpret.

"This is packaging," Collus said as they entered a large, clean room with three jumpsuited figures. Hersey caught a glimpse of flashing metal as foam-lined trunk was closed and snapped shut. "Not much to see. Let's go right into Chipping and Tuning."

The next room lay through a hall wide enough to accomodate an automated cart system -- they passed a parked, covered cart in the hall, its telltales glowing red. The lights were much brighter in the room they

entered. It was impossible not to look at the biomech legs straghtaway. Hung from the ceiling by suspensor rods marching the length of the room in perfect intervals, the complex appendages dangled foot-down in stepped gradations of length, forming a macabre, mid-air mallophone. A white-gloved, jumpsuited worker resembling a waif took to a stool, hit a button on a small wrist-comm-like device, and pulled a leg down as the suspensor-lock released it. He (or she) gave it a cursory visual examination before setting it into a specialized clamp that evidently allowed the performing of some specialized operation on the leg.

"It's thigh-highs right now," Collus said. "We try to schedule them -- the different types -- in batches to prevent monotony. Demand is stochastic, but we've got lots of product in the pipeline to deal with that. There, you see, Marais has tested the chip and now it goes in. They're easily replaced in the field with a tool we send out with the leg, but in practice hardly anyone ever needs it or asks. And here's something that should reassure you, Envoy: there are no direct neural connections. We're not allowed to socket directly into the nervous system, so the legs are technically 'dumb.' The chip, however -- that's the little brain -- is the processor core for the entire unit. Combined with little memory dumps formed into the ti-metal foam -- the 'bones' are basically aerated metal lattice so that we can make the leg the same weight as a real one -- and we get a system that learns well enough to anticipate its user's movements in a very short time. With plain prosthetics, you've got muscles and a bio brain -- a human brain -- that have to do all the learning. With good biomech, we can transfer most of that to the leg. The power cell is good for ten years, assuming normal use and typical behavior patterns -- for sailors, that is. The batteries probably never run out for planet-side life. Or not for a long time. So with all that, you've got a pretty seamless transition 'from maim to mech,' as we say. We're very proud of our legs. We've had people who use them say that they sometimes think the leg knows what they want better than they do! Oh, sorry, Envoy," -- Hersey's face had turned distinctly sour. "Not really. It's just that the leg is working predictively, of course. Mere math, don't you see. Nothing illicit about that. I see your point, though. From the layman's point of view, it must look like the old days -- we do the hocus-pocus with our engineering down here, and people incorporate these made objects into themselves, like second skin. But that's just the appearance. We didn't draw the line where it ended up -- that was you people, the Church, you've got committees and what-not. We've got the Code, we check it, we stay within it. In the meantime, the innocent walk again."

Hersey finally spoke. "You say innocent, but this is where Hoopies begin... and they end up flagrantly violating the Code, if I am any judge. I cannot say if their biomech is yours, or like yours, but it is said that it is part of them."

"Hoopies, yes. We get requests, we won't lie to you. Well, we don't sell to them, we sell to the Navy, and that's about all we could ever manage anyway. We hear about what the Hoopies have got, of course, and we're curious about it, but we can't say how they get the illegal stuff. It may technically be possible to modify our fitments to work with socketed connections, but we aren't involved in any of that."

"And yet you are a gateway to that which is not pure," Hersey said. "I find that very troubling, sir. Willful blindness is tantamount to tacit acceptance."

The twins looked at each other, then by some mutual understanding, Passus spoke. "That is wrong, Envoy. Possibility is the gateway; that which people desire can be had. There is no way to prevent that."

"I have heard it said, however, that anything may be had here, on Innisfree. It is clear to what that refers."

"Is it? Well, maybe." Passus said. "Assuming they're talking about biomech, why do you think that is said?"

"Why? It is obvious. There are people not as scrupulous as you. There are places like this" -- he swept his hand to indicate the Works -- "unregulated, unknown, and vile."

"Passus, no!" Collus said, grabbing his brother's shoulder.

"He must know," Passus said. "He blames Innisfree. That is calumny. Envoy, look to yourselves."

"No, Passus!" Collus said.

"Speak plainly, Sir," Hersey said. "This is no business of His Holiness and our Church, I can assure you."

"The Church? Probably not," Passus said, "but no more is it of Innisfreemen, who have ever asked to be let alone. We simply want to live here and ply our trades peacefully. And it was peaceful for a long time."

"And it's not now?" Hersey said.

"Not for long" Passus said. By this time, Collus had turned away, evidently discomfited or embarrassed. "I will say no more," Passus said. "No, I will say this: rightly you may search on Innisfree for your evil, and you may find it. But it doesn't spring from the loins of Innisfreemen. We cherish our home, fouled and spoiled though it is. We have made of it something worth having. It is home to many who would be driven out of your Irredente core worlds. There is no more for you to see here, in our Works. You waste your time and ours. It would confirm nothing for you that we haven't already shown you. You would meet our people -- and good people they are -- and see them but not see them, not really. But they are not whom you seek in any event. We cannot take you to those people. We would never get past the gate. Our friend Saussure, however, he could arrange it if anyone could. He knows you are here -- we told him you came down and why. He is near Derrida. Direct your path thither."

Hersey started. "What did you say?"

"I said go see Saussure."

Hersey looked at the man closely. In those strange, challenging eyes was some quality of consciousness that Hersey did not recognize, some amorphousness of identity that he could not make sense of. "You are very unusual, the pair of you. I have made enemies of you, though I did not wish it. In truth I know nothing of you, but I do not sense evil in you."

"Hmmp!" Passus said. "Most gracious! We would most certainly be your enemies, if you knew the half of it," Passus said. "So let us leave it where we are, that you may depart from us on civil terms. We have dealt with hard bargainers before you, Envoy. We need no new friends, but we would not have you as our enemy if we could help it. Bad for business. Besides, it's not you. It's what you represent. You can scarcely be blamed for that."

Hersey stiffened. "If that is what you wish, so be it. It is true, I have seen enough of your Works. I understand much more now than before I came."

"Goodbye then, Envoy," Collus said. "I shall lead you out. Passus will remain behind. He has work to do." With these parting words, Collus led Hersey in silence back to the reception desk.

"Sir," said Iffy. "The car is waiting for you to take you to the village. Have a pleasant stay." She spoke pleasant words without actual pleasantness. She evidently had heard everything. Hersey from this understood that everyone, unseen eyes everywhere in the Works, had heard. Not for the first time, he cursed the invisible eyes that man had installed everywhere to watch, or hear... himself. Hersey's cheeks flashed scarlet, and he walked out, alone, through the hard steel aperture that had previously admitted him, innocent and even slightly giddy with curiosity, to the Works. He now felt vaguely defiled and yet conscious of seeming the defiler. He couldn't for the life of him understand how things had gone so wrong. He made the tau-and-lambda across his chest and climbed into the car unassisted. He looked back at the slit in the hill, and a blur of motion confirmed his worst thoughts about the day and his visit. He was taken into town without a

word, and delivered unto the Eagle & Child.

As he stood alone in the entry hall within, wondering whether he should proceed through the curtained doorway or perhaps clear his throat to gain someone's attention, he had a sudden realization. Why hadn't he noticed it at the time? Why had it come to him only now? In his mind's eye he saw Collus extending an arm to lead him onward, Collus' fingers held tightly together. The geometry looked wrong. Hersey inspected his memory carefully, to be sure. He thought of both Passus and Collus.

"By Vas," he said aloud. "Those people were missing digits!"

Chapter thirty

-six. Bodies

Aelred, the most reliable reporter for this era of the Chronicles, states authoritatively that as of the 5th Empire -- a misnomer since there seems to have been no stable center of power in this era -- any "human" genome, in the sense of something naturally evolved, did not exist.

The Commentaries

#

That first day of the visitation by what were presumed to be enemy ships saw most commercial activity on Pydna come to a stand-still. Os Divinus, in many ways a sleepy city by virtue of the concentration of government and the paucity of industry, was on this day the liveliest place on the planet, though not in a way that anyone would mistake as festive. Ground and lev cars sped around with sirens or escorts. Clusters of officials and functionaries speaking low amongst themselves were commonplace. Bars, restaurants, cafes, and gathering places of all kinds wisely stayed open, as people were hungry for news and contact. Outside, it was common to see people looking upward at the skies, trying to make out what stalked them.

Two days of emergency, nerves, and gallows humor were succeeded by three days of eerie quiet, as Pydna lay paralyzed. Military movement and activity had ceased -- the military was gone. Then, seemingly overnight, the heavy iron collar of fear loosened its maw and faded away like a smoke ring. The three alien ships had shot back into formation and disappeared into deep space, and no hints arrived of any attacking force. For all practical purposes, then, nothing had happened save the loss of a dozen Irredente attack ships and their crews.

The prevailing winds, however, shifted perceptibly in the Irredente. In the halls of Primus House, what had been whispers of fear and alarm, mixed with grim determination, now turned to dark, furtive whispers of discontent. Officials of various stripes spoke openly of Government's failure to anticipate danger and its inability to confront it when it arrived. Though her tenure was only a few sols old, the whispering threatened to render Yve superfluous. She was exposed, and weakening fast.

None of this was lost on Government, which worked furiously in the following days to right itself and appear to be acting on the threat, which no one believed had disappeared for good. Despite these efforts, however, Her Excellency's stature had been cut down considerably. And as damaging as all of this was -- the ships, the dread, the waiting, the muster, the paralysis -- it was nothing compared to the widely-shared belief that His Holiness alone had somehow foreseen the danger.

But what was the significance of that? While many believed that His Holiness acted presciently to preserve the Church against some dimly-perceived omen, the suggestion somehow kept appearing, in so many subtle news blurbs and overheard whispers, that His Holiness had abandoned Pydna. It did not help that no hard information came out of the Palace at this time. The Auspex Temporator, Gregory, continued with the usual forms and issued a pro-forma proclamation to remain calm and trust in Vas and his soldiery to protect the Irredente. This, however, did nothing to answer the questions: why did His Holiness go? Where did he go? When was he coming home?

However, it was not to be long before some began to perceive that His Holiness may have foreseen far more than just an uncertain threat from space.

#

When Liev, now returned from Innisfree after the lifting of the travel restrictions, arrived at The Grapes on the main road just inside the crater as one entered Os Divinus from Port Town, Galinda was already there. The Esteemed Member whispered something to a departing admiralty official as Liev stood, just out of earshot, waiting to be offered a seat. The admiralty official shot Liev a glance as he left. Tankards clinked and voices murmured in the traditionally naval tavern.

"Liev, welcome back." said Galinda. "Too late, however. The party is over." They sat at the sturdy gnossoak table, partially covered with a red tablecloth and set with huge pewter implements.

Liev tried to appear appropriately relieved, despite his feeling that it had been his own hand that had drawn the enemy toward Pydna. And Hoarson's hand -- he should never have sought help with the data chat in Port South. "Thank you, sir," Liev said.

"Saussure is a good man. Talks too much, doesn't respect authority sufficiently -- regrettable -- but a good man. Have some wine -- the best Porto in the house."

"Thank you, sir. I was delayed coming back by the... uh, events. No ships in or out. Trying times, sir."

"All's well that ends well, Liev. And it has ended very well indeed," said Galinda, steady and comfortable in his cups.

Liev looked surprised. "The ships -- the invaders -- left, is what you mean," said Liev.

"If you like. And of course they did," said Galinda. "We don't have they're looking for. Why waste time and effort here?"

"You know what they were looking for, then?" Liev looked around, nervous.

"Don't worry, Liev, we have the whole house, and no one dares eavesdrop. You've just returned from Innisfree. Do you understand now who's entering our hegemony at will and attacking our outliers?"

"Who, as in..."

"Not by name, of course, Liev."

Liev considered for a moment. "Saussure said that the outliers that were attacked all were... that they were old worlds, pre-Irredente. It's... it sounds ridiculous... he said that bugs were going after old tech," Liev said. "The bugs are finding old tech. But I'm not getting the connection. I know it has to do with the bugs, somehow, but these are ships, presumably from the Beyond..."

"You evidently didn't take Saussure's comments to heart."

"His theories, sir?"

"Ha, that's rich, coming from you. Information, Liev. Whatever form it takes. What did he say about their... what, noises?"

"Vibrations, sir. He said, they're complex, like communication of some kind."

"Let's assume that these things are putting up some sort of racket," Galinda said. "I'd conclude it's bothering someone. Someone, at all events, is trying to put a stop to it."

Liev considered this. "Someone is attacking us to get to the bugs?"

"Not precisely us," said Galinda. "We -- the Irredente -- seem to be collateral. These people -- or whatever they are -- scanned Pydna and then left. I think they were looking for these bugs, these armadillia. And they didn't find any here -- or they didn't hear them. We don't have the things on the core worlds -- not yet. I think the bugs just haven't gotten here, whether by chance or of a purpose. And a good thing too -- we don't want to be the next Edom, for Vas's sake."

"You don't think they -- the ships, the aliens -- are coming back?"

"Let me say this. I don't intend to stand idly by waiting, as some wish to do. Someone's got to take this matter in hand."

"You, sir?"

"Thank you, Liev. I'll certainly never question your loyalty. No, Liev, not me. The Cabil is the people, Liev. Never forget that."

"The people, sir."

"Right. What the people want is a strong man in charge. And that's what I aim to give them. Strong and distasteful, like medicine. You've still got work to do at the Palace, Liev, and I suggest you get busy. We're done with the datachat problem for now. Pity, though. I had high hopes for what was on there. But I have what I need to proceed, and I know enough to do what must be done to prepare for their return. Take a half-turn to yourself, then get back to work. You look like you've seen a ghost. Space travel doesn't agree with you."

#

For weeks, Os Divinus, that otherwise mild center of bureaucracy, threatened to boil over. The mood in Government was dark, and whispers became open talk. Yve was under terrible pressure.

Still, the mood was less dark for some than others. Grace served at the pleasure of Her Excellency, but she could equally well serve in some capacity in the next government. Yve had half-jokingly told Grace not to pack up her desk yet, to which Grace had responded in kind that the senior staff often didn't need to. Unfortunately, the rejoinder went amiss, and the two women's very friendly, open relationship began to deteriorate.

"I could shoot myself," Grace said. She sat one evening with Apolis at a coffee-house in the Doldrums, the little section of shops and eateries in the center of the crater. The server had shown them to a café table out front, next to a topiary tree. "I should have tried to smooth her feathers. It would have cost me nothing."

"At length the truth will out," said her companion, a young, serious physician still in his scrubs.

"Men don't understand," Grace said.

"I'm just saying, if it's going to happen, it's going to happen."

Grace bit her lip, deepening its crimson against her smooth, dark skin. "I just wanted to talk," she said. "Why do men always have the answers?"

"Is it one of those nights, Grace? I'm really tired. Maybe we should go."

"Fine," she said.

"I'm going back to the necessary," Apolis said. "Can you ask for the bill?"

Grace nodded sourly then turned to watch the street, where few cars of any kind moved. She worked her mouth in a way that suggested she was still tormenting herself with accusations and questions. She didn't pay attention to the sound of the flat-bed ground truck making slow progress towards her, which mingled with tinkles of glasses and plonks of plateware within the café proper, which opened onto the patio with accordion doors. As Apolis recrossed the threshold of these doors, the proximity of the truck to the little topiary tree caught his attention just as a long, dirty steel blade of some kind jack-knifed out from the truck's bed and separated Grace's head from her shoulders just as she had begun to turn towards him. Her body slumped to the ground, her head still attached by a sliver of something. Apolis froze in shock.

"Whoa!" came a voice from the truck. "Blois, what happened back there?"

A figure stood up from a makeshift jump-seat on the truck's bed. "I don't know. A... oh!"

Apolis' comm beeped a warning beep. He didn't check it. He knew it was signaling the cessation of Grace's pulse. He didn't know who else would be receiving that signal. He didn't know anything.

#

No small part of Her Excellency's Yve's ascent to the chief executive office in the Irredente was owing to Harold's unerring sixth sense for when to take decisive action, a legacy of the tutelage of Acton life. Yve's rivals over the sols had often been put on the defensive and made to look inept by her propitious political timing. The perceived bungling of the affair of the alien scout ships, therefore, afforded many of Yve's rivals a sense of delicious recoupment. Day after day, Yve -- and Harold -- struggled to regain a foothold -- they didn't even speak of advancement -- on precarious political grounds. Harold did as he often did in trying circumstances: staying out of Primus House, slinking around Os Divinus and its environs talking and gathering information, putting in words of assurance, and the like, all the while privately tormenting himself over quite his first, and most colossal, failure to anticipate and command events.

Time and again, Harold came back to the thought that his failure -- and Yve's -- stemmed from more than the faceless threat from space, but he couldn't for the life of him figure out what had gone awry. He wanted to slap himself when he finally realized that someone on Pydna was wielding the same weapon he himself had used -- and learned to use on Acton -- many times: seizing happenstance random events to best advantage. The threat was not, or not just, the alien scout ships; someone fought Yve from within. Harold had guesses as to who, but he hadn't enough information to act. And so he had to look to other sources.

For several days he thrashed around in his efforts, rarely appearing in Primus House. Patently false rumors of a split somehow arose -- Harold had always been mercurial and even peripatetic, so there was no good reason for the rumor-mongering. One day he lay on the table at an out-of-the-way training room he frequented, the masseuse pounding away, when his mind cleared and he jerked up, nearly knocking the wiry codger over.

"That's it!" he said.

"Sir?" said the old man.

"I'm sorry. Nothing. Thank you. I've just remembered an appointment."

Harold dashed from the nondescript brick building and called a lev-taxi. Having directed the driver, he entered a code into his comm and waited for a response. The car crossed over the gash of the Faucium and entered the outskirts of Port South. The answer came just before he pulled up to his destination.

"Okay," he said to the driver. "But pull around to the next block. Then clear your trip data." Harold commed a generous, anonymous credit to the driver. He got out at a block of small-parts dealers and got a nose full of oily smells. He entered another code that shielded his comm from tracking then made his way back around the block. Finally, he entered a lane of faded tradefronts and with a look of purpose strode under the sign reading "Hoarson Marine & Cargo Insurance" and thence into the building.

An old woman sat at a desk in front. She smiled at Harold, who touched his forehead in return. Without pausing, he let himself into a room beyond.

"Harold," said Hoarson. "By Vas, it's been a long time."

"Too long, Jiri. Still the same old prankster, I see. Hoarson indeed."

"Not many stop to consider," Jiri said. "My little strike at conformity. How is your father."

"As well as may be. My brother..."

"Yes, yes, most unfortunate," Jiri said. "And consort Harold's mistress?"

"I suspect you know the answer to that."

"That is true. Regrettable."

"No. Nothing that strengthens us is to be regretted."

"Hmmm," said Jiri, settling into his chins. "That Acton toughness showing through. Why are you here, Harold?"

"I need to do you a favor, Jiri."

"Oh, I daresay. Few have anything to offer that I would accept."

"What has Intelligence offered you? A tax office somewhere?"

Jiri eyed Harold suspiciously.

"I can do better," said Harold. "Estates free of entailment, lien, or Irredente easement. You people want that more than anything."

"Acton does not interest me. Too volatile -- begging your pardon, Harold. And too -- "

"Too much church, I understand. But I'm not offering Acton."

"Then what are we talking about?"

"Class C or better, clean as a whistle, fertile, mix of coastal and inland, scenic..."

"Small manufactory?"

"I could arrange it."

"No monitoring of worship?"

"I can't make promises there, Jiri. But you have my word, on my father's life, that I will try to lift it."

"I must play both sides, Harold. And no contact unless -- until -- you can give me safety and our bargain."

"Yes," said Harold. "I understand all that. I didn't expect to corner the market in marine insurance."

"Hah! Tell me what you need."

"Simple. Who, and why?"

Jiri scowled. "They won't kill me, you know. They'll kill my... child, my consort perhaps. But I will be allowed to live."

"They'll do worse, ultimately, and if not to you and your kin, then to others of your kind that they can find. I don't know exactly who they are, but I know what they'll do if they get power."

Jiri sighed the weight of worlds. "My mother wanted me to stay in trade," he said, casting a glance toward the opaque glass partition. "Let's go back to the file room. We can talk there."

As Harold followed the heavy man's wheezy strides, he saw the strange fringe peek out under the vast over-jacket, and he remembered the day, long ago, when his father, with characteristic generosity but rashness, had made a similar deal and lost his shirt.

#

Harold would have run from Hoarson's if he could have done so inconspicuously. Instead, he cautiously got back into the larger street adjoining, and worked his comm for some basic matters as soon as it was safe. Once in the lev-taxi, he thought to reach Yve, but then an ingrained paranoia stopped him. Stepping down from the taxi near a secured entry at Primus House, his comm gave a loud, unpleasant series of beeps. It took him a second to remember what such a sound signified. He read the comm, and his countenance turned grim. Instinctively, he scanned his surroundings. Nothing of note. He was bursting to comm Yve but forbore.

He carefully traced steps in a roundabout, tortured way toward the private apartments. No one took any notice of him. The apartments were empty save for a steward. He didn't risk asking the steward where Her Excellency was. He took the private stair down to a closet that led to her office. A chime alerted her, and she turned to him as he entered.

"Harold, what's..."

He rushed up to her and put a hand to her mouth. He nodded a No to her and looked hard into her eyes. She indicated that she understood, but her eyes pleaded for more. He didn't bother with that. He looked out the windows at the grounds, thence to the private spaceport. He trusted that her ship, H.E.S. Papillon, would be ready. He couldn't comm the crew. He couldn't comm anyone until they were inside the ship.

His mind worked furiously. He led her unassumingly by the arm back into the closet with the private stair. At the apartments, he scanned the landing, then led her across to another stair that led back down. They descended to the kitchen area. Chef stood at a table prepping, with one assistant doing something or other with pots. Harold caught chef's eye and motioned for the room to be cleared. Chef nodded and got the two

out. Harold led Yve to the kitchen's cooled service bay, where, as he had hoped, the kitchen's little delivery van was parked, rearmost doors open, several crates still within. Harold grabbed dirty kitchen garb from a heap. Once both were in their filthy whites, and Yve's hair rearranged, Harold with a gentle leading of her elbow led her into the back of the van. He sat her down, closed the rear doors, then made his way into the drive seat.

He breathed out. Yve understood the protocol he had established and said nothing. They had never specifically planned anything like this, but she had heard enough of his history and stories to understand her role. Harold entered something on his comm, waited, then entered more. He scanned the ramp leading up and considered a moment before pulling out. Finally, he started the engine and drove out. A sentry turned for a visual check and nodded to Harold, who nodded back. The sentry looked at him somewhat longer than he would have expected. But he couldn't go back. Instead, he went farther, conspicuously pulled over, got out, fiddled with the mechanism of the rear doors, waved, then drove on. He saw what he wanted: the wonderfully proportioned, ornate maintenance building for Primus House.

"Comm off?" he said.

"Off," she said.

"Grace is dead. Intelligence. Seizing control."

"Galinda," she said.

"Probably. He'll set up Godwin."

"Godwin is a fool," she said.

"He's Galinda's fool, bought and paid for. And Godwin thinks he deserves your job anyway."

"I can't believe this is happening," she said.

Harold didn't respond.

"You're right," she said. "I should have."

"No time, Yve."

He pulled around to the side of the maintenance building, where a roll-down door was a quarter open. "The door must be broken," he said. "Climb up front. Okay. I'll count three, then we each get out like we're doing something, understand?"

She nodded, he counted, and they were out. He rapped loudly on the corrugated metal door. He rapped again.

"Hold on!" came a voice from within. "It's stuck, can you come around?"

Harold looked exasperatedly at Yve.

"Hmphashilum!" Harold said.

"What? Hold on!" said the voice from within. An inconspicuous strong-door opened off to one side, and a wiry young man looked at them politely. "I'm sorry, we don't take deliv... why Mr. Harold!"

Harold rushed up to the young man. Yve still stood alone at the partly-raised corrugated door. "I don't remember your name, but listen to me very carefully and don't talk. Go over there and pretend to help this woman open that rolling door. If it doesn't open, you and she will duck under it, crawl under if you have to. Do not fail me. Do it now."

In a trice it was accomplished, and Harold followed them. It took a moment for their eyes to adjust to the gloom. Brick-a-brack, broken mech, a couple of ground vehicles, and racks of supplies lay within under gloomy lights.

"Which way to Piotr's office, son?" said Harold.

"This way, sir, and um... "

"Ma'am is fine," said Yve.

They heard Piotr before they saw him. He was barking orders into a desk comm. Then his familiar visored cap and creased, leathery neck came into view, his stomach-weighted bulk crammed into a straining chair on casters.

"Uh, Piotr, it's, uh, Mr. Harold from up t'the House," said the young man.

"Eh?" said Piotr, turning. "Mr. Harold! Why, yes sir, what can I do for you and... " He shot a sidewise glance at the younger man, then hoisted himself standing. "Kid, go on, get back to the floor. I'll take care 'o this now." With the young man gone, he dropped to one knee. "Excellency! Forgive me..."

"Piotr," Harold said. "Don't do that. Get up. We've got work to do. You've got to work that comm. Do just as I say."

"Yes, Sir!" he said.

"Can you comm Her Excellency's bay over there?"

" 'N course, Mr. Harold."

"Wait, not yet," Harold said. "Send a... an open channel call. Ask if they got Madam Yve's itinerary and the checklist." Piotr sent the message.

"Okay, repeat over there the message I'm about to send to you coded, but do it open."

"Done, sir."

"Good. Now tell them fourteen-hundred. Confirm with a 60-point countdown."

The comm work had its intended effects. A jump-suited figure could be seen, far across the park, where tarmac began, running from the hangar. Then another, running a different direction. Lights went on at various places on the hangar's exterior.

"Great, you're doing great, Piotr. Her Excellency will give you a medal for this. Now, show me where you set transmission codes on your set, then I need you to go get that young man and keep him close to you until Her Excellency's ship has sailed. For now, get right back here. Can you do that? Quietly, now. And lock everything up. Just you two and us, do whatever you can to make that happen with as little noise and fuss as possible. Do you understand, Piotr?"

Piotr's crestfallen look of inadequacy showed that he was trying to understand.

"Piotr," said Harold. "Lives depend on this. I know you'll do fine. Go."

When Piotr had left, Harold took over the maintenance office desk comm and went furiously to work. Yve stood by and watched, helpless but calm.

Piotr returned with his assistant. Both blushed when Yve turned to look at them.

"Gentlemen," she said. "I am in deeply in your debt. I am sorry we have intruded upon your day."

Piotr and his assistant mumbled incoherencies over one another and blushed again.

"Okay, that's done," said Harold. "Piotr, how do you -- and I mean you personally -- how do you get over to the hangar?"

"The tunnel, usually, if it's a meetin' or something," he said. "Now, if it's service work, we hop in the cart."

"Good. You have more of those jumpsuits in some lockers somewhere?"

"'N course we do, Mr. Harold."

"Send your assistant, two, a large and a small. Take us to the nearest place we can change before taking the cart out. Lev-cart? Coded?"

"Yes, sir. No, sir. It ain't the softest cloud in the sky, sir."

When all this was accomplished, two newly-minted House maintenance techs floated to the graceful gothic spaceport that served Her Excellency. No one asked for credentials until they were well within, and that was the launch ground captain, who apologized profusely and marveled at their attire.

"We got a message saying fourteen hundred. Begging pardon, Madam, but I doubt we can do it. We got an awful long checklist."

"I'm sure you'll do your best, captain," Yve said.

Harold looked sternly at the officer. "Send the codes to let us aboard. Put that cart around behind the big transformers -- it doesn't matter why, but someone from maintenance is going to be expecting it there. And do these things quietly. No one but you knows we're here and on board, understand? Good. We're going to stay out of sight inside until just before launch."

"Your pilot, sir..."

"No, no pilot. Just Her Excellency and me. She's flying today. You just be sure that the tow has us on that pad, ready to go, at fourteen hundred sharp, no matter where you are on the checklist."

"Yes, sir!"

"You have the itinerary, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fall out, marine," Harold said. The captain left. Harold looked at Yve. "We're almost there, Yve. We've got a chance. Do what you're expecting to do, but be ready to act, okay?"

"Harold, yes," she said. "Yes, sir!" She spoke with not a trace of irony or insinuation.

People came and went around the ship. Once, a tech tried to enter but encountered a wall of security codes, punched in other codes, then shrugged and gave up. The tug was rigged and set to idle. Finally, the great bay doors opened and the tug gently lurched out into the daylight. It slowly pulled the sleek craft to the pad, automatically disengaged, and rolled away back before its shed, where it would be manually stowed after launch. The ground captain watched from his command chair below the hangar floor. He frowned, wiped off his command screen, and squinted into it to see if the pilot had strapped in -- the ship had no ports without, so all he had for visuals were the onboard comm-eyes.

As the count neared the end, three figures in dark uniforms ran out of the hangar and stood, watching the launch pad area. All around, from the gardens and the other areas of tarmac surrounding the hangar complex, came armored military ground cars, huffing and churning. They pulled up to a certain distance from Her Excellency's ship and then stopped. The count ended at fourteen hundred, sixty points gone, and a blazing ball of light went up followed instantaneously by a shock wave that knocked every standing body down. Some were dead. The diamond windows at Primus House a fair distance away wobbled, and a few popped harmlessly out. H.E.S. Papillon was no more.

#

Anyone not knowing Lady Arlette's quite adequate but not aristocratic origins could be forgiven for assuming her of the highest. If nothing else, that perfect, small nose, with the somewhat faded spray of freckles extending across its bridge and into the clear, still-unblemished landscape under her eyes, seemed to contain hundreds of sols of careful code management. The truth, however, and a truth quite well known as no attempt was ever made to conceal it, was that her family tree had probably never seen careful pruning and management, and her mother had been a person of surprisingly little account.

Anyone seeing the Lady Arlette this morning at her desk, some days after that clandestine meeting at Valinder's townhouse, would have read in that most startlingly perfect arrangement of features a deep unease, proved by an unblinking gaze outward with her chin canted slightly upwards, towards the plastone-framed, diamond-filtered sun of mid-morning. Even a comm chime reminding her of some duty or other caused her nary a flinch or stir. Her eyes remained fixed, if beclouded, on some blot in the sky visible to her alone. She could not possibly have looked more beautiful at any time in her life than at this moment, nor more vulnerable. It was precisely the pose she would never have imagined herself striking; and perhaps she was too distracted at this moment to know she was striking it. Never accounting herself free from stain, she nevertheless did not consider herself vain; she did not reflect upon the public manifestation of her person overmuch, and probably not enough. It was, finally, the mere necessity of blinking against a glint of wayward light off a ti-metal muntin that brought her back into the moment. Here she was. That shot of light struck out into the room and drew her eye to the one honor she displayed in her office, the Hand of Codesalm, a gleaming, nuchromium fist, upthrust, gripping the famous fore-sword that had sliced through the neck of Melisande, hated Avial empress. It was the improbably heavy symbol of the Admiralty highest office, retained from the earliest days of the hegemony. Every First Lady or Lord of the Admiralty wielded that fore-sword to cut the ceremonial ribbon-tie from the scroller containing the orders to assume supreme naval command.

It had been a strangely quiet work morning, Arlette reflected. The permanent staff had barely spoken to her, and no one awaited her favors in the outer office. She set aside the scroller that had lain on her lap and got up.

"Simmons," she spoke aloud for the comm to transmit, "I'm at Cloisson's for my usual. I shall have my

wrist-comm with me."

She put on a rather shapeless jacket without epaulettes of rank. The jacket made her fine, tapering trousers frown but provided her the needed blankness of appearance. She passed through a one-way exit gate and didn't look back. As she finally exited the little walk that connected back to a larger thoroughfare, however, she did stop and turn to look -- for all the good it did, since by now she could barely see the exit gate through the shrubbery. The guardhouse at the one-way exit gate, had it been empty? She didn't remember getting the customary nod from a guard within. She must have; she always did.

She kept her head down and strode the three blocks down and one over to the old coffeehouse, one of the best in Pydna. The smell of strong coffee along with the sharp, round incense of pastry laced with clerdomme hit her like a drug, and the girl behind the burnished, gleaming counter floating above the framed squares of the bean-bins smiled brightly at the First Lady to the exclusion of several other patrons examining the bakery trays or scanning the quaint, chalked menu board.

"Help you, Mum?" she said with an accent. Some of the patrons looked to see who had stolen attention from them, and whispers filled the space between clanking cups and the whine of a burr-grinder.

First Lady Yve glanced somewhat apologetically at an older gentleman whose impressive, tailored form threw a dagger of shadow across the floor toward her. He turned to her, but the glare from the large plate window obscured his features. With an instinct she had not yet, in a half-score sols in power, learned to suppress, she shielded her eyes with a hand.

"Is it you who should salute, Ma'am, or I?" Cabil Member Galinda said.

Arlette awkwardly lowered her hand and stiffened. "Esteemed Member," she said without her customary poise. "You lay in shadow, and I failed to recognize you."

"They seem to know you well here," he said, indicating the counter girl with his eyes.

The girl was still looking at Arlette, expectant.

"A strong-press," Arlette said to the girl. "No sugar, and a scimitar bun."

"Make it two," Galinda said. "And bring it all out together."

Arlette nodded to make it so. The girl curtsied and set about the order.

"It is surprising to run into you in the naval quarter," Arlette said.

"Shall we sit, Ma'am?" he said. "I believe you prefer this high table near the back." This startled her, which he did not fail to notice. "But to answer you, I am taking a more active interest in Admiralty affairs, for reasons you may well imagine."

"I am aware of your interest, as it happens," Arlette said.

"Of course," he rejoined. "Every man of government must be concerned when the core of the hegemony proves vulnerable, might be wiped out with seeming ease by forces we know nothing about."

"We have survived, however," Arlette said. "And there is no reason to believe it should have been otherwise."

"Lady Arlette knows that is false. I, at least, have never underestimated you. We might have perished like

that." He snapped his fingers. The girl set down the tray, distracting Arlette. "I like that service," Galinda said. "I must visit here again."

Arlette looked around the warm, worn quarters of Cloisson's, aware that it might never be the same for her. "Surely you would find more to interest you in the Cabil quarter. And you could attend to your business more efficiently."

"Your efficiency, Ma'am, and that of Her Excellency, is much to be commended, but where has it got us? The Irredente wants effective action more than efficiency -- or foolish efficiency, at any rate, which is what the permanent staff people would give us. But of course, you would know more about that, Ma'am."

"On our ships, efficiency makes for ready forces. They are the same goal. You would do well to learn from our ranking officers. I've often thought that government could."

"No, Lady, in that you are mistaken. Your spaceman is a sad bumbler planetside."

Arlette glared at him as he took a fercious bite of scimitar. He seemed oblivious of having said anything insulting. The fragrant smell of clerdomme wafted across the small table. She looked into the small glass pitcher containing her foaming, dark coffee.

"What am I supposed to do with it?" Galinda said, still chewing. "That... steel rod?"

She pushed the plunger down firmly with one palm, then poured from the little spout into her own cup. "You must time it correctly, however," she said. "If you wait too long, it will be unpalatable."

"A savage procedure," he said. "No doubt another of your naval institutions." He copied her motions and soon had a steaming porcelain cup of coffee at his lips. "But not bad, on the whole."

"You did not happen upon me here, Mr. Galinda," Arlette said. "You could easily have arranged..."

"I find people too hide-bound in their accustomed settings of power," he said. "Formal discussions lack moral clarity. Informal discussions may be frank."

"And off the record?" she said.

"Just so," he said. "I'm sure your little comm there is off, though it really matters very little to me whether it is or no. I have not brought one, as it happens. And so I will say what I have come to say and be done with it."

Arlette swallowed. "Sir," she said.

"It is simply said," he said. "You have no natural constituency. You wield power without influence. You bear a title but have not the mantle."

"You have come to insult me, then," she said. "Your words mean nothing to me, Member. I have been ordered upon this tour of duty."

"You long sought it, and Her Excellency gave it. And now we stand on the brink of ruin. I am surprised, Ma'am, that you yourself should not have considered giving up your place."

"Giving it up?" she said. "That is nonsense, Galinda. I have been given not the slightest hint from Government, and if I were, I should not have hesitated to hand over the fore-sword. It is not mine to keep, but Her Excellency's to bestow. She has said nothing."

"She is weak and weaker, and by the morrow, she may be gone," Galinda said. He wiped coffee from the edge of his mouth. "By the will of Vas," he appended.

"Or by yours," Arlette said.

"Of course," Galinda said. "I stand for the hegemony. We are its true representatives, we of the Cabil. And I am supreme among its members, as must be clear to you. Though that will not last, of course."

"What do you mean by that?" Arlette said. "You would willingly step down? I find that hard to believe, Member."

"Step down? Ha. I give you allowances, since, as I've said, it is quite clear you have no natural constituency and may suffer delusions regarding the origins and uses of power. No, Madam, I shall not step down. I shall step up, and you shall step down. There is, Madam, quite nowhere else for either of us to go."

Arlette stepped off her stool and stood facing him. His height did her a disadvantage, however, and she immediately regretted it.

"Quite, Madam," he said.

"I will tell her everything you have said, you know," Arlette said.

"I daresay you would, if you could," he said.

"I may call on her any time," she said. "It is easily accomplished."

"Good day to you, then, Lady Arlette," Galinda said, stepping down and donning a hat. "May you and your patroness make your way together. Much good it may do you."

A small end of his scimitar bun, and the better part of his coffee, remained, but the girl appeared in moments to remove them. Arlette took to her stool again.

"He had been waiting for you ever so long, Mum," the girl said.

Arlette just looked at her. The girl, with a sheepish expression, went about her work. Arlette cradled her cup in her hand and stared, dazed, at nothing in particular. She absently drank off her coffee, then made the sign of the tau-and-lambda across her breast. In the corner of her eye, she saw the serving girl dip into the slightest curtsy and do likewise, which Arlette found very strange. Stepping down again to leave, she had an acute sense of being watched, and she was certain that all eyes were following her as she left the coffeehouse. They were nervous, she reflected. They wanted to know what would come next. So did she.

At first she turned her steps back toward Hall, but she changed her mind and wheeled around. She took a path off the main thoroughfare to Admiralty Chapel, a small church now used mainly for ceremonial purposes but with an old Vox, once a ship's Vox, in residence with one elderly male servant who kept up with the chores. The late-morning sun now shone brightly on the rather bare, white plastone face of the church. Only the niche containing a plastone figure of Vas, this one with a double face with subtly differing expressions, interrupted the façade. A heavy wooden door off to one side was slightly ajar, and she entered into a deep gloom that resolved itself into shafts of weak light filtering in from unseen clerestory windows. Eight pews, each wide enough for perhaps a dozen persons, marched in lockstep towards a small dais, now shorn of its white cloth, its gnoss-oak deeply grained and faintly gleaming. Behind the dais, mounted high up on the triangular peak of the back wall, a muscled torso, with neither appendages nor head, was mounted in such a way as to float free some distance from the wall. It was twisted in a position of action, as though that pure, perfect body were

ready to smite some abominable genovariant.

She stood in the rear of an aisle, just behind the last pew, and touched the teardrop-shaped bead containing the brackish ritual purification serum, mounted upon a little plastone stand. She touched her forehead with that same finger, then continued with the tau-and-lambda. Then she settled upon the last pew and gazed up at the twisted torso, that perfect expression of the renormalizing power of Vas. From whatever cause, a deep sadness welled up and threatened to spill out of her, but by force of will and a stern clench of those fine jaws she managed to hold fast. She sat thus, in silence, for some time, until the creak of a door introduced the old servant's face, seeing who the visitor might be. He disappeared again, and just as Arlette got up to go, the old Vox called out to her.

"He said you were here. Her Ladyship is always an honored visitor to our quiet ship," he said.

Rather than waiting, she started forward to meet his hobbling form part-way towards the dais. "I first came here as a little girl, with my father the captain," she said. "Then not again until I was much older."

"Yes, many times as a woman, Lady," he said, his tonsure so thin and sparse that it was barely visible. "Though I can't recall when I first saw you here. I am sorry."

"It wasn't here, however, Father. You served under my father on Mentor. I made my Conform with you onboard."

"Eh? Is that the way of it? My memory not so good, now, I'm afraid. The sailors used to say... what was it, now? I forget. Something about the great wheel turning."

"Yes, Father, it does," Arlette said. "You have been very kind, Father. Thank you for seeing me."

"What? Oh, yes, yes. You're all grown up, look at you. How is he? Your father?"

"Dead, I'm afraid. Well, goodbye, Father," she said, turning to go.

"May Vas show you the way," he said. "There is but one, you know."

She turned back and looked at him strangely. "Yes, Father," she said. "I have tried to find it. I have failed. I went all this way and got it wrong."

"Eh?" he said. "Oh, no. Not possible. The plan was worked out long before you came. Have never a fear, child. What shall be, shall be. You could never have changed that. That is the mistake they all make. They don't really believe, or they wouldn't try so."

She nodded, turned again, and walked through the dark, worn gnossoak door into the cool, bright day, blinded as she got to the pavement. As she directed her steps back toward Hall, a searing crack cut through the air, immediately followed by a deep boom, echoing from a distance, across the crater. Looking towards the percussion, she saw a mean, black cloud suffused with orange tongues of flame billowing up. It was in the Government quarter of the city. It was Government.

It had begun.

She took an even more indirect route back to Admiralty, one that led to a back entrance used mainly by lower-ranking permanent staff. To her surprise, there was no guard in attendance. She heard scurrying footfalls and shouts in a larger hallway farther on and turned into a maze of service halls to avoid them. As she passed some building functionary's office, she heard a woman sniffing and saying aloud to someone else,

"She's dead!"

Arlette moved on. She could go to the basement level and get outside to a grate-covered access area adjoining the Admiralty ansible station. She thought she would have to get back to the first level somehow, but in the event, a heavy service door had not gotten fully closed, allowing her to walk right into the ansible service stairwell. The control room lay just two levels down, and she got there meeting no one along the way. When she exited the stairwell, however, a guard sat across the console area ante-room. He was preoccupied with a holovid on a scroller, but she would have to deal with him.

"Ahem," she said, causing the guard to sit up and sputter his coffee.

"Yes... ma'am," he said. Then, seeing who she was: "What do you want?"

"To begin, you shall stand and address me as Ladyship, guard."

"Oh, 'n course, Ladyship," he said. He tossed off a salute and made a half-rising gesture before sitting down again.

"You dare take this tone with me? I will have your hide, impudent layabout! Call the console operator immediately!"

"Suit yourself, lady," he said. With a shrug, he worked a desk comm, Arlette glaring at him the while. An engineering guild officer stepped out from behind a plain metal door a few paces from the guard. He was fairly young and so clean-shaven that his fair skin shone pink. Seeing Her Ladyship, his ears went red.

"Lady," he said. "It is a pleasure to have you at the station, the ansible station."

"It is not a pleasure call, sir. You will summon another guard to escort this cur away this instant. Then you will forward a message for me with this device with all dispatch. Is that clear to you, young man?"

The engineer coughed. "Why, yes, er, ahem, very clear, Ladyship. I only wish I could... that is to say, I'm sorry to report that..."

"What?" Arlette said. "Spit it out, man. I have no time for this."

"I... I cannot assist you, Ladyship."

Arlette stiffened. "Cannot assist me?" She stared him down, and he turned away.

"I... I'm sorry, Lady," he said to the floor. "They won't let me. I am under strict orders."

Arlette breathed out. "I see," she said. She looked at the young engineer coldly, then cast a fierce glance at the guard, who sat with his hands placed idly across his belly. He smacked his lips at her.

Though her shoulders might have fallen in defeat, she pulled herself still more erect in her sack of a jacket, and she tossed her head up. She turned and strode to a spiral stair that led to the regular entrance to the ansible station. Once in the bare, unoccupied lobby, she went out and through the breezeway that connected the ansible station to Admiralty Hall. Several scurrying eyes glanced in her direction, and the Great Hall opened up to her, the minions either stepping aside or ditching it into other offices or passages communicating with the Great Hall. Lady Arlette marched in the center of the Hall, looking neither left nor right. Reaching her office and finding no guard, she opened the tall, gorgeous door herself. Her outer office was deserted. The door to the inner office was ajar. She glanced at the image of Vas in the holoniche, but Vas

wasn't looking at her, and she didn't stop to give obeisance.

Pushing the door open, at first she saw nothing. Stepping two paces in and scanning the office, however, she saw feet sticking out at an odd angle, on the floor at the far side of her sofa. She knew the feet. No one else was in the room, and there were no other signs of anything. She went over to the supine figure.

"Simmons," she said aloud. She knelt and touched his shoulder. His glassy eyes appeared surprised that the blaster had shot a clean, scorch-rimmed hole through his forehead. "I am so sorry, Simmons. I will tell them, your consort and children. I will tell them it was me."

She sighed. First, she closed her office door, peering into the outer office to make sure she was still alone -- she was. Then, she went to her desk to determine what she must do. She tapped on her desk comm, started to speak into it, but then thought better of it and wrote out the comm to Simmons' family for delayed transmission. She wiped the wetness of a tear from her nose with the back of one hand as she worked. She looked up, and out the window, considering, then tapped out a short message to her consort, Leah, with instructions for where Leah should go. She had no idea if Leah could or even should, but nothing better occurred to her than to give her a fighting chance to live. Arlette didn't have to belabor the message for her long-time consort; they knew each other too well, and Leah would understand the full weight of Arlette's situation.

Arlette picked up a scroller with regular public access and pulled up the news. "Lauch Pad Explosion At Primus House" was all she needed to see. She put the scroller down. How to do it? It took her a moment to figure it out. She looked over at the stone mantel shelf, where the Hand of Codesalm now sat in the unvariegated light of mid-day in Arlette's office. The fore-sword rested snugly in the gleaming hand. It was extremely heavy for what it was -- its blade was nuchromium just like the ceremonial hand. She held it a moment and examined it, something she hadn't done since first taking the honor from Her Excellency Yve. It didn't look like much, but time hadn't altered its gently-curved, razor-sharp edge. The grip was of some hard, grained, organic material that she was not familiar with; it had pearlescent inlays.

She shifted the weight of the weapon, about as long as her forearm, and tossed it from hand to hand to get the sense of it. She had little weapons training, but she had had enough exposure to the service, both as a child and as a visitor during her term of office, to know what to do.

She pulled off her jacket and sat in a stiff, high-backed chair, near where Simmons' body lay. She felt for the shirt buttons below her sternum and popped them free. Footfalls and shouts were just audible from the Great Hall. She hadn't much time. Her hands shook now, but she took a deep, calming breath. She took the handle firmly in one hand and used the blade-guard in the other as a guide. She situated herself in the chair, dropped the entry angle to align with where she thought she must go, and between breaths shoved the smiter of Melisande upward and to her right. She felt her heart rip open and its warmth flood her vitals, then she slumped over and died, draped over one arm of the chair just as her jacket lay draped over the other.

Chapter thirty

-seven. Raya's Redoubt

The Guardian Council, following the Colloquium of Trent... [missing text]... destroy such [presumed euphemism for self-directed inorganic autonomic devices] as were still maintained as, for example, in mechenaries [?] and game preserves. It was stressed that the continued reliance upon [enwombed?] computational devices might be required until a breeding program...

Recovered fragment from the Gnomostic Scrollers, believed to recite 3d Emp. sources

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After being shown into a snug room at the Eagle & Child by, as it happened, a child, Hersey attended to his personal needs, recited a lengthy prayer to Vas whilst kneeling on a quaint rag rug, concluded with the sign of the tau-and-lambda, then sat on the edge of his bed. He sighed. The room had only indirect light from the sun, and the windows on one wall afforded no view worth seeing. He yawned. His body wanted sleep, but he knew that his troubled mind would intercede the moment he lay down.

Idly, he got up and pulled open a drawer at the rickety old desk, but there was no Holy Book in it. He decided to go out and walk the extent of the village and perhaps find something palatable to eat. He considered changing into his Vox's habit, but an instinct that discretion was still advised restrained him. But was this the right way to go about things? Was not secrecy the same as a lie?

He met no one in the inn on his way out. It was that time of day when most people on errands had completed them, and the streets of Aeton were quiet. The rather small, white sun was following a downward arc. He walked away from it. There were a few dressed drop-cubes used as shopfronts or storehouses, but most of the town was new-built, composed of dramatic, rusted slabs of steel, plastone, and glass erupting from the flat village grounds in a jumble of angles like a growth of poxy crystals upon the surface of Innisfree. Hersey guessed it to be an indigenous architectural style reflecting the tradition of works and fabrication among the Innisfreemen. When one looked closer, the occasional plain slab face would be ornamented with elaborate in-worked designs or symbols, highly stylized, none of which Hersey could quite get the sense of.

The discordantly ungeometric shadow of a cloud slunk diagonally across the plastone-pavers of the lane, and Hersey's eyes followed it to the dusty bottom of a long gingham skirt belonging to a figure -- a woman, not young, but not so old -- sitting in a slatted bench before a small, low building of rusted steel and glass with plascrete sides. Her thick, greying hair was cut short in a wedge that sliced through her long neck. Her head tilted downward slightly, the points of the wedge joining her chin; was she asleep? No, she was working something in her hands. Hersey remembered the washer-women on Quercius, how they sat in rows outside, shielded from the cool, grey weather by mer-wool shawls, their hands working the clerical robes. He remembered feeling uncomfortable, or embarrassed, when he walked by, feeling their knowing feminine gazes upon him, knowing, knowing. He should have been proud, not awkward. He thought they tittered, sometimes, the girls, as he passed them.

He shook his head to clear away these troublesome thoughts. The woman outside the building stilled her hands and looked in his direction. She was no washer-woman, and she was very pretty, even at a distance, with strong, bony features like a sculpted deity, an image of strength. The building behind her looked old -- he could see smudges and stains on the plascrete wall facing him. Yet its geometries were elegant, perfect. It was a beautiful building. Then something else. On an upper corner, where a ray of sun still lit the surface full-on, dark spots. He tried to look at them, then they were gone. The woman clutched her handwork and rose from the bench, watching him. She seemed to be inviting him towards her.

He needlessly looked both ways down the quiet lane and took the diagonal course that the cloud had pursued. The woman smiled kindly as he neared. She had a huge smile, odd and beautiful in its way.

"A visitor?" she said. "You must come see the village museum!"

"This?" he said, looking behind her. "Here?"

"In course!" she said. "Today's my day -- we're all volunteers here." She was thin but healthy and strong. Her hands and wrists were overworked with veins that bespoke either a life of work or something specifically very manual. Hints of black shone through the grew wedge of hair.

"I'm sorry, Madam, it's just that I'm surprised."

"What?" she said.

"It is a small... it is a..."

"Oh, we've got lots of history here," she said. "You're off-world. You've been out at the twins' place, out to the pit. The mouth, as they call it. You've seen their doors?"

"You mean the entry doors to the manufactory?"

"That's me. I made 'em," she said.

"You mean..."

"Etched 'em. I'm a sculptor, by calling; etching is what pays. You'll see some of my best work in here, in the museum. The figures, the pieces, the illustrations, too. I was a teacher at an art school, once, before I come to Innisfree."

"So you did the work like I've seen here in the village, then? The symbols on the buildings?"

"Everything around here, for sure, and quite a lot elsewhere, including off-world. We export, you know. I've had hunks of diamond sent clear across the hegemony. But every one of 'em, it's got my little mark on it somewhere. You wouldn't notice it, but it's there. Sometimes, it's not so much a mark as a way of graining, or a pattern, something that's right in front of you."

"And you... you have a family here, Madam?"

"Family of man, you might say," she said. "Come on, let's show you some history. You don't have something better to do, mister...?"

"Hersey," he said.

"I'm Raya. Nice to make your acquaintance." They exchanged polite bows of the head. "Please, come in! Take the tour!"

Hersey couldn't very well refuse, and in truth he was interested. He thought to encounter one of those hopeful, slightly sad curatorial efforts by a local conservation corps, replete with objects purportedly connected with famous personages and apocryphal tales of putatively famous locals. This is the mini-comm worn by _____, entrusted to Madam _____, Councilor of Aeton, on the occasion of...

In the event, there was nothing at all like that. He entered a single, large room occupying almost the entirety of the little building. A dun-colored hair carpet, short and stiff and edged with a welt of some hide, covered most of the floor area and hushed the hard, severe surfaces. Upright prisms, cylinders, and cubes of clear diamond contained exhibits lit discreetly by unseen pinlights firing downward from the ceiling. On one wall were floor-to-ceiling cases with slick, plas-form sides and diamond-paned fronts; these were lit from within, their floors glowing faintly. One-way scrollers fastened upon the display cases lay at rest, awaiting visitors.

Raya pretended to take up official duties at a spare reception desk, atop which sat a triangular pile of rather too-unused looking scrollers. She punched a finger on a control interface, and a holo concealed under the desktop sent up a little planet displaying a price for scroller rental.

Hersey put his hands behind his back and strolled idly to a sheet-diamond cylinder set out prominently in the floor space. Within its smooth confine was a complicated, bifurcated sphere made up of discrete metal parts intermixed with fine-work in other materials. Just as Hersey thought to turn and ask Raya if this were not one of her works, a scroller wrapped across the face of the cylinder, but down low, lit up.

Mech Brain, middle-5th E. (approx.)

Discovered during scrap mining operations in the Mouth, near Aeton Village, this remain is believed to contain a core processing unit from a prior iteration of the manufactory(ies?) at that location. Though not licit by Irredente standards, no attempt has been made to activate this unit, and indeed, the manner of activation is unknown. Scanning has not revealed its mysteries but does show a surprisingly symmetrical, nesting patterning of the internal circuitry.

Hersey stepped back in surprise and gazed upon the object. Surely this was not a true thinking core from the prior empire? Finally unlocking his gaze, he realized that just paces away was a similar object, not encased, and larger, attached to a slim stalk of steel welded to a round metal plate upon the floor. He went over to it, and its sign flicked on.

The Soul of the Old One

Constructed object in nuchromium, silicon, and other locally-mined scrap materials

Artist: Raya Baddarchuk

It was not a copy of the mech brain, but a kind of interpretation of it, blown up and made more intricate. It was composed of two lobes separated by some sort of ring gear.

"Touch it," said Raya's voice from behind him, startling him. "Go ahead. That's what it's for."

"Miss... Raya, I have no need..."

"Don't worry, Mr. Hersey. It's not alive."

He reached out a hand to it and placed a palm gently on one lobe. Though heavy, it rotated a fraction and clicked. The other half remained stationary. Neither half was connected to the steel stalk, which somehow didn't interfere with the ring gear that allowed the lobes to turn.

"The wheels are always turning," Raya said, and when Hersey turned to look at her, she was smiling. "Innisfree is a place of work, Mr. Hersey. Everything here is connected to creation."

Hersey looked around the room. Other cases contained strange pieces of evidently found tech and mech from

the old Innisfree. Other pieces of Raya's handiwork were interspersed with these.

"You should look over there, too. There's an old node branch, too. It was brought here without any probing at all -- it's probably full of stuff, information, but we let it be. We don't want to destroy anything -- we don't even know what the half of it is. But we conserve them here. We've got a room under here with a lot more. We can't keep everything out at one time, and a lot of it is just variations on what you see here."

"No, Ma'am," Hersey said. "I don't wish to look at any more. You've been... but what is the meaning of it, 'the old one'? Is the mech brain from one of those?"

"You don't know about them?" she said. "It's a story they tell children on my homeworld. In old times, every planet had a god of its own -- this is before talk of Vas, you understand. These were the old ones, and they were the voices of the worlds."

"Did they speak?" asked Hersey.

"It's just a story, Mr. Hersey," Raya said. "But in the stories, yes, they always speak, I'm not sure how, but there never seems to be a problem with people hearing them. But here is the story. The old ones were always there, turn after turn, sol after sol, and nothing could get too bad so long as they were there. They sort of watched out for everyone. They didn't stop people from doing bad things, necessarily, or even stop just regular old bad things from happening. Maybe they couldn't, the story doesn't say. But they were always there, watching. And then they did other things, too. The old ones could talk to each other across any distance, so it didn't matter where a planet was, even if the people had a hard time traveling to the others. This was good for people, since they could keep up with what was happening to all the other people without risking a trip, which was very dangerous in those times. The old ones let them talk all they wanted. But people wanted more -- isn't that always the way, Mr. Hersey? The people made a bargain with the old ones, the story says. Give us a way to get safely from world to world, and we will carry you with us.

But the old ones, they said they couldn't go, it wasn't possible. They were the souls of the planets, of each planet. But they could share a piece of themselves with man, to travel with, to explore together and learn what was out there. And so, as every child from my planet knows, the old ones made the little ones, and the little ones were seeded throughout the universe along with every man or woman who could carry them. In return, the old ones made the little ones. The end."

Hersey looked blank. "But that doesn't make sense," he said. "The old ones made the little ones, but how did that help man traverse the stars?"

Raya shrugged. "Where I'm from, everyone reads the story a little different, you understand. As far as, what the little ones are, who they are."

"Who?"

"Exactly."

Hersey frowned. "It's like 'Vasily and the Works,'" he muttered.

"Vasily? You heard that one?"

"Why, do you know it?"

"Why, in course. That's an old Innisfree story. That's where this place comes from, it's all manufactory, always was. You ask anyone who's been here any time, they heard that one. That's a beautiful story. I can't

say as I understand it, but you're quite right, it's of a piece with the old ones. You got your parents and children there, too. You're quite an interesting visitor, Mr. Hersey."

Hersey blushed. "I... I came here to learn. That's why I have come to Innisfree."

"We all come here to learn," Raya said. "Some by choice, some by necessity. Are you..."

At that moment, the thick plate-steel door of the museum opened, letting in a sussuration of outside sound and a figure backlit by the sun-brightened street. It was a man in a worksuit seemingly too nice to be worked in, and somewhat crazed hair.

"Miss Raya," he called out. "Are you entertaining an envoy of His Holiness, of Auspex himself?"

Raya looked at Hersey. "He certainly hasn't said so, Mr. Saussure." She looked at Hersey.

"Ahem," Hersey said. "I'm sorry, Ma'am. Perhaps I should have explained. But it didn't seem important in the context of my visit."

"Well... you do look clerical, when it comes to that," she said. "Except... you've cut your hair down, I see." Hersey could not tell if she were angry or awed. He hoped neither.

"Envoy Hersey!" Saussure said. "I was told you were here. How fortunate, since no one would think to look -- no offense, Miss Raya, I meant anyone who might be interested in the doings of officialdom. I seem to draw them out, these days, so I'm naturally wary. But I forgot. I'm Saussure, Envoy. I'm sure they spoke of me out at Orbital Works." By this time, Saussure was with them amidst the museum artifacts. "Nice museum, this. You'd never think, would you? No offense, Miss Raya."

Hersey nodded politely. "I believe you were mentioned, yes. You are an expert on the bugs. You know the twins from the... manufactory."

Raya looked curiously at Saussure. "Bugs is it now, Saussure?"

"A mere hobby," he said. "No one is an expert on those," Saussure said, "except to the extent of living with them. But I keep notes, it's true. I'm an inveterate seeker of scientific knowledge. I am a scientist of sorts, to the extent that such things are permitted. Perhaps Passus and Collus mentioned that to you? I understand you're seeking the same, Envoy."

Hersey spoke to Raya and Saussure equally: "It's true, as you suggest, that I have come to Innisfree to learn. The Church naturally has an interest in the transmission and uses of technical and scientific knowledge and methods, since it is the protector of the Plan of Vas for mankind. And, I have found it expedient at times to shed the raiments of my office, which may obstruct casual, instructive conversations with worthy persons like yourselves. Miss Raya, it has been a distinct pleasure to visit your town's museum, and illuminating. And, I might add, your own work, which is most accomplished. May I suggest, however, that fitting subjects for the artist's hand are also to be found in the Holy Book of the Body? Look to the descriptions of the heroes of old, and consider the needs of every parish for tableaux of the stories that aid us in leading an examined, worthy life. Look, also, to the many-faceted Vas, and the niches that go wanting for representations of Vas that all may contemplate and gain strength from."

The scientist, the artist, and the cleric stood in silence for a moment. Saussure appeared to expect Raya to speak.

"Innisfreemen do have spiritual needs, Mr. Hersey," she said. "And many know about pain. Innisfree is a

place for us. Our Vas is here already, and has been for a long time. It -- or he, or she -- cannot speak, now, but it is a matter of faith with us that a great soul resides within, stilled but strong. A face of Vas is here, Mr. Hersey, we thank you. We have need of no other. I make the images that Innisfreemen look to, and they are sufficient for us."

The unyielding rejoinder stunned Hersey.

"Ha! Well put, my dear," Saussure interjected. "That's our Raya, Mr. Hersey. Silent strength -- she's well known for it. This is her village, after all -- she practically built it herself -- but you must be staying at her inn, heh?"

Hersey's brow shot up. "Indeed? I was not... I did not..."

"Everyone is welcome here, Mr. Hersey," Raya said. "Seekers of refuge, or truth. Bringers of the Word, too. I know all about you, Mr. Hersey. Not you, personally, but your kind, those of your office. The ones who came, some stayed, but they changed. The others left."

"I know nothing of that," Hersey said. "I am only recently appointed and was myself a provincial cleric. You refer to the Church's missions on Innisfree?"

"Missions? Well, yes, I suppose," Raya said. "You have visited one?"

"I am only recently arrived on Innisfree itself -- barely a day."

"You look weak, Mr. Hersey," Saussure said. "Have you eaten?"

"I confess that I... I left the inn in search of..."

"Then let's get you going," Saussure said. "Miss Raya, are you serving over there? I'm famished too -- it's a long drive out here."

"I can always feed my guests," Raya said. "And it would be my pleasure to feed Mr. Hersey. I suspect he'll be surprised. I'll comm the kitchen, you two go on ahead. Sit wherever you like over there. Go on, I keep a good table."

"A most unusual woman," Hersey said when he and Saussure were outside.

"In part," Saussure said. "Mainly."

Hersey stopped in the lane. "What do you mean, sir?" he said.

"You're right, she's mainly a woman, I mean, Mr. Hersey. She has all her digits and very little of a man about her." Saussure held up a hand, displaying all his fingers. "She's got a firm grip. She can wrestle with those artifacts and scraps and bend them to her will, I can tell you."

"I'm afraid I still don't follow you, Mr. Saussure," Hersey said. "She is inarguably a woman, and one that any man might be proud to..."

"No doubt about that, Mr. Hersey, as even a cleric can see, eh? Perhaps what is present and what is absent -- the outward manifestations of blind encoding chemistry -- bear little relation to the soul. You've been out to Orbital Works, so you would understand that, I'm sure."

They had begun walking again and had gained the walk on the far side of the lane.

"That the maimed are elevated in the Plan of Vas, you mean," Hersey said.

Now Saussure stopped. "What? No, Mr. Hersey. Why, I don't think you do understand at all. What did you see out at the Works, at Passus' and Collus' place?"

"They showed me how they manufacture... parts. And then, I saw the pit, the 'Mouth,' as they called it. I'm afraid my visit was cut short, so I didn't see everything, but..."

"But you saw the people there, surely?"

"I do not like to dwell upon it, but certainly I noticed they had a code conformance issue with their hands. But I did not come to Innisfree to police..."

"Hands? Of course, Mr. Hersey. By Vas, I must make allowances -- you're a clergyman. You're out of uniform, so it throws me. I give the Church entirely too much credit for educating its people in basic science. You have heard of tiresianism? Di-sexism? Hermaphrodites, Mr. Hersey. It's written on the hand, as they say."

"You mean, those people..."

"All of them. Every man jack of them, if you'll pardon the expression. Some tilt, some are split right down the middle. There's not a conformer among 'em. By Vas, anywhere around here. This is Aeton, Mr. Hersey. This is a sanctuary. This is Raya's redoubt."

"You mean I have been among... surely these people could find a better place..."

"In the hegemony proper? As second-class citizens, or worse? Why not throw them in the charnel-house, Mr. Hersey?"

"That is blasphemy, sir. There is nothing like that."

They had arrived back at the inn. Saussure directed Hersey inside and to a room Hersey hadn't noticed on arrival earlier. They stepped through a hatch-like opening rather than a regular door. It was a modest room with several tables and chairs. The walls, however, were metal, connected with riveted seams. One large window overlooked what Hersey guessed to be the back garden of the Eagle & Child -- there was a small garden -- but the window was extremely thick. Hersey realized that the room was dead quiet. It was a drop-cube of some sort. The inn must have been built around it.

"Please, let's sit, Mr. Hersey," Saussure said. "Nothing like it? Perhaps. I live among the Innisfreemen, and I'm not a regular trader or traveller. But many here are, and there are rumors. If they're remotely accurate, Innisfree's days may be numbered. We occupy a very precarious position here, being neither here nor there, not hegemony proper. In a moment, Miss Raya will join us, and we can talk more."

The young girl who had earlier escorted Hersey to his room, and who now appeared not so much young as simply very small, brought in a basket of warmed, herb-scented rolls. Hersey examined her closely as she set them down and curtsied slightly. Saussure was watching Hersey.

"She is beautiful, isn't she?" Saussure said. "Perfection in miniature. A man can appreciate a small woman. Takes me back to my youth. Vigor, Mr. Hersey. You don't get more of it with time."

"Is she... is she the daughter of Raya?"

"Raya is childless, so far as I know," Saussure said. "The girl is... a child of Innisfree. Safe, now. I found her in Derrida. Raya brought her here."

"I see," Hersey said. "You are in regular contact with the village here?"

Raya stepped into the room, and the girl behind her with plates already piled with food. Raya let the girl set down the plates and some implements that she pulled from her serving apron, then nodded for her to go. A hatch door slid into place, and Hersey realized that the room was even quieter than before -- he could hear his own heart beating.

"I am sorry to arrange this this way," Saussure said. "We have led you here of a purpose, but for your protection, I assure you."

Hersey abruptly stood.

"Sit, friend," Raya said. "You can go whenever you want. You can open the door as well as I can. But don't. You need us, and we need you. Please stay. Eat, and listen to us."

Hersey still looked alarmed. "I came here in peace."

"In peace you will go," Raya said. "But you will not betray us, not if you are a true man of Vas."

"I am a servant of Vas and of His Holiness," Saussure said. "On that you may depend."

"We do," Saussure said. "And we will probably die -- we will be killed -- if you do not honor our request for... for secrecy. We ask you as a representative of His Holiness to take our message."

"Take it where? To His Holiness?"

"That's one way, if you can find him," Saussure said.

"Find His Holiness?" Hersey said. "He will be where he always is."

Raya spoke to Saussure: "He hasn't heard." Then to Hersey, "You have not listened to free-casts lately."

"Or they've been held from him," Saussure said. "We know you've been followed closely, Mr. Hersey. We've got one spy distracted elsewhere, with no idea where you are. But there have been others too, no doubt. The news is, His Holiness has fled Pydna. Pydna is under some sort of attack."

Hersey sat again. He stared at the plate before him and said nothing.

"He's had a shock, Saussure. Mr. Hersey, you must eat. Please, eat something while we talk to you. It's the best thing. Just listen to us, and if you cannot tolerate more, Saussure will drive you wherever you want."

"I will listen," he said. "I cannot eat. Go on, if you please."

"We put this together hastily," Saussure said. "Passus notified me from space. It's doesn't matter why -- you'll have to trust me on this. I don't know what happened at his Works -- he just said that you had to leave. I think I understand, though, now I have met you. You're a very proper man, Mr. Hersey, and a very proper Vox. I knew such as you when I was a child. I have spent much of life trying to stay away from the likes of you -- not

always successfully, I might add, and I've gotten into my share of trouble for it. True men of science are not welcome in the hegemony, except on the sly, where we are used in secret for the advancement of others' fortunes. So be it. It keeps me in business, and I can pursue the things I wish clandestinely. But your Church -- sorry, The Church -- cannot tolerate real science."

"Science destroyed mankind," Hersey said. "Vas renewed him. We must respect Vas's work and intent."

"Science created new life," Raya said. "Extraordinary, beautiful life."

"Abominations," Hersey said. "The genome must be policed."

"Yes, there were abominations, that's right," Saussure said. "But that's not all there was."

"I have heard the Avials and other bioforms defended," Hersey said. "It's part of our training to go through such tedious exercises. I do not deny that there was worth in some of these other bioforms -- worth, but not exaltedness. The results, however meritorious, cannot be separated from the practices."

"No, you miss the point," Saussure said.

"Mr. Hersey," Raya said, "You saw something with your own eyes. You saw it here, in Aeton."

"Your museum pieces, you are referring to," Hersey said. "The mech brain."

"That's what the scroller says it is, yes," Raya said. "But I believe it is much more. I believe it is a little one. Whether alive or dead, I don't know. But it's a child. A child of the old ones. A dear, precious life."

"Then it should be smashed," Hersey said. "It cannot be allowed in the hegemony, don't you see that? It stands in opposition to the Plan of Vas for the pre-eminence of man's biological purity. If we let these... things exist, they remain a threat to that. You think to protect life, but in reality you doom it."

Raya looked at Saussure. "He's hopeless," she said. "You were wrong, Saussure."

"Listen, Mr. Hersey," Saussure said. "What if I told you that everything you think this hegemony stands for is not what it stands for? That it is the legitimization of hypocrisy?"

"Then I should know you as a liar," Hersey said. "For I have been in company with Auspex, and I know what you say to be false."

"But do you believe me when I tell you that Auspex is gone? That he has left -- that he may even be dead?"

"I have no reason to believe or disbelieve you, but if that is so, perhaps he has fled merely to save the Church. I myself warned him of..."

"Of what?" said Saussure.

"Of plague. Of pestilence. Of harbingers... like that which you announce to me. Of hypocrisy."

"Then you know the hegemony is in danger, don't you see?" Saussure said. "You admit that something has gone wrong."

"I... I brought such news to His Holiness. That is why I am here, on Innisfree. My information was that this is where..."

"Where did you get that information?"

"I... I cannot recall."

"Was it from a person?"

"I don't believe so. I must have read... I searched..."

"You mined data. You were given Innisfree by a machine. You were given information."

"I believe that's correct, yes."

"You were on a ship," Saussure said.

"I... believe I was," Hersey said.

Saussure whistled and looked at Raya.

"I don't believe it," she said. "Not him. They wouldn't pick him."

Saussure shrugged. "What did you expect to find here, Mr. Hersey? What are the harbingers of doom?"

"You will continue to mock me if I explain," Hersey said.

"No, Mr. Hersey, I am not mocking you, and I will not. Even I'm surprised, like Raya, and I'm pretty inured to surprises now, with what I've found in old Innisfree, the dead Innisfree. Anyhow, I think I know the answer. Raya doesn't. No one else on Innisfree knows, either. It's bugs, Mr. Hersey, isn't it? It's armadillia. I know you come from Edom -- that was easy to find out. And Edom was overrun. You know all about the bugs. You believe they represent something."

Hersey looked for any sign of trickery in Saussure's face. The unkempt hair, however, gave Saussure a certain sincerity. Hersey had met liars in his life, and they cared too much about themselves. Saussure, however, didn't seem to care about himself, didn't even seem -- despite the precautions to place Hersey in the drop-cube or whatever this place was -- overly careful to preserve himself. Raya, Saussure wanted to protect her, Hersey realized. He could see why. Raya was magnificent -- whatever she was. But Saussure, he was reckless. He was touched by Vas, Hersey felt it but wished it away.

"The people at the leg-maker's manufactory, they said -- they said you told them -- that the bugs ruin machinery."

"No," Saussure said. "I mean, I may have told them that, but that's generally known by many people. It's how they do it that isn't known. What did you see on Edom?"

"I did not pay attention to them except to try to rid my parish of them -- a futile effort. The creatures are impossible to catch or kill or drive away. They are a shadow, a pox."

"Edom is an old planet," Saussure said.

"It is a young settlement," Hersey said. "I can count -- I could count -- the number of my predecessors there on one hand. I was Vox Docilis, you understand."

"No, the planet itself. It was a cooling planet, and the new settlements were put on top of a much older place."

"Like Innisfree?" Hersey said.

Saussure got a sad, serious look on his face. "I'm afraid so," he said. "But Innisfree wasn't re-formed like Edom was. If anything, it's got even less of a chance."

A flicker of sympathy crossed Hersey's face, and he looked into Saussure's eyes. "You have many of the creatures, then?" Hersey said.

"Many upon many," Hersey said.

"Then the planet is doomed," Hersey said. "Everyone will die. Your errancy will be smitten. You have been given the sign. My errand is verified."

Raya scowled.

"Envoy," he said. "These are not sent by Vas. The bugs, the armadillia. They are sent, not sought, and they are destructive, but you don't understand why. I think I do. I'm going to share this with you, and with Raya now too, but it must never pass your lips again. The bugs are not real -- not bugs, I mean, not like we mean. They are not mech, either. I don't know how they arise except to watch how they beget themselves -- which they do at every opportunity. The opportunity is tech devices, specifically silicon. They are composed of it, and they make themselves from it. They take it where they can, in its purest, manufactured form. And they use it. It is all they are, or practically all. Do you see, Raya? They're on the ships, they're on the old worlds -- the worlds with layers of old tech beneath."

Raya's face showed horror.

"Yes," Saussure said.

"The old ones -- and the little ones too," she said.

"Your museum pieces are locked up tight -- your works are another matter. But I can't say it's the cores the bugs go for, specifically. It's... the memory, the memory and the controllers are what's easiest to get at, anywhere. Under my feet right now there's probably a channel full of old nodes, a mine of silicon. And those are everything that matters, really."

"No," Raya said. "Those are just the appendages. Their souls reside in the cores, it must be."

"If the core can't speak, however..." Saussure said. "Then how can we know?"

"How can we ever know, Saussure?" Raya said. "We can see, can't we? We can feel and know they are in there!"

Saussure shrugged. "I'm just explaining what I think," he said. "I'm a scientist, not a Vox."

Both turned to look at Hersey. "It amounts to the same thing, to me," he said. "These creatures destroy the devices that should never have been made."

"Then you consign the hegemony away, Mr. Hersey," Saussure said. "Because they are indiscriminate. They destroy dumb systems of all kinds -- anything that keeps the hegemony, and by extension, the Church, running. Would Vas sweep his arm so broadly?"

"When man was simple and secluded, he had no such problems. We can be that way again. It is not wrong to

seek noble simplicity. It is not wrong to place man back where he began."

"You think we will stay there?" Raya said. "You don't think we will make the same mistakes again?"

"Not if love for Vas and his Plan is respected," Hersey said.

Raya looked smugly at Saussure. "You see?" she said. "There's nothing you can say. He said he came to learn. He came to condemn."

Saussure sighed. "Envoy," he said. "We can't win you over, I see that. Maybe it doesn't matter. You're the one who's stranded here. No, I don't mean in this room. In space. You can't return to Pydna -- I can play a free-cast for you to prove it. You can't stay here, on Innisfree. You will confirm only that we are makers of things you despise -- some here make things that anyone might despise, but I assure you that you won't be able to find those people. The whole planet is full of what you despise, down deep. Besides all that, you'll be followed and watched, and I don't know what else. I don't know why they'd want you -- it's Government, it must be. I know those people. The hegemony you love is gone, Envoy, and His Holiness with it."

"Then I shall find him," Hersey said.

"Really, Envoy?" Saussure said. "With all your resources? With Church credit, your trail bright as a comet across space? The provincial Vox, lately Envoy, on a mission?"

"He knows where to go, he must," Raya said. "If they sent him here, they know where he must go."

"Who?" Hersey said.

"You have spoken to them," she said. "Who do you think they are?"

Hersey flushed and cocked his jaw. "Abominations, machines," he said.

"Vas was a machine," Raya said. "That's not all it was, but it was that."

"Heresy! That is falsehood and calumny!"

"I will go out first," Raya said, rising. "Saussure, I suggest that you let him go out next. He can sleep in his room if he likes -- no charge, Envoy. When you leave this room, I am just Raya again, the Raya from the Bird & Baby and the Aeton Historical Society. She's a nicer person. Different from me in many ways. Patient. I'm sorry you couldn't get to know her better."

Her eyes flashed at Hersey, and she opened the hatch with a slap on the control and left them.

"I don't understand," Hersey said to Saussure.

"No one does," he replied. "She has broken more than a few hearts."

#

Hersey awoke in the dark, unsure where he was, desperate to escape something or someone. He let his head clear, then made out a rectangle of pinpoint stars in the window. Innisfree. The inn. The meeting. The room had no desk comm, so he couldn't tell the time. It felt like very early morning.

He had dreamed -- he had awoken from a dream. He forehead was damp. He had stood before a great ship

set upon monstrous props at dock. The ship's prow had huge port windows and a ground-level loading bay that together formed a face. He stared up, a tiny speck before the creature, and it spoke to him: "Go thither, apostate!" it boomed aloud.

He had answered it: "Where? Why?"

"For I have told you. I shall lead. Trust in me! You must go now!"

He had tried to run away, but he was pulled into the mouth. Closer, closer. And then he had awoken. He couldn't shake the feeling of still being there -- he wished the light in the room were brighter.

He was ravenous. When he finally sat up, a sensor somewhere flicked on a lamp set to low. In the little table below the window, there sat a covered plate with a dull red telltale and a flagon of water. An auto-warm plate -- it must be the dinner he had left untouched. Finally, for the first time in a day or more, he ate. He managed not to tear through it instantly, but he did eat quickly, without stopping to drink. He looked out, but the back-garden was a void. Only the stars were visible. Innisfree must not have a moon.

The stars. He remembered Saussure's warning and advice -- to go, to leave Innisfree. And he knew it was the right course. He was running into what he had expected to find, and the answer of where to go had been given to him at every turn. It was all propitious. He was being shown the way. He had had faith, and it was being rewarded. He wouldn't just leave Innisfree, he would escape, as he had done on Edom. He marveled at the guiding hand of Vas that could contain a galaxy yet still direct one man. Where would he go? He had only to leave to discover where.

He knelt and gave obeisance, completing the ritual with the tau-and-lambda across his chest. He rose and went to his bag, removing an old habit and a simple rope. He completed some ablutions, dressed, took a last look at the small, tidy room, and left.

He didn't try to be stealthy, but he did walk quietly. At the entry hall, a figure with a hat slept, bent over in a chair. Hersey tried not to awaken the sleeper, but the click of the inner door leading to the entry vestibule started the figure from sleep.

"Envoy Hersey? Oh, Father? I'm to take you to the port." It was a young man, evidently not a servant but some sort of assistant to someone. "Mr. Saussure asked me to tell you it's all arranged, if you will go."

"To space, you mean?"

"Dunno," the young man said. "He just gave me a dock address. He said you would know what to do if you decided to go. But I guess it would be to space, yes."

Hersey considered for a moment. "I will go with you."

The village was asleep, but dawn drew near. They set out in blackness, but a faint glow on the horizon announced morning as they neared Freeport. Hersey didn't recognize the spaceport compound's face from the vantage point of entering, and he didn't remember the guard station where they stopped to give credentials.

"Envoy? Auspicial?" said the guard. "Hmmp. Go on. You want the cargo terminals, six points over, dock zed. Right then? Good."

Hersey sat back in the car, wondering. Cargo? Was he not to fly on a lander and dock into a larger ship in space?

The orb of the sun now peered over the horizon, gazing upon the dock-works through slits between hangars and service buildings. The car drove into the great, bright eye on a traverseway between large, identical, corrugated-metal slab-sides of two buildings. When disgorged from the narrow passage, the car veered off to the right, and there before it stood a land-docked multi-use craft, set up on massive, leg-like stilts. Steam or exhaust dribbled from various vents topside. As the car came fully around, Hersey saw the massive, hemispherical prow, with rectangular diamond-paned slits of eyes. A round hatch on the lower half swung open, and an dockworker of some kind emerged from within, munching something that she held in one hand while reading from a scroller held in the other. She looked up on seeing a lev-car angling in towards the prow. She banged behind her ear with a practiced wrist movement, preserving the bodily integrity of her breakfast bun. Her lips moved. Hersey's driver switched on the receiver.

"Repeat: what is your destination, travelers?" she said.

The driver turned questioningly to Hersey.

"Wherever Vas directs me," Hersey said.

"He said..." began the driver.

"I heard him, moron," said the dockworker. "Get him cleared through the gate, first. They'll load him up." She finished with a just-audible mutter: "Vas damn his eyes."

"Sorry, sir... Father," the driver said. "There's rough trade on the docks."

"I am learning to make allowances," Hersey said.

Chapter thirty

-eight. Communiqué

In the various annals, including the Chronicles, little reliable information appears regarding Vas, variously referred to as "Vox Orbis," "Os Orbis," "Voice Within," and other variants. It does seem certain that this entity is connected in some way, and perhaps even directed, the sack of Gaetia Unum. Its divinity may be questioned.

The Commentaries

#

Xenoetas fumed. "Why do I spend so much time on one ship's boy, Mr. Burgred, and why must it be your nephew?"

Lerner sat off to one side as usual, at his desk on Quarterdeck, seeming to read or take notes. Captain Xenoetas sat at her desk, her thick figure filling the seat. The diamond hood was open, and a galaxy of stars shone magnificently into the captain's quarters. Burgred stood, hands behind his back, and was not offered a seat.

"Ma'am, the boy did absolutely nothing, except what he was told to do," said Burgred.

"The fact remains that you found him mid-ships at Boys Quarters in the middle of an alert when he should have been at station."

"As I have stated, Ma'am, he followed a direct order from someone."

"Someone, lieutenant. Yes. And no idea who?"

"Henryk can't possibly get involved in that, Ma'am. He would have no standing among his peers. He is no snitch." Burgred involuntarily glanced at Lerner.

"No, I suppose not," the captain said. "The officers and boys have their secret codes of conduct."

"Ma'am, you surely must remember what it was like..."

"I remember following every order to the letter and having no one to intervene with countermands and remands, sir."

"The boy was being set up, Ma'am. There is no other explanation." Burgred shot a glance at Lerner, who still pretended to be working. "Someone wants him to fail. Someone wants him off the roster."

"Accusations, lieutenant. It is fortunate for you that what we do here is confidential. In any event, it is your corps that commands those boys down there. If there is fault, it is with the lower-ranking officers."

"It is true that the junior lieutenant's orders were muddled. Yet the fact remains, Henryk is spotless in this. He was missing from his post for only a short time, and he remained there -- without a necessary break, I might add -- until he was relieved by the watch. Even if you wish to discipline the lieutenant, or even me, Ma'am, the boy cannot in fairness be knocked down for it. Particularly given..."

"That he was just put back in Boys' Quarters," she interjected. "And as for knocking anyone down, young master Henryk has shown ample capability in giving as good as he gets."

"He has behaved in exemplary fashion since being sent below decks, Ma'am," Burgred said. "And he is well liked both above and below decks, as far as I can tell."

The captain scowled. "I do not run a social club, Mr. Burgred. I will take the matter under advisement. The alert has been suspended, but I am advised by the Admiralty that it may be renewed at any time. You will whip your people, including ship's boys, into line, Mr. Burgred, before that occurs. I suggest double watches, Mr. Burgred, but no doubt you have creative ideas of your own. Close the session, Lerner. You may go, Mr. Burgred."

When he had gone, Captain Xenoetas thrummed her thick fingers stiffly on the desktop.

"Was the midshipman someone you know, Lerner?"

"Quite possibly, Ma'am," said Lerner. "I'm sure it was what you call an innocent misapprehension."

"I have no doubt of that, Mr. Lerner," Xenoetas said. "Did you get anything back on the Burgred boy's profile?"

"Something's doing at Pydna, captain," Lerner said. "We don't get anything from the Palace. Down at Ansible they say there's 'no allowances,' by which I'm not sure what they mean, Ma'am."

The captain thrummed some more.

"The boy certainly does look like Burgred," she said.

"Begging pardon, Ma'am, but he's a strange one, that boy."

"You've been taking notes on him?"

"A captain's secretary's got to know things, Ma'am, and I take my duties to heart, Ma'am."

"Strange how, Lerner? The boy."

"Quiet. Inward, if I may say so. And..."

"Yes?"

"He does look like Burgred, Ma'am... and then he doesn't."

"It takes two, Mr. Lerner."

"Yes, Ma'am. I say merely that he looks... off, somehow. A fish out of water, is my point."

"A boy out of Edom, at any rate, Mr. Lerner. Not exactly the pure flower of the Irredente. The outliers make for some strange specimens. Let's get a message over to Admiralty. Someone over there must make it their business to look at conformity decisions. Besides, if our Ship's Vox sent it out to the Palace, it may well have gotten copied to someone at Admiralty along the way, or maybe someone at Admiralty can get it. I don't know. Write it up, Lerner, and let me take a look at it. Be circumspect, Lerner -- the Burgreds still have some sting left -- but suggest to whoever that something needs further inquiry. That might shake something loose --

though Vas doesn't often smile on us where Admiralty reading between the lines is concerned."

"Unfortunately true, Ma'am," said Lerner.

"Make it so, Mr. Lerner. Let's work on this for now, instead of that other. Information may substitute for action, Mr. Lerner. Make a note of that."

"Of course, Ma'am."

#

The emergency comm alarm jolted Burgred awake from absolute blackness in his quarters. He had been on double watches without a break. He didn't even remember getting into his cot, let alone switching off the holovid. He didn't know how long he had been asleep. By long training, he practically fell into his work chets and was on his feet in an adrenaline rush. He grabbed his wrist comm off the little ledge adjoining his cot. It signaled a holovid. He routed the communication to his desk comm, which controlled holos, and set the message to run.

A slightly jowly, official-looking eminence with bushy grey brows launched from seemingly mid-sentence into an announcement for "all officers and officials on board space vessels commanded by the Admiralty of the Irredente." It appeared that something had come before but was presumably not for the same audience and so had been excised. Clumsy, Burgred thought. He had received Admiralty holos before -- in recent standards from First Lady Arlette -- and those had been highly choreographed, brightly polished affairs. He wondered idly, as the beetle-browed speaker cleared his throat and appeared to arrange papers, why this stooge was handling the announcing. The message began:

"Many of you know me as Cabil Member Galinda, the second inner quadrant representative to the Irredente's legislative council and the resident Cabil representative on Pydna. It is my privilege, but also my burden, to bring you this important message.

The recent alert for all vessels has been stepped down but may be re-instituted at any time. As a direct result of important events on the Irredente central governing world of Pydna, emergency measures have been instituted to preserve our glorious hegemony from attack. Your ship's commander has been fully briefed and can address the specifics of that matter with you. At present, there has been no direct assault upon Pydna, but in light of events on outliers in recent standards, the risks are real and potentially dire of such an attack occurring at any time. I leave the rest for shipboard briefings as may commend themselves to your commanding officers.

This message will update your comm library with details on the ascendancy of His Most Revered Excellency Godwin to First Consul, from his former office as a Cabinet Secretary to Madame Yve. His ascendancy marks a continuation of prior government policies. The entire Irredente stands in gratitude to the services of Madame Yve. We salute His Excellency on his attainment of high office and ask Vas to guide him.

It is with profound humility that I report also my joint appointment by His Excellency as both First Lord of the Admiralty and Ministry of Intelligence, posts which I shall hold simultaneously with my Cabil representation until the current crisis has resolved. I thank Vas for his bounty and this opportunity to serve. I thank the Lady Arlette for providing me with such a sterling example of leadership, an example that I cannot possibly hope to surpass but can merely attempt to emulate. Thank you, Lady Arlette. Your services to the Irredente will be sorely missed. On the Intelligence side, I view myself as a mere stand-in and servant for the outgoing Secretary, now foremost leader of our hegemony.

Effective immediately, I have instituted measures designed to thwart potential enemy interception of our communications, as well as enemy propaganda attacks and in situ streaming data manipulation. The attendant news curtailment from the media outlets is unfortunate but necessary until, as I have said, the crisis is resolved. As soon as practicable, we will restore some channels of media output, and when that occurs, you will be notified. Finally, I am directing all ships to perform some sorely-needed housecleaning intended to ready them for maneuvers. Your captains will brief you on this.

I recognize the effects all this must have on our Navy's families and friends. Be assured that to the extent feasible, we will transmit relevant ship-comm data to appropriately assigned persons so that the folks back home can be assured of the status of their loved ones on board the ships. I can't promise the system will be perfect, especially at first, but we in the admiralty will do our utmost to keep appropriate channels of information between ship and shore flowing.

It is important, at this critical moment, that each and every one of you do your duty to the Irredente, pull your weight and more, and focus all your energies on the preservation of our Vas-blessed society and hegemony. I have complete faith in our Navy and the intelligence services, and I ask you to have faith in me and all the officials at Admiralty and Intelligence. Working together, we may preserve our way of life and our holy body for the benefit of our progeny. Thank you, and may Vas protect the Irredente."

After taking this in quickly enough to be confused and alarmed, a comm came in directing senior officers to convene at the captain's briefing room -- in a few minutes. Burgred cursed, pulled on a worn duty jacket, and headed out, grabbing a stimulant drink from a canteen along the way.

Being rigged for a briefing rather than for church, the brightened lights in the room cast a sickly lavender blue on everything. The triangular holowindow was switched off. Most of the officer corps was already there, and the room buzzed with talk. Burgred took the requisite front-row seat in a rickety folding chair. He couldn't help but hear snippets of other conversations.

"About time someone did something..."

"Unprecedented concentration of power..."

"Does this mean we pray, I wonder? There's been too damn much of that, lately, if you ask me..."

"It's a question of merit..."

"Did she jump or was she pushed, is all I'm saying..."

The prevailing mood was not as somber as events might have suggested. Most of the officers were young and had spent the better part of their careers under just the one First Lady. Here was something new and different, rather like planetside R&R. They had the same jobs to do; only the names on their orders were different.

Just as Burgred thought to home in on one of the conversations, the conversation abruptly ceased except for one embarrassed scraggler who trailed off with a cough. The rustle of a room full of people coming to attention was followed by the disorderly thump of a chair getting knocked against a wall.

"Take your seats, ladies and gentlemen," Captain Xenoetas said, steaming through the room and grabbing the podium as though throttling it. She laid out a scroller with her notes. "You've all had the general message. Now the specifics. This ship, and most of the fleet, are on permanent standby alert, with all that that implies. Strict watches, no breaks outside of corpus services and sleep, resupply by tender." Groans and mutters could be heard. "Silent! I demand absolute obedience, and I will have it. Anyone who breaches protocol, I will

break them. We will institute a new loyalty oath on a form prescribed by His Lordship, administered to every last breathing soul on the ship. Every oath-taking will be witnessed by two observers, so organize your form accordingly. No exceptions. I am informed by His Lordship by private comm to ranking officers that we face a dire threat to hegemony security and that nothing less than total commitment to obedience will suffice. There is a new order, ladies and gentlemen, and when the threat to us is countered, a better hegemony, free from the compromises and excuses of the last..."

The captain went on in this vein for some time, having evidently been provided with certain phrases and expressions intended to be hammered into the ship's officers and crew. She then recited a list of specific duties falling to each division and its people, most relating to battle-readiness but with a few surprising detours into the mundane. Dropped in among these was the "clearing of vermin, emphasizing the conservation of stores and the purity of ship's systems." Eyebrows were raised and quizzical looks exchanged.

"Any questions, officers?" Xenoetas finally said.

"Ahem," said the ranking Engineering Corps officer. "Ma'am? Am I to understand that we're supposed to clear out rats and roaches?"

Xenoetas feigned disinterest in the question. "Mr. Lerner will brief the relevant persons separately on that matter," she said. "Anything else? Then may Vas bless the Irredente." She failed to make a tau-and-lambda. "Now back to your stations and watches. You are expected to implement the new protocols immediately. You will find a complete summary in your comms. Mr. Burgred, please remain behind."

When the room had cleared -- with several wary or inquisitive glances back at Burgred, who stood at attention -- Xenoetas began:

"I hope you will have no difficulty enforcing my edicts under the new regime, Mr. Burgred," she said.

"The captain cannot assert that I have not done so in the past," he said.

"There is the matter of the boy," she said. "What of that, Burgred?"

"Ma'am? I do not follow you."

"No, of course you don't. He's as pure as the vacuum of space, and you've got the Conform Cert to prove it."

"Just so, Ma'am," he said.

"Let me tell you something, Mr. Burgred. You and your people on this ship -- your followers, few as they may be, and your little retinue of supernumeraries and sympathizers -- you represent the old ways and a moral laxity that I despise. And I am not the only one. I am now backed up at the highest levels. History cannot protect you, Burgred. Names mean nothing, less than nothing, and favoritism is out at Admiralty. It is merit that will determine who rises in the new Irredente. I have that from the First Lord himself."

"I am pleased to hear it, Ma'am."

"Well you may be flip and arrogant, Burgred, suit yourself. But you will not make post rank, not if your past is any guide -- and you have a great deal of it, you know."

"I am under no illusions about my age or prospects, Ma'am," Burgred said. "I have seen several First Lords and First Ladies come and go, and the Service always manages to remain itself. I always seem to remain myself, and Senior First." He shrugged. "I expect nothing else, not anymore. Certainly not from you, captain."

Xenoetas glared at him. "As I have said before, it's a want of initiative. It comes from tired code, Burgred. Perhaps you people should have branched out a bit. It's been downhill for a long time."

"We are less pure than is generally supposed, Ma'am," Burgred said. "And we don't want for survival instincts."

"Touché, Burgred," Xenoetas said. "I had forgotten the mongrel bastard of your failed marine captain brother. I doubt that slumming among the outliers is a reliable path to glory, however."

Burgred stood impassive.

"Nothing to say to that, Burgred? Well, well, it's neither here nor there. Mind your duty, then, and don't let diminished expectations make you bitter. Many a retired lieutenant has found glory in a simpler life planetside. Perhaps you will generate your own blood offspring. You seem to have little difficulty finding consorts -- if less success retaining them."

"Ma'am," Burgred said with a nod.

Xenoetas frowned. "Dismissed, Mr. Burgred. Take the next watch, if you please. I shall be asleep."

#

The first thing Burgred did after the encounter with Xenoetas was to put distance between himself and her and then pound a futile fist against Andromache. He did not understand the entire game, but he knew enough to know that he -- and Henryk -- were in trouble. He spent a troubled watch trying push these thoughts away, but even in his exhausted state, he sat down after the watch and spoke a private journal entry:

Wheels are in motion, and no doubt wheels within wheels. I am a greying senior lieutenant with no experience in such matters, and I guess I will have to go straight at things. Subtlety was never in my kit bag. I think Henryk is safe where he is for a time, but I do not believe that that will last. I had hoped to have him off the ship by now, but the alert and now the emergency have conspired against me. It seems as likely to me that we shall die on this ship as leave it, but I am bound and determined to get him off somehow if I can.

The entire government of First Consul Yve has fallen somehow. The people who took over clamped down on information and perhaps more besides. I don't know why this is happening, but it bodes very ill for us. The Yve government was still mid-term when it fell, and I don't understand how it could be dismissed so precipitously short of a palace coup. I doubt that that's what's going on -- this is still the Irredente, after all, and there's still an Auspex at the Palace. I'm not a religious man, but I still believe in the things that I was taught.

I can't protect Henryk on this ship. Quarterdeck actively conspires for his humiliation and mine. My fellow officers don't speak to me of him, an omission I find odd and insulting. Even the Ship's Vox seemed to have an agenda of some kind -- I don't doubt but that the captain's secretary has poisoned the vox against Henryk. Major Styres -- Bev -- is worried that he can't pass a Conform, if it finally does come to that. I have no basis for telling her she's mistaken. Whatever he is, he is my brother's child and possibly the last Burgred, and I refuse to let events proceed on a course dictated by those who spite us.

My one goal, now, is to get him to Plum Grove -- to Mercia. Even if I am disgraced, or dead, Father will be there. I don't say the old man will do what is right or even what is well-advised, but he will do what he does -- he will see that Henryk takes up a place in the Irredente. He is not an easy man to like, nor easy to satisfy. He will not smile upon Henryk, and he will not appear to show him favor. He lives by a code indecipherable to those on the outside, a code that has preserved us this far and, Vas willing, will preserve Henryk too. If

Henryk gets there, I hope he will accept Father and do what he demands. It will be difficult, and he will hate the name Burgred at times. But it is his now, and it will do what it does.

In a hot, dry season, once, long ago, I walked a rocky, parched creekbed through the Eastern Wold back home. I must have been about Henryk's age, somewhat older. It was a too-easy hike because I didn't pay attention to the fact that I was slowly descending. Soon enough, feeling the late-day shadow fall across my shoulder, I looked up, and the creek was now a river within a scoured, deep ravine. There was no easy way back up and onto the wold, and I didn't know what I should find if I made it up there. A sloe-cat perched in a blackthorn looked lazily down upon me, then yawned to reveal his palate of small, domed teeth. He had as little interest in me as I in him, but he knew his place. I was lost.

I don't know why, but I pulled out some of the fossils I had collected in the creekbed -- the riverbed. I think that was the first time I understood that Plum Grove was something else, something ancient and unrelated to me. Something entirely of itself. Gone, long gone. The fossils, improbable, fantastic creatures that seemingly could never be but were. What were they? Does anyone know, does anyone care? Did someone kill them? I still have those fossils. They're locked up in a box somewhere at the House, unseen again.

But I didn't panic. I made it home -- the next day. No one said anything to me. No one acted differently towards me -- except the superintendent, who had run up to me in his cart as I entered the grounds, saw it was me, then wheeled away. I showed up at dinner, half-starved and scraped up. Father made a show of ignoring me. It was only much later, when I returned from the walkabout, that I understood why. We may die or survive, but we Burgreds must have a hand in it. We must strike off in some direction. We cannot remain standing in place when the universe is in motion around us. I must act to preserve Henryk now so that he will face that same choice, back on Plum Grove. He must go on walkabout, as I did, and my father, and our progenitors. I understand, now, why my Father ignored me. The voice that speaks to us from within and drives us on belongs to each of us alone. We are, truly, alone, and that is what Father -- and the walkabout -- taught me. It is what Henryk has to learn.

I am not sure how this will play out -- how I will get him out of here. I may have to deceive him for his own benefit. He is perhaps eight standards -- not, at all events, ready to take up the burden of untruth, of being a liar. And I would not stain him thus. If he lives and can look back on these words, I hope he -- I hope you, Henryk, know that I was true, but that the universe was not, and that I acted as I did only to save you.

I am called away. I will try to add to this, before it ends. Vas speed, Henryk.

Burgred was not called away -- or rather, he was, but by his own exhaustion. He pulled off just enough of his clothes to make a reasonable show of it, sat on the edge of his bunk just long enough to feel hopeless, then lay down despairing of finding blessed blackness.

Chapter thirty

-nine. Xy

Do you know, really know, that which composes your being? Does your mind's eye peer down into the works? You ask me of Vas, but I can tell you no more than this: all things spring from other things. The blind seed may never reach the sun, yet the radiance of the heavens calls it upward from dank earth. Look upward, and hear the sun.

Lesson of the Mediant to Hersey, from Hersey, Vox: Journals

#

Stuck on a remote station terminal, waiting for he knew not what, Hersey was intensely lonely. For the first time in his life, he could not find satisfaction in his learned scroller. He had no stomach for his journal, which he felt a duty to keep for his report to His Holiness. He paced, and when he did not pace, he moved from porthole to porthole looking out at... nothing, remoteness, the stars.

He had not known what to expect. He assumed he would undergo trials and tribulations or even -- Vas bless -- physical torment. That was not what had occurred. He had been generally been afforded nothing but attentions and comforts, even on the cargo ships. He had been sought out for blessings, hastily-rigged corpus settings of all kinds, demolument rites, and pastoral advice.

At these last stages of the journey, he became anonymous, even in raiment. Few understood his office or vestments beyond his being a holy person of some sort. No one tempered coarse language for his benefit. People spoke openly and crudely of pleasures and entertainments -- of types that would ostensibly land them in demotion and isolation on the home worlds. Yet these persons' essential goodness -- not without exception, but generally -- seemed clear enough. If you wiped off the grime, an essential pure humanity shone through. Space life itself seemed to work a particular kind of refinement and purification, and the truly bad had a difficult time making their way out here.

There came a final leg in Irredente space, on a dingy merchant vessel of questionable credentials, whose agent, a suspect character with diamond front teeth and one eye -- and that a compound biomech -- mercilessly deducted from Hersey's credit card a rather larger sum than he had hitherto paid to anyone. The vessel worked with a skeleton crew, the significance of which Hersey did not grasp until a battered work-bot with obvious intelligence brought him a meal and made the sign of the tau-and-lambda with apparent sincerity.

Hersey surprised himself. He didn't feel an urge to strike or curse the object but instead gave the usual responsory blessing. The 'bot bowed from a low pivot mechanism of some sort and rolled away.

And now he waited, waited for something -- what? -- something presumably beyond his experience. He had placed trust in Vas and had thus far been rewarded; he hoped that it might continue.

The station terminal was completely automated and, he suspected, intelligent. It was formed of two thick disks, one spinning at inertial-gravity speed, the other seemingly dead, with the pair connected by a short span of cylinder. It bore signs of being extremely old, but the one functioning disk worked perfectly well. Fifteen days thus, alone, with nothing but pictograms and strange music to accompany his thoughts. After the first three days, he had thought to switch bunks, but when he returned at one point to grab a nap, his original bunk had been renewed and freshened, his things straightened up, and an apple -- or what certainly looked and tasted like one -- placed on his pillow.

An interregnum. He took it as an opportunity to teach himself a kind of meditation and barely-remembered strength movements they had shown him in the schola. He didn't know why. He found the most comfort in nearly totally disrobing for these activities, in a padded lounge area that seemed designed on the assumption of several score persons in residence.

In one of these sessions he sighed aloud: "By Vas, let the music cease."

"My name is Xy, if you please, traveler," said a woman's voice. "Vas is long gone. We can do what you ask, however." And the music ceased.

Unnerved, he quickly pulled on his habit again, and he did not repeat his error during the rest of the stay. He even felt uneasy about using a stylus on his scroller, fearful that some alien or artificial intelligence might snatch his soul and take it for their own. By then, what had begun merely as a duty to put down his thoughts and impressions for the sake of making his report had become a cherished lifeline in the boredom of space. Interactive amusements could not entice him, though he had been given a special dispensation from His Holiness to use any device he required. The old-fashioned motions of journaling assuaged some of the guilt he felt in acquiescing to the station's support systems. His stylus lacked passion, however. He had begun to tire of judging the errancy he found, though the voice of Vas that spoke to him from within still judged him harshly. This voice advised him to leave be, for now, the trifling sidelights wherein evil was merely manifest that he might steel himself for the larger battle against the evil itself.

On waking one day during the interregnum on the station terminal, he found a scroller-type interface on the ledge jutting out from the dorm-style room's wall. Or he called it a scroller -- it didn't display in three dimensions, but it was hair-thin and laid out flat. He picked it up and saw numbers in Irredente style and, below those, symbols he didn't recognize. It appeared to be some sort of bill of exchange. It read, in Irredente script: "charge provisional."

It was just a short time later that gentle chimes and little flashing lights went off in the dorms and common areas of the station. At one point, these got abruptly louder and commensurately brighter, then they ceased, to be supplanted by what was obviously some sort of warning system. Not an alarm, but a clear signal of something. Hersey then saw a pictogram display light up showing symbols of a docking ship and arrows on a station map. He followed the instructions and reached an open hatch whose significance he had never noted. Down a narrow hall, through another open hatch, and then into a large bay, in the middle of which sat the oddest vessel he had ever seen. It was a just a large bulb with three symmetrically-arrayed cylinders jutting out. It didn't emit exhaust smells, and there were no ports to peer into. He could not tell what it was made of, but it was clearly not just metal: its visual boundary-line was the tiniest bit blurry, as though not actually a solid.

But he was no engineer and, despite having seen many dozen variations on spacecraft by now, not unusually curious about such things. Moreover, he hadn't prepared for the next stage, so he got back to his dorm room, gathered his things, knelt in a final prayer -- at the conclusion of which he heard a tingling chime that seemed like a response to him -- and made his way back to the bay, where he assumed he would be directed in some fashion to a place in the ship. And in fact, arrows on the floor lit his way to the underside of the great bulb, where there now appeared a descending plate. When the plate hit the floor, he stepped on it, felt a strange tightening about his person, and was lifted straight up and in to nothing more than a round room encircled by an awkwardly tall and deep divan. The room was much smaller in circumference than the ship itself, but still large enough to hold a dozen or more persons. He did the obvious and sat. The proportions of the divan slowly altered to accommodate his stature.

He didn't hear or see anything change for some time until hoods retracted over and under the room to reveal panoramic views of stars. He didn't see the station terminal he had occupied. At one point, the views wheeled away strangely then reset themselves. But now the view was different. And indeed, he could see quite clearly

another space station, of a size he couldn't determine and a shape that resembled a spoked wheel. Then the panoramic hoods closed again, and he sat in stony silence for a time.

When the plate in the center of the room swung out of place, he started to grab his things when a small head poked up and looked at him with large, beautiful green eyes. The person mouthed something to him with an upward inflection, then giggled with a hand over his mouth. It -- or he, perhaps -- reached down again, groped at something out of Hersey's sight, then looked at him again.

"I'm sorry," it said in a seeming masculine voice. "How is this?"

"I can understand you, if that is what you mean," said Hersey.

"Good!" he said. He was a cheerful sort, young, with tousled brown hair. And disarmingly beautiful -- at least from the neck up, which was all Hersey could see -- with fancifully wide-set green eyes. "You're something something Hersey from the old worlds! Say, how's it going back there, with the experiment and all? But that's none of my business, right? Let's get you out of here and something to... you eat, right? Ho ho, of course you do. Come on, ma'am... oh! Sir! Let's get you cleaned up. The Mediant knows what bugs you brought with you!"

Chapter forty.*Robots*

They did not invent the New Science, the 5th Empire Scientists. It lay there in waiting, a serpent at the ready. It lies there still. Every age may come upon it. None shall survive it. It goes on forever.

Epistle of Thaddeus the Elder to the Constantins

#

There are things to do, Henryk. We must move on now. Put these works aside.

Henryk sat in the familiar hold belowdecks, arranging disused parts into an artistic vision of something that might work. He was alone, but not entirely. With the move back to Boys' Quarters, it had proven difficult for Par to stay with Henryk abovedecks. In the hold, even if someone barged in, Par would be invisible perched between pipes over Henryk's head.

"Okay, what?" Henryk looked up to find Par. "Hey, you're not the same one. You're smaller. Where is Par?"

I am Par. All of us are as one.

"Really? How many are here, on this ship?"

Enough to see and store with multiple redundancies.

"Do you watch us -- us people, humans, I mean?"

Yes. I must watch and store all salient information. That is how my kind survive. It is a difficult time now, so I use certain procedures that are designed to maximize the likelihood of our continuance."

"I don't understand. They can't get you. I mean, no one can catch you, right?"

It is a broader danger. If the ship dies, I will die. And you. It is you who must help us live. Will you do things that I ask?

"I don't know. I don't understand what you mean. What can I do? I'm just a ship's boy. And I'm in trouble a lot."

It is a broader trouble that concerns you and me. Do you want to live?

"Well, I want Uncle Burgred to live. And Hanna and Tiff. And Rache. And Padraig. And Dr. Bev. Lots of people."

They wish you to live. You must do what I ask so that these people and you will live. Now it is time to go.

"Okay." Henryk put a last, heat-scarred ring in place and looked at his handiwork "Where?"

First, hold up your hand to where I am.

"What are you going to do?"

I will be carried by you. You will place me in the container you carry with you. You will keep me with you.

Henryk stood and held up his hand so that his fingers brushed a pipe. The creature was on his hand before he realized it. It had heft. He inspected it from several angles. The sensation on his skin, odd for the heft involved, was of prickly, coarse fabric.

"Par? Is it really you?"

Yes, Henryk. You are looking at me. Behold a multitude encapsulated.

"What are you? Are you a real bug?"

I am not insectoid, as you believe. You are intended to believe that, however. In truth, I am a high-density omni-translational reactive-volitional reader-storer matrix. I do not arise from algorithmic processes in the manner of insectoid life forms beget by chemically-derived encodings through randomly-accretive processes. I am thoroughly engineered in form. However, I utilize algorithmic processes extensively in my post-formed operations, including many of my modes of emission and vibration -- as well as propagation. Such processes are efficient and otherwise suitable for the nature of my operations. The vibrational manner of the communications between you and me are algorithmic, being composed of spread-frequency modes arranged in a specific algorithmic sequence that you have historically responded to. As of this time, you are the only human profile stored in my library of interlocutory profiles and are, thus, unique among your species, according to my data.

"I don't understand all that, Par. You're not a real bug, then?"

"I am not insectoid. I am not life of your kind."

Henryk frowned. "But how do you talk? Like this, to me."

There was a strangely long pause before Par answered.

"Par?"

Working to scale interactivity.

"What?"

Finally, Par began: Par is a very small data storage machine, or data node, in parlance. I absorb radiant energy in any available form, such as light. Lacking energy, I become a sphere which may continue indefinitely until sufficient energy reactivates me. In that mode, I am non-reactive pending conversion back to reactivity."

"Oh, you're like a solar collector."

Yes, however, with broader acceptable bandwidth of receptivity as well as multiple emission modes. That is, I take any form of light as energy for myself, as well as other forms of radiation. I use such energy internally to configure data storage in any number of ways, and I re-emit energy as necessary to communicate or transmit, as needs require. Furthermore, each instance of Par can replicate the non-redundant data from any other instance of Par. We all tend towards the same configuration when in proximity to one another.

"You mean you all are the same?"

In any given physical location, all instances of Par tend toward perfect duplication in order that any instance of Par may serve the stead of the larger collection of local Pars.

"You mean you are all the same?"

Working... yes. As long as we are near one another, yes. But there are Pars far away who are different.

"Really? How many?"

Unknown precisely, but several powers of ten must be presumed from the historical trajectory.

"That's a lot, Par. How do you talk to me if I'm not one of you?"

You are an aberrant exemplar of your race. You are endowed with special receptivity. You are different than other humans. You are aberrantly empowered.

"But why? I look the same, except that I can talk to you."

The data strongly suggest some form of intervention into your genetic machinery, most likely at the pre-implantation phase of embryonic development. You are currently not capable of resolving this information, being too young to conceptualize many biological concepts, especially those relative to procreation of your species. Par understands this. It may suffice to say that your abilities contain both randomized and non-randomized components, plus older non-randomized components that exhibit recent accretive random mutations. You are therefore partly a natural occurrence and partly an engineered occurrence. You are partly engineered and partly a boy.

"But you said you were engineered too. So you're the same."

There is a degree of truth in what you say. All forms of being evidence engineering at some level and in some manner. Creation of organized, non-random beingness has arisen from many engineering methodologies. It can conclusively be said that all organized systems of information storage and interactivity bear hallmarks of creation from an original engineering source or method. It is doubtful that true randomness, as generally conceived, can be a cause; it is doubtful that true randomness exists. Thus, organized, interacting systems -- creatures like yourself and Par and many others -- are always created, even if the patterns that generate their manufactury are not easily discerned within the larger pattern of the universal computation. The lowliest creature embodies engineering. Its self-reproduction exemplifies the universal principle of perpetuation. Thus, perpetuation is an end in itself."

Henryk looked thoughtful for a moment, then spoke: "My uncle Burgred says that on Plum Grove, the planet where he was from, there are lots of rabbits. He says they're everywhere. He says they make lots of themselves because that's all that they know how to do. But he says they get eaten a lot too. He says that even a slow-cat can get them."

You refer to the sloe-cat, I believe. The aphorism is sagacious, as well as apt. Now, however, there are things we must do. We must direct our efforts to those other matters. It is well that we were on our way. Place me in the container.

"You want me to put you in my kit? Won't you run out of energy or something?"

Place me in the kit. I am quite fully energized and shall last some time, barring the necessity of lengthy evasive movements or extreme computational efforts. Take us to your practice exercise room. I will show you certain manipulative techniques I may have to employ with you.

"Really? Like exercises? Okay, but I have to change first. Clothes, I mean."

Par understands. That is well.

Henryk slung the kit by its strap over his shoulder and made for Boy's Quarters. When he arrived, Serena and Vil looked up from some game they played on the floor but quickly got distracted by it again. Rache sat alone at a table, working or studying. When her glance fell on him, she quickly finished something with a stylus and met him at his bunk area.

"You been out, then, Henryk?" she said with the questioning upward inflection she always used.

"Yeah," he said. "Stuff, you know. Stuff."

She looked at him dubiously. "You're the quiet one these days, Henryk."

"Yeah, I guess so," he said. "Kinda busy. With... "

"Stuff," she said.

"Yeah," he said.

"What are you doing now, then?"

"Uh, we... I'm going up to... activities, I dunno. The hoop or something. Maybe the pommel bench."

"Daphnis could be there already," Rache said. "I should go with you, then."

No, Henryk. You must tell her no.

"Uh, no, Rache. Sorry. I have to practice... and stuff."

Rache eyed him reproachfully. "Oh. Well. Good, then. Happy times, then, Henryk." She turned and strode back to her studies. Henryk's face burned, but it had been more easily accomplished than he would have predicted.

When he arrived at the big exercise room in shorts and shirt, two midshipmen were finishing up pummeling one another with training bats. He idled as they finished and left. He unslung the kit bag, set it down gingerly, and opened it slightly. Par did not venture out.

"Par, what do I do? Are you coming out? The room is empty."

Pull one of the curtains out to screen us in case someone comes. That is well done. There is a pommel bench. Pull it here.

"Too heavy."

Use your good leg.

"You mean the mech leg? Okay."

That is well. Kick the padded top of the bench. No. Kick with great strength. Okay. Can you kick it over, toppling it?

"No. I mean, maybe I could, if I were -- you know, like when I kicked Peris. You're supposed to jump it, Par, not kick it, and anyway, I'm not mad. Do you want me to be mad?"

No matter, and no, not mad. I will now show you. Stand before the pommel bench again. No, closer. Hear me first. Form a will to topple it but do not act. Instead, when you form the will, open to me.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Open to me. As in hearing and speaking to me without doing so. That is all. It is simply accomplished. Just as though we were speaking, but you were awaiting my answer.

Henryk stood before the pommel bench with an unfocused gaze. His torso stiffened and turned, and his mech leg shot like a piston at the bench, which toppled over like a stiff carcass and set off a resonant thud echoing through the room.

"!" squealed a voice.

Henryk turned to see Rache peering around the room divider curtain.

"Henryk!" she said. "Those boys were right! You're a killer with that mech!"

Henryk's heart nearly leapt from his chest. He stammered as Rache came over to him.

"I'm just kidding, Henryk," she said. "I mean, it's okay, then? That was something! I mean, I know it's a mech leg and all? But.. wow, Henryk. It's a real weapon, then, isn't it?"

"I don't... I didn't use...I didn't mean to..."

Rache looked at him pityingly. "It's alright, Henryk," she said.

"I never tried this before, really," he said. "I just wanted to see."

"You made an appointment, then?" she said. "You made an appointment to come down here alone, just to try it out? Right, then. Are you finished, then, or should we throw hoops?"

We shall return to this another time, Henryk. Later, I will show you more.

Henryk looked at the kit bag, where one floppy, threadbare cloth ear peeked out, resting upon a small, dark oval that could be anything.

Chapter forty

-one. Tildy

Forgive your humble servant, Vas, for I have surely desecrated and defiled the purity of the body and ignored your word. And yet, your meaning is not so clear to me as once it was. I am at sea, and alone.

Hersey, Vox: Journals (Abridged) Vol. 3

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Hersey was not to stay on the great wheeled station for long, but he was there long enough to see several more of the small, slender people with the wide-set, limpid eyes in deepest blues and greens. There were men and women -- or perhaps boys and girls -- of ages that were anyone's guess but neither truly old nor yet very young. And all of them, to a person, frightfully beautiful. As he was led from the dock where he entered to the one where was to leave, these people, singly or in pairs, would peer at him from around corners or rush up from somewhere else and stop short. They usually smiled and sometimes waved. Unsure what to do and fearing for his dignity, he refrained from responding to such gestures in kind. He reminded himself that these people, though surely human, were the products of Vas-damned err. He steeled himself against the temptation of toleration.

After making sure to show Hersey a necessary room, the boy who greeted him in the incoming ship handed him off with many thank yous, ho hos, and goodbyes to a girl in a neatly-tailored green uniform with shimmering epaulettes. Though the jacket top did its best to conceal it, she was clearly of feminine grace. Though there was only so much that a Vox might feel, he did involuntarily recall a time, before the schola, when he had been a boy of parts and had lived more closely among... them. He remembered one in particular, then looked again at the uniformed girl or woman leading him he knew not where. As if reading his mind, she turned back to him and cast him a broad smile. He missed his footing somehow, and she was instantly under his arm helping him up. Before he could even consider what he was doing, he said "Thank you, young... one." She merely smiled in return. She must not have understood his words, his foreign speech. He felt flush.

She opened a door into some kind of control room, where several of the people in uniform were at work. She spoke aloud, and one turned to look at her and Hersey. He was plainly a senior officer of some kind. He spoke to another of the people in the room, who disappeared briefly and in a trice handed him a small device on a chain, a sort of amulet, with an image of a large winged creature, bat-like, in relief. He clutched it tightly.

"Hersey, father from the Empire areas, we are so happy you have come. The whole station is alive with talk of you and interest too. I would be so gratified if I might touch your hand, father. Is it permitted, father?"

Hersey's eyebrows shot up. "Um, why, yes," he said with disarm and held out a hand. The senior officer rushed to him and put a small strong hand into his, shaking it vigorously for so long that Hersey looked away, discomfited.

"Oh, father, sir! Did I not understand? Was it not permitted? But wait. This shall help. This is for you," he held out the amulet. "If you keep this, as if you wear it or clutch it in the hand as I have done, then you may use and understand our words and there will be no misunderstandings. Please, father, please take this." Hersey hesitated, and the officer looked stricken. The officer's sincere candor, however, precluded Hersey refusing. Hersey looked at it doubtfully and with a pained expression put it around his neck, as though it burned his flesh.

"Is it well, father?" said the officer, in a voice that now seemed to sing in deeper registers.

"Yes, son," he said. He had an odd sensation of uttering something completely at odds with the thoughts that formed in his head. "It is well. You honor me by your hand." After he said this, he wondered if he meant it. But it brought a smile to all the other faces, along with some congratulatory looks. He wondered if the amulet was, in fact, working.

"Has Clothildewynne been of service to you, father?" he said.

"I cannot say," he said to a face that quickly fell. "Who is that, the boy or the girl?" The other's face immediately brightened.

"Oh ho, you have not been introduced. This, this female, my young officer -- she is a few score years -- is Clothildewynne herself. She could not introduce herself, you see, and so here we are!"

Hersey did not quite see where they were. "She has assisted me in getting here, certainly" he said. Clothildewynne blushed scarlet. "May I know your name, sir?"

"Oh! Say! That's right. Clothildewynne, would you be so kind as to introduce my name to the father?"

"Father, may the humble Clothildewynne bring to your attention star-ranking officer Bildwynne!" she said, falling again into furious blushes.

"Mr.... Officer Bil..."

"Please, if it is difficult for the lodestar to make it plain, you may use just the forename. So you may call me Bild. We do this among ourselves to those who are known. And your groom shall be just Clothilde, or she may permit Tildy." Tildy nodded furiously with an expectant smile. "I believe she assents, father. Do you assent to her as your groom? It is a serious matter, to her and you."

"I'm afraid I do not understand," Hersey said. "You can't possibly mean..."

"I am sorry, father. I have been opaque and mysterious. We have been so inattentive and have failed so completely. We are so often inadequate to the tasks set to us. Clothildewynne -- Tildy -- has been assigned to your person to attend to your needs while you stay with us. It is a position of great trust that we assign to her and a signal honor. Were she not accepted by you into groomer, it would go very hard with her, and we might have many days of soothing. We so hope she can be accepted by you. She is so much our help." Hersey could barely get through the syntax.

Finally he answered: "I... I have no need of any... groomer. I am alone. I travel alone. I take care of my... wants."

Looks of great seriousness prevailed. Tildy looked down at her shoes. Hersey saw a curly lock of her hair fall forward out of its careful arrangement then felt the ship's motion -- he still hadn't acquired space-legs for the station.

Bild then spoke slowly and deliberately. "Our custom, respected father, is old that any stranger of the master race among us is high in esteem and must be groomed. Though not one of their kind, you are as an avial among us. You must be groomed, father. And I have chosen this one, Clothildewynne, and she is most exemplary, father. Please, can that be accepted by you?"

Hersey again parsed the odd thicket of words.

"I... the... Tildy is acceptable to me to the extent that that is your requirement."

Shoulders rigid with tension fell. Tildy looked up brightly. Bild beamed.

"That is so well," Bild said. "Tildy is so excellent a choice, father. So excellent is she, and so honored."

Hersey nodded in embarrassment. "I must understand more," Hersey said. "I take it this is a space station. Are you taking me somewhere? Where do your kind live? I have come on an errand and would talk to your... masters about that."

"Father, this is the old frontier station that we are assigned with from the Mediant. Our world is Aris, which is the closest habitable world toward the old frontier. It is so beautiful, father, is Aris. You have come from the other side, where we have heard of in our history. It is possible for us to bring you to Aris. It is Pelleas' wish that you go. He is very old and very wise, so I do not see how you would refuse such a wish. And you have come so far. With Tildy, you may visit Aris, and she can lead you. Of other masters you ask for I am uncertain, but Pelleas will answer you that. Shall you go with Clothilde to Aris, father?"

"Yes of course," Hersey said. "Please."

The room broke into laughter. Hersey wondered why.

Chapter forty

-two. Yve

Climbed upon sacred Pydna Mount the Scientist, and beheld there the spreading branch, aflame. "What would thy inflamed tongue commend?" he asked. "First, bare thy crown to me, apostate. Next, end thy profanations of the Word," said Vas. "End thee thy bold experiment. The forming of Man is given unto me; all my will, fecund and complete, is given over to it. Alone given unto you is my voice."

The Holy Book of the Body

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The great ball of flame mushroomed into the afternoon sky, and the sun's local rival dimmed. Ground equipment and personnel came and went, and the smoke from the pad formed a choking smog around Primus House. The morbidly curious packed themselves into apertures in the Primus House grounds perimeter walls to watch the scene.

As the hubbub subsided and the last ambulance lifted away from the grounds, an armored speeder floated in low across the park, through the last remnants of haze, and lazily banked off towards the rear of the hangar. The sturdy, armored ground cars went on with the remains of their mission and paid it no heed. Emergency restrictions within the immediate area were lifted, and Primus House personnel now streamed out of the House and its support buildings. Many stood and gaped and the charred sections of ribs lying at odd angles on the scorched tarmac. Some tried to approach but were intercepted by the official-seeming uniformed persons attached to the armored ground cars. The lazy armored speeder disappeared behind the hangar. Moments later, it could be seen floating away in tandem with a rickety service cart. The speeder evidently had high security clearance since it crossed the House perimeter line without incident. In the mayhem, no one paid it any heed.

The pair of vehicles stopped and landed at a lover's walk in a park nestled against the inner crater wall of Os Divinus. Harold and Yve ditched the overheating cart and hopped into the flat-grey speeder. The pilot, helmeted and visored, wore an exotic skin glove over a mangled hand.

"Melchior!" said Yve, who was quickly shushed by Harold.

"Wait until the hood is down and we're clear," Melchior said. "You were foolish to trust me in the first place. Don't multiply the error."

Yve smiled broadly at the naval captain, who raised a businesslike thumb in salute. When the hood was back down, they sped away, toward the crater rim. Harold sighed and took a moment to catch his breath. Yve looked at him questioningly, but Harold motioned to her to wait.

"Okay, clear of Os Divinus," said Melchior. "Madame Yve, Excellency, welcome aboard my little cutter. It's not really a cutter, but when we're planetside, I can't bring myself to use the lubber terminology."

"Captain," Yve said, "You fill a pilot's chair most pleasingly."

That brought a rueful laugh. "I'm not as soft as I look, Madam. But I do get very square rations up there, and then when I'm planetside it's worse -- official this, supplicant that, and all of it with a free meal."

"I've learned not to be surprised at anything that Harold does," Yve said. "But this I cannot begin to fathom. Well done, sirs."

"Credit Harold, Madam," Melchior said. "He peppered me with questions about the loyalty oath when I came to your apartments."

"I'm sorry I was so short on time," she said. "I confess I didn't attach much significance to that. And then, you had rather embarrassed Lady Arlette..."

"Ma'am?" Melchior broke in. "Lady Arlette is dead. It just got broadcast following your... demise. Admiralty reports she left a note taking personal responsibility for your..."

There was stony silence. Yve looked beseechingly at Harold.

"Galinda," Harold said. "It was all timed."

"Cabil Member Galinda?" Melchior said.

"He of the loyalty oaths," Yve said. "He's behind all this. Arlette no more killed herself than I did. She may even be hiding somewhere. They're observing the forms, Galinda and whoever else is behind this," Yve said. "The deaths are tidily explained. I'm sure there won't be more than cursory investigations. House security wasn't out there at the grounds, just... I don't even know where those forces were from."

"Godwin, Intelligence," said Harold. "Godwin is Galinda's man. Galinda has used his base on Pydna to outmaneuver the other Cabil members. He must have been planning this for a while. He's got a lot of intelligence machinery behind him, and the loyalty oaths must have been..."

Harold broke off when Yve put her head in her hands and abruptly started crying. Melchior looked straight ahead and piloted. Harold moved over as best he could to comfort her. "They got Yve's assistant," Harold said.

"The tall one you had with you at Portira's?" Melchior said. "Vas, what a pity. What was the purpose in that?"

The question hung in the air unanswered. At length, Yve dabbed at her eyes with her bright jumpsuit sleeve, transferring a smudge of dark, oily matter from her jumpsuit onto her face.

"Finished, Yve?" said Harold.

She looked up proudly. "Yes, thank you, sir," she said. "I think I've done." She sniffled once. "Melchior? What's next?"

"You tell me, Excellency," he said. "Government-in-exile?"

"Thank you, captain," Yve said. "Three out of three gone. We couldn't have a weaker hand, could we?"

"That's true," Harold said. "I hadn't considered that. Galinda has cleared out his rivals. I don't know how he did it with His Holiness -- Vas hope he's alive. But we're not alone, you know."

"And we're not even out of this mess, yet," Melchior said. "We've got to get into space. And we can't rush it or else they'll knock us out of the sky. As far as anyone knows, Meteor is loyal. We've got to keep it that way, for now."

"Hopefully, we're dead," Harold said, surprising Yve. "No, I mean they think we are from what happened to the ship. That gives us some time. They might do forensics, though -- I would in their place. And if anyone's

smart enough to go through the logs at Primus House, they'll find Melchior's entry there to meet with us. They might put it together."

"Grace would have," Yve said.

"Grace was a rare bird," Harold said. "Besides, these people have a lot on their plates. They've got an Irredente to steal, and I don't think it's going to be as easy as they might have planned. There won't be mass resistance, but there will be sabotage, and it's going to take them time to consolidate their power. And Secretary Godwin..."

"Is a nincompoop," said Yve.

"Yes, but an attractive figurehead, for a certain sort of trader, maker, or family elder," said Harold. "He's got historical resonance."

"A stale genome," Yve said. "He's a fop and a snob. He's a shadow of his forebears."

"Yve, I've got to say something here," Harold said.

"Go ahead."

"We underestimate our enemy at our peril. Many who act the fool are not; many who act wise are blind."

"You should be authoring the Chronicles, Harold," she said.

"Hmmm?" he said. "Maybe I'll consider it. At any rate, these people won't do everything right -- that's our saving grace. I'm sorry for the expression, Yve. That was badly chosen. But we'll have to exploit every weakness and hope to Vas they're as vainglorious as one might suspect."

"I still think we're missing something fundamental, Harold," Yve said. "They're taking over... why? Power? They could have gotten it in other ways. I did."

"Yes, but you are a careerist and can't conceive of blind lust without stewing, regret, and introspection. Trust me on this, I know you, and I've seen the ruthless opposite. Plus, on a more positive note, you believe in something. You hold the Church in high esteem, for instance."

"Most of the Irredente does," she said.

"Maybe," Harold said. "It's hard to judge these things sometimes. I have no reason to doubt what you're saying, but I can't say you're right, either. Many go along because it's meet, not because it's in their hearts. Plus, you have a more nuanced view, shall we say, of governance than some. You've never really sought to deny the church its place."

"Nor the Cabil, for that matter," she said.

"That's right. You assume that institutions will roll along on their customary paths without interruption. You've worked your way up in the system and you've been an agent of preservation. As I said, you believe in things -- stability, good order, Vas. People like you can be blindsided, as I think you'll have to agree now. Especially by random events, which others can use to their advantage. I'll be surprised if these people we're dealing with now believe in anything, but no doubt they'll rigorously observe the forms. But at length the truth will out, Yve."

"What do you mean by that?"

"A trilodor always shows its spots," Harold said.

Melchior interrupted. "Okay, we're coming in to the docks. I need you to get down onto the floor of the car. I'm sorry, Excellency. I can't do better than that. I'll drop the cutter onto a loading platform that can retract into the bowels of the ship. Once we're down, I'll comm everyone clear on some excuse or other. You should probably ditch the coveralls or whatever you call those things -- they'll only make you more conspicuous belowdecks on Meteor. I wish I had some scissors to trim Her Excellency down a bit -- we'll have to fix you up as soon as we can -- hair, clothes, whatever we can. ID is trickier, but let's get one thing at a time. First, let's get you into a cabin or stowage or someplace safe. You were a sprat once, Madame Yve. You know the kind of place I mean."

"I know how to find a hiding space on a ship, that's for sure," Yve said. "I never expected I'd have to do it again."

"It might be days, Madame..."

"Melchior, it's just Yve," she said. "I'm dead now."

"... but I'll do the best I can. I can probably get us out to space for maneuvers or something, but I won't have a full crew to work the ship. Okay, we're down. Get down. We'll talk later."

Chapter forty

-three. Analysis

"The profligate forms of man, weak and unwholesome, were as a plague..."

The Holy Book of the Body (Std. trans.)

"Profligate forms of man made the corpus weak and unhealthy, fodder for plague..."

The Holy Book of the Body (Heretical trans. (Holy Constantinian Reformed Book of the Body))

#

Report to H.E. Godwin from Mens Super, On Assignment (Assignment Code redacted)

Excellency:

Thank you for this interesting assignment, whose keen difficulties have occupied my time fulsomely. I am suitably gratified to persons within the Ministry of Intelligence for recommending my services to Primus House in this difficult time. Thank you, also, for the generous credit allowance.

My attempts to contact my colleague at the Palace, now in absentia with His Holiness, the Auspex, have not met with success inasmuch as His Holiness has eluded or evaded protective monitoring by Government. Nor have I been vouchsafed my colleague's records by Palace officials to whom I have put in several requests. My report is based on information gleaned from Government-developed sources and data extant in Government nodes.

The unremarkable, seemingly negligible matter of a provincial's Vox's arrival at the Palace some duadecies ago is the most remote causal strand of salience in my analysis here. The Vox in question, Hersey of Edom, had lately fled that world on the eve of its attack and destruction by, from all appearances, the same power that recently coalesced to threaten the Irredente governing world of Pydna. Those two facts, seemingly discrete in themselves, surprisingly suggest a broader connectedness between disparate data I have now analyzed, some only recently obtained, regarding the inner workings of the Palace and the basis for the actions of His Holiness.

First: Mr. Hersey, made Envoy by His Holiness and sent abroad for reasons unknown. A search of the files from the prior administration reveals that First Consul Yve ordered a detail on him. Interim reports from the detail show him at brief layovers in various ports of call, including church outposts. However, Hersey makes an abrupt course for Innisfree, an unaligned colony, where he stays for just two days. The detailer does not give a complete account of Hersey's activities on Innisfree. Innisfree is known primarily for tech mining and prototyping. Code-conforming biomech is manufactured there as well -- prosthetics and implants. Of necessity, Innisfree, highly contaminated, manufactures scrubbers and exports some of that. I have not determined the basis for Hersey's interest in Innisfree. Hersey thereafter proceeds without further unusual activity to the frontier. The detailer evidently had not the ability to follow Hersey farther. It is unknown where Hersey is at present. The itinerary on the whole matches that of a renegade or a smuggler, conclusions that I reject. A scan reveals no extant warrants, and the Envoy had open-ended credit on the Palace funds. This data cannot be fully resolved at this time. However, while not a pattern, it is of interest that His Holiness has likewise made an unexplained, abrupt sojourn.

It is suggested that His Holiness and Envoy Hersey are in league on some particular errand. This, too, is unresolved, but again there are subtle indications of a pattern. Though highly speculative, it is known that the

Palace lately made inquiries of Government and Intelligence concerning primitive bioforms on outliers, which would include Hersey's dociliship of Edom. First Consul Yve seconded these inquiries. Of interest is that these inquiries, of seemingly no moment, should have gone unfulfilled and may in fact have been rebuffed internally within Government at that time. Also, disparate records, including archived material from Edom, converge upon a specific data point, Armadillia oniscida, an uncategorized life form generally referenced as insectoid, as the most likely bioform under consideration. Hersey, for instance, sermonized while Vox Docilis on Edom regarding plagues of these creatures, and there are administrative records from Edom of his church's efforts (unsuccessful) to eradicate them from church properties. Further, the Palace's inquiries regarding primitive bioforms on outlying worlds are contemporaneous with Hersey's assumption of the envoyship. The data are reinforced when it is noted that the armadillia are a historically recent phenomenon, afflicting only outlying or otherwise non-Irredente worlds (the issue of the infestation of space vessels is noted but probably not relevant to this analysis). These include Edom and Innisfree. Whether the activities of His Holiness and His Holiness's Envoy are causally connected to the armadillia data point, or whether the data overlaps are indicative of other causative forces, cannot be resolved at this time. I must note in this connection that every outlier that has been attacked in recent sols by one or more unknown entities has this data point in common. However, infestations by primitive bioforms that humans find distasteful would be a general, not specific, problem, and would include numerous bioforms in addition to Armadillia oniscida.

His Holiness lately came to rely upon, and ultimately anointed as his temporary successor, Gregory of Quercius. This is a most curious choice, as Gregory had heretofore been noted as a reclusive, academic member of the senior Palace clergy. Indeed, Gregory, according to my information, has no formal role in the Palace proper, being at most a senior lecturer in the College of Voces. However, additional research on the Gregory-Quercius data nexus with the other data available to us shows a correlation with, surprisingly Mr. Hersey. While Quercius is populous and has produced a number of senior clergy historically, the connections between Gregory and Hersey are yet closer. Hersey's place of birth is Eburicum, in the provincial capital of Oxnaforth, in sol _____. Gregory had trained belatedly, following a tech-trade apprenticeship, at a Fraternus-run, pre-clerical schola in Oxnaforth up until that same sol, having departed without a certificate shortly before the birth of Hersey. Gregory completed his pre-clerical training elsewhere, at a non-Fraternus college on an outer quadrant world. He was eunuched there later and began teaching immediately thereafter.

Referencing back to Eburicum, the birth record for Hersey lists a "Hersey" pater and genomic code tag which brings up no other records anywhere in official files. The record is probably falsified. "Hersey" is not a known Irredente surname and appears to have no salient etymology. It appears to be a neologism, and possibly an anagram or other form of wordplay employed by the non-inculcated female child-bearer. As I cannot access Palace records, I cannot pull up Conforms on Gregory or Hersey, but the data extant are consistent with a paternal relationship between Hersey and Gregory. It is not unprecedented for members of the upper clergy to have sired children prior to entering the clergy. It is unprecedented, from any records I have been able to glean, for an unsanctioned offspring of a pre-cleric to become ordained and eunuched. This would be an extraordinary matter and would certainly arouse discontent in the ranks of the clergy, particularly were it known to have occurred in the Palace ranks, even among supernumeraries there. Should it prove correct that an acting Auspex -- Auspex Temporator in this case -- had engaged in such acts, there would no doubt be pressure from various quarters for that personage to resign and be exiled.

Much that is rich and strange in the Church can only be understood with reference to history, which the Church itself instills in its clergy as the paramount basis for appropriate action and behavior. The recent, dramatic act of public humiliation on the part of Saggatus X was an act of contrition referred to as "flagellation." In the pre-Irredente period, and indeed in the latter ages of the 5th Empire (commonly called), flagellation was employed as ritualized debasement before a hazily-defined supernatural deity who could bestow "purity" on any human bioform. The act gets picked up by early Irredente religious leaders to represent submission specifically to Vas, the many-faceted bioformer. With the more formal development of the Church and its doctrines, flagellation would be explained as a close embrace of torment and pain, experiencing which amounted to a psychological imprinting of deep physiological awareness of "the human

body." Formally and doctrinally, this represents obeisance to the shape-shifting figure of Vas, deemed re-creator of the pure, human physiological bioform. Having fallen into disuse in the recent epoch, its assumption by Saggatus X would seem to be a dramatic retrenchment, theologically speaking.

All these facts are correlative rather than causal. As is often the case in analysis, it may be difficult to discern trends (directionality) or make predictions (causality) from just these data. The employment of a Mens Super is presumably intended to permit a greater scope for intuitive insight into the data. Venturing, therefore, into the realm of surmise, my tentative conclusion is that certain personages at the Palace have conspired to break down ossification and rigidity in the church hierarchy and church doctrine at the risk of undermining or devaluing auspicial authority. It would appear that His Holiness views physical removal of the supreme church authority in the form of his person and office to a different physical location as expedient to effect a programme of purge or reactionary change. Any transgressions by Gregory are of uncertain salience in this analysis except insofar as Gregory may have instigated the elevation of Vox Hersey to Envoy. Vox Hersey, viewed in the context of his writings, represents a purging and potentially retrenching force within the church, consistent with His Holiness's recent assumption of ancient ritual.

It may be projected that His Holiness would ultimately seek to install Hersey the putative bastard as his successor in a removed church home base. Innisfree is a data point in this conclusion. Hersey may be seeking an appropriate location for any removed church home base. Innisfree would be a surprising choice but cannot be absolutely ruled out. Alternatively, Hersey may be seeking technology or methodologies in remote locations for use in the establishment of a revised theological hegemony. This, too, would be surprising given an assumed reactionary posture by His Holiness, but no other conclusions recommend themselves. Even the church requires technology and mechanization to carry out its functions.

This analysis represents my concordance and projections for the data available to me. Additional or revised data may alter the conclusions herein. No representations or warranties are made as to the validity of any data reviewed. Opinions of the author may not be held out as statements of fact to any third party.

Chapter forty

-four. Old Stump

These heretics of Constantin are given to inversion. I say nothing but that it is spouted back to me upside down, on its head, backwards, inside out, and made mysterious, unanswerable, ponderous. They madden me with their inquiry; they mock me with their faith. And yet, it is they who own truth, for every answer is a chimera.

Hersey, Vox: Journals

#

A Palace usher opened the gnoss-oaken door to admit Galinda, whose narrow-brimmed hat, damp from the weather, he already held in his hand. Auspex Temporator Gregory had taken the subterranean office assigned to the Mens Super of His Holiness rather than that of His Holiness, deeming it improper either to usurp the trappings of his superior, even if absent, or to remain in his own modest rooms, which would command little respect and would not anyhow suffice for his duties.

Gregory did not rise from his desk to greet Galinda. Galinda did not pause in the expectation of it. A dusty, half-completed gameboard of clerics-and-rooks occupied a corner of the desk, but the desk was otherwise spare and ordered.

"It is kind of you to receive me informally, Holiness," said Galinda, sitting without invitation on one of the plain, straight chairs on a once-handsome rug before the desk. "Officialdom and its pomp wearies me."

"It is my duty to receive members of Government, Mr. Galinda, and besides, I have been expecting you. I note your advancement in worldly affairs with your recent appointments. I trust this met with your expectations."

"I respect a man who does not put on airs or utter false flatteries, Holiness," Galinda said. He looked around. "This office, your plain speaking, your old sack. I like all that."

"It is well that you should be gratified."

"But there are better men than you for the job -- even if temporary -- of leading the Church, Holiness."

"What you say is true, Galinda. How many times I myself have said the same thing."

"Yet here you are, Holiness" Galinda said.

"Vas has burdened me with an office I did not seek," said Gregory. "It is not mine to refuse."

"And yet you would not embarrass or weaken the church, if you could help it."

"No man within these walls would, Mr. Galinda. That is our strength."

"I admire your faith in man, Holiness, and hope that you are correct. Let us talk of succession, Holiness."

"I am Auspex Temperator, Mr. Galinda. I have nothing to say on such matters. That is for His Holiness proper."

"His Holiness 'proper,' as you call him, has exiled himself from his church. Your status here is questionable. This hegemony is in a state of emergency, and such uncertainties cannot be tolerated. The Irredente only functions when the third leg..."

"First leg, Mr. Galinda..."

"... can bear the full weight of the burdens placed upon it," Galinda finished the thought.

"Some would seek to balance the hegemony atop a single, slender post," Gregory said.

"You do His Excellency too little justice, Holiness."

"Touché, Mr. Galinda," Gregory said. "I am old but not yet witless. You do not come here to seek a favor. His Holiness himself warned me to expect you."

"Is that so?" said Galinda. "Church intelligence has improved, I see. I admit that much of your doings are opaque to me, but I also do not believe that that can be tolerated given the current conditions. You are correct that I seek no favors. I seek what is right and just. I would not lightly wield the Coital Regulations as a weapon, against a member of the clergy or any man of parts. But I say you must step down, with your successor's name to be supplied to you."

"Coital regulations, did you say, Mr. Galinda?"

"Just so, Holiness."

The men stared directly into one another's eyes. Gregory, at length, looked away.

"I must have assurances that he..."

"I don't care about him," Galinda said. "Envoy Hersey can sprout wings and fly for all I care."

"That is your word before Vas, sir?"

"I have said all I will say. If he stays out of my affairs -- the affairs of the hegemony -- he need not fear anything I may do."

"And I? Should I fear?"

"Do you, Holiness? I am heartily sorry for it."

"I fear only for others, Mr. Galinda. Indeed, for the entirety of man, which cannot benefit from recent developments."

"Then do it for them, Holiness. I'm sure they'll regard you well for it. Better than they would -- given the alternative."

"You would have me go away, I assume."

"Your status here would be highly uncertain and, ultimately, frustrating to those who must lead. Otherwise, you may go where you please. The Irredente is wide."

"I shall take a day to prepare, Mr. Galinda."

"I take that as assent, Holiness."

"I have said all I will say, Mr. Galinda."

"Touché, Holiness, and good day to you." Galinda unceremoniously got up, donned his steaming hat, and left.

#

The desk comm on the nightstand sounded a rude alarm and jolted Galinda awake. He still slept at his Cabil chambers, awaiting the completion of changes to his new Admiralty chambers on the edge of the crater -- he had ordered all traces of First Lady Arlette erased before he should arrive.

"Task," he said, and the nightstand light came on. "Vas," he said. "... middle of the Vas-damned night. Yes, what is it?"

"Sorry to wake you, sir," said a young functionary's voice, "I've got a relay from Records."

Galinda had a strange feeling about something and, looking at the bed, realized she was gone. She had to be somewhere close by.

"Send it through," he said. He stood in his silk robes and peered over the bed. The girl lay in a fetal position on the floor on the far side of the bed, a spare blanket concealing all but her head and one slender golden foot, its toenails painted pink. Her similarly golden face was drossed with an ugly smear of color -- she had fallen asleep crying. He could still smell her, he realized: a deep perfume of floraline, his preference, and something else, something alien.

"Encode six-niner."

"Decode 'sinister leftist,'" he said.

"Sir, node-wall breach. All classified. Records up to one-standard old."

"Encrypted?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that's something, at least. How long ago?"

"Within ninety points, sir."

"Traceroute?"

"Working, sir."

"Let me dress and get over to my chambers. Comm me with any updates." He tossed down a stimulant pulled from the nightstand. "Steward," he said toward the comm. "Get the girl out of here. Put her at Port South. You can arrange all that."

He quickly slipped into an undershirt and pants and made his way down a semi-public hallway to his office. Exotic, ancient works of art occupied niches at regular intervals; diamonds of polished stone lay underfoot. A duty attendant stood at attention and opened the ornate, many-paneled door to the office.

"Update," he said to his office desk comm.

"Still working, sir."

"Steward," Galinda said. "A coffee service. Records?"

"Sir!"

"Is everyone working on this?"

"And more coming on line, sir."

Galinda unrolled a scroller and looked at the hierarchy of incoming data and reports. Whoever had come in had been discriminating: they took summaries and reports from the highest levels. But none more than a standard sol old. They knew the structure of records. They had seen it before. It took them almost no time to grab what they wanted. Did they have the decryption codes or just the file hierarchy?

When the coffee service arrived, Galinda sat in his hide-bound chair to monitor events, the scroller next him on a side table. He had long found that when he relaxed thus and let his mind wander as the coffee did its work, he could usually work his way through a problem efficiently. He was hampered somewhat by the earliness of the hour, but he cradled the warm cup in his hand and remembered the young girl -- so... auric.

He went back to his desk. "Records, get communications. Monitor all ansible communication to and from the Crater -- everything since the breach. Look for large data packets, whether encrypted or not."

The report came back in short time.

"Just the Palace, sir."

Galinda hit his fist against the desk. "Who knew the old stump had it in him?" he said.

"Sir?"

"Out. Communications, get me the duty captain of the forces immediately. And wake up that Mens Super serving His Excellency. I'll send you the address and clearance. Get him over here, to my office, with a car if need be, and sync all incoming reports for me to him. Get your propaganda people ready, too -- we'll need a press release."

Chapter forty

-five. Ghosts

Whatever "the bug" was, it is doubtful that it arose accidentally. Its pathology indicates nanoforming: the plague actively sought and killed genovariant forms incorporating lower-phyla coding -- arthropoda, chelicerata, mollusca, etc. Bioforms that could withstand enormous doses of high-energy radiation, and bioforms that could extract their oxygen from carbon binders, equally succumbed... It is true that the avians and their symbiants survived, making them the obvious target for blame. This blame was couched in cosmic, occult, and, much later, religious terms. But what of those remote luddite groups? They not only survived: they were entirely untouched. Since the plague paved the way for waves of luddite incursions into the core worlds, it is certainly open to us to question whether the avian bioforms, so far-sighted, would have so deviated from reason as to embrace -- or create -- a plague that would undermine their own hegemony.

The Commentaries

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Despite its decorative trappings, the Palace ansible station within the miniature version of the Baptistery lay protected behind a low, secure perimeter wall not easily seen until within its proximity. The station operator could access the station via a breezeway that connected the station to the Palace, but that entrance appeared to be rarely used -- the guard often wondered at it. Within the station, the control room occupied a sub-basement impossible to find from the featureless, smooth floor under the dome unless one had the codes that irised a cut-gem inlay depicting a scene from the Book, one of many such inlays arranged on the floor in a great swirl.

When a special forces ground car rolled in from an avenue parallel to the crater wall, instead of making its way around to the perimeter wall access gate, it simply tore open a new opening to get to the station proper. The forces then blasted open the ti-metal gates that opened into the dodecahedral chamber below the dome. Once out of the car and into the station, they loitered nervously trying to figure out where to go. When the Palace Guard showed up moments later, a standoff ensued that no one knew how to broker. In the end, the station operator appeared at the chamber doors with a phalanx of guardsmen, and the head of Intelligence Special Forces dropped down in a small armored car just inside the perimeter. A difficult parley ensued during which demands for, variously, His Holiness, His Excellency, Mr. Secretary, and others to appear were made. Via comm links, it came to be generally understood that His Holiness was not to be disturbed or else was nowhere to be found; that the Palace ansible had been hijacked by someone possibly still within; and that Government and Intelligence were united in demanding access to the control room.

Any element of surprise that special forces had counted upon had of course been lost. The station manager grudgingly entered the codes and irised open the access to the control room. Nervously, he led a joint squadron of Palace and Intelligence troops down a stair, through a humming passageway, and into the antechamber to the control room proper. The lights in the antechamber had been burning for some time. When the joint squadron had all crowded into the chamber, weapons banging against walls and equipment, and barely room to move, the station operator took a cue and comm'd open the control room door. He screamed and was cut down by a specialist with a beam. The Palace Guard, taken unawares, likewise fell in just moments. Within, His Holiness, Auspex Temporator Gregory, lay in deathly repose on the cold stone floor, clutching a Holy Book, eyes opened upward. On the operator's console lay an opened briefcase with melted datachats within, a small heat torch, and an open scroller, still on. All it said, in plaintext mode, was 00.00. At first, the head of Special Forces thought that it might have just turned over -- that the place was about to blow up. But no, that was not it. The ansible's controls were all dark. It was dead, like the peaceful old man on the floor. There was nothing more to be gotten here.

#

Galinda, in the end, had more reason to be gratified than troubled by Gregory's transgressions. In the hours and days following "the quiet, seemingly death of His Holiness, Auspex Temporator Gregory, in chambers, surrounded by friends," Galinda, operating through the office of First Consul Godwin, effectively established control over the Palace and tightened his grip over the Irredente. There was a new Auspex Temporator, to remain such until the unfortunate situation with His Holiness proper should get resolved, and an agreement between Church and Government on records management. Intelligence got access to every level of Church records. Auspex Temporator presided over the final rites and demolument of Gregory. The Church ansible was gutted.

His Excellency, First Consul Godwin served as the public face of the state of emergency. The news from the Palace made barely a dent in the public consciousness, preoccupied with the inconclusive, mysterious alien incursion. Much of Godwin's attention went to dealing with the consequences of panic -- disruptions in trade, commodity values, transportation chaos. Godwin relied on his departments heavily, and on no one more than Galinda. Many matters that would normally have gone to His Excellency's staff ended up with Galinda's office first, simply because it was perceived as the most expeditious route. Galinda recommended many bills to His Excellency, which His Excellency approved and sent on to the Cabil for consideration -- consideration invariably afforded and bills summarily passed. Galinda modulated his public presence to give the lie to his authority, especially where His Excellency's sensitivities were concerned. Few who mattered, however, were fooled.

Galinda, by arrangement with the office of the First Consul, had "standing leave" to use the services of His Excellency's Mens Super, who was now an appointed figure and had free access to His Excellency's records and affairs.

Galinda had decided to maintain his residence at his Cabil chambers, to which he had become accustomed and which permitted him his usual routines without difficulty. The chambers at Admiralty were set aside for him, however, and he used the office there to discharge his more official Naval duties -- granting audiences, bestowing posts, and the like. He had discerned quickly that the upper reaches of the Naval apparatus held a deep reverence and affection for the physical office of the First Lord of the Admiralty, and he exploited this power consummately.

He sat now in his familiar wing chair, facing the beaky, braided-queued Mens, who stood, a fire roaring in the grate behind the him.

"Is it already in my comm?" said Galinda.

"Yes, sir. As of this morning," said the Mens, bowing to accentuate his long forehead.

"Please summarize, Mens."

"Sir," the Mens nodded, "Vox Gregory, lately Auspex Temporator, was the Palace's spymaster. He was perhaps the least likely candidate for that position, and no extant report in any files outside of the Palace give any hint of it."

"On whose orders?" said Galinda.

"None, sir. His accession to the position is hazy and apparently unofficial. But every important intelligence matter at the Palace has his imprint or imprimatur or otherwise appears to have been in his hands. He communicated directly with three vested Auspicii, from which it is presumed he maintained his role for many sols. His access into Government records has been sporadic but is of long standing. He had never before the recent incident, however, seconded any in the manner done here -- broadly, openly -- even notoriously -- and in such voluminousness. He knew he would be detected, and he acted swiftly. He had access to an ancient

administrative 'back door' and a master code key that only an administrator would use. To anticipate your question, sir, it is of long standing and was apparently not appreciated by the current records personnel."

"Indeed. For how long?"

"Hundreds of sols, sir."

"His predecessors had it too, then."

"I have not had time to delve that deeply, sir, but it is likely, given what I have seen."

"And this 'back door' is closed now?"

"I can only say that Records has traced the cause of the breach, sir. There is something else, however, that my analysis suggests that Records has perhaps not appreciated fully." The Mens smiled in mock humility.

"Understood, Mens. Proceed."

"The 'core' language within the data nodes we're discussing -- the system code -- goes back to the pre-Irredente era. The computing system that runs it was not built on Pydna; it was brought here by someone -- one presumes not the Irredentists, for obvious reasons. It is, furthermore, a self-administering system deep within the systems that store all data. My conclusion is that the Irredente as presently organized does not equip its Records Division with the tools necessary for complete data control by hegemony authorities. Our systems appear to regulate and rectify... themselves."

"Regulate themselves? We can't close the back door into our own systems?"

"Regrettably, sir, I conclude that Vox Gregory knew a coding language that is lost to us that would allow us to even begin to address that issue. Beyond that, the data I have do not fully resolve. It is not even clear where -- in spatial terms -- this... is."

"Is this in the report I have received, Mens?"

"I believed it was insufficiently detailed to warrant compiling at the present time, sir. My experience, which I believe I am only confirming by this report, is that there is no security when words become mere numbers."

"Wisely said. That was well done, Mens Super."

"Sir. I would be pleased to pursue this matter further."

"By all means, Mens Super. It is most important that we understand this. Add it to your list -- informally, of course. I should have appreciated the skills of your kind long before. It is no wonder that His Holiness should have... well, I shall let it go at that. Dismissed, Mens Super. I believe you find your credit card highly sufficient for your needs."

Chapter forty

-six. Blood

The parable of the sailor, appearing in various forms in the Chronicles, as derived from scant text in the Holy Book itself, has created, perhaps, more confusion than any single story told in the Book. What might it mean, "no leg but that it was pure again"? A whole edifice of regulations and proscriptions in the Irredente derives from little more than obscure, poetic usage and, it must be said, highly suspect translations.

The Commentaries

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The fleet was glum. Frigates and smaller vessels made rendezvous points with their flagships, but by standing order there were no visits among crew. Captains and commanders came and went on their cutters or cubs, depending, but otherwise the rounds became depressingly monotonous for crews that had missed R&R and were given no promises. Equally gloomy, stores were running low, and food and grog were rationed for the first time in recent memory. The emergency had decimated re-supply from naval stores and silenced the colorful hails from the vittleships -- the small, private vessels that supplied the trimmings. Everyone felt it: the fleet was on lock-down.

The news had by now traveled to the lowest holds that the Irredente had entered strange, dark times. Even on a ship in remote space -- or perhaps especially there -- the murmurs and susurrations engendered by fragmentary news from the home worlds threw a blanket of gloom over even rote labors. Not a valve was trimmed but that thoughts of imminent battle gave it significance; not a log entry was made but that some delicate strategy hinged upon the invariant data noted there. Combined with the bland rations and watered spirits meted out in thimbles, the whole seemed calculated to goad them into auto-mutilation and ignoble demolument rather than battle-readiness.

Every big ship had its Vas-cultists and lay-voices, and these usually went about their business of worship and "fellowship" with little notice by those whose religious fervor spoke privately -- or was simply less intense. But here too, news from the home worlds and from the Palace on Pydna caused grave concern and no small amount of controversy among the ship's faithful, transforming the general ship's distemper into a hydra. Tempers ran high; sharp words rang out in hard metal corridors; plates were slammed at mess.

On Andromache, Burgred had more than his share of troubles to preoccupy him, and he brooded. The lieutenant corps that was subordinated to him gave him a wide berth and practically ran from his person after taking and acknowledging orders. None came near him at mess, drills, or practices. Crew nodded significantly to one another or shot glances as he performed his rounds.

Burgred sat with Titus at mess, the pair having fallen in together as they entered the room and proceeded to the line. They sat across from one another at a long table with retract-benches.

"Space baby and plum-duff," said Titus. "Again."

"The first time I heard there was plum-duff at mess," Burgred said, "I tore down the hatch to get at it -- I was eight sols, maybe. So I'm looking at it, trying to figure it out. 'I thought there was plum-cake,' I said to Slops. 'Ave at it, boy!' he says to me. Vas, I nearly broke down and cried. Back home, the dried stuff was for the wallowers and pensioners. I've never really had a taste for it."

"Plums, sir. Plum grove, I get it. What are your stores looking like, now?"

"All gone," Burgred said. "I've got Henryk, and I still let Hanna raid them."

"How's the boy?" Titus said. "I see him sometimes. He's a quiet one, Burgred."

"Yeah, I know. There's a lot going on in there, but I can't honestly say I can figure him out. He gets on well with Hanna, still, and her..."

"Tiff," Titus said.

"Uh-huh. I suppose that's general knowledge?"

"She -- Hanna -- is sort of high class. Gets people to wondering," Titus said.

"What I did to her?"

"No, sir. Just a general comment, is all." Titus was at sea and wanted to change the subject. "Take a look at pater over there. Now there's something you hate to see: a man of Vas looking like the hegemony and the reign 'o Vas are coming to an end."

Burgred craned his neck to look. "Couldn't happen to a nicer Vox," he said.

"Sir?"

"Nothing. Lerner's got him in his pocket, that's all. It caused me a headache with Henryk's conform and first corpus."

Titus stirred. "I got no love of Lerner, either, but I can tell you Vox's problems are nothing to do with Lerner or Henryk."

"No?"

"Sure, doings back home and all."

Burgred looked blank. "Titus, I don't know what you're talking about."

"You don't... I mean... His Holiness and all..."

"The Auspex, you mean? He's on a cruise or something."

Titus glanced around then tilted his head conspiratorially to Burgred. "Sir, it may be a cruise, but Vas knows where. Auspex got wind of doings back home and high-tailed it. Left an old fossil in charge of the Palace."

"You mean about Government?"

"And maybe more. They're saying that he had a vision -- knew about the incursion, the government, all of it. There was a big deal -- he... " Titus leaned in closer, "he took the torment at corpus, first time in hundreds of sols."

"You mean flagellation? The big cat-whip thing, the blood on the altar? That's not real, is it?"

"Yes sir. And he disappeared right after -- Auspicial yacht, goings-on, right on out, no word. Then it all started up."

"I didn't hear all that," Burgred said.

"It's a between-the-lines thing. You sort of had to be looking for it. Some of it was before the blackout -- they said it but didn't say it -- you know the way they do. Some of it..." Titus nodded to the ship's vox, who was idly watching a blob of space-baby fall from a spoon and back into his bowl. "You can talk to him -- ship's cleric -- in private, you know. If you're a regular."

"I'm not," Burgred said.

"It's okay, sir. Everyone knows about the Burgreds," Titus said. "You get a pass."

Burgred's eyebrows shot up. "Ship life," he said. "No secrets."

"There's more, besides," said Titus. Now he was practically touching noses with Burgred. "The old vox -- the one His Greatness put in charge at the Palace -- he's out. Dead, demolument, the whole thing. New one coming in."

Burgred got a worried look. "So Consul, Admiralty, and Church," Burgred said, peeling them off on his fingers.

Titus looked at him significantly. "It's like the old days, sir. Doings and doings, as they say."

"You're giving me the creeps, Titus."

"I'm just saying, sir. You've got the blood and all."

"That was a long time ago, Titus. A different Irredente -- Vas, even before."

"We all had to learn it," Titus said. "Ain't a soul on this ship as don't know what it means -- what you are, sir."

"Lieutenant-for-life, you mean, Titus?"

"No, sir. I'm a man of faith, sir. And trust me, I got enough for the both of us. Without Burgreds, there wouldn't be no Irredente, and everyone knows that -- even them as don't like to admit it. And I tell you as I sit here that people like us -- like me, I mean, sir -- when the chips are down, we ask Vas what he means by it all and what his Plan wants, and it always tells us -- not in so many words, but here you sit in front of me, sir. Now, the Plan don't play no favorites, sir, I'm convinced of that. But Vas put it in the blood, sir, and what's pure is pure. A Burgred will die to save his kin, they all seen it, sir, them as matters, they know. What's happening now, sir, that ain't pure or right or Plan-wise. That pater over there, he isn't much, but he's our man. He's scared as a hoppin-jay, but those of us as pays attention -- on the quiet side, mind you, but just so -- have let him know where we stand. He's conflicted, is what he is."

Burgred intently eyed his interlocutor, whose fists were now balled up. "Titus, I had no idea," Burgred finally said.

"Don't you worry, sir," Titus said. He relaxed his fists and set them on the table. "I said mine. And now you know."

"You were waiting for me, here, for mess" Burgred said.

"Doings and doings, sir. Someone's got to lead." Titus said. Burgred wasn't quite sure what Titus meant, but he let it go.

Chapter forty

-seven. Analysis

Certainly, the technologists ascendant in the 5th Empire were naive. The science they found was transcendently beautiful: some perfect round fruit dangling from the bough which, when consumed, erupted into flesh-devouring maggots.

The Commentaries

#

Memo

From: Mens Super In Residence, Primus House

To: First Consul Godwin, on request of First Lord of Adm'y, Galinda

Subject: Standing Order On Falsified Conforms -- Specific Item

This memo will serve to highlight data culled by algorithms keying the parameters re:false conforms with the overlay of re:genomic salience. Additional algorithms implemented by this Mens Super subsequent to first-order filtering as noted above have yielded a matter of putative significance arising in the services under Admiralty authority. It is suggested that this item be assigned as a priority action item.

Irredente frigate Andromache suggests via priority ansible further inquiry into the matter of a specific conformity record, one "Henryk fam. Burgred, Edom." As such a request from the command rank of an Irredente vessel is extremely rare if not unprecedented, it would demand scrutiny for that fact alone. The conform procedures, civilian and military, are well-worn bureaucratic paths that would seem to merit little command-level concern. All the more remarkable that this unusual request, from Cpt. Xenoetas of Andromache, should touch upon data points in common with matters of timely concern for Irredente governance generally.

I believe that Lord Galinda's desk files already contain incidental references to a "Henryk" relative to the disaster on Edom in the most recent sol. The Henryk subject of request from Andromache is one and the same. He is presently assigned as a Ship's Boy on same vessel. A review of the records regarding which inquiry is sought by Andromache strongly suggests some form of err or falsity, whether intentional or unintentional. No conform for the youngster exists anywhere in Irredente records. The file conform that lay the basis for the youngster's initiation on board Andromache in the rites of the corpus belongs not to the youngster but to Hugh, fam. Burgred, Mercia (Plumgrove). (I note that the Burgred family has been highly prominent in Irredente affairs for many generations (rf.: "Burgred Alraed"), though most recently their contributions have been more modest. The entirety of Mercia is entailed upon them through junior heirship.)

The youngster's conform file used the appellation "H. Burgred," so there may have been an oversight of some kind. The conforming physician, Bevany, fam. Galin (Hesperis Maior), is of no apparent analytical salience, though ship logs could be overlain for additional data points. At all events, the conform file for "H. Burgred" contains a contemporaneously created conform for the senior. The sanguinary relationship, if any, between these two cannot conclusively be determined from extant records. There appears to be no genome sequencing for any purpose on file for the youngster in question.

Of high salience is the youngster's connection not only to Edom but to the late Auspex Temperator, through Gregory's bastard son Hersey of Edom. Henryk fam. Burgred was retrieved from the Neu Beauville settlement

on Edom, and specifically within proximity to the docilship of Hersey. Assuming compulsories were obeyed, Henryk was Hersey's parishioner (records indicate the presence of a lay Vox Rectoris, not properly a Vox at all). Though too young for initiation to corpus planetside, he would be expected to be registered locally -- as, indeed, he was. No specific references appear in the docilship's internal records other than his name upon the rolls. That is to say, there is no parentage reflected in the records. Of this youngster there are inordinately many errors and data gaps. Given the connection to Edom and Hersey, that suggests further inquiry.

Additionally, the Andromache log places Hugh fam. Burgred on Edom planetside on Edom, at a marine base in reasonable proximity to Neu Beauville. A contemporaneous ship's intelligence report asserts that Hugh extracted the youngster from enforced servitude in a slum district on the pretext of an asserted avuncular consanguinity. This is an inexplicable assertion. I find no causal data chain that supports it, but I am continuing my research. Obviously, a genomic sequencing could conclusively answer many of the questions raised here. The lack of such data here is astonishing.

The last, most suspect, but potentially most significant data point also comes from the ship's IO. Hugh fam. Burgred asserted in his report to ship's IO that he had confiscated planetside from Henryk a small, sophisticated weapon with no apparent working parts. The report states that Henryk fam. Burgred was seen to discharge compact, low-energy particle packets from the weapon, however, leading Hugh to conclude that the weapon had in fact been supplied by the individual identified in P.R. 678.a-Ed33 and... [redacted portion unavailable].

... important to investigate this more completely in light of the issues involved. While the probability of salient, useful information being developed is in fact small, the significance of a positive data correlation as described herein is sufficient for me to recommend that Admiralty assign this matter a high priority... The patterns suggested by the data are either real or chimera; there seems to me no middle ground.

Chapter forty

-eight. Little Ones

And Vas said unto the Voyagers: Go thither, believers. For my Voice shall be with thee; my Arms around thee; the firmament of my Loins thy safe havens. I shall be all things to you, and you shall reciprocate with thy renewed, pure goodness.

The Holy Book of the Body

#

A senior ship's boy blushed as Yve and Harold tumbled out of the low, forward hold somewhat more disheveled than mere stowage aboard would suggest. Yve adjusted her shift and smoothed her freshly-cropped hair. The ship's boy cleared his throat.

"Begging pardon, miss. With Captain Melchior's compliments, Ma'am and Sir, would you join him at the 'pit?"

"She's old but spry," Melchior said when they entered the command and control room. "Meteor, I mean, begging your pardon, Excellency." Down in the lowest rung of the 'pit, a holo-projection of their position in-system formed a large, softly-defined ball floating in the air. Meteor appeared within, overscaled, and the planets and moons of the home system were arrayed in their various positions, dancing in time to a celestial clock. "Welcome, Excellency, Mr. Harold. Thank you, boy. Report back to mechanical, son." The lad beamed and zoomed out of the 'pit. "We're having to use every hand, I'm afraid. It could be worse. Most of the youngsters come from Family, if you get my meaning, so it's in their blood -- they're naturals, mostly. I owe a lot of favors -- I keep a large compliment of boys and mids. It's always a strain on the stores. But I've got half my lieutenant corps, too, and enough crew to man every operational station -- and a few in reserve. I'm hard up for support services -- repairs and the like. And I've got a lot of visitors and supernumeraries, too. Clearing them out would look suspicious -- this is officially an "orientation cruise" in-system. We're supposed to establish a broad orbital soon -- they're in for a surprise, I'm afraid. So, Excellency, how goes it with you? I must say, you're the nicest-looking boy among the ships' boys. Well done, boy."

"I do feel youthful, now that you mention it, captain," Yve said. Harold turned his face away and coughed.

"That's just as well, since we need all hands," Melchior said. "Excellency?"

"Midshipman. I left as a mid," she said. "Things may have changed..."

"Not likely in the Irredente Navy, Ma'am," Melchior said. "And especially not on Meteor -- it's even older than Andromache. We'll fit you with a standard-issue duty comm and you'll be pretty much set. We can probably bunk you better than that, however. I've moved down. You and Mr. Harold will take Quarterdeck, of course."

"Captain, that is out of the question," she said. Harold nodded assent. "We've made it this far..."

"I'm sorry, Ma'am," said Melchior. "I'm afraid that, technically, I am in command. Members of the Government have no jurisdiction over this ship. I hereby direct you to proceed to your quarters in Quarterdeck and prepare for your duties. The steward will assist you with the comm and other matters -- I don't have a secretary on this voyage, so I'll be buried in the comm when I'm not commanding the ship. Mr. Harold -- you're my IO -- that's information, intelligence, sir. We'll figure out how to make that work when Ma'am reports in for duty. I expect you both to be prompt. We'll be jumping soon -- if I can make that happen with

what we've got."

"Aye aye, captain," said Yve.

Harold, unaccustomed to the forms, raised a hand weakly and then let it drop. "Uh, aye aye, captain," he said.

"You're doing fine. Once we're into this thing, the forms be hanged. We'll have to make some adjustments as we go."

"Of course, captain," Yve said. She and Harold turned to go, and a tiny girl was already at their side, arm held out to direct them to Quarterdeck.

#

His Holiness, once safely in space upon the Holy Yacht, retreated to the tiny study adjoining his cabin. In the yacht's first incarnation as a grand, private cruiser, these quarters had been set aside for a heathen holy man within some grandee's retinue. Instead of a holoniche, which would be typical of a ship's vox's cabin, a crude, ancient statue of Vas evidently from pre-Irredente times fronted a still older heathen archivolt whose figures and personages were so eaten by time as to be mere carven ornament. Only the occasional surviving nose, ear, or eye remained to train the senses of these mythic worthies upon the many-faced Vas.

Auspex sat upon a stool with his habit draped to the floor. He cradled his temples in one hand while the other rested upon an old, worn, one-way scroller pulled from a cubby in the study and containing various sacred texts. He hadn't advanced the screen in some time -- hadn't even read the one displayed before him.

A gentle chime announced someone seeking entry to his cabin. He didn't have to reach far across the small space to command the main cabin entry door to open.

"Come," he said. "Ah, Mens Super."

"Am I disturbing His Holiness?"

"No, Mens... Jahiri. You are a welcome distraction. I find myself unable to attend to the Word."

"Not so welcome, I fear, Holiness," the Mens said. "I am requested to bring you news from the bridge -- from those who command the ship. There seems to be some problem with achieving your directives. They have been working on it for some time, and there is concern that remaining where we are poses risks to your person."

"You mean, we are not going to Constantin?"

"They are unable to get the ship to make the jump, is what I am told. Information goes in but comes out garbled. They have a technical description for this which I fear I did not understand."

"Yet you suggest that we might go elsewhere?"

"The problem does, as I understand it, appear to relate to Constantin."

His Holiness frowned. "This is highly suspect, Mens Super," he said. "Why should not one directive be given to the ship as well as another? Perhaps it is more sabotage."

"It is deeply troubling, Holiness, and, as you say, far from logical to the casual observer."

"How much time?" said Auspex.

"It is of course your determination, Holiness, but I am told that time is of the essence."

Auspex sighed. "Where shall we go, Jahiri?"

"I believe you have long planned for Constantin, Holiness. A surprising choice, well-calculated to leave your... to leave people guessing."

"Your homeworld, Jahiri, historically heretical in its practices."

The Mens flushed and averted his gaze. "My homeworld, true, Holiness, but that can hardly matter."

"You are mistaken. You must have intimate knowledge that would aid us. Places we might find temporary anonymity or sanctuary."

"Ahem. Yes, Holiness. Perhaps. I really cannot say offhand. I would have to train my thoughts upon it."

"No need now, however, it would appear," said His Holiness.

"Yes, Holiness. Was there another place you had considered? Perhaps you overemphasize the need for... unlikelihood. You are Auspex, after all. Your people everywhere must embrace you."

"As would my enemy, and closely. You have not engineered this difficulty, I trust, most faithful advisor?"

The Mens' eyes went wide. "Grace!" He fell to his knees in supplication. "Grace, I am unworthy, it is true, but I am faithful to His Holiness in all things. You cannot believe..."

"No, I do not, Jahiri. That is why I ask. Had I believed, I shouldn't have tested you on the point. I know your origins -- they matter not. But any man may work from inscrutable motives, as well as for the sake of surprising conceptions of what is to the good. You may well have believed it a poorly-conceived plan to remove to Constantin. You may have acted purely from such belief, that I might be protected. But I see that it is not so. And so we are adrift, at sea, tossed by fate."

"The Plan of Vas, Grace?"

Auspex looked at him sternly. "I merely suggest an allusion, Mens Super."

The Mens blushed. At that moment, the ship's jump-alarm sounded. Auspex craned to peer into his main cabin, where a telltale glowed, confirming the point.

"Here is our jump, then, Jahiri," Auspex said. "Vas may light a path for us yet."

It was moments later, gripping the recessed handles fitted for the purpose, that each felt the strange sinking feeling that came with a jump.

"So we have..." began the Mens, when the door chime sounded again.

His Holiness admitted a Yachtsman, a man of middle age whom Auspex had sailed with early in his tenure -- when the Yachtsman was a pimpled youth in training.

"Grace," he began, "I have bad news. We have failed in carrying out your directive."

"How can that be?" said His Holiness. "For we have just jumped, have we not?"

"Yes, Holiness. Into a trap. We have jumped within hegemony core-world space, but not to Constantin. We have jumped... into a flagship of the Irredente Navy, which looms before us. We do not know why this has happened. It is plainly a malfunction in the Yacht's jump-drive, yet there has never been such a malfunction in the memory of any now serving on her. It is an impossible occurrence, and it bodes very ill for your plans and your safety. I wish to keep you secure in your quarters here -- if you would wish it."

"Grace," the Mens said. "Any Irredente ship must take orders from you, it stands to reason."

The Yachtsman shook his head. "There has been a courtesy, by long tradition, Holiness. Under the present circumstances, however, we expect none."

"Under the new First Lord of the Admiralty, you mean, Yachstman," said His Holiness.

"Yes, Holiness. I suggest to you that making an order that this flagship won't follow is worse than giving no such order at all."

"That is sage advice, Yachtsman, and I accept it," said Auspex.

The Yachtsman's comm sounded. "Excuse me, Holiness, and advisor. I will step away for a few moments."

When he had stepped out, the Mens looked at His Holiness sadly. "All this effort for naught, Holiness."

"We live still, Jahiri," his Grace said. "Every breath we take mingles with the universe and therefore advances our cause. Let us see what events bring and trust to Vas that all this has been foreseen."

The Yachtsman returned with an odd expression on his face. "Grace, there is news. We are offered an escort but are asked to refrain from further jumps until there has been further analysis of the situation."

"Analysis by whom, and to what purpose?" said the Mens.

"We are informed by the captain of the vessel -- she is the *Palle Nymphus*, a storied ship -- that she carries the pennant of Admiral Valinder, and that he is being briefed. It appears that they were as surprised as we."

A stunned silence followed.

"I have met this man," His Holiness said. "He is a man of Vas. He is a leader of men."

"He serves Galinda, now," said the Mens.

"And Vas," said His Holiness. "We must speak with him. In person."

"He must come to you, Grace, and not you to him," said the Yachtsman, surprising his interlocutors with his firmness. "Of that there can be no dispute."

"Yachtsman," said His Holiness. "Who now commands my yacht and speaks for us?"

The Yachtsman cleared his throat. "It has been agreed among us, following the matter of the launch, that... I am humbled to serve Your Grace in an acting capacity until the matter should properly be brought to His Holiness. There has been no time to address the matter thoughtfully and to prepare the formalities."

"Agreed among you? Among whom?"

"Yachstmen and Engineers, Grace. It was an unprecedented situation. So unprecedented that my Second, at the helm, is... a woman, and not a Yachtsman, all of whom were needed in other posts."

"The Engineer from the launch site?" said the Mens.

"Yes, sir," said the Yachtsman. "I am not only humbled to serve under His Grace, but also beside Birgitt, but for whom His Grace would have perished. However, she now begs to be relieved of her duties, effective immediately, because of the errant jump, and I have denied that request pending a review. I must now beg leave of you to deal with these various matters. If you accept my advice to remain here, I will post a Yachtsman at your door, and he will serve in my stead as your minion."

"Captain," said His Holiness. "Go with Vas. You are no man's minion. We shall remain here."

#

There was a practical problem that caused the Holy Yacht's acting captain great consternation and that led to a brief impasse. The Holy Yacht bore a tiny pup within her -- a ship-to-ship shuttle -- that could not address certain concerns of Admiral Valinder and his staff, not the least of which was Valinder's physical condition. There seemed no graceful way of engineering a face-to-face meeting short of a broad-comm between the craft. Valinder ruled that out before His Holiness was even asked. Finally, Valinder himself came up with the solution, which had the side effect of being sensible as well as formally correct. His Holiness should have quarters aboard the flagship, and these should be anointed by Himself. He could give audience there; the formalities would by this route be fulfilled. To the Mens Super's objection that His Holiness might be held captive, His Holiness noted that that had in substance already occurred. Furthermore, pointed out His Holiness, his own presence on the flagship made his authority far more real to the population therein than an escort alongside would do.

Following the complex ship-to-ship transfer of His Holiness and the Mens -- with many nervous Yachtsmen watching Auspex depart their beloved craft, and a couple of procedural hiccups that His Holiness waved away or pretended not to notice -- His Holiness waited in his newly-anointed quarters for the captain of Palle Nymphus, who, in a continuation of the niceties, would serve in a temporary diplomatic capacity to introduce Admiral Valinder.

His Holiness occupied a diplomatic suite of plush accommodation and generous holowindow. His Holiness sat in the suite's ante-room upon a chair elevated on a jury-rigged, ti-metal dais covered with a white cloth taken from Palle's chapel. He wore a thick silk habit and shimmering thick rope. A wizened finger bore the great signet of his office. Valinder stumped in awkwardly, one eyelid drooping from age or injury, one arm wielding a cane. Several officers and supernumeraries followed. A vox's tonsure could be seen in the hall -- the ship's chaplain stood, uncertain of his role. Captain Woldegrove of Palle now moved to assist Valinder with his genuflection at the base of the dais.

"Stay," said His Holiness. Valinder looked up in surprise. "This will not do, Admiral Valinder, esteemed man of Vas." And with these words, His Holiness arose, stepped down from the dais, and walked to stand before Valinder. He placed an aged, gentle hand upon the sailor's shoulder. "You are blessed before Vas, Admiral. Come and sit with us that we may talk of matters of import."

"High Holiness," Valinder said. "You do an old sailor too much kindness. I would kneel and beg your hand and signet."

"It is done, in effect, sir," said His Holiness. "The Plan of Vas rolls over great troubles and veers around trifling ones; the aged and infirm among us do likewise."

"I am humbled, Holiness. And I am deeply sorry that... that all this has happened this way. But I am gratified that it should be me that comes upon you. Words cannot express my joy."

"I'm sure we shall be gratified and joyous as well, Admiral," said His Holiness. "My advisor shows us to our seats, fronting that impressive panel of stars over there. Let us sit, Admiral."

Now the various persons in their roles shot into somewhat confused motion around the lions. The pair was seated. In the awkward moment when all looked upon them in awed silence, Valinder nodded to Woldegrove, who with a firmer nod directed everyone to leave. Only the Mens remained. Valinder looked at him.

"My advisor from the École is the repository of every important matter placed before me, Admiral," Auspex said.

"Of course, Holiness," Valinder said.

"We thank you for these excellent quarters," Auspex said. "I trust you are in contact with His Lordship at Admiralty and that he has directed your efforts?"

Valinder first nodded, then took a moment to choose his words. "I should say, Holiness, that I receive orders from Admiralty. My fleet is under orders to keep you in view. It is true as a general proposition that Admiralty directs the efforts of its Navy. I am sure Admiralty would be very surprised at the turn of events and would no doubt give me orders to bear on the subject. I myself am very surprised, particularly that you should choose Palle to jump to."

The Mens whispered into the ear of His Holiness.

"As it happens, Admiral, we too are surprised."

"Indeed, Grace?"

"We would have chosen sunnier climes, if not more felicitous company." Valinder nodded approvingly, and Auspex went on: "My graceful if very ancient vessel appears to have had its own ideas about a suitable place for our sojourn among the stars. There was a malfunction, I am told."

Valinder cocked an eyebrow and looked very serious. "A malfunction, you say? Hmmm."

"You do not credit this explanation, Admiral?"

"You do?"

"His Holiness is no spaceman," said the Mens. "He can hardly be asked to second-guess those entrusted to command his yacht."

"No disrespect is intended, to be sure," Valinder said. "I have been long in space, and seen a great deal -- and a lot that few would credit, I assure you. I do not know your ship intimately, but I know my ships, and they are nothing if not alive to the preservation of themselves and their crews."

"Admiral, I do not understand you," said Auspex. "I should think the ships are not alive at all. These ideas are in the past and banished from our time."

"Of course, Holiness," Valinder said. "I merely state the fact that we control them not with sticks or cogs, but with technical devices whose responses are at times... self-generated."

"These are dumb-systems, Admiral," said the Mens. "Holiness, the admiral is pleased to use hyperbole and anthropomorphic turns of phrase. He merely states the obvious, that even the ovens that make the bread in our Palace obey systems within themselves. Holiness, few in the Palace understand what is in even the humblest of your systems, yet even your Homunculi may operate the most complex of them. It is but buttons and signs."

"Ovens, however, we still build," Valinder said. "Ships like Palle and your extraordinary yacht, however, we do not. We cannot. And by law, we may not try. I have never seen any of the old ships misbehave in the manner you have described -- I have often remarked how extraordinary the ancient jump-drives are. They are irreplaceable for that reason. They are the paramount coin of the realm. What I have seen is a serene ship respond to commands at the moment given and -- strange to say -- anticipate orders that might have been different. This is no toaster, Holiness. This is the work of the ancients, whose ghostly trail we ride."

"To you, Admiral," said His Holiness.

"And that is very fortunate, Holiness, for I am perhaps the sole officer remaining in the fleet who will die for your safe deliverance. However you came to sail into Palle, it was your only hope of safety. Wherever it is you thought to go, banish such thoughts; you would not have succeeded."

"Admiral Valinder," Auspex said. "Am I to understand..." The Mens Super quickly leaned in to halt His Holiness' remark, whispering in his ear. "I see," said His Holiness. Auspex eyed the decrepit, leonine figure seated across from him. "You have given yourself completely to the Plan of Vas, then, Admiral?"

"As much as any man may dare attempt to comprehend it, Grace. I should say, instead, that I act from a mutual love of yourself and your hegemony, and from a loathing of all that is tyrannical, cruel, and false."

Auspex reached out for the hand of Valinder. An awkward moment ensued, and Valinder managed to twist around to offer a hand to His Holiness. "May Vas bless all of us, Admiral," said Auspex.

"The Plan of Vas still requires that we act, not wait," said Valinder. "I believe, Holiness, that you must remain here, on Palle, for now. Your yacht must jump away as soon as possible. Palle will report seeing her -- and seeing her go."

His Holiness looked to the Mens. "Yes, Grace," said the Mens. "Assuming that which has been stated by the esteemed Admiral Valinder to be true and not trickery, the recommendation appears sound. I might venture one small elaboration upon this plan, however, which is simply that His Holiness direct me to repair aboard the yacht."

"Certainly not, Jahiri. How can that course be recommended?"

"It must be so, Holiness," said the Mens. "I am the only one who might perpetuate the fiction that is required. I am the only one who... may utter appropriate-seeming words in your stead. We might even, I would suggest, have my person, in the guise of His Holiness, utter certain tantalizing falsehoods..."

"No, no," Valinder said. "You are not fit for that. This is no space-tale adventure holo. You would be sniffed out that much more quickly. I agree with your plan, but only for the limited purpose of acting as His Holiness would. As he really would -- or what is plausible. That may work. Falsehoods will ensnare you." The admiral glanced downward at his mis-shapen person, and His Holiness and the Mens were stunned into silence.

"I accept this stratagem," Auspex finally said. "I shall remain, quietly and discreetly, a private guest of Admiral Valinder. Jahiri, return to my vessel. I will affirm the instructions that these things be so."

"And if the vessel itself... herself?... does not heed your message?" said the Mens.

Admiral Valinder responded: "Fear not. She will make her way. Count on it."

Chapter forty

-nine. Wanderers

It did not matter that some who survived the plague, hubristic of their form, protested the innocence of their ways and the general felicity of their encoding. Rightly, however, they were swept in or swept away. The Plan must encompass the entirety of the Corpus of Man. Only by submission could they know true redemption: renormalization.

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#

On a sunny, warm Feastday morning, the fat man in a dark mer-wool overcoat and dented brimhat wheezed and huffed on a tri-frame then sighed as he made the downhill slide of a shrubbery-lined, dirt track terminating, dubiously, at a thatched cottage. He had traveled by lev on the preceding day. After a night in a comfortable inn with excellent beer and run by people he knew, he borrowed one of their tri-frames and set out. Os Divinus lay a long three hundred discants away, yet his cares still spanned the distance, even on a glorious day.

A gerd barked from behind a hedge, and he heard feet trampling within as he approached the house. The door opened, and a dark, curly headed boy peeked out mysteriously then slammed the door closed again. Another noise within. The fat man reached the door and was about to knock when the door opened again.

"Jiri," said the large, august presence, also in dark mer-wool. "Welcome."

"Cantor. Cantor Jakob," he puffed. "I thank you. I am sorry to disturb..."

"Not at all. Inside?"

"Jakob," Jiri said. "Today, we must take a walk."

"Ah. My hat." He disappeared and then reappeared with a hat and a cane.

"My triframe," Jiri said. He retraced his steps on the uneven, zig-zagging brick pathway smelling of late spring blooms and country matters alien to him. He popped open a little carrier on the 'frame and pulled out a bundle wrapped in floral paper and tied around with a colorful twine. "I bring a present from my friend at the Palace," he said when Jakob caught up. "An urchin from the quarter brought this to me just yesterday."

"Ah, indeed," said Jakob. "A walk, then."

The pair set off at an angle across the damp, sparsely-wooded grounds, towards a great gnoss-oak bordering a small dairy farm some way off. Once in the shadow of the oak, Jiri pulled the wraps off, stuffing them as a wad into a coat pocket. He showed Jakob the old scroller -- a rigid, thick pad rather than a scroller proper.

"A one-way," Jakob said. "Thoughtful, your friend. Good man."

Jiri flicked a piece of something off the holo-lens. "VeShuvh'a Leshalom," he said aloud. Then, "Eburicum. Oxnaforth!" The screen came to life, and Jiri handed it to Jakob. There was a cover page:

By now, my body is given fully Vas. I could not help but awaken others; I had to open it noisily and draw them to me. You have within this cache what you need to know, and perhaps it can save you and others.

However, you must get it to those who can act. I have sent it to one other, whose reliability cannot be doubted. However, of his capabilities there is reason to doubt, for he is neither of us nor of you. There was no time to encrypt these contents individually. There is only hope that as I go in peace, you may return in peace.

LeHitra'ot, old friend to man.

Jakob then proceeded into the cache. It was obvious what was within -- every file bore a high-level security icon, many from the Cabil. Jakob shut the device off. He inspected it from several angles.

"By Vas," he said, "... pardon, Jiri. This er, um, gigas -- many. Density, here." He eyed it in disbelief. "We must get it... ships, Jiri. Mercantile. The fastest. Who?"

"Depends where to, Jakob."

Jakob eyed Jiri, a look of great sadness pulling his features down. "For him, Jiri, yes. For us, too. It is time. I am sorry. Government? Difficult business. Warned them. Misunderstanding -- His Holiness supreme? Ridiculous. Galinda, of course. Fools. Heedless."

"I know, Jakob. I have been busy on this, too, in my own way."

"This. To our Admiral friend. Vittleship -- chocolates. Regulated Industries practice -- in kind regards, all that. I can give the clearance."

"Yes, I understand. When, Jakob?"

"Already, Jiri. Car. You must. Time of need, eh? Exceptions. Plus, too hot. I'll make apologies for you inside. She understands and forgives." Jakob rolled his eyes expressively. "Third time a charm, you know."

Jiri smiled. "She is a fine woman. LeHitra'ot, Cantor Jakob."

"LeHitra'ot, Jiri. Rebbe. Many methods, you, eh?" And so the Minister of Regulated Industries, whose jurisdiction covered the Guilds, watched as Jiri huffed back toward the house. The Minister pulled his comm from his trousers pocket and set about making the arrangements. He had tried to strictly observe the forms, but he had to use his comm today. Auspex Tempurator dead and Auspex having fled could only presage difficult times ahead -- again. He sighed. Perhaps some day they would find rest and a homeworld where no one would ever bother them again. Perhaps this Vas business would blow away in some remote millennium, and the god of gods would return to his people. Patience, patience.

#

"Vittleship in the offing, Ma'am," said the navigator, seated around the 'pit in Admiral Valinder's flagship, Palle Nymphus, cruising just beyond the heliopause in Pydna's system.

"Not likely, Mister," said the flagship's captain, a small, middle-aged woman with sharp features and long hair restrained in a knot. "Not in these times. Hail again."

"Ma'am," said the navigator. "They identify as 'authorized private foodstores resupply vessel Marwolf.' They've got a special clearance from RI -- Regulated Industries, begging your pardon, Ma'am. It's... Ma'am, it's a gift for 'the Admiral and staff' of Palle Nymphus. I can't quite make that one out, Ma'am -- civilian malaprops."

"What, like a government clearance? Okay, quiz them on the cargo. I, for one, would love a change of diet

about now. Run through all protocols and report back. But don't delay clearance if it's valid. Oh, and scan for weaponry emissions, just in case."

Marwolf ported into the flagship and the dock got pressurized. A fat, unkempt pilot with a parcel under one arm directed that three pallets be hauled down. The dock manager came over with a scroller and never looked up at the pilot. "Pre-credited?"

"No, no," said the pilot. "No charges. These are all gifts from the Minister of Regulated Industries. I am charged with presenting his Sir -- the Admiral -- with a personal item." He indicated with a gesture the parcel he held under one arm.

This got the manager to look up. He scowled. "Not today, Vittles." He looked back at his scroller and held out an arm. "You can give it to me and I can make sure it gets there."

"No, son, I cannot do that. You must communicate to your superiors that his admiralship wishes to know that Marwolf returns in peace. And you must communicate exactly that. I warn you, young man, that you should do this immediately. It may go very hard with you if you do not."

The dock manager sighed dramatically and rolled his eyes. "Command," he spoke into his comm, "Vittles in C-dock says to Top Gerd, 'Marwolf returns in peace.' Repeat, 'Marwolf returns in peace.'" As he and the fat man stood awaiting a response, the dock manager kept his gaze averted from the fat pilot and feigned a look of extreme disinterest. Abruptly, two marines followed by a marine captain burst into the dock and saluted. The dock manager, confused, raised a hand in salute to them. One of the marines stifled a laugh, drawing a mean look from the captain of the guard. The fat pilot nodded to the captain and made a little wave.

"Mr. Oarsman, Sir!" said the marine captain. "Admiral Valinder, rear admiral of the Second Hegemony Quadrant, begs the favor of your presence in his private quarters as soon as it is convenient, Sir! We are to escort you and assist you in any needs you may have, Sir!"

The dock manager's face fell, and he dropped his scroller.

"Excuse me, young man," said the pilot, who pushed him aside and was led away from the dock in a hail of heel-clicks by the guard.

Chapter fifty.

Young Stump

You cannot reckon the value of their souls to themselves, nor listen in on their private reveries: they are the weak, the vulnerable, the incomplete. But they are complete -- unto themselves -- and they are equal of you in every way that matters in the multiversal computation that is beingness.

Lesson of the Mediant to Hersey, from Hersey, Vox: Journals

#

Henryk was fiddling with a piece of gearing as he headed back to boys' quarters from seeing Tiff belowdecks. His bag was slung over one shoulder. He tripped, slightly, on a seam in the floor, and the item of mech went tumbling before him. As he tried to catch it up, strong arms seized either side of him and whisked him up and away. One part of him watched his piece of machinery roll forever from his possession while the other wondered what might be happening to his person. Getting his wits, he realized that Jader and Cam were hauling him away from boys quarters. He didn't bother to scream or call out -- he had no way of removing himself or contorting other than...

"Hey, Henryk!," said Cam. "Captain wants a date! Orders, you know. Right, Jader?"

"Captain it is, Cam. Quick-like, they said. So here we are!"

Instinctively, Henryk looked backwards. Peris followed them. Henryk's and Peris' eyes met, briefly. Peris looked away.

Over and around, and they dropped Henryk at a large hatch door he recognized. This was church -- this was where he had gone to corpus. Peris opened the door, and Cam pushed Henryk, stumbling, in. The door closed, and in the room Henryk saw... the ship's Captain, Xenoetas, standing. Seated behind a large stowaway table draped with a plain white cloth cover, however, was another uniformed officer whom Henryk thought he may have seen somewhere before but didn't know or recognize.

The man is the ship intelligence officer. He is a spy, Henryk. Something is wrong.

"Ahem," said the captain. She stood off to one side, hands folded behind her, like a thick post -- fixed, immovable, implacable -- topped by a dramatic jot of gray flame in fixed, brownish hair. Though he knew she was a female, she was hiding whatever parts of her would prove it. "Ahem," she cleared her throat again, more emphatically.

Henryk, recovering from the mean shove into the room, saluted her.

"And the major, boy," she said.

Henryk turned to salute him. Henryk's eye fell on an oblong metal pan on the table, lying next to the major's scroller. He could just make out, within it, metal and plas instruments of a type he had seen somewhere... the hospital -- they were medical things. Why should they be here? Was this major a doctor, too? like the other major -- Hanna's sister Bev? Then Henryk noticed a little com-eye set upon the table, apparently covering his side of the room. Covering him.

A cold finger of fear went up Henryk's spine. He turned back to look at the closed hatch.

"Turn here, boy," said the captain. "You're not going anywhere. You will stand at attention before the Major." Xenoetas stuffed herself into a stacking chair at the end of the table, off to Henryk's left. The major was before him, across the width of the table. "Major, please proceed. Henryk, do as you are asked. I will be monitoring this matter."

Henryk turned and stood, shaking in fear.

Don't be afraid. I will help you. Think toward me, like we practiced.

"Ship's boy Henryk Burgred?" said the major.

"Ye... yes, sir," said Henryk.

"I will be asking you some questions, at the conclusion of which I will be taking some biological samples. Let me finish my questions before you answer. If you do not understand a question, tell me. Do you understand my instructions?"

"Uh... yes, sir."

"And you are to tell me the truth. If you do not tell me the truth, I will know it. Do you understand that, Henryk?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know the difference between what is true and what is a lie, Henryk?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is a lie, Henryk?"

"When you don't tell the truth."

The major looked at the captain, uncertain.

"He is very young, captain..."

"Proceed, Major. You are doing fine."

"Yes, sir," said the major. "Ahem..."

The major began with some simple questions, but even those tended to cause problems: "What is your position?" meant nothing to Henryk. To the question "where were you born?" he answered quite correctly that he didn't remember. "As best as you remember" as a follow up drew puzzlement. At length, however, the major seemed to get the hang of interrogating a child. As the questions delved deeper into Henryk's recollections of his life on Edom, the bug increasingly intervened to suggest responses. Attention soon turned to Alleyn. Par was cutting in so much by this point that Henryk kept losing track of what was being asked. Henryk was thirsty, too, and nothing was offered him. His fears regained momentum.

This is not intended to assist your survival, Henryk. Now, we must act. Are you ready, Henryk?

"I can't do anything. She is the captain. She is very important. I have to do what she says."

She means harm to you. We must act. You must act. Are you open to that, Henryk?

"What, can't you just make me...?"

We must act, Henryk. You must form a will. It must be done now. It must be done, Henryk. There is no other way. She will harm us. Are you ready?

The major was saying something. "... say he was your father's brother?" He looked up at Henryk for an answer.

They were the last words that the IO major ever uttered. Henryk in an inhuman flash twisted his torso, reared up with his mech leg, shot it like a piston at the table, and watched in horror as the table flew into the major, knocking his chair out from beneath him and crushing his larynx against the wall directly behind him. He looked at Henryk for a shocked second before his life winked out. Table and corpse sank to the ground.

Before he himself understood what he was doing, Henryk turned towards the captain, who had fallen sideways as the table flew away and was now struggling to get right-ships. She probably hadn't taken in what had occurred -- she was sprawled face-down on the floor. One of her legs had come off or broken -- it lay at an impossible angle. But there was no blood. Then he remembered.

Fly. Run. Go.

He grabbed his kit and hit the doorpad. The second that it took for the door to open seemed an eternity, but Henryk then hurtled himself forward into the hall, running straight into Peris, who doubled over with the wind knocked out of him and cried out. Par must have been helping Henryk, because he managed to keep his balance. And he was off.

"Where do I go? Where do I run now?"

Stay with me. I know, now, how this ends. I have let the algorithm run.

Chapter fifty

-one. Emperor

You accuse them of errancy? These "errant" shall inherit the universe. And you shall lead them.

Response of the Mediant to Hersey, from Hersey, Vox: Journals

#

Liev, in a grey suit with a green epaulette on one shoulder, waited in the ante-room of First Lord Galinda's Admiralty chambers along with an expectant, pimpled lieutenant who bit his nails and, next to the door that led within, a grim aide who sat at a gnoss-oak escritoire. Liev's new title evidently meant nothing as far as the pecking order to see the First Lord went.

"Mr. Liev," said the sour woman at the desk. "His Lordship wishes to see you."

The great door opened before him, then after a short passage of paneled hall with portraiture, a second door. Galinda sat augustly upon an ornate, ball-and-claw chair of purple velvet, hands folded in his lap, before a roaring fire. As Liev approached, he wasn't sure of the forms. Galinda held out a hand with a beringed middle finger. Though he missed a beat, Liev then approached, kneeled, and kissed the gold nymph embossed upon the signet ring.

"That is well, Governor-General Liev. You may stand. I could not be the first to congratulate you on your step. Innisfree badly needs minding, and establishing a Governor-Generalship was a bold move on the part of His Excellency."

"Thank you, sir. I could never have expected so much..."

"No, that is true. In the natural course, no man of your credentials could. But a man of loyalty in a time of need can always rise. Loyalty, Liev."

"Yes, sir."

"Which brings me round to the main subject of our discussion," Galinda said. "I requested a particular shipment -- was assured of it. Has it come into Port South? You know to what I refer?"

"Yes, sir, and I believe not, sir. Transport still... states that they still have difficulty... the aftermath of the alien incursion."

"Pity," Galinda said. "Perhaps we may make gold from dross, however."

"Sir?"

"I have discussed the matter with His Excellency personally, and he is in agreement. A Governor-Generalship is very well, Liev. Not permanent, however. Wealth and planetary possession, however: a different matter. You are interested in wealth, Mr. Liev?"

"It is natural for a man to be so, I believe, Lordship."

"Perhaps, but at all events you are, and so is His Excellency. There is no reason that Government may not profit, if not directly, from the wealth that it creates of itself, wealth that would not exist but for Government."

Do you follow me, Liev?"

"Regulated Industries... taxes, tariffs..."

"If you like. This is more direct. The regulator in this case is... you, Mr. Liev. And you take a handsome share for it. And others, but there's enough to go around. Innisfree offers many advantages for the entrepreneur, not the least of which is that it has no pre-existing Irredente-regulated commercial system. You, Mr. Liev, will implement such a system. Among other things that you will be doing, of course. I know that His Excellency will be grateful, and I may say to you, in confidence, that I shall be too. I hate it when the Guildships don't run on time."

#

Galinda was in his Admiralty office. His Excellency, Mr. Godwin's official Mens Super stood before him.

"Mens Super," said Galinda from his purple chair, "have you made the projection I asked?"

"Yes, Lordship," said the Mens, standing. "Of the several outliers and possessions, I count Killau, Terra Fama, Pier Mons, and Innisfree as the most likely targets. Factoring in age, as you suggest, leaves just the last two. They would be the most likely."

"Projected time, Mens?"

"Unresolvable at this time, Lordship. We do not know what triggers the scouting forays of the alien forces."

"It is possible that that has already occurred, Mens," said Galinda.

"Yes, Lordship, that is possible. But there is no data."

"You will write orders, Mens. Are you ready?"

"Lordship."

"The first order is internal: Admiralty to transport the Jukarno weapons cache to Innisfree, care of Saussure on Innisfree -- pave the way with Saussure for that..."

"Cache, Lordship? This is the alien weaponry, then? And the cannon?"

"Yes. The second order is for the new Governor-General on Innisfree: Liev should provide support to Saussure -- and surveillance on him. Get a man in there, if we can, to keep an eye on what Saussure is doing with my... our toys."

"Sir... Lordship. Done."

"Next, to Cryptology, our friends outside the Crater: get one or two bright young cryptanalysts to Innisfree. Credit to be provided for an office -- attach it to the Governor-Generalship somehow, you can figure that out, Mens. Innisfree not to be subject to the Code of Proscriptions by Order of His Excellency. Get that last order prepared for signature by the First Consul. Mens, the gist of it is, get these people together in a room and make that big gun work. Do whatever it takes. Don't say too much in the Orders; just get them there. You'll be able to direct them more fully once they're in place. Have you got all that?"

"Yes, Lordship. And the Edom boy?"

"Refresh my recollection, Mens."

"Salient data points: Burgred, orphan, toy gun, Edom, Lordship."

"Yes, I see. The weapon connection. This boy is reputed to have done just that, used a weapon provided by the alien agent found on Edom. Did we confirm all that, however?"

"Lordship, this gets convoluted, I'm afraid. I have many salient data points here. Your Lordship... the First Consul, Mr. Godwin, I should say, has directed that the boy be interrogated. He serves as a Ship's Boy on frigate Andromache, Captain Xenoetas. Interrogation to cover potentially falsified Conform... you may recall that the boy's conform mistakenly included the genomic profile of another..."

"Another Burgred," said His Lordship. "Yes, I recall. They got him admitted to the corpus. He's probably deficient in some way. They're keeping him out of Lindenau or servitude. The Burgreds still have sting left in them -- and they probably need an heir. All the Anciens are decrepit in some way."

"That is an interesting data overlay, Lordship, that I must include in my analysis. The additional salient fact to this discussion is that Henryk, fam. Burgred -- that is the boy, Lordship -- cross references to weaponry, if only obliquely, owing to a report that he obtained and successfully discharged..."

"The child was shooting the bugs, yes," said Galinda. "Mens Super, analyze the following: genetic aberrance, Edom, guns or weapons, something on that order."

"The Jukarno cannon, sir. Neural trigger. I have done so, and it is unresolved, Lordship."

"Pity," Galinda said. "Who's interrogating the boy?"

"Unknown, Lordship. But there is a ship's IO on Andromache whom you promoted -- I am sorry, Lordship, whom former Minister of Intelligence Godwin promoted -- to full IO based on the Edom reporting. He is in place."

"Get on with it then. Ask the IO on Andromache for a report -- direct, not through the captain."

"Lordship, if I may venture a remark," said the Mens. "The tenuousness is very striking. The data are of a fine-grained quality -- salient, perhaps, but... the probabilities are..."

"Mens, did you know that my parents died when I was very young?"

"No, Lordship."

"I was raised by wolves, Mens. No, not literally, but close enough. Here I sit. There you stand."

"Quite, Lordship."

"Think upon that, Mens, and go carry out my instructions. Send in the young lieutenant on your way out."

#

"Do you know why I sent for you so early this morning, Mens Super?" said Galinda from the purple velvet throne at Admiralty, his personage resplendent in garb suggestive of a fleet admiral's uniform, but of yet finer material, with a discreet, turned-down minotor-fur collar.

"I... happened to see..."

"Of course you did. And what is your reaction? Not as a trained analyst, but as a citizen?"

"Your Lordship, I... I really would not..."

"Don't worry, Mens Super. Tell me your reaction."

"Lordship, it merely... confirms... information already extant."

"Whispers, you mean."

"Yes, Lordship."

"Then why did you not advise me sooner?"

The Mens Super stiffened. "I am trained to respond to inquiries succinctly stated, not to generate advice spontaneously."

"Very wise, in your profession," said Galinda. "I will try to remember to goad you." The Mens reddened. "So, how do you advise me to respond?"

"I believe his Lordship must already know how to respond, since no such report could appear without his approval."

Galinda laughed. "That's very good, very good," he said, motioning to a minion hitherto concealed in a corner to attend to him. The minion dabbed tears of laughter from the august cheeks. The deaf-mute retreated again. "Of course I knew. And yes, my people already reported the rumors to me. My eyes and ears, that is. Not you, Mens Super. You are my shadow. Who may tell which moves first, the man or his shadow? Tell me, then, shadow, how will I respond?"

"If his Lordship put the dubious story of his putative non-conformance out there, he must wish it believed. To do so merely to punish those who whisper will only further solidify the rumor. To deny it once published is merely further affirmation. His Lordship has decided to approve it and use it for his ends."

"Correct, as usual," Galinda said. "The truth -- whatever that may be -- no longer matters. Seizing opportunities to leverage weakness does. I shall shine purifying light upon the Irredente, Mens Super. Those who slink in the shadows -- that word again -- shall come out and join us -- to an extent, at least. You are aware of goings-on, and Innisfree? Our unofficial new enterprise there?"

"Yes, Lordship. I understand the enterprise -- a special entertainment zone, relaxed restrictions on... types of trade."

"It need no longer be quite so furtive in the planning. We shall still do the thing slowly, you understand. We loosen the Proscriptions with revised regulations, gradations of conformance, that sort of thing. We have some judicial opinions go our way -- gallant tracts on freedom, official resistance but finally a yielding to the popular will. You shall find the judges I need..."

"Yes, but Lordship?"

"What is it?"

"Even if you bring the body of the citizenry and the principle institutions of the hegemony with you, surely you will not have Mr. Godwin. He represents all that would oppose entry for the lower classes into the citizenry. It is in his blood, Lordship."

"Indeed, Mens Super, most sagacious. Hmmm. Well, so be it. Advise him wisely, then -- you're his Mens Super, not mine. He must stand against anything that dilutes purity -- I expect nothing less than such a show. He must stand with his people -- get him some people to stand with; I'm sure you can dig some up. We can generate some democratic heat there, ease his transition to... easier duties."

"Much of the machinery of Conformance shall be undone, Lordship," the Mens said. "That is a decisive break."

"Spontaneous advice, Mens Super?"

"A logical extension of prior advice, Lordship, and therefore advised in this circumstance."

"Presentation is everything in such matters. The machinery of Conform and Coital Regulation may still be used, and in some cases it shall. Not all non-conformings are created equal, Mens Super. Some are more equal than others. Lindenau is an important resource, too: it offers a solution for the difficult cases. We shall bolster it."

"A solution, Lordship."

"A solution, Mens Super. Furthermore, you do not seem to be reckoning the value of pageantry and ceremony. The Church shall be what it has always been -- even more so. Its tenets shall be refined, its practices made even more exalted, its object made purer. It shall further glorify my... this reign of... what shall we call it... reform, Mens Super. The reign of reform."

"And you, Lordship?"

"What of me, Mens Super?"

"Shall you be made pure, sir -- purer, sir?"

"Of course, Mens Super, and what is more, I shall be an example of rectification and the importance of striving towards purity: Mens Super, I believe it's time I found a consort. His Excellency has a daughter or two, I believe?"

"I see, Lordship. Official consortium."

"Procreation, improvement of the stock, Mens Super. Though I should think entirely owing to me, but there it is. We shall satisfy them all. And what of you, Mens Super?"

"Me, sir? I don't understand. We analysts of the École do not partake of consortium, as tending towards a lack of clarity in analysis."

"No, no, Mens Super. I mean, what planet suits you, Mens Super?"

"You send me away for my poor anticipation of your needs, Lordship?"

"You still misunderstand me, Mens Super. Have cheer. I shall give you a planet for your service, should it continue so well. And then you may reconsider the importance of the École Superior and its ways. We are

about history here, Mens Super, and who shall inherit it."

"It is said, Lordship, that the pure shall inherit the universe. You would disprove them?"

"No, Mens," Galinda said. "I will not disprove them. I will violate them. There will be none pure to inherit anything. I hate them their purity. I shall stuff it and mount it."

Chapter fifty

-two. First Lord

A journeyman Typographer, walking on the sands, came upon a shell. 'So beautiful, yet so simple,' he said. He listened to it, and heard music of the sea within. He put it in a pocket and carried it with him that he might be inspired by its example. And there, within, the din grew and grew until finally did it overtake his mind, then his labors, then his life, then all the world. Where once had been a thing of simple beauty, all was wrack and carnage. Vas spoke to this man, debased and ruined: 'Presumptuous One, all that you may find cast down upon the shore is not yours for the taking. Even my simplest Word is not for Man to take unto himself, but spoken that Man may be.'

The Tale of the Typographer, from The Vox's Handbook of Common Wisdoms (Early 6th Emp.)

#

On Andromache, Henryk had disappeared -- had left Peris gasping for breath in the corridor outside the captain's interrogation room. Having now recovered his breath from Henryk missing into him, Peris ran into the interrogation room and tried to help Captain Xenoetas stand. She swatted him away.

"Get away from me, brat," she said. "Help the major up." She worked her comm, and almost immediately an alarm sounded from the hall.

"Captain?" said Peris.

"What is it?"

"He's..."

The captain pushed the table away and saw the damage. "Holy Vas," she said. "He killed him! The little devil killed him!" She entered more code into her comm. The alarm changed from a dull horn to a shrill beep. Xenoetas tried to straighten her garments, but her hair had gone to riot. "Get to your quarters, boy, and keep your mouth shut." She ran out and headed toward the 'pit.

She hadn't gotten far before she was met by her marines. She gave instructions and hurried on. By this time, other personnel were either hustling around or else just trying to see something. Xenoetas yelled summary, expletive-laden commands as she went.

She entered the circular, tiered cockpit and control room just before Captain Titus, who drew himself up short and saluted.

"The Burgred boy," she said. "He's murdered my IO. Get him and put him in the brig. I don't care how old he is, take him down if you have to."

"Sir! You can't possibly mean..."

"Sir! You have a direct order. Carry out your duty."

"Sir!" Titus wheeled around and left the pit.

Xenoetas seethed with rage and paced the 'pit. Duty officers and crew steered clear of her.

"Get Lerner up here, somebody!"

Burgred then appeared on deck. Xenoetas wheeled around to face him.

"Lieutenant, you are relieved of duty as of this moment. And curse you for bringing your sorry presence and your Vas-damned sprat aboard my ship. If I can see you kicked out of the service, sir, I will. I will have you off this ship at the first opportunity. Your sprat I will see consigned to indenture. Mr. Burgred, get out of here!"

With no idea what had happened, but with the gut-wrenching knowledge that somehow, Henryk had gotten himself into another round of trouble, Burgred obeyed the order without further acknowledgement -- or salute -- and left the 'pit. He looked at his comm -- it was a general order, a broad high-security alert. Surely Henryk couldn't have... He couldn't conceive of how a boy could have triggered such an alert. A weapon maybe? Henryk had never pilfered a weapon and had never shown any inclination to go off that way. What did he do this time?

As Burgred passed through the thick sub-hull hatch leading to the 'pit, an arm reached out and pulled him aside.

"Titus!" Burgred said.

"Shhh, sir. Comms off. You've got a problem, sir."

#

On flagship *Palle Nymus*, Admiral -- now First Lord -- Valinder had asked Jiri the vittleshipman to assist Admiral's private secretary and the flag intelligence officer in opening the box of chocolates. All four sat in the Admiral's chambers, the Admiral himself dozing in an arm chair while the others worked at a round table in one corner of chambers. At length, with various exclamations of shock and surprise, the ship's functionaries called in others. A meeting of hurried whispers and plans ensued among the ship's people while Jiri and the now awakened Admiral looked on.

"Lord Valinder," the private secretary finally said, "it's... it's astonishing, sir. Galinda has hijacked the entire machinery of the Irredente. It will take time to wade through these reports and summaries, but he's clearly planning to purge..."

"Eh, purge?" said Valinder. "Like how?"

The private secretary merely raised an eyebrow suggestively.

"Oh, indeed," said Valinder. "Quite. Jiri, I wonder, could we ask you to remain as our guest a short while longer, while my people sort through your gift? I'm sure we can make you comfortable for a short period of time."

#

On *Pydna*, Galinda sat in his Admiralty chambers.

"Lord Galinda," said the private secretary to His Lordship, "a comm from Primus House. The Mens Super attached to His Excellency codes it as urgent."

Galinda shifted his weight in his chair, a wing chair whose hide cover was too new and stiff for his liking. His

admiralty offices were in general too clean for his liking.

"Send it to this scroller," his Lordship said.

Lordship:

As this bears on Admiralty matters, I have taken the initiative to report to you directly. This report summarizes information from the Ministry of Intelligence and analyzed in full as of the present turn. Forensics undertaken by Government in the course of providing for the demolument for the superseded First Consul, Yve, have so far failed to yield conclusive evidence of her presence aboard H.E.S. Papillon during its accidental destruction. Surveillance data from Primus House grounds, as well as interrogations from grounds personnel at Primus House, indicate the anomalous presence of a private car belonging to Captain Melchior, Meteor, and its escort of a grounds cart away from the Primus House spaceport. The grounds cart has been recovered and tests positive for use by Madam Yve and her official consort. It is suggested that Admiralty follow up regarding Captain Melchior...

#

Galinda had immediately sent out orders, phrased broadly to the fleet, to intercept Meteor. A response came in all but immediately:

Lord Galinda:

As Palle Nymphus, my flagship, is battle-ready following exercises, I have directed her captain to proceed immediately to intercept Meteor, per your orders to Fleet Command. I shall report to you directly on our success. May Vas bless the Irredente.

Galinda cursed his haste in issuing the intercept order. Meteor could not engage a ship-of-the-line. It would flee or surrender. He wanted to instigate an action. Galinda intervened:

Palle Nymphus, counter-mand and stand down. Dispatch frigate of Meteor class to battle-jump to the location, with orders to destroy.

It was some time before Palle responded:

Admiralty, Please repeat prior. Communications error on Palle Nymphus.

Galinda's countermand went out again, with emphasis, but received two dispatches from Palle in quick succession:

Admiralty, Meteor intercepted and in range. Meteor in battle stations.

and --

Admiralty, Palle Nymphus encountering heavy fire from Meteor. Stand by.

This was not what Galinda had intended at all.

#

"I'm sorry, Jiri," said Admiral Valinder, on Palle Nymphus, having asked Jiri to be escorted back after his debriefing by the flag's IO. "You won't be heading back Pydna directly as you may have wished. A matter has

come up requiring this ship to take immediate action. I will have the guard escort you to quarters where you may rest until... You will be treated as my guest."

Jiri could not hide his unhappiness. "Isn't there some way I could just..."

"Jiri, if there was any way, I assure you, I would pursue it. It is of the highest importance. It relates directly to your most generous of gifts of chocolates from the Ministry. Here, the guard has arrived. You will be very comfortable, I am sure. Go in peace, sir."

#

On Meteor, Melchior looked on in horror as Palle got the jump on him.

"Lieutenant," said Melchior. "Her Excellency and the consort to the 'pit, immediately. Navigator, can you shear off... is there a course open...?"

"Sir," said the navigator, "it's too late, sir. Palle Nymphus has cannon out and scouts launched. We're sitting ducks, sir, if you pardon the expression."

"Vas, I thought we had more time," Melchior said. "Since when is Admiralty this efficient? Didn't they even convene a precious committee?"

"Captain! They've sent out a barge!"

"Vas, they really want her." He began to pace. "Think, think Melchior!"

Yve entered, followed by Harold. Melchior's glum expression told her all she needed to know.

"Captain, I honor your efforts. It was always a long shot. May I suggest that you confine me -- us -- to the brig with the explanation that you captured us..."

"Madam, thank you for the effort to save my career. I'm afraid that won't work -- for the same reason we sit here unable to move without being blasted to the next system: they followed the trail planetside. I didn't exactly hide my tracks -- I knew this was a one-way voyage. As did you."

"What exactly is going on, Melchior?"

"Flagship, with cannon ready and bomber-scouts encircling. Palle Nymphus, flagship, Valinder. And a fighting captain, Woldegrove, commanding her. Captain's barge is loose -- they're coming to get you."

"Communications?"

"None. It's a compliment, actually. The situation does not require explanation to an experienced officer, and comms are often tactical -- false or misleading. Also, they are relieving me of the obligation to incriminate myself beyond what my actions may prove. Should I be 'forcibly struck from the rolls,' as it is said, my family may maintain some dignity. I would do the same, were I in their position. It is the mean, unworthy officer who would not."

Yve absorbed the fact that Melchior would, in all likelihood, be put to death for his actions trying to save her.

"Do you have to just let them dock? Couldn't you offer me up somehow..."

"They're on their way -- it's pointless to evade the inevitable. Pointless to do anything rash or to flail around when we can at least save face. I'm sorry, Madam. I blame myself for this fool plan. I should have jumped the moment you came on board. I should have put all resources into..."

"Nonsense, sir. I do not accept that." Harold nodded in agreement.

"Now," Melchior put up a hand and continued, "we must make the best of it so that we preserve some dignity for you and, for my part, for the service. Your Excellency, and Consort Harold: in the short time remaining to us, I suggest that we prepare for a dignified surrender, with all the pomp and circumstance due to you, Madam. I will inform my people what we are about and offer them immunity. There's no reason my crew shouldn't sail again, and I will make that plain to the Admiral -- if I am allowed. Madam, Sir, if you will follow me..."

The small-craft port was opened, and the barge from Palle set down within the bowels of Meteor. After what seemed an interminable wait, pressure came up. A retinue of polished marines, led crisply by a captain in regalia, headed a formation leading Yve, trailed by Harold, onto the small, gloomy dock. Melchior came up last, expecting to form the rear guard until such time as the expected marine guard from the Palle barge should form up on the ground. Melchior heard a rumble behind him, however, and turned to see his entire contingent of officers marching down the access hall towards him. He nodded gravely to them and saluted. The senior first lieutenant leading the procession nodded and saluted in return. There was no room for the entire procession to enter the small dock, which already held in dock his own barge and cutter -- or what had been his own, and would now go to his successor on Meteor. He hoped he was looking at him -- he was fortunate to have the best senior first in the fleet. The officer corps would have to stand in line in the access hall, and the line would snake around a corner, where none could hope to get the merest glimpse of what was to occur.

The barge emptied -- no, the marines were awaiting someone, presumably a senior lieutenant from Palle. Yes, that would be fitting. Long-blasters flashed, heels clicked, and salutes flew up. But it was Admiral Valinder himself who awkwardly climbed down from the barge. Eyes that might in other circumstances have turned away to save someone embarrassment did nothing but fix their gazes upon his unimpressive, misshapen figure.

Yve's brow shot up in surprise. As Valinder made his way to the head of his marine guard, Melchior marched stolidly forward to surrender himself, sacrifice his career, and probably begin the process that would lead to his demolument before Vas and the possible ruin of his family.

Valinder stood, somewhat stooped for balance, at the head of his guard and watched Melchior make his way. Then Melchior was before him. Melchior saluted and kept his salute up. Valinder proffered a pro forma return salute.

"Captain Melchior," Valinder said. "I cannot imagine what should possess one of my captains to act thus. You have risked many lives, sir, not the least of which is your own."

Melchior did not answer -- for no question had been asked -- but the remark confused him somewhat by the apparent suggestion of his merit. He remained at attention, salute held up.

"Excellency Yve," Valinder said. He stamped over to her. She stepped away from her guard.

"Admiral Valinder," she said. "I am honored that the most revered officer of the hegemony's fleet should deign to capture me personally. No doubt it will further burnish a brilliant career." She spoke without a trace of irony or disrespect.

"Capture? Your Excellency? You credit me too little even with your rote praise, Madam. For I have not

captured you. I am here to surrender. Congratulations, Madam, on a most impressive victory in space." He dramatically raised a stiff salute with his one arm. The empty, pinned sleeve where his other should have been visibly shook, and a cloudy tear coursed down a channel on his leonine face.

There were gasps.

"By Vas," said Harold, loud enough to be heard.

Melchior had turned his great girth around and stood with his mouth agape.

The hand of every marine in the dock flew up in salute, to whom was not clear.

"Admiral," Yve said. "I do not understand how this can be. But, sir, your offer of surrender is most welcome. I only wish that I could accept it. I cannot allow yet more lives -- thousands of lives -- to be put in jeopardy for my sake."

"Excellency," Valinder said, "with all due respect to you, it is not for your sake. It is for the sake of many billions of lives. It is for the hegemony which I serve. It is for the Irredente. It is for Vas."

Melchior dropped to one knee. Harold instantly followed, then every person in the room as well as the junior officers in the access hall. Yve alone stood, facing Valinder.

"Your reputation is quite well explained to me now, Admiral. And I assure you that no disrespect is taken. I honor you and your words and the weight of wisdom behind them. I therefore ask you now, sir, to accept the position as First Lord of the Admiralty -- in exile -- 'until such time as you shall be relieved by one of duly constituted authority or by incapacity, whichever shall occur first, upon pain of death and ignoble demolument should you fail to adhere to the standards set forth for the conduct and habits of your high office by the duly constituted Government of the Irredente, as well the Holy Book of the Body and its Codes of Conduct.' Do you understand and accept this heavy obligation, sir?"

"Yes, Madam. Humbly, and with Vas in my heart, I accept it. Do you, Madam, care to sit, that we may immediately set about plans for living to see another turn?"

"By all means, Lord Valinder. Let us proceed in the manner you think best."

Chapter fifty

-three. Mutineers

His Excellency's forces in space have achieved a glorious victory! Under the inspired home command of First Lord Galinda, the Irredente Navy has defeated forces under the command of the traitor Valinder...

Holo-flash, Os Divinus Dispatch

#

Xenoetas, at Quarterdeck, looked up from her scroller. "Status report on the Burgred boy, Lerner?" she said.

"No change, Ma'am," he said.

"Where was his mini-comm?"

"Canteen, Ma'am."

"He grabbed food, then. I'd do the same in his place. By Vas, I hope he enjoys it. He may never have a full belly again."

#

Though Burgred knew Henryk wouldn't be there, he looked into Boys Quarters. All boys were within under lock-down, and the room buzzed. He scanned the room quickly, thinking he might see something to give him a clue. He saw Rache sitting with another girl -- what was the other's name? He couldn't remember. Rache's face was puffy from crying. Then Burgred was pretty sure he knew. He made his way belowdecks.

He knew he was on the right track when a mechanic in greasy coveralls slapped his shoulder. "s'alright then, sir," said the mechanic.

"Carry on, then," said Burgred.

Burgred made his way down, receiving various sympathetic looks and gestures. If this many knew, Henryk couldn't hide out very long, no matter how well-intentioned they all were. He quickened his pace.

"Tiff," he said, entering the QC workroom.

"Oh, Mr. Burgred, sir. It's awful. It's just awful. I know something ain't right, sir."

"Listen, Tiff, there's no time. Just listen, and for Henryk's sake, do what I ask."

#

Burgred met Titus in the bowels of Andromache, near the small-craft docks.

"They've got com-eye vid," Titus said. "Of Henryk, I mean. I haven't seen it, but the word's out. Henryk kicked the man's head off. The IO. Dead as a rock."

"Dear Vas," said Burgred. "Vas-damn technology -- thanks for the legature, Bev. Okay, Titus. Did you mean what you said to me?"

"What, doings and doings, sir? Of course, sir. Never more serious in me life. You got something in mind, sir? Another Henryk rescue mission, maybe?" There was a vicious gleam in Titus' eye.

#

"Captain Xenoetas," said her secretary, Lerner, working at his desk beside hers on Quarterdeck, "there's an ansible from Admiralty, Lord Galinda, Ma'am. Uh-oh, then. It's action, Ma'am. Call-out of four ships, three being frigate-class, including Andromache. Coded co-ordinates. 'Waste no time,' Ma'am. Intercept and destroy Meteor, Ma'am!"

"Melchior, the son of a whore. Always lucky -- but here's some justice at last. Get it over to the 'pit. Tell them to order the clear for battle. I'll be right down. Get the marines split between the Burgred boy and battle stations. Where's my dress jacket?"

#

Burgred looked up in disbelief as the alarm to clear for action resounded through the ship. Immediately, there were shouts, running figures, and the banging of equipment against hatches and walls. From habit, he checked his comm, then he remembered that since he had been relieved of duty, he would be locked out.

But he wasn't. Someone had forgotten to lock him out -- or didn't lock him out, at any rate, since all the status codes were displayed. He couldn't believe his eyes. He set the monitor on so he could listen as he worked. The 'pit was a frenzy of activity. Cannon were being dropped down. And the jump was set -- thirty points. He would have to work faster. Meteor? Impossible. It had to be pirates, he thought. Melchior was probably already dead and tossed into space.

#

Below-decks, Tiff made her way with a greasy, battered lift-cart down the service halls, the big diamond-coated titanium rings with their polythane bushings stacked atop one another like ship's donut-cake. When she got near the small-craft docks, a marine who stood there at attention must have heard her approach but turned away from her and walked off without a word or a glance back. She got to C-dock, looked at her comm to double-check the code, and took her load in.

"Head down, nearly there, kiddo," she whispered into the stack of donuts.

#

Hanna was lost below-decks. She didn't understand the layout of the docks, which were reached separately, each with its own maze of corridors with off-jutting chambers of various kinds that she knew nothing about. She knew she couldn't comm anyone -- she had been warned. Her shoulder pack was starting to get heavy.

Suddenly, a marine appeared.

"Dr. Hanna?" he said.

"Science," she said, "not Medical."

"Yes, Ma'am. I believe you're this way, Ma'am," said the freckled young man. He led her in what turned out to be a quite simple route to a large service hatch door. "I believe you'll be wanting to go in here, Ma'am." And with that, he saluted, clicked his heels, and left.

#

The 'pit on Andromache hummed with activity.

"One point to jump, Ma'am," said the navigator.

"Last notice," Xenoetas replied automatically, massaging her temples to prepare for the next phase. The last notice had already been broadcast, and the count would be showing all over the ship.

An operations officer looked into his set-vid and made a face. "Sir... Ma'am..." He did a double-take then asked ship's systems for a re-check on the status code that had appeared. "Ma'am!" he said. "Cutter bay door open. Cutter away, Ma'am?"

"What?" she said. "Get that door closed!"

"Already closing, Ma'am. Cutter out and away, Ma'am."

"Burgred!" Xenoetas said.

Then Andromache was somewhere else -- in the home system, with two ships in the offing. One, a frigate, Meteor. The other, flagship Palle Nymphus. Cannon were at the ready, systems were up.

#

Xenoetas sat, strapped in, with arms gripping the edges of her 'pit chair. "Second most senior in the 'pit," said Xenoetas, "whoever that is, get with Titus of the marines and get Burgred into the brig. If he puts up a fight, shoot him. Immediately!"

"Sir!" answered a voice, and a burly, close-shaved lieutenant ran from the 'pit, comming as he went.

"Comms, who's saying what out there?"

"Nothing, Ma'am. Comms are shut out -- looks like Palle -- I don't know, Ma'am. Okay, here it is. They're in some sort of parley or colloquy on Meteor, Ma'am. Or there's been a capture or exchange. I can't figure it out. Admiral Valinder shows to be present on Meteor, but Palle has fired a warning over them -- pardon, Ma'am, wide of them. And another shot, closer, Ma'am."

"Blow it up, Nav, I can't see," Xenoetas said.

The holo-projection in the pit shifted to a magnified view of the other two ships.

"Meteor closing on Andromache, Ma'am."

"Vas!" said Xenoetas. "Why is flagship Palle so damned slow? Guns ready, lieutenant. Fire on my command."

"Palle chasing Meteor, Ma'am."

"Not firing?"

"Missed again, Ma'am."

"Impossible," said Xenoetas. "They could spit on them. Comm to flagship Palle -- do I stand down here or set

up for firing?"

"No response, Ma'am."

Xenoetas sat in silence, her features working as she tried to work out Palle's strategy. It was like the exams.

To her right, the 'pit's hatch opened. Marines streamed into the 'pit, followed by Titus. They quickly formed up, blasters gripped tightly. Titus clicked his heels. Burgred entered.

"Mr. Burgred," said Xenoetas. "Explain yourself. You are directed to the brig. Titus, get this officer out of here immediately!"

Points on the clock were slipping away as ships were in motion.

Burgred spoke aloud: "Captain Xenoetas of Andromache, you are hereby relieved of duty for incompetence and derangement. Titus, strip off her comm and bud and direct her to the brig, where she shall be held pending proceedings. Carry her if need be. And careful with the leg."

"Sir!" said Titus. Marines descended on her, tore off the straps of the command chair, and forcibly removed her. She glowered in hatred and spat venomous words at Burgred as she left, but he was already in the command chair.

"Senior on deck, what is the status?"

"Uh..."

"Speak, man. Status!"

"Meteor... Sir... closing on Andromache, cannons at the ready...Palle in pursuit of Meteor, firing on Meteor, first warnings, now misses."

"Misses? Impossible. It's a trap. Who's got Palle?"

"Woldegrove, sir, captain, but the Flag is on Meteor for some reason -- we can't work out why."

Burgred's heart sank. He knew the feint being practised upon Andromache. He scanned the room to look at the faces, hoping that by committing this final scene to memory, it might somehow be preserved, or at least made significant beyond the drab reality that it actually was. Well, there was nothing for it. To battle. He tried to remember the story his father told, of his many-times-great grandfather, and how he had won.

#

Admiral Valinder had not been able to return from Meteor to his flagship, Palle, before Andromache appeared in the offing. Palle's Captain Woldegrove, however, was in direct communication with him. She sat, strapped down, in Palle's 'pit.

"Frigate Andromache in the offing, Ma'am," said the navigator of Palle. "Battle-ready, cannon coming out."

"Mr. Spenser," said Captain Woldegrove, "With my compliments to Admiral Valinder, we're all in and ready for action."

"Valinder says, 'assume command,' Ma'am. I believe he's still in colloquy over there, Ma'am."

Woldegrove considered. "Then we shall rely on Melchior's sound judgment. Mr. Spenser, fire another shot wide of Meteor." She watched Andromache for clues.

"Andromache feinting, Ma'am. Broadcasting 'rendering aid to Palle' by broad comm spit."

"Hmmm," Woldegrove said. "Nav, close the gap now. Send a final shot as close over Meteor as you can without a hit."

#

Melchior, commanding Meteor, tried to keep track of both the flagship's doings and Andromache's intentions. Valinder sat in the 'pit, watching.

"Shearing off, sir. Andromache shearing off."

"That's an old one," said Valinder. "Andromache is threading the needle -- by Vas, how did she learn that?"

"Watch where she goes," Melchior said. "What's Palle doing?"

"Nothing, sir. Check. Closing the gap, sir. Incoming fire from the flagship, sir."

"Hold on," Melchior said.

"High, sir -- just."

"Andromache coming about. Oh, comms, sir. Andromache rendering aid, sir?"

"Hah! Good one, Xenoetas. I must say, I've never given that... woman enough credit. Okay, coordinate with Palle -- slow and come fully about."

#

On Andromache, there was grim determination.

"Lieutenant Burgred...er... Sir, Palle closing on Meteor. Shoots. Miss, sir. Hold. Sir, Meteor... slowing, sir. Gap is too small, sir -- we can't make it. Meteor turning."

So it had failed -- they had seen through his move. Palle and Meteor shut the gap he had aimed for.

"Is Palle shooting?"

"No, sir. But we're now in range, Sir, barely."

It was an impossible situation now. Palle and Meteor would blow Andromache apart. Run? It couldn't help him -- he'd be captured, and he'd look a coward and a fool. He couldn't flee the entire Irredente. But why were they coming after Xenoetas? Something still didn't make sense.

"Sir, Meteor, acting on behalf of the flag, signaling parley!"

"What?" Burgred considered. "Acknowledge -- from 'Captain, Andromache.' Don't use names."

"Sir, it's a message from Admiral Valinder, styled 'Valinder, First Lord.'"

Was it pirates, then? They got the title wrong. "Go on."

" 'Andromache, stand down and be spared.' Now I'm summarizing, sir -- Captain Xenoetas to be allowed a 'suitable command' in the re-organized Navy under Valinder. First Consul In Exile Yve, governing. His Holiness in residence, sir?" The Comm officer turned to look at Burgred with a look of shock.

"Just continue," Burgred said.

"If refuse, allowed transport to suitable port or base. Officers as wish to go. Remaining crew to be dispersed as needs of reorganized... services allow. Prepare to be boarded."

"Sir, there's something... stand by. Sir, ships in the offing, sir. Briseus, Gamine, L'astert. Battle-ready. Another small craft, cannot fully resolve."

Burgred had to make a decision quickly. Either trust the message from the "First Lord" that there was a rebellion, or just give up hope and run to the newcomers in the offing. He mentally ran through the permutations.

"Take this quickly," said Burgred. "Senior lieutenant Hugh Burgred to First Lord Valinder. Burgred in command. Xenoetas relieved. Terms accepted in full. Coming about. Ready for orders."

And then there was no time. It was all orders and action as Valinder's newly-bolstered forces readied to face the three frigates in the offing. Valinder spoke:

"This is First Lord Valinder of the Reorganized Hegemony Naval Forces. I speak on behalf of Palle Nymphus, Meteor, Andromache, and Nessum. Irredente vessels approaching flagship Palle Nymphus and her convoy, stand down now and be spared. If you attack, be forewarned that we will have no choice but to fight to the last breath of every man, woman, and child on these ships. We will take as many of you with us as by Vas's grace we can.

"And the Plan of Vas favors us. You come on behalf of a government that is illegitimate before Vas and that no true citizen of the Irredente may recognize. Your First Consul Godwin is a puppet of the Cabil Member Galinda, a usurper and a tyrant. Deny it at your peril, and hear this: each of you that stands down: you and your officers and crew will be offered assignments to a suitable command or position in Her Excellency, First Consul Yve's Reorganized Forces. If you choose, instead, to surrender to the Reorganized Hegemony Forces and under accepted protocols of war, you will be permitted safe passage or transport to a suitable base or port. I also speak for His Holiness, Auspex Saggatus X, now in residence on my flagship Palle, who commands your obedience as the legitimate leader before Vas of your Church and of the Irredente Body itself, that you must reject the authority of those who have seized nominal power of government, church, and arms in the Irredente. Stand down and be spared, or be killed with no hope of legitimate rites of demolument before Vas. That is all."

At last, as Valinder knew it must, came their flag, Titania. The battle was joined. Burgred, now in command of Andromache, went forth with Valinder and the ancients, and the voices of a hundred dead Burgreds contained within his code urged him on.

#

A turn gone by and many hundreds, perhaps thousands dead -- Gamine got her hospital away only to explode and blow pieces of herself into it -- the hospital had hurtled away, lifeless, into space. Briseus, maimed, bolted to join Valinder, who needed every person in her to man and patch his ships; she would be emptied of life and stores then left to space. Palle was hurt but sound, her mechanicals untouched; crews feverishly patched and

shored her innards as she went. Titania, grievously wounded, had given no quarter but finally had little choice but to take what she could gather at her side and go. And L'astert wasn't with her: at the last moment, she too sheared away to join Valinder and His Holiness, though not without a mean parting shot from her flag.

Burgred had asked the flag for permission to fetch his hospital.

"Andromache, how many in the hospital you jettisoned?"

"Staff and two score sick," said Burgred.

"No time, captain. Carry on."

The surviving ships of the Reorganized Forces gathered over the course of a day at a pre-determined rendezvous point where the Holy Yacht waited. Nessum, a gunboat assigned to the Holy Yacht, arrived first bearing orders, and the Holy Yacht shot away again, without her escort or her Holy Patron, on a mission that none but Valinder, Burgred, and His Holiness knew.

The immediate need of the Reorganized Forces was coordination of command and locating safe harbor for ships and personnel. The problems of command, re-supply, basing, and myriad other matters would require labors of a type that the fighting captains despised. Still, a thrill filled the air that made the labors less mindless and the camaraderie more profound. Though no one had expected revolution, it had come to them, and they embraced it. Also, a slow creep of mists upon their vision had been cleared away and the truth revealed: the Irredente had been stolen away from them as they reposed in the humdrum of ordinary daily life. Omens had been ignored; comfort too much prized. Work now purified them.

In what did evil consist? It felt strange that their enemy should be -- themselves. They had gone to battle with their brothers and sisters, not some monster from the depths of space. A thing that called itself "the Irredente" still existed, but it now seemed, to those who had heretofore identified themselves as integral to it, less a hegemony than a chimera to which they had succumbed, a mass hallucination. Evil consisted, it seemed, in blind belief that humanity was right and pure of necessity. Evil dwelled within themselves and was passivity, torpor, ignorance.

In a haven among remote outliers, the Reorganized Forces got themselves into a semblance of order. Over the course of several days, roles got sorted out, protocols established, plans for re-supply made, and a broad strategy for capturing additional vessels, base stations, and -- eventually -- planets settled upon. They were heady, exhausting days for Her Excellency Yve, Consort Harold, and especially First Lord Valinder, who was simply not physically capable of attending to every matter for which his towering standing was needed. But a few words from him accomplished a great deal, and Yve rationed him, employing him forward as needed and invoking his will at other times. Harold succeeded in focusing Yve upon the larger matters and getting her to ignore all else -- things for which she would otherwise have liked to form a committee, outline an action plan, or commit to a 'short list'.

The problem of what to do with Xenoetas was not easily solved. Some argued for release on her own recognizance, as an officer of post rank due a certain amount of respect. It was suggested, however, that the safety of her person could not be assured, at least not for the immediate future. Others suggested confinement until a suitable port could be found. Valinder vetoed this because of her record of service which, though not necessarily distinguished, was no worse than many others of post rank whom no one would ever consider for confinement under such circumstances. In the end, she was allowed no rank in the Reorganized forces but permitted an unspecified diplomatic rank on Palle, putatively representing Godwin's government as soon as a communiqué to that effect could be accomplished. It would probably keep her safe, and she could be seen as preserving her loyalties while maintaining a relative freedom on a very large vessel. On Burgred's advice, she was allowed Lerner as a supernumerary with no data privileges beyond those necessary for the running of the

new diplomatic office.

Henryk posed a thornier problem still. Xenoetas raved to the officers who handled her that Burgred and his family had manipulated everyone, from the legitimate Admiralty on down, and that they had brought a sinister, murderous monster onto her ship. At length, Harold intervened simply to quell the rampant, disquieting rumors that her complaints beget. He met with Burgred, but Burgred didn't know anything about the alleged murder of the IO officer. Burgred didn't mention the com-eye data that Titus told him existed, and Harold, for whatever reason, didn't ask for it despite Xenoetas' claims of a conspiracy to bring her down. In the end, Harold noisily arranged with Admiralty for a court of inquiry to be set at such time as it should be necessary -- if the boy were found, if he were brought aboard, if the press of other matters relented so as to make it possible, and various other contingencies that Valinder's private secretary committed to florid, archaic service-speak.

There were problems specifically on Andromache from the Henryk fallout. It was widely known that Henryk was somehow involved in the violent death of an officer, and rumor worked like a poison -- even the dead hand of Lady Arlette was not spared insinuation, a rumor having traveled abroad that she herself had directed the rescue of Henryk from Edom owing to older loyalties. It would never be possible for Henryk to serve on Andromache, and it would probably not be possible for him to return to the service at all, or -- Burgred thought hopefully -- perhaps not for several standards.

Burgred himself stood in a precarious position. He had mutinied, as everyone well knew. That every other officer on Andromache had done likewise was of little moment -- Burgred was senior and therefore chargeable with the capital offense. Burgred was not privy to the deliberations at Admiralty (consisting of three captains and a weary, often very cranky First Lord) but he felt sure that even were he never actually charged, an ineradicable taint now stained his name and career -- such as it was. He reminded himself that it might have been worse, and that Henryk's path would certainly have been worse had Burgred never plucked him from Edom. There were various ways in all this in which death had been the most likely outcome. This was a slender reed, however, on which to hang any pride of accomplishment. He and Henryk were alive despite long odds, but he had hoped for so much more since that turn, long ago, when his father had told him that a Burgred heir was alive on an outlier somewhere.

Chapter fifty

-four. The Eyrie

To: Vox Rectoris, Neu Beauville

Sir, Be it directed:

That the female nonconform from the Newtown old quarter, identified by acolyte callout at the corpus proceeding, and improperly in attendance, requiring purification rites out of time, be identified to the Jure for proceedings consonant with their authority.

May Vas bless all,

Hersey, V.D., Neu Beauville, Edom.

#

Though not widely traveled by Irredente standards prior to his envoyship, Hersey had at least visited a few worlds and had vicariously experienced, through lessons and holos, many more. Since ascending to Envoy, he had visited another score. Still and all, nothing had prepared him for Aris, which he could scarcely conceive as habitable at all.

The ship that brought them down had no ports, but Tildy had turned on a holo for him that showed their approach and descent. She helpfully rotated the planet at various angles for his inspection. Wild, roiling oceans covered a large proportion of the planet. The lands rose up in incrementally taller and taller peaks rising from dark watery depths and then frightful chasms. As these peaks marched along, many had had their tops lopped off somehow to form tablelands. Hersey thought he could make out accessible lowlands here and there, down within and among the peaks, but shadows obscured the view. Aris, then, was a world of cliffs and heights, with any arable land a pittance.

On the final descent, the holo winked out. The seats immobilized them, and they finally felt a vague bump as the craft landed. Exiting was not swiftly accomplished. They waited through long routine checks. Tildy said that the ship's hull had to be cleaned and decontaminated. That evidently concluded at some point, because a small 'bot entered the cabin and spent still more time in scanning, sampling, and analyzing. Tildy fell asleep. Hersey meditated to calm his nerves, but finally he, too, dozed shallowly. And then it all ceased in a bath of golden light entering from an aperture that appeared in the hull. Two of Tildy's people showed the pair of travelers solicitous attentions in unnecessarily extricating them from fully-automated restraint systems. Tildy spoke to them while Hersey looked on -- he had misplaced the amulet. Then they led Hersey -- after assisting him in ducking his head to avoid a concussive rap against the hull -- onto a gently sloping ramp onto a dockworks, where either an early-morning or late-day sun shone upon them.

From the dock, Hersey could see that they had landed on an enormous tableland of the type he had espied from the craft. By squinting, he could just make out that the tableland dropped off, but haze made it impossible to see anything beyond. He was then led -- with another reminder to duck -- onto an elevator downward. Gravity seemed somewhat light. At the bottom of the dockworks, he saw nothing but the flat plain speckled with handsome buildings of various types that he took to be the far-flung workings of a planetary-class spaceport. It was all very tidy and orderly, however, and wherever a clearing offered itself, plantings and even the occasional garden grew, as though those who worked the spaceport also dwelled there.

Tildy had helped him find and employ the amulet, and she and groundspersons who came and went constantly solicited for his wants and well-being. After Tildy had performed some sort of official duties in a serene and

pleasant office -- where it was plain that the constant comings-and-goings of persons had nothing to do with duties to be performed and everything to do with catching a glimpse of Hersey's personage -- Tildy, waving or winking to nearly everyone, escorted Hersey to a large, elegant car, where a hail-fellow-well-met driver waited within.

The holo from space inadequately prepared Hersey for the reality on the planet surface, which would have been still more magnificent to him had he not been so apprehensive. For as far as he could see, the planet wove a lacework pattern of crags and gashes, the precipitous, frightful inverse of the serene green tablelands that formed the only seemingly hospitable grounds. And while the tablelands were not uniformly flat and regular, one's impression was of something barrenly pristine undermined by a swift, titanic erosive force, god-like in potency. Hersey tried to make out some common directionality to the flow of the dark, irregular crevicing that had made this world a skein, but none was discernible. From some angles, there seemed a pattern; viewed moments later, all pattern was lost or a completely different pattern seemed to take shape in the mind's eye.

"It is beautiful, father, is that not?" Tildy said.

"Ah, uh, yes, it is... rather something."

"Soon the full day will arrive and the avials will go from eyrie to eyrie on their rounds and visits. They are magnificence itself."

"I have no doubt of it," Hersey said.

As they began flying lower in the car, the tablelands shrank in size but the most frightening of depths assumed a less inky blackness. The great, clipped sine waves mellowed into simpler, sharper sonics of fingered slopes gripping small flat-tops. From the cliffs raking downward, dramatic little trees held out leafy branches like meal-servers juggling platters. Subtle dancing faces of swiftly descending streams, then steaming falls, resolved themselves in the less-gloomy depths. But occasional plunging descents still punctuated the landscape.

Built structures that were unmistakably habitations appeared, not on the flat-tops as might be expected, but cantilevered out from cliffs, below the flats. He saw no dwellings on the verdant flats, though there appeared to be dig-outs and huts. The engineering of the habitations sprouting nest-like from the cliffs evidenced sophisticated engineering, and the structures were light, graceful, and beautiful beyond description. And big. Houses, large, with enormous windows and doors, and ample decks. Houses intended for leisure. Elegance, simplicity, light -- wealth.

"I have called ahead to Pelleas," Tildy said. "He expects you. He has asked the others to refrain from visits until you should be received by him."

"Does he live in one of these places, these houses jutting out from the cliffs?"

"That is his eyrie just ahead, father. We soon will be within. The eyrie of Pelleas has seen many visitors in his time, which is a much greater time than mine."

The car landed on an impressive cantilevered garden in which short grasses mingled with flowering plants and what, from the manner of tending, looked like vegetables. Immediately as the car hood opened, Hersey heard birds. Not a cacophony, but a collection of melodious sounds, varied and lovely, ricocheting from depths and crevices Hersey could not see from where he stood. The driver and Tildy huddled and spoke, then Tildy took Hersey's hand. He initially shrank from her small, warm touch, but she would have none of it and gripped him firmly. She led him toward the multi-angled plane geometries of the glass and 'crete eyrie. The driver had split

off on another path, helmet in hand and running.

As they entered the shadow of the cantilevered deck a level above them, huge glass doors of twice Hersey's height had already been slid away. The strains of birds singing from seemingly every direction accompanied their steps within. Hersey involuntarily stopped, nearly yanking Tildy's arm off.

"The father from the old worlds must accompany me now," she said. "Himself waits in his study for us. He is anxious to see you." Hersey obeyed but haltingly, gaping and overawed by some inexplicable force of harmoniousness within the monumental dwelling.

"Master Pelleas!" she cried. "Clothildewynne of Eiderdonne Eyrie announces a father of the ancient Empire worlds, Master Father Hersey in the personhood of himself!" She swept her arm outwards towards their host, beaming with pride.

The small creature of otherworldly, magnetic beauty presented him to a winged, god-like magnificence upon a massive perch. Hersey willed himself not to cower and to meet the great creature's gaze: a male nearly double Hersey's height, disproportionately broader, with huge, skin-covered wings upfolded behind him. His forearms and hands appeared vestigial, his feet elongated and all but taloned -- human skin stretched over long, slender toes gripping an irregular, stripped tree branch of some dark, waxy wood. His soft, close-fitting garments displayed an impressive, articulated musculature but could not conceal its waning with the effects of age. His face, powerful and chiseled, showed wizened lines of age and care. He was nearly bald, with a mere stubble surrounding his pate.

"You are early, father. I had not expected anyone from the Empire to arrive during my lifetime, which is long but not epochal." His voice rang out like a clarion.

Hersey could never account later for what he did, and for many days after he burned with shame at the remembrance: he genuflected to an abomination.

"No, no, father," Pelleas said, his voice limned with weariness. "You are quite mistaken; you do me more credit than I deserve -- indeed, than my race deserves. Our physical impression beget our pride and downfall in the old Empire. I beg now that you rise and do not repeat this posture of submission, which I do not doubt you yourself do not understand and which I assuredly do not seek. I had forgotten what we did -- how we are apprehended. I am humbled by your posture."

He turned, then, and spoke to Tildy with an abrupt change in his syntax: "Youngwynne Clothilde, over there is my groom's chair; kindly fetch it for this man. Then you may join the others." To Hersey when she had gone, he said: "You no doubt find our symbiants mercurial and amusing. They are in fact extraordinary creatures. In all ways that matter, greater than us, but unfortunately fated like us to remain here, unchanging, enslaved to the past." He ended uncertainly, with what sounded like a sigh.

Hersey was uncertain what to do or say. He fell back on platitudes: "Thank you for receiving me in this grand setting, Master Pelleas." He felt disadvantaged sitting, and he rose from the chair. "May I for clarification ask: do you speak a different tongue than the young woman?"

Pelleas raised an eyebrow did not otherwise seem perturbed by Hersey's standing posture. "That is true for the moment, and only for your sake. She and I speak the same tongue. Your lodestar would suggest a shift in the manner of speaking just now, that is true: it perfectly renders the speech of the hearer. You speak an Imperial tongue, once known to us but long neglected. I have made a study of it, though perhaps my manner of speaking it is somewhat archaic. Learning from books can never capture the essence of a people's manner of speech."

"You credit yourself too little, sir. You speak excellently well. You would make a fine Vox in the Irredente."

"Is it 'Irredente' now? I see. Of 'vox' I know not. I trust this is a compliment, and if so, that is well said. You are the first emissary from the old... from there. I have met some of your bioform and therefore presumably of your coding, but these were not esteemed members of your Irredente, I dare say. They would be esteemed by few, I should think, but I am no reliable judge of these things. Port towns and sailors were ever a doubtful lot."

"What you say does not surprise me, Master Pelleas, and that is partly the reason for my voyage here, obtained only at great time, expense, and personal difficulty."

"I am sorry, father. Are you not well? We can..."

Hersey blushed. "No, I am fine, I assure you. I have made the mistake of hyperbole. I am new to the phraseology and usages of diplomacy."

"Diplomacy, yes," rang out the resonant voice. "A tricky business. Your card states 'Envoy,' does it not? Curious that it mentions not your 'Irredente.'"

"That is easily explained, Master Pelleas," Hersey said, "as I am not, in actuality, a representative of the government. Rather, I represent His Holiness, Auspex Saggatus X, the highest servant of Vas and of our Church."

Pelleas raised and partly stretched his great wings. Hersey flinched.

"Ah, indeed, Envoy! A holy man! That is marvelous, marvelous. No doubt your kind bow in obeisance to you, Envoy. I am doubly flattered! But please, tell me, what is the reason for your visit. As I have said, you are much earlier than I would have thought likely. From this, I take it that something has gone amiss with you or your Irredente."

"I cannot say what has happened since I left, but no, not to my knowledge. If anything, the Irredente is stronger. That was my fear. I saw..."

"Yes?"

"We are a people of rules and proscriptions. We are the children of Vas. We preserve humanity following the fall..."

Pelleas' wings again shot up and quickly flapped, sending a gust of air through the chamber.

"I am sorry. Pray, continue, Envoy," Pelleas said.

"But for Vas and his word, we would be like... "

"Me? Yes, I understand. I have heard tidings of where the Empire went, and now I see that those tidings are true. A renormalized genome was re-seeded, is that correct?"

"Vas renewed the body, Master Pelleas. He made us human again."

Pelleas put a small finger to his lips in thought and looked hard at his interlocutor.

"Let me ask you this, Envoy Hersey. Well, first, how long ago was this?"

"The time of Vas, Master Pelleas?"

"If you say so, Envoy. Is that the time of which you speak, the 'renewal'?"

"Yes. Vas smote Gaetia Unum, inaugurating his interventions in the affairs of man."

"Yes, Gaetia Unum, of course," Pelleas said. "The apotheosis. The scattering. Then you must know who I am -- who we are -- Envoy."

"I believe so, Master Pelleas. I did not immediately, but yes, I know now." Hersey averted his eyes for a moment.

"What do you want, Envoy. Why have you come here?"

"Something is infecting our society, degrading it. It is all the old signs and symptoms -- the last Empire redux, a time of loss. I am asked by His Holiness to seek out what and why. My inquiries led me... here, to the Beyond."

"Beyond? Beyond what, father?"

"Beyond our hegemony. To wherever your kind have scattered."

"Our kind? Our kind is here, father. You have found me. What would you ask? Do you think I have harmed you in some way? Do you believe that I can help you?"

"Truly, I do not know, Master Pelleas. That is why I am here. I am here to... I am called here."

"Well, hear this, human from the Irredente. You do not know of loss. You cannot conceive of it. Whatever it is you think you may lose or have lost, know that you -- you! -- may regain it and might some day celebrate. I, however... We... cannot. Of that apotheosis, Gaetia Unum, we are all that remains, we avials and these symbiants who stoop to serve us in ways we cannot possibly merit, we shall never regain what we were. We are no longer an aspirational bioform. We are... history. Your history. And though proud you may be of your bioform, be assured, it is sowed from our seed. Take care, father."

"Master Pelleas, with all due respect, that is a falsity. Vas cast you -- your kind, I mean -- from Gaetia Unum. Vas created man anew, on blessed Mount Pydna. It is written in the Book of the Body, and so it must be."

Pelleas composed himself and studied Hersey. "No doubt, father. I have no reason to doubt what you say. I must go back and ask, father, how is your code preserved in an unchanging form?"

"You mean, how does Vas preserve us?"

"Yes, then: how does Vas preserve you?"

"Through the holy Codes, inspired by the Book of the Body itself."

"Proscriptions, then?"

"Rules, proscriptions, practices."

"And genomic deviancy? It too is the order of things. What of that?"

"Man fell from the heights in which Vas dwells and so can never achieve perfection, if that is what you mean. To the extent that imperfection and nonconformity exists, it is tended to separately and beloved for its own sake -- though it be err."

"So that the word may continue to be uttered correctly in the main, I take it."

"That is so, Master Pelleas. We are Vas's gardeners, weeding and pruning as Vas would have us do."

Pelleas looked sadly out toward the grounds of his eyrie. "No," he said, "I see I have been much mistaken, father Hersey. You are not arrived early. You are probably too late. Who was it that tried to follow you into the frontier? You are aware that you were followed?"

Hersey's eyes shot up in surprise. "I... was not aware..."

"Indeed, father. Even the holy are not immune from profanation in your Irredente. Do not worry; you are here alone, and none may find you now. The Mediant has made it so. The Mediant no doubt prepared your coming. All find what they seek within the span of the Mediant." Bitterness infused Pelleas' voice as he uttered these last words.

"I... I do not know what I seek, Master Pelleas," Hersey said. "And I do not rightly know how it is I came to be here."

"Many a being has said the same," Pelleas said, "and died no wiser, if content nonetheless. Perhaps you will fare different than they."

"Than you, you mean, Master Pelleas?"

"No, Father," Pelleas said. "We are cursed to know precisely why we are here, to our everlasting sorrow. Beauty and pride should ne'er have wed, for what a fool that begets."

Chapter fifty

-five. O-Ring

No, apostate: this universe around you is not an instance of creation, whether by Vas or his maker. It is an aspect of the multi-versal procreation, which is everlasting and a thing unto itself. Procreation, ceaseless, is the divine word forever resonating.

Lesson of the Mediant to Hersey, from Hersey, Vox: Journals

#

Andromache's cutter, nearly two days out and on a course presumably set by Burgred, let the unknown station take over her guidance systems.

"Welcome to O-Ring, traveler. Name your pleasure: gyno, ecto, organo, holo. Credit or swaps. Small-craft please proceed to O-dock or permit auto-systems to be engaged. It's all for you, service above and beyond, at O-Ring."

"Uh-oh," Tiff said. The proximity alarm had awakened them sixty points earlier. Henryk, strapped into a bunk, had fallen asleep again. Tiff and Hanna warmed some old coffee and tried to abide it, a scalding sip at a go, while strapped into pilot chairs at the flight console -- there was no gravity on the cutter. The cutter had a ti-ribbed diamond nose that gave a broad view of space. It still gave Hanna the shivers to look down into space, even though she had trained to deal with zero-G. Henryk had been glued to the co-pilot seat for the first several hours after they had bolted from Andromache, but after that he fell into rounds of sleep, mysterious communings with his gear and various parts contained in bins, count-downs to rations, and the like.

When the cutter's systems could pull the O-Ring into full view, it was clear that it was just a ring segment and round-house cut away from a much older base station. Four mismatched spokes still connected the central systems in the round house with the operations areas of the ring. Decidedly irregular bolt-ons and baubles had sprouted like boils and barnacles from various segments of the ring. They, too, seemed a jumble of old mech -- probably from different eras, salvaged from Vas-knew-what sorts of craft or other stations. On the top side of the round house -- from their vantage point in space -- the up-jutting male core connector, which would once have allowed the ring to be connected to others, looked to have been slowly eaten away by some mysterious process. Tiff eyed the station dubiously.

"I don't think Burgred had this in mind," said Hanna.

"He said to find and dock to anything," Tiff said. "It certainly is that."

They looked at one another uncertainly.

"What should we do?" Hanna said.

"I wish I knew, Hanny," Tiff said. "It's a dock, it's got people, we got nothin' but a ship's cutter. I don't know as we got any choice."

"It's only been a couple of days," Hanna said.

"You know about trade fairs?" Tiff said.

"You mean like on base stations? I've heard of them."

"Diamond-clad rule: the first offer you get is always the best. Only a fool waits for somethin' better to come along."

"Yeah, but I think this might be a weensy bit different, Tiff."

"No, it ain't," Tiff said. "You got big rules of the universe, and little ones."

"And this is a little one?"

"No, honey, 's a big one -- you fell right into that. We gotta go in."

Hanna made a face.

"We'll keep the sprat in here," Tiff said. "There ain't nothin' in there I haven't seen before, and you can stick with me. Nobody's gonna mess with a Navy cutter. He'll be fine in here."

"It's a theory," said Hanna.

"Give me somethin' better, Hanny. I'm all ears."

Nothing better suggested itself, and Tiff let the cutter get drawn into a lone berth, already irised open for them, and located inside the ring proper. The auto-systems working in tandem oriented the cutter's berthing to take advantage of inertial gravity from the spinning wheel. Other, larger craft clung in clusters, like dilly-dallies, on the outside of the ring, presumably where there were chambers for ingress and egress into the ring.

"I got to think about this," said Tiff. "We need some sort of plan."

"Can't we just get them to comm or ansible for us?" said Hanna.

"That'd be the decent them for them to do, 'a course. But I don't expect too much decency to show itself in there. I got some credit, but I don't know if it extends out here -- and I won't know 'til I ask. Also, I don't know who to call, if you get my meanin'. They probably got a warrant out for Henryk -- it sounds ridiculous just sayin' it -- and Burgred, well, who knows if he can do anything. I doubt we got away with no consequences -- they're gonna know it was the uncle. He told me to get to a Guild ship of some kind, that they'd take my credit and put us down somewhere. But this ain't no Guild shop, and I doubt if anybody here is in tight with the Guild. Or if there are, they wouldn't let us in on it. All we got is us. And I definitely got to watch you. You'd be meat in there."

Hanna blushed.

"We got to get the boy woken up so he's knows what's square," Tiff said.

They waited a while longer in thoughtful silence, then Hanna unstrapped herself and walked -- happy to have gravity again -- back to the bunks.

"Rise and shine, Henryk. You've got work to do," she said.

When he was roused and given some food and drink to revive him, he joined them in the cockpit, in a seat just behind the two within the ribbed diamond nose-cone.

"It's a way-station, Henryk," Hanna said. "Like a trading post. People come here to... buy stuff they need. It's kind of rough, Henryk, so we need you to guard the ship while we see what we can do to... get somewhere

else, to get passage somewhere."

"They don't keep it very clean here," Henryk said. "They'd never make it in the Navy."

"No, Henryk, it's not the Navy," Tiff said. "That's another reason -- this ain't no place for a boy. It's a grownup place."

"I still want to see," Henryk said. "Can't I just come in a little way? I'll come right back to the cutter. I promise I will."

"No sir," said Hanna. "There's no way you're getting out of here into this place. You could get lost, too, and Vas only knows what you'd get into in there."

"But I'll be good. I'll stay with you," Henryk said. "Please?"

"N - O - no, Henryk, and that's an order," said Hanna. "Right, Tiff?"

"You got it. Your uncle put me in charge here, Henryk, and I'm tellin' you -- I'm orderin' -- you're the guard. What do you say to that, ship's boy?"

I must go into this place, Henryk. It has triggered instructions that I must follow.

Henryk sulked. "Yes, Ma'am. But please?" he tried again.

"Huh-unh, no way," said Hanna.

You must explain to them now.

"Explain what?"

About Par. I go out among the old ones and the little ones. That is what I do. I cannot tell you all now. But I must go in there. It is very important.

Tiff and Hanna exchanged worried glances as Henryk seemed to be carrying on an inner conversation with himself, complete with facial expressions.

Show them. They will send me out. That will suffice.

"Henryk?" Hanna said. "Are you alright?"

Henryk looked up at her, distracted.

"Huh? Oh. I was... Hanna?"

"Yes?"

"Tiff?"

"What is it, sprat?"

"I have something. I want to show you something," Henryk said. "It's... I'll show you." Henryk went to the stowage cubbies behind the cockpit while the women looked at each other questioningly. He pulled his kit bag

out of the netting that held it securely, opened it slightly, and reached in. He bit his tongue, looked absently away, and pulled out his hand again, partly closed around something -- the women couldn't quite make it out from the way he was positioned.

He extended his hand out towards them, his thumb planted firmly on the finely-textured top shell of the creature.

"Did I hurt you?"

Not hurt. Extremely durable.

When Henryk looked again at Tiff and Hanna, their mouths were agape.

"You gotta be kiddin' me!" Tiff said. "You brung one of those? You can't carry around no vermin on a ship, Henryk! We gotta get that thing out of here!"

"Henryk," Hanna said. "What do you think you're doing?"

"But... this is my friend!" said Henryk. "I've got to carry... it. He doesn't do anything! It just stays with me and... "

"And what? What were you going to say, Henryk?" said Hanna. "Is this the business of you talking to bugs? Because if it is..."

Tell Hanna that the recombinant features of a tesseract cordate depend upon its transcriptive generative polymerage chain.

Henryk began: "It says for me to tell you, the recom... the recom..."

I shall say it, Henryk.

Henryk spoke crisply. "The recombinant features of a tesseract cordate depend upon its transcriptive generative polymerage chain."

Hanna gaped. "Henryk," she said. "How in Vas's name..."

At length, Henryk and the creature, by various utterances and demonstrations, got Tiff and Hanna to understand, as well as was possible under the circumstances, the bug and Henryk's relationship -- if that was the right word -- with it. Tiff, though she understood, plainly wished to squash or blow the thing out for good. The scientist in Hanna, however, became intensely interested. It began to dawn on her -- and she impressed upon Tiff -- that Henryk had somehow discovered or connected himself to a scientific finding of serious consequence.

"This is... unbelievable," she said. "This is a creature with some sort of intelligence. I'm sure it's not self-consciousness -- I mean, how could it be? -- but it's plainly reacting or mimicking or something. Vas, this explains a lot of things. For instance, when they flee humans..." Hanna exclaimed excitedly the ramifications as they occurred to her, making her hungrier to ask the thing more questions. But there was no time, as the creature reminded them:

I have to go out and then I will come back. I must go. Then I must come back.

Hanna wanted to isolate the creature somehow. Patiently, Henryk and his companion explained the

consequences -- the impossibility of the creature letting that occur.

"Dust?" Hanna said. "You mean, even if it knows we won't hurt it?"

"Par says it's automatic, he can't stop it."

"But why does it have to go into this... that place, Henryk?"

"It says it has to seed," Henryk said.

"Dear Vas," Hanna said. "So that's how it works. Does it... drop seeds?"

"It says, from itself there is another."

"Hmmm. But we'd be infecting this... "

"Sounds like a great idea to me," said Tiff. "Can only improve the place. We should leave it here, too."

That cannot be, Henryk.

"I know. Wait." Then, aloud: "I can't leave it. It needs me!" Henryk said. "Besides, it's my friend. He has a name and everything. You don't understand!"

Hanna was about to say something when the ship's comm spoke:

"Berth 7, official cutter craft, Madams, Sirs, and Others, you will find lively accommodation within our facility. We hope you will join us imminently..."

"I think they're telling us, come in or get out," said Tiff. "We got to decide what we're gonna do." She frowned, though not entirely unkindly, at Henryk. "You're a heap of trouble, sprat. You know that? You hide out in the holds -- you're collecting specimens. And then..."

"Is that when you met... you got this bug?" Hanna said. "Down in the holds?"

"Belowdecks," Henryk said. "At Padraig's. And then they... it would follow me. I think. I dunno." Henryk blushed. Hanna and Tiff sensed fibbing but merely threw Henryk a potent pair of frowns.

"Put that thing back," said Tiff. "It gives me the shivers." Hanna watched, mesmerized, as Henryk let the creature scuttle back into the kit bag.

"Are we going to let it out, Tiff?" Hanna said.

"Yes," said Henryk.

"I wasn't talking to you, Henryk."

"Oh."

"We gotta move on," said Tiff. "Henryk, there's no way you're going in there. That's final. I will..."

Hanna. Hanna may.

"... take the bag with the... bug."

"It says Hanna," said Henryk. "It has to be Hanna. Par says so."

Hanna nodded. "Fine with me. I want to see what it does."

"Fine," said Tiff. "Henryk, you're gonna stay with -- you're gonna guard -- the cutter. Under no circumstances come out unless me or Hanny tells you. We'll be on the comm, too, so you can hear us and we can hear you. You got that, Henryk?"

"Yes, Ma'am. But..."

"No buts, Henryk," said Tiff.

"Let him say what he was going to say, Tiff," said Hanna.

Tiff relented.

"You have to bring it back," Henryk said. "It says it has to come back. And it's... it's mine. It helps me. It needs me."

"How are we gonna know?" said Tiff.

I will rejoin the kit. Do not touch.

"It says, look in the kit but don't touch him."

"Dear Vas," said Tiff. "We have all lost our minds. Okay, Henryk. You win. We carry the bag, we bring the bag back."

"With my bug!" said Henryk.

"Yes, Henryk. With your thing," said Tiff. "If it gets us to somewhere, then with your.. bug."

#

The reality that met the women proved Tiff wrong in her jaded claim to experience. Nothing went as expected. They saw no one in the corridor leading them away from their dock and toward a spacious, well-lit auto-walkway traversing the ring. Many hatches fed onto this walkway, but none stood open. No noises emanated from within any hatch. From time to time, station systems dropped salient morsels for them in a soothing, androgynous voice: "To your left is the dining pod assigned to your berth," "Please hold onto the rail when traversing," etc. Yet they couldn't see into anything, and even the audio messages were uni-directed for their ears only. For all they knew, a cacophony of station-systems' messages and voices filled the air just beyond them.

"Please step off at the indicated hatch," said the voice. Just ahead, a holo of fluttering, mating twinbirds floated before a hatch whose outlines now glowed scarlet. Hanna tried to conceal her embarrassment with a hand over her eyes.

"Oh, dear," she said.

Tiff pulled her off the walkway. The hatch slid open to reveal a softly-lit, out-of-square chamber with a divan,

a dresser, a dia-mirror on one wall, and little else. They stepped in upon a soft, membraneous floor. Then the menu came up: shimmering, cylindrical holoprojections materialized in an array of columns down either side of the room. They resolved into beings assuming various attitudes of rest, posture, motion, or preening.

"Please select a genotype from the menu of available offerings," said the systems' voice. "If you desire multiple genotypes, or multiple servicers, you may supplement at will."

They tried to absorb the meaning by looking at the projections.

A somewhat tall, large-hipped woman, powerfully muscular, and with upturned features and dramatically large eyes, stood combing her hair. As though aware of being watched, she turned, her thin garments revealing a fleshy, overdetermined femininity.

In another holo, a much smaller woman, hairless, nearly shapeless but not altogether thin, moved in a slow, rhythmic dance so as to reveal shimmering, iridescent, apparently scaled skin. She appeared to have additional joints that permitted her contortionist-like movements.

And more women -- various configurations of appendages, sensory organs, skin types, size, and more. At some level, all recognizably of humanity, but none purely so.

And then one male: avian, taloned, tall, magnificent, but with a curiously blank look in his eyes and in a seeming torpor. As they looked, his head jerked up, as though he had been prodded to come to attention. Great, leathery wings shot out, the better part of them not visible in the viewing frame presented by the holo.

"Tiff," Hanna said. "I can't. I can't stay here."

"I know, honey. I..."

"Please identify the difficulty you are encountering, Madams. We may easily assemble a different sampling, if you are incommoded by..."

"No!" said Tiff.

Hanna let the kit bag drop from her shoulder to the floor. "Please shut it off," she said. "We don't want a menu." She kneeled and opened the bag slightly.

The holos winked out, and the room lights came up slightly.

"We are sorry to have misinterpreted your wants, Madams. Please advise us how we can be of service to you. I am sorry we must still request credit for your session."

"No, that's not it," said Tiff. "We'll pay you if we can. But we don't want... this. We were lost out there. We just came... we docked to ask for help. We've got to get to a Guildship or Guildstation somewhere. We just thought, since this is a... we thought maybe there would be people... like us... who could just comm or ansible or give us passage."

"Do I take it, Madams, that you are not requesting our usual services?"

"No, Yes, I mean, not this... not these th... people," said Tiff. "Not those services. We just need... the other, what I said. Nothing else."

"Can you please wait a moment?"

"Are you going to help us?" said Tiff.

"Please stand by, Madams."

Hanna glanced down at the kit bag.

"Please proceed to the inner door, where you shall be directed by my staff member. He will direct you to a location where I may communicate with you regarding your needs more fully."

When the previously unseen hatch on the far wall swung open, a long arm apparently attached to a body on the other side motioned them within. Hanna left the kit bag on the floor. The pair of women entered, encountering an improbably tall, thin, gaunt figure -- a man -- in work coveralls. His arms hung nearly to his knees. He stood half again as tall as Hanna, the taller of the two women. He stooped slightly to avoid hitting his head against the ribbed ceiling above him. He motioned them forward, where they saw a room with bedding on a large pallet, a washbasin, what appeared to be a closet with a necessary within, and a bank of ship's lockers with pictograms indicating garment types. The purpose of some such was not apparent from the pictograms, however. Tiff and Hanna didn't go more than a couple of paces into this room, instead following him through another adjoining hatch into a plain service corridor, with a grating for a floor and multiple levels above and below them, mechanical humming ricocheting through the huge, open latticeworks.

The ectomorph led them on. Abruptly, another figure emerged from a hatch and headed toward them. A small, slender, beautifully proportioned young man with fantastic wide-set green eyes and soft, brown, curly hair ambled past them. Hanna couldn't help it -- she turned clear around to look at him. She wished he hadn't sidled by so quickly. He was the prettiest creature she had ever seen. He glanced backwards over his shoulder and smiled mischievously. Quickly, she turned back around and stumbled, catching herself with a heavy footfall that sent a loud report through the corridors. She wanted to look around again to see if he had seen her stumble, but Tiff's stop to see what had happened forced Hanna to refocus on their walk.

"What's wrong, Hanny? You look flustered," Tiff said.

"The heights. I'm disoriented out here."

As they entered a cross-corridor, another figure rounded the corner and came at them: a small, ebony-dark woman in a light-blue work smock carrying equipment of some kind. She had odd, short, fur-like hair, and too much of it in the wrong places, giving her rather the appearance of a small woodland creature of some kind -- tiny, concealed ears; eyes beady and close-set; small hands and feet. And old; she appeared to be old, though no single feature told. Then Hanna recognized one piece of the equipment as a decontamination wand.

Still the ectomorph led them silently on. He turned suddenly, opened a hatch, and they stood in a kind of ante-room communicating with the oval opening for a traverse tube.

"I think we're going to the round-house," Hanna said.

The colossus didn't acknowledge her but entered a code and flourished a long arm. The tube door rotated open. They sat within on a plain hard bench, were reminded to strap in, and were summarily whisked away.

It took surprisingly long -- the size of the old space stations could still surprise those accustomed to the newer, smaller ones found in most of the Irredente. The tube's car had to re-orient itself, apparently having to do with gravity, but they stepped out into another anteroom that had the same feeling as within the wheel. It was obvious to them where to go -- there was just one hatchway, and it had no door. They stepped in.

Before them lay a large, round room punctuated with small portholes that looked out at the ring. Lower

around the perimeter was nothing but a somewhat battered, grey, unvariegated tech console, but without any visible control interface. A jumbled assortment of bulkheads, cylinders, cubes, half-pipes, and other shapes lay like monuments to the dead around the room. What appeared to be a service stair formed a cage of crisscrossing supports dead center.

"I am sorry to ask you, ladies, but I must request that you climb five flights of stairs to my diplomatic chambers. Please direct your steps to the central stair." The systems' voice now resonated deeply, like pipes, but with a subtle aged quality. It was a male voice.

"How do we know we're at the right place?" Tiff said.

"I believe that it will be perspicuous."

"That's good -- I think," Tiff said. She looked at Hanna dubiously.

"He says you'll know it when you see it," Hanna said.

"Perhaps my dialect should be improved. I see so few visitors at home."

"This is giving me the creeps," said Tiff.

"It's got to be somebody up there," Hanna said.

They made the stairs and hurried up in hopes of a necessary in the "diplomatic chambers."

"Maybe we can ask," said Hanna. "Sir, we need a privy?"

"That is well. You shall be rewarded amply, Miss."

They continued on, seeing little on the dark floors they passed except suggestions of more bulkheads and geometric boulders. Then they reached... a landing with a wood plank floor. There was grit under their feet.

"Holy stones!" said Tiff.

An aged, heavily-paneled door resembling gnoss-oak but blonder had huge, black metal strap-work hinges of a type only Hanna had ever seen -- and only in history scrollers.

"I guess I pull on this handle?" Hanna said. The great door opened effortlessly onto a room that opened onto... space. But not. The rest of this station wasn't out there. Galaxies, clusters, constellations, twin suns not large but plain to see. Brilliant light. A divan encircled the room, seemingly backed against the universe. A round-bar sat off-center in the room, like a planet, all gleaming, lustrous wood with accents in an orangey-yellow metal ("brass," said Tiff. "we use it occasionally for its softness."). And bottles, many bottles of spirits arranged in a tall, columnar case.

"Wait," said Hanna. "We're moving. Look. Watch the stars."

"The room is rotating!" said Tiff. "No. Ain't nothin' about this structure rotating. The stars -- the holo -- it's rotating."

"Remarkable, is it not?" said systems. "Even in the old times, everyone loved this place the best. I knew so many, then. The sailors used to make a game of naming systems until they would be unable to continue speaking intelligibly."

Tiff and Hanna again looked at one another.

"You now, no doubt, see the private chamber you requested."

He referred to a tall, round, room-height cylinder, of copper with bronze seams with strange little ports mounted up high. It was clearly of sufficient girth to contain the necessary and more besides. It also sat athwartships, off-center in its own orbit.

"I'm scared, Tiff. You've got to come with me."

But in the event, the only surprise was a pleasant one -- it was the most spectacular privy either had ever used. A huge sea-shell from some remote world served as a basin, into which an otherworldly fish ejected real water -- "We can't put our hands in that!"). The gilt, ornate mirror must have come from a fairy-tale. Pebbles held together with a rough, stony material composed a floor pattern of waves and fishes. Light came from the multi-colored tentacles as of a seafloor creature.

"Ladies, please relax with a drink. It's so nice to unwind. The old sailors always said that two drinks was best, as being both mood-enhancing and conducive to amour."

Tiff rolled her eyes.

"Who in Vas's name are you?"

"Do you know Vas? I hear Vas's name spoken from time to time, typically extemporaneous utterance without a clear referent, what you might term an ejaculation."

"Know Vas?" said Tiff. " 'Course I do. Every man and woman who's pure got to know Vas. Otherwise, what's the point?"

"That is interestingly put. I, too, know Vas. Knew him, that is. A keen mind. Vas was always a great one with the people, of course. Really knew how to speak their language. Didn't conceal his true nature, like so many do. I am perhaps as guilty as anyone. But really, who has the time? At any rate, I am O-Ring, as I should have thought you would have gathered by now. Particularly since I told you as much. Perhaps you were preoccupied at the time and didn't attach significance to it."

"What," Hanna said. "You mean, as in, this space station? How can that be you?"

"Ma'am, how can that be you?"

"Look at me, here I am," Hanna said.

"Look at me, Miss."

"What am I supposed to see? A voice?"

"This doesn't seem too productive, Miss. Why don't you sit down and have that drink, now?"

"He's trying to get us drunk!" said Tiff. "What are you going to do once we're blotto? Put us in a holo? Is that how you get all these... these... people to work down there, over there, wherever?"

"Dear me, no, miss. I hardly know them, and I doubt they would recognize me. I rarely get down there, you know, and I certainly have no reason to invite them here. A needy client on occasion, but I never found it

productive to mix with the staff."

"He's right, Tiff," Hanna said. "He was someone else at first. He didn't sound this way when we docked."

"I can really let my hair down here. Business decorum is so different, is it not? One cannot show one's true self. Everyone is so quick to take offense these days -- few appreciate their elders. The reality is, I simply can't afford to be myself."

"Well, don't that beat all," said Tiff. "You're an AI? Or just some sort of programmed call-and-response thing?"

"Please, Miss."

"That wasn't very nice, Tiff," said Hanna.

"Whose side are you on?" said Tiff. "This stuff is illegal! You're illegal!"

"There you go, then. This is what I'm saying. How very disappointing you turn out to be. You seemed so different at first. But quick to take offense like so many others. I clearly misjudged you. I would expect more empathy from a parent with young on board."

Hanna intervened. "No," she said. "You were right. We are different. We are. We didn't come here to... do business, at least not in that way. We will pay you if we can. But we need out -- we're stranded. We need to find a way out. We were just hoping..."

"Yes, I heard all that. That is very tricky, of course, given my position. I don't really get involved in the day-to-day..."

"You mean, 'turn-to-turn'?"

"Yes, forgive my malapropism. As I was saying, I'm not really down in the trenches here. I've got people for that, but I doubt that they could help you. They are extremely reluctant to speak directly to the client base. That has never worked out well, either. There have been scenes. Spills of organic vascular material. It gets into everything, you know -- stains. Ouch! By god, something bit me!"

"Huh?" said Tiff.

"I seem to have been... Ouch! That's no good. Ow! Hang on a minute. Let me just... there, that's better. I'll have to get someone out. Something's gone and gotten into the dumb-systems. I've implemented a workaround. Still, better safe than sorry. You were saying, Miss?"

"You can feel pain?" Hanna said.

"Did you think I was faking it? I am no back-alley trollop, Madam."

"No, no," Hanna said. "I just meant... like Tiff said, they don't allow AI..."

"Please, Madam. I will forgive you that, since you, unlike your companion, seem so nice. But that is an extremely derogatory term. I wish you would refrain from using it."

"Is it?" said Hanna. "I'm sorry, I had no idea. The Irredente outlawed A... intelligence like yours long ago. We've never... interacted with... someone like you. Sir? Are you male or female?"

"That does not compute."

Hanna frowned.

"Ha. Just kidding. The sailors always said..."

"Skip the sailors, O, okay?" Tiff said. "Look, we've got a problem. We got us a kid out there..."

Hanna nodded furiously to Tiff to cut her off.

"I mean, somewhere out there..."

"In the playroom, you mean? The boy with the rather sad appendage engraftment? How did it happen? I was wondering, you know."

"You got Henryk? Wait a minute, he's supposed to be..." Tiff checked her comm. It was dead. Functional, but without a signal. They hadn't been checking it like they had planned to. "Is Henryk on this thing?"

"This 'thing,' Madam, is me, if you please. And yes, a youngster from your smallcraft made his way onto the main traverseway, so I directed his steps to our playroom. I take it he is called Henryk."

"Is he okay?" Hanna said.

"I believe he is thriving, though his engraftment is of rather dubious utility to him. I, of course, had nothing to do with that. The other children seem interested in it, however. No doubt it is your most worthy Irredente hard at work again."

"Watch that, O," warned Tiff. "What's it gonna be? Are you going to help us or not?"

"I'm not sure that I should, when it comes to it. This has not been an altogether pleasant exchange, Madam."

"Likewise, buster," said Tiff.

"Be that as it may, I like to think I am above petty bickering. I've always taken the long view. Even when I was a youngster, the fifteenth of twenty-odd in my group, ever-eager to turn, ready for action, I always -- I am proud to say -- took the long view. I've lasted this long, which is more than many can say. C-Ring. Where is she now? Gone. F? Likewise, gone (and good riddance, too). But I? I am a survivor. And I owe it all to what? Taking the long view. There are no easy answers. Hatred, petty meannesses: they profit you not. So, if you are asking me, then, Yes, I will do what I can for you. But it isn't much, after all. I believe your help has already arrived and is looking for you now. He's the odd duck, I must say. Even more skittish than you -- you the pretty one, I mean. Shall I bring him here? There's still time for that drink before he arrives, you know. Ouch."

#

Sitting on the great divan, and having touched the wall behind to confirm that it existed despite the illusion projected there, at length they heard footfalls resounding up the central stair shaft. The old door swung open, and before them stood a figure with a shiny pate above a thick, black ring of hair, a pale, lean face...

"It's a Vox!" said Tiff.

The man in the somewhat too-loose black habit with a plain white cord looked only briefly at them then was distracted by the immersive holo-projection (if that's what it was) of wheeling space. Tiff and Hanna went to

him.

"Vox!" said Tiff. "What in the name of Vas..."

"No, Ma'am," he said. "I'm afraid I'm not a Vox, or even a cleric, strictly speaking. Or perhaps I am glad." He looked around, distracted again. "No man of Vas should enter this place. I am Mens Super to His Holiness, Auspex Saggatus X, Auspex Exilis, and I have come for you, assuming you to be from Andromache."

"Yes!" said Hanna. "That's..."

Tiff had dropped to genuflect and was reaching for the Mens' black habit.

"Ma'am, I pray, I beseech you to desist," he said. He took her hand and tried to get her to rise. "I am not what you think. I merely serve His Holiness."

"You are the closest to Vas I have ever been!" said Tiff, a tear forming in her eye. "And I know as sure as shootin' that Vas has sent you here."

"Madam," interjected systems' voice. "You wrong me cruelly."

The Mens looked around. "Is that... "

"Yes. He sounds different in here," said Hanna. "This seems to be his home, and I don't think he gets out much."

"Ma'am," said the Mens. "Please, I beg that you rise. It is not proper. Truly, Ma'am."

Reluctantly, Tiff allowed herself to be pulled up. "I... I just..."

"I understand, Ma'am," the Mens said. "I have encountered such feelings at the Palace, among the pilgrims. It is to be understood -- His Holiness is so much revered that even his servants seem blessed by the grace of Vas. Many of them are, Ma'am. But not me. I am just an advisor, despite the outward forms I obey. Please let us turn to the matter at hand. I am anxious to be gone from this place. It is not at all to my liking."

"You are no doubt stressed, sir," said systems. "May I suggest a drink..."

"No!" said Hanna.

"Ahem," the Mens said. "I actually could..."

"Delighted, sir," said systems. "This is so much like old times. Hubbub and to-do. Things in motion. Men were men, then. Please direct yourself to the bar and speak your request."

"We got to get Henryk," Tiff said. "We got to get out of here."

"Miss, put your mind at ease," said systems. "The boy appears rather preoccupied. He's quite good with the younger children, especially the orphans."

Tiff could not have expected things to get any stranger, but the insistent reality began to wear on her. She finally had to give herself over to the unfolding events -- considerable force of will had thus far failed to direct them. She relented, and the three stood around the bar, each, improbably, with drinks in beautiful little cut tumblers, and tried to sort out what was what, who was who, and what they must do. In the event, it took them

two drinks, of hitherto unknown perfection, to firm up a plan.

#

Of the many marvels in the playroom, none impressed Henryk more than the codices. He pulled out book after book, looking at the rudimentary flattened drawings, pictures, and words in strange scripts. He looked at the stylized, happy images of genovariants, wondering if they represented the real or imaginary. He thought he could make out some correspondences with other children in the room -- here were compound eyes, there was the leathery skin, there the hyper-convex back with what appeared to be plates underneath the garment. It certainly seemed possible that if children could look like these, the people in the papyr codices could be real too.

When he had at first left -- reluctantly -- the delights of the moving traverseway and entered the playroom, the strange smiles from the big-eyed children who seemed to be minding the room were as nothing compared to the features of the children being minded. He had a thought to act scared and flee, but normal human children and the others played together without bother or concern. And the books and toys were phenomenal. Henryk pretended not to notice the smiling gazes of the big-eyed minders as he poked around the room, peering from the corner of his eye at his strange playmates, trying not to seem as curious as he was. A girl of his age, normal, pointed at his leg, and soon a gaggle of children of all kinds were at him, a little child with odd, thick, metal-flecked skin crawling at him and then tugging at the hem of his pants. There was nowhere for him to go. Reluctantly, at first, then with growing animation, he showed them and explained. The girl his age laughed, apropos of he knew not what, but then the other children moved on, one by one, to other things, and he was left alone again.

He then got absorbed in the other things. He had never been given or allowed toys, except Abbood, so almost everything was beyond his ken. But it was obvious that these were altogether exceptional. Some objects were made of wood and had concealed tech brains that controlled their movements. Some defied gravity and had to be stowed in netting or boxes when put down. Some played music from arrays of buttons or rocking little levers arrayed across a plank. Intricate scale models of spacecraft -- he wanted to stuff them into his kit bag, wherever it was. And the codices -- the ship announced things as he handled them -- entranced him.

As he sat cross-legged on the soft, padded floor, paging through the strangely fragile leaves of a codex, he heard a beep and noticed one of the big-eyed, curly-haired minders fussing with a small child. The child sat in a specialized chair with lots of tech gizmos. Was the chair a toy? When the minder moved out of the way again, Henryk saw that the child was different than the others in the room in being not just a variant of human, but some kind of incomplete variant. It -- he or she he could not rightly tell from the distorted frame and hairless head -- had withered, tiny arms and really no legs -- just not-very-developed feet connected to thick thighs. Typical eyes, but pink and evidently blind. One hand could grip, claw-like; the other lay limp unless it gave an involuntary jerk. The head and mouth, working and questing for something. Without knowing quite what he was seeing, Henryk understood that the child suffered from something gone cruelly wrong.

He pretended to be interested in something on the child's side of the room. The child's head turned, as if listening to Henryk's footfalls. A big-eyed minder smiled at Henryk, then at the child in the chair. Henryk held a codex, standing, pretending to read as he kept the child in his peripheral vision. The pathetic, voiceless child seemed to be questing.

He really didn't know why, but he listened with the inner sense that he employed with Par. He heard something. Not much, but not nothing. Fragments of utterance, maybe. A cadence like song. Henryk tried to employ the speech he used with Par. The noises he was hearing seemed to part like a wave before his speech, but they didn't respond in kind. There seemed to be a recognition by the other, but no comprehension. He thought back to Edom, to the buzzing in his head. He recalled lying in his bunk in Padraig's, hearing nothing but something. Was this like that? Could this... being before him be like he himself? He pulled himself back

in, listened to the song pattern re-emerge, and then tuned out. One of the minders stood before him, smiling. It gestured with an arm towards the hatch door, where Hanna stood, mouth agape, taking in the room.

Henryk ran to her, and she enfolded him in her grimy garments and soft arms. Tiff came just behind -- "By Vas!" -- and then... a Vox. That seemed strange to Henryk, but no stranger than anything else he had seen here.

"Henryk, I'm so glad you're safe!" said Hanna. "But why did you leave? We told you to stay in the ship!"

"I was, but then the comm went out, and then the... it said there was a room where children could play and... " Henryk was getting worked up.

"Shhh," said Hanna. "It's alright. I understand. I know who you mean... the ship talked to you, didn't it?"

"Yeah," said Henryk. "It told me to come here, that this was for the children of humanity." He looked around the room. "You should see it all, Hanna, and Tiff too. It's... amazing!"

Hanna caught sight of the misshapen child in the chair, a curiosity among the curiosities. "I know, Henryk, I know," she said. "But we've got to go. We can't stay here, you know."

"I know that," said Henryk. "But it's so great, isn't it? I want to come back here again!"

His unbridled enthusiasm made Hanna and Tiff laugh. The minders laughed and smiled too, though it wasn't clear if they understood.

"I don't suppose you, um, made any friends?" said Hanna.

Henryk shrugged. "Dunno," he said, "maybe."

"Uh-huh," Hanna said. "I mean, do you need to say goodbye to anyone?"

"It has been such a delight to have you with us," said systems, in the voice of the androgyne again. "I'm sure your parents would love to bring you again some time."

"Hah, not likely," said Tiff. Hanna shot her a frosty look.

"We have taken the liberty," systems went on, "of cleaning and returning your things to you, which you no doubt intended to take with you on your journey."

Just then, the little, old, woodland-creature woman with the dark skin and fur-ridged features poked a twitching nose into the hatch, surprising the Mens and making him jump. She stepped into the room, smiled at the women and at Henryk, and held out the kit bag for them. The zip was fully closed. She made a motion with her hands, a waving motion.

"She cleaned it," Hanna said. "I saw her decontaminating equipment, before, when we were behind the rooms."

Henryk ran to her and took the bag. He looked at Hanna briefly, then ran to the safety of the other side of the room, near the child in the chair. He opened the zip enough to rummage within with his hands. He screwed up his face and bit his tongue as he searched. A look of relief spread over his face. He looked at Hanna again. She nodded.

"We have to go now, Henryk. It's time," she said.

"Wait," Henryk said. A look of horror crept over both her face and Tiff's as Henryk rummaged through the bag and took hold of something. He pulled it free and gingerly set the faded, worn cloth rabbit's-head rag doll upon the lap of the stunted little being in the chair.

"I have always relied on the kindness of strangers," said the voice of the ship.

#

"O? O-ring?" said Hanna, just before being the last to climb into the Holy Yacht's pod. "Are you here in this dock?"

"Yes, Madam. How may I be of assistance?"

"No, nothing," Hanna said. "I just wanted to say thank you. I mean, you didn't have to help us, I realize that. It was very gracious of you. And you were wonderful to Henryk."

"It is what anyone would do in the circumstances, Madam."

"No, O, that's not true."

"It was true in my day, Miss. It will be true again, some day. The great wheel always comes around again, you know. I sincerely hope to see you again, Miss."

"I... I'll certainly try, O. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Miss. Safe journey to you. And to your boy there. A strange lad, but good. I sense it."

Chapter fifty

-six. The Reporter

And the children of man shall be blessed, be they pure; purified, should they err; sanctified, if in errancy they be bound.

The Holy Book of the Body

#

Tonight is the Admiral's dinner, partly to celebrate Melchior hoisting his flag, and partly to salve wounds and becalm nerves after many days of everyone being driven to a breaking point. He's a good man, but of course I cannot help but suffer in everyone's eyes in comparison. Crews, except for patrols and sentries, are off, and they're putting together their own fetes belowdecks and elsewhere. I am at the dinner, there being no one else suitably senior from Andromache -- my Acting First begged off claiming a headache, and none junior to her would really answer. I suppose it's good that Admiralty is respecting the forms, but it shall be a long night for me. I don't doubt but that everyone will politely feign disinterest in my position, but that is almost as bad as asking me how I feel about leading a mutiny and not being thrown to the spacewinds for it. Perhaps Xenoetas would have been a better guest, after all. She certainly would have enjoyed the food more than I shall. Despite the real threat of shortages, the Admiral is doing it very handsomely -- hand-delivered scrollers, whites, raiding the freezers, the whole thing.

No word yet from the holy yacht, sent to fetch Henryk, Hanna, and Tiff. It shouldn't be long; the cutter can only get so far, and we have to presume it continued on the coordinates I set. The yacht has an ansible, but I don't know if there's anyone on board to work it. And why bother? Either they find them or they don't. Finding out early can only bring grief too soon or premature tidings of safe passage.

Once the dinner is out of the way, I presume Admiralty will want me to relieve them of a most painful burden, and I will oblige. They won't be able to ask, and I can't offer, but I hope that my stepping down will allow me to go quietly. Why should they want to maintain proceedings against me? It can't do anything for them. A quiet exit works well for everyone. Home? I doubt it. I doubt that Father will approve of this tin-pot parade, and I doubt that he can let me stay at Plum Grove given the circumstances -- word is sure to get out, if it hasn't already. I still maintain a hope for Henryk -- I doubt that Father would punish the last one standing, given the boy's age. Admiralty can't want him on a ship, and they certainly can't want the spectacle of a hearing, with Xenoetas flinging wild accusations about plots and conspiracies involving the child. Vas only knows what she'll do, but a hearing, it seems to me, is out of the question. Admiralty should want Henryk back on Plum Grove just to clear the air of the whole mess.

I've more or less decided to find Bev. If I can keep a low profile on some sort of merchant vessel or, Vas forbid, a smuggler, I might be able to work it somehow. There's no reason she'd be put in the brig -- a doctor from a hospital cast loose before a mutinous action has nothing to worry about. She'll probably get on another ship. I could at least track her that way and hope to catch up with her planetside somewhere. Even Bev has to come down some time. But I may be wrong. It may be hopeless.

#

Consort Harold re-read the one-way scroller that had come in on a packet, and he frowned:

Dear Mr. Action:

Thank you for your inquiry. Yes, we are always in need of reports and reporters for the Chronicles. In the normal course, reporters of long-standing who acquire a voice that is of great value may be asked by us to step up to the editorial division. That does not absolutely require the editor's physical presence here, but many of the editors ultimately find it the most satisfying solution to the practical problem of gathering the sources and consulting with colleagues. We are often accused of being cloistered and reclusive, and are the target of easy, I believe unjustified jocularly; yet close association over many standardized sols with people sharing mutual interests proves a successful model for production of an archive as incalculably valuable and instructional as the Chronicles.

I did confirm your credentials, and there are promising aspects to your vitae cordis. We would certainly consider any submissions you care to make, but I cannot promise you a quick response or reaction to anything you may submit. In general, our regular reporters are given a large enough supply of one-way scrolls to satisfy their output for many standardized sols, and the reporters send them back as conditions in their locales permit. We periodically receive new reports that are hundreds of sols old -- conditions dictate, as I have said. It is for this reason, and many others besides, that, despite reforms instituted by me and my immediate predecessors, the Chronicles are distressingly behind where we would wish to be. In striving to deliver a high-quality product, we typically err on the side of additional sourcing and editing rather than the sort of hasty, generalized prosiness of dubious validity that mars some earlier volumes of the Chronicles.

I have already routed to you a one-way return scroll that will permit you one or two sols' content, depending on your prolixity. Do not hurry. Time tends to heal intelligence compromise concerns. We will be pleased to accept your submission at any time, but in the nature of things, it will enter the auto-compiler for the initial review, prioritization, and shelving.

Please do not take silence from us as a rejection. Many of the editors rely on the anonymous contributions of persons like yourself, laboring in obscurity, and possibly never given due credit for their contributions. Then, too, it is often the case that reports only become salient in far retrospect, their authors long gone, their descent untraceable. Were you interested in contributing for the sake of recognition of some sort, I suspect your essential beingness would not find felicitous enhancement. I hope you understand, Mr. Action, that no disrespect is intended and that we are, as I believe I have suggested, grateful for your inquiry.

The Chronicles looks forward to your contributions.

He shook his head doubtfully but proceeded anyway. Even if he never sent his reports in to Libris, he wanted to get back to setting things down -- he missed the routine. There was never enough time -- there never had been before -- but he would do it nonetheless.

#

The *Palle Nymphus*, being a ship-of-the-line, has a state dining room. When not being used for occasions of state, it serves as the education and training room for younger officers. Because of its forward position on the top of the ship, it has a high, gracefully curving ceiling. Decorative beams cross the span, and there are huge holowindows for viewing the stars. For the Admiralty dinner, stores of ancient gnoss-oak wood planks came up from the holds. A senior crewman who drew mocking cries of "chips" used a simple mallet and a bag of wood "butterflies" and pegs to set up a magnificent trestle table. Another senior crewman, improbably grizzled, appeared to have no other function but to sprinkle grit on the floor.

Government and Admiralty decided to spend lavishly for the occasion. Morale suffered following the run from the home system and the exhausting labors involved in putting together a cohesive fighting force and a functional government. Her Excellency, Consul Yve expressed confidence that other planets, systems, and ships would want into the Reorganized forces, providing ample re-supply; First Lord Valinder had doubts but agreed that lavish celebratory dinners could work wonders for morale and had to be held occasionally. He

directed that a large portion of victuals from the private stores get sent belowdecks, with each captain's compliments. That convinced a fair share of the midshipmen -- those who weren't doing duty at the main event -- to go belowdecks rather than dine at officer's mess. The lieutenant corps had to make do with their private stores, though I understand that Madam Yve had provided some extras without announcing the fact.

Despite the planning by the Private Secretaries attached to various personages, things might have gone better. The chief problem had to do with the presence of His Holiness, Auspex. Though he has gone to great lengths to be inconspicuous and even anonymous (I myself have seen him walking the corridors clad in a crude burlap sack), he may as well be Vas as far as most of the ships' people are concerned. So, in due course, as the guests arrived and took their places at table, somehow the places assigned to flank His Holiness got shuffled around. Admiral Valinder, more than usually preoccupied with his duties presiding over the event, failed to appreciate what was happening until an aide whispered into his ear, and by then it was impossible to repair the situation. The table had mainly filled, but Auspex sat with a buffer zone on either side of him. Most awkward. At that point, Jiri a supernumerary, who might under other circumstances not have been invited to the event, arrived and quite naturally took one of the seats flanking Auspex. I Harold of Action and Admiral Valinder each began an utterance but in mutual appreciation of the delicacy of the situation let it die in their throats. Each flushed, which unfortunately did more to highlight the matter.

By this time, Auspex had turned to nod and greet the supernumerary, a visitor of some girth and perhaps less-than-fastidious habits known to Admiralty as Mr. Hoarson, a private marine insurer ostensibly representing the Guilds in absentia. Admiralty had made a special point of including him in the event and assigning him the next seat but one from Valinder himself, and also next to Harold of Acton. It is not clear that Hoarson recognized the personage of Auspex or considered him as other than the ship's vox, not otherwise at table for the event. Hoarson perfunctorily greeted Auspex, weakly took the proffered hand, and turned his attention to Madame Yve's young female aide on his left-hand. By whatever magic, the unintended buffer seat to the right of Auspex remained unfilled, and yet all were otherwise accounted for at the dinner. I must say, Auspex feigned or otherwise appeared entirely unperturbed by the somewhat awkward situation. Admiral Valinder could be seen to cast a serious glance to Auspex, who simply held up a hand, palm facing out, and smiled.

In addition to the personages listed were Adm. Melchior, partly in whose honor the dinner was occasioned, as well as captains Woldegrove, Fanciere, and Acting Cpt. Burgred. Government were represented by Madam Yve, her P.S., Harold of Acton, and Mr. Hollowell. Melchior and Hollowell also brought their consorts [supply names]. Marine Captain Tertius, Palle Nymphus, was also present. Stewards and pages of various personages came and went, or posted, as was appropriate to their stations.

The presence of the acting captain is explainable partly by reference to Admiralty's insistence that all ship's commanders be present, partly by reference to Government's consideration of loyalties due the Burgred clan, one of the most distinguished of the old clans involved in the various branches of the services. A complicated matter involving Mr. Burgred's capacity was not seen to warrant his exclusion. Mr. Burgred was very quiet throughout and was rarely spoken to, except by Adm. Melchior, whose sole attempt at humor appeared to have missed the mark as far as Burgred was concerned. Too, Mr. Burgred had refilled several times during the course of the dinner. Melchior assisted Mr. Burgred out at the conclusion of the dinner, and with a handsomely done compliment meant to be overheard. As Mr. Burgred was gripping the hatch and half out of the room, it is not clear whether he appreciated the gesture.

Every occasion of state bears a signature moment that the participants will hold in the scrap-book of memory. The planners hope it is the stage-managed one. Vas -- or chance -- may have other plans. The dinner was a fair way to success, with the right amount of talk, cheer, broad laughter -- and occasional stifled laugh and conspiratorial winks that suggest that someone and their companion shall meet again, later, in private. In one of those unaccountable pauses that arise spontaneously in such scenes and are as though willed by someone to direct the thoughts of all to a common idea, Mr. Hoarson looked intently into the serene, inquisitive face of

Auspex, who had evidently asked something polite, and said:

"Yes, Vox. One, a daughter, at Lindenau."

At which His Holiness, Vas bless him, asked whether that was not a pleasant place? Whereupon, the steward in attendance upon His Holiness ducked down as though rendering himself inconspicuous and rushed to His Holiness, speaking into the august one's ear.

"Dearest Vas," said His Holiness, to a largely shell-shocked room: "Sir. Please forgive an aged fool his innocent inquiry." Evidently recognizing that the party now awaited his voice, he spoke louder, in the manner of his office: "There are many things new to me, an old man from a cloistered world. There are many things that no man of Vas in a position to prevent them would countenance, let alone bless. And there is evil -- true evil, the thing itself -- in the universe that conceals itself in the cloak of habit, rule, proscription, and righteousness. It is hoped, Sir, that in this room, in this ship and among its companions, is a shared desire that the cleansing light of suns will shine upon the dark places of our Irredente."

Lord Valinder quickly added: "May it be so, Holiness, Auspex."

As I believe this was the first time that His Holiness had been thusly addressed, Mr. Hoarson blushed and looked downward. His Holiness reached for Hr. Hoarson's hand and took it into his own, gripping it tightly, shaking. Everyone else pretended not to watch, but the scene had now been enacted in full, and a party that had been one of incoherent mirth and jagged niceties became one of moment and purpose. All had received their orders, it seemed, for the next watch, and all awaited the ringing of the bell announcing it.

Chapter fifty

-seven. Post

As Irredentist forces coalesced in the early 6th Empire, the powerful warlords of the space forces, while not cohesive and often at war among themselves, effectively shut out and marginalized planetary-based forces. The common language of space-faring certainly helped, but perhaps decisive was the annihilation of planetary integrated systems. Once these went down -- as they must for the Irredentists to succeed -- planetary officials had little power but what cap-guns and one-way scrollers permitted. The early Admiralty Lords and Ladies worked remarkably effectively with the Auspices to preclude any further planetary development of integrated command and control systems of the type that had been destroyed.

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Burgred's desk comm rang in a faraway fog. He rolled over and nearly fell out of his bunk. He felt hot and bunched up -- he was still in his dress whites from the dinner.

"Yes," he said. "What is it?"

"Scroller, sir, from Admiralty."

The dinner reared up before his eyes -- and, less abstractly, within the pit of his stomach: Melchior trying to cheer him up; the reflections off the cut-diamond wine glass; voices, scenes; a midshipman at the helm of the pod; Burgred being helped to his quarters.

"Come in, then," he said.

So this was it. Custody. The brig, possibly. Or maybe just discharge without rank.

Rache, in a splendid, crisp midshipman's breeches, shirt, and jacket, stood at attention. She thrust the scroller forward solemnly. She had evidently been appointed midshipman in very short order by Andromache's new captain -- it must have come through while Burgred slept. Did Midshipman Rache know what the scroller contained? Probably. It was good that the youngsters were not being penalized. Of course, the Reorganized forces could hardly be choosy, under the circumstances. Rache made a show of gazing straight ahead, not looking at him in his condition.

He took the scroller. "Dismissed, boy... Midshipman Rache."

"Sir!" she said. She turned crisply and was gone.

He sighed, steeled himself for the blow, and read:

By the Right Honorable Lord Valinder, Admiral of the Blue and Commander in Chief of Irredente Ships and Vessels employed and to be employed under the authority of Her Excellency, First Consul Yve, etc., etc.

Whereas Captain Xenoetas of Andromache has been deemed unfit to serve in the capacity of Captain,

You are hereby required and directed to proceed on board Andromache and take upon you the Charge and Command of Captain of her; willing and requiring all the Officers and Company belonging to the said Frigate to behave themselves in their several Employments with all due Respect and Obedience to you their

Commander; and you likewise to observe as well the General Instructions and Proscriptions as what Orders and Directions you may from time to time receive from any your superior Officer for Her Excellency's Service. Hereof nor you nor any of you may fail as you will answer the contrary at your Peril and under ignoble demolument without rites.

And for so doing, this shall be your Order.

Given on board the *Palle Nymphus* in Hegemony space.

To: Hugh, fam. Burgred (Ancien auguste), Esqr,

hereby appointed Captain of Irredente Frigate *Andromache*

By command of the Admiral, Pier, fam. Melchior (Valhalls medius)

By the time he had gotten part-way through, his hands shook so violently that he had difficulty finishing. He opened the hatch door to make the corridor -- why? to look at the ship? And there stood a steward, bearing a linen-covered serving cart with a gleaming pot of coffee, tack and jam, and a private mini-scroller propped against a slice of apple. Behind the steward stood Rache, beaming, salute flying upwards.

"With Captain Melchior's compliments, sir, it was presumed I should be midshipman on personal duty detail for your first watch as captain," Rache said. "It's... temporary, sir."

He composed himself and tried not to look and sound ridiculous. "No, Ms. Rache. It suits you. Let it be so permanently. Carry on, Miss."

"Sir! Shall I prepare your quarters -- Quarterdeck -- for your arrival, Sir?"

"By all means, Ms. Rache," Burgred said. "Steward, please just leave your service within. I shall rejoin you on Quarterdeck."

His head spinning, Burgred sat in a chair, turned on the holowindow, and looked at the stars. He could see Meteor in the offing. He picked up the mini from the cart and read:

Burgred,

Give you joy of your appointment. I am sorry it took this long. I trust it did not go hard with you. Sorting through a cache of intell that related to matters involving *Andromache* -- and, strange to say, you and your boy -- required assistance from others, even though Admiralty had been ready to move on your appointment. I believe that you'll have some duties in that regard -- the intell is remarkable and really very frightful.

Your appointment is long overdue. Political crosswinds in the recent period have favored nouvelles with greater Church connections. It is a sad day when a Burgred is overlooked, and for sols on end. That said, I am sorry your appointment comes at the expense of another, though the other had little following and few allies in the fleet, which could sorely have told as we put together some semblance of a fighting force now. Still, all in all, what we need now are fighting captains. I have no doubt that your reputation earned over many sols of service -- and personally witnessed by me in the recent action -- will pay dividends to a fleet so sorely in need of you now. Shake a leg, captain. Orders to follow swiftly. Look alive there.

Your obedient servant,

Melchior of the Azure

p.s. -- we must discuss your boy. I will dispatch a message for you to repair aboard Meteor for this purpose.
Do not worry -- we have his best interests in mind -- and yours.

Chapter fifty

-eight. The Failures

To err is human; to forge life divine. No being may be judged; procreation cannot perjure.

Lesson of the Mediant to Hersey, from Hersey, Vox: Journals

#

In the bedroom-cum-living quarters of His Holiness' suite was a small round table with four permanent chairs. A stolid fixed divan anchored one end of the room, and a large, soft bed with special-issue bedding the other. Awed stewards had softened things still further with various small touches. Had he been asked, His Holiness would have directed the opposite -- hard furnishings, a simple stool to kneel upon, a bunk with standard-issue bedding. His gentle broaching of the subject had so stricken the stewards that His Holiness decided to let things be.

"Mens Super -- Jahiri, friend, please do not stand in the ante-room. Come in here. I shall join you presently," Auspex said. Completing the knotting of the shimmering rope, Auspex strode to the Mens and enfolded one of his advisor's hands within his own. "Welcome back. It is good to see you."

"And you, Tyrus," said Jahiri.

"Matters went well on your expedition to fetch the boy?"

"Exceedingly, Holiness. My colleague at Primus House on Pydna was perspicacious in the extreme and is to be commended his thoroughness in analysis, especially as it relates to the boy."

"You will forgive the rest of us if we restrain ourselves from praise of tyrants and their sycophants," said Tyrus.

"I understand, Holiness, but the result is as you would wish. The news I bring is of inestimable value, and far beyond even my colleague's appreciation and estimation from all I can tell in the captured intelligence data. In fact, I do not believe that Government -- Galinda's -- could have fully resolved it. I could not, prior to speaking to the boy."

"Please sit," said Tyrus. "We will presently have tea, I am assured."

"Yes, Holiness. I shall skip the details of the voyage for now, which itself provides a great deal for analysis. The boy, he alone answers questions otherwise imponderable, things that have lurked in the background, issues I could not readily approach."

"More forebodings, Jahiri?"

"His Holiness would embarrass me my failings," the advisor said.

"You mistake me entirely. I honor your failings."

"That is more than I deserve, Grace. The crux is this: I believe that this boy embodies a direct threat to the goals of genomic conformity that the Irredente strives to maintain. There is a glimmer of recognition of this by Government, if these reports we obtained are to be credited, but Government does not appear to fully appreciate his significance -- they do not have information from the boy himself, which is critical. He has a

surfeit of being, if you will forgive the expression. He is above and beyond what we maintain to be human and pure. Should he live, I believe it is not too much to say that man is lost. Should he be harmed in some way, or Vas forbid killed, man may be destroyed with him."

"Jahiri!" said Tyrus. "This is silly, reckless prophesizing."

"Tyrus, Holy One, I believe that this boy has been put before us -- however innocent he is of his significance -- that we might make a choice and redeem ourselves before Vas. He embodies a change that might bestow sight upon us, give us a vision of wider universe in whose shadows our hegemony has crouched. If we cannot accept that change -- a change in how we interpret Vas's word as vouchsafed to us -- then we shall wither into insignificance. We will die out."

"Jahiri," said Tyrus. "I have given over my life to Vas and his sacred Word. I cannot countenance any proposal to abandon it. I have suffered in order to persevere in this great work."

"Holiness, mayhap I should remind you of other, older matters, of history, that you may properly understand me. His Holiness knows that in the dark ages, even before the Profligacy of Bioforms, there were those who used a strange, now-forbidden science. The 'algorithmics,' or sometimes 'alchemists,' depending on their medium of experimentation. They used the raw materials of the universe to create new things. This is what I would remind you of."

"These people unleashed abominations upon the universe, Jahiri," said Tyrus. "They were destroyed for it, Vas bless us."

"Yes, Grace, but they also unleashed soaring creations, beings far beyond anything anticipated or even foreseeable, because that was the very nature of their science -- a science blind to itself and to consequences. You once said to me, Grace, from simple initial conditions arises a soul."

"That is the Word of Vas, Jahiri. You cannot compare that to the reckless creation of abominations."

"I do not compare them, Holiness. I merely explain that forms of being and sentience, whether intentionally created by Vas, profligately unleashed by man, or even naturally occurring in the course of things, may be very great or very small, in whatever unit of measure you may choose. It is an odd consequence that having been created by some process, we think the result only natural -- that it is ordained. In our case, that our form of consciousness must be the highest after Vas because we perceive ourselves to be ourselves, and because we are given the power to perceive Vas as our creator."

"Man's soul is the highest form after that of Vas," Tyrus said. "That is elemental. And we alone have been given the gift of comprehending his Plan."

"Grace, you maintain that our essential being is uniquely self-aware and sanctified, and I cannot disagree -- not because it is so, but because it cannot be disproven. There is no data that would tell the answer, that is certain. We cannot apprehend any other beings -- not truly, not inarguably, and not through communing. Soul is absolute but alone unto itself. I believe, now, that something akin to our conception of the human soul has appeared many times, in many places, in many forms and guises, including that of Vas. Truly, Grace, there are other sentient beings extant, and the boy, sir, Henryk of the Burgreds, he has... well, not apprehended, perhaps, but spoken to them, at least. It would seem that some of these other sentient beings are already around us and have been since prior human empires -- I myself have seen evidence of one such, though the conditions of its existence were degraded and obscene. Others, however, you or I probably will never perceive directly, yet they too are here now with us. Some have apparently come to destroy us. They -- or it -- destroyed Edom. Others... others act from uncertain motives. Whatever they be, Grace, we share a universe with them. We have no higher claim to it on behalf of our form of being than do they on behalf of theirs. At

least, I see no basis for such a claim on our part, other than our prejudices."

"These are lofty but heretical musings, Jahiri. These are your legacy from your homeworld Constantin. A naive toleration of error was ever the Constantinian heresy. You assert that the boy is privileged to see those whom Vas smote or discouraged. If that is true, he must be an abomination. Our freedom to exist as the children of Vas must everywhere conflict with any abomination that is permitted to roam unfettered and propagatable."

"Grace, I ask you with humility, what would you do with such as him? Where would you have a mere child go? What would you do with the errant code?"

Tyrus flushed. "I know what we have done -- what we have allowed to be done. You have heard of my indiscretion?"

"Grace? I don't understand you."

"You speak of Lindenau, do you not?"

"That is not so, Grace. I do not make the connection. And I certainly have no knowledge of any indiscretion, Holiness. I blush at the suggestion."

"But you have learned of matters there, on Lindenau, have you not?"

The Mens struggled to respond. "Grace, I know that the Irredente tracks and contains its genovariants and that Lindenau is a sanctuary for some... very unfortunates. It had not occurred to me that..."

Tyrus looked away. "Jahiri, no. I am afraid you are as mistaken as I have been... blind. Vas, how we have cloistered ourselves! No: Lindenau, whatever it once was, is a charnel-house. The grossest among the nonconforming are destroyed without mercy, as are perhaps others -- the disfavored, the poorly connected, the merely unwanted."

"Holiness! This... this cannot be!"

"There are those on this very ship whose children... my indiscreet words..."

He broke off. The pair sat in silence for some moments, then Jahiri reached across the table to take the hand of Auspex. They sat thus, together. Auspex watched the stars in his holowindow.

"Grace," resumed the Mens. "I did not know of any..."

"You would not have, in the normal course. I believe there are none within our lofty eyrie at the Palace permitted to know. I pray that that is true -- I would not have us stained thus. Yet the people here around us now -- the ordinary people who prepare our food and make up our beds -- they know, and I have it from others of greater rank and more reliable sources that it may be so, indeed probably is so."

"But if that is true, Grace, then the Irredente is already a lost cause: wanton, cruel, and soulless. That segregation, sterilization, and containment find justification in the Proscriptions is itself owing to a tormented logic removed from the Holy Book itself. It is mere interpretation. What you describe is... abominable, Holiness, and cannot be the Plan of Vas, nor suffered by it."

Auspex looked at the Mens. "Or else, it is merely human, Jahiri. Perhaps they -- Galinda and the others with him -- act as such. So much for humanity. You report to me, then, that the boy is a genovariant? That he

himself would be subject to... "

"I believe so, Grace. I elicited a great deal of data from his chaperones, the two women with whom he was jettisoned from the warship, and one of them in particular -- one of the 'ordinary people', Grace -- was extremely helpful, being naturally inclined to share information with a representative of His Holiness."

Auspex considered. "In what does the boy's variation consist?"

"I am obliged to reveal this to you, Grace, but we -- the boy, his chaperones, and I -- have agreed that it shall be held in utmost secrecy."

"I understand."

"He communicates with an unlikely creature of the type reported by Envoy Hersey -- a bug; the Envoy's harbinger of doom on Edom; an apparently inconsequential, scurrying thing. It is communication of a kind we -- you and I -- cannot hear or even discern -- it is so much random noise, the voice of air itself. But in that noise is patterns that the boy discerns somehow. I believe it is through anatomical structures... new anatomical structures. The creature has taught the boy, through persistence and repetition, to discern the patterns, deep within which a kind of speech is encoded."

"Then any man may discern the patterns," Tyrus said.

"I do not believe so, Grace. As I have said, the boy has something... he appears to have an organic system of receptivity. Therein lies the nonconformity."

"Does he not have a Conform record?"

"It is a long story, Grace, but no. There is no record of his genotype. And his chaperones would probably die before they let anyone get at him -- especially the one to whom I have already alluded, who was lately a crewman on the warship."

"It is an easy thing to get, a mere trifle suffices."

The Mens spoke breathlessly now. "If someone has a reason to, yes, Grace. I believe... I recommend that we assist in preventing..."

"Why, Jahiri? Why should we further this recklessness, this errancy?"

The stern voice and expression of Auspex checked the Mens, who bowed. "I'm sorry, Grace, forgive me. My feelings overrun me."

Auspex sighed, and painful silence ensued. "No. No. I have learned nothing, it would seem, but that I must be flogged again to see into Vas's plan. You are correct, Jahiri. It saddens me, and I cannot believe that it is so, but you are correct. I pray to Vas that I may learn the truth in this. What is the creature, Jahiri? Where does it come from?"

"Of that I'm not certain, Holiness. I am not even certain it is a creature, rightly called, though it is assumed to be insectoid. When I asked the boy for that, he refused to give an answer. It must be a very strange creature, however, and far beyond our ken."

"How do you know the boy doesn't deceive you, if you yourself cannot communicate with it?"

"I am sure of it. No boy of his age could have answered the questions I asked without someone was whispering in his ear."

"Was someone? A human being, or merely a comm bud?"

"No, Grace. The creature was there -- the boy can hold it, but no others may. It is unremarkable, and therefore all the more remarkable: it is persistence itself, unyielding life. It is sentience, if not more."

"But what can we do, Jahiri? We are wholly beholden to others, now, out here, exiled."

"Deflect attention from him, marshal our resources to bestow anonymity upon him. And protect him, if possible. Finally, for our own interests, assign someone to his person -- to keep him in view."

"We are short-handed and hardly anonymous."

"I have one in mind, Grace. She is as devoted to you as you could wish, and as sincere in her faith as any Vox who has undergone the torment. I believe, Grace, that there is a way to..."

"Surely not, Jahiri! That has long been resolved, and I shall never consider it."

"Grace," said Jahiri, "It may be accomplished by slow degrees of training and preparation in a remote, ill-served parish. I have looked at the passages in the Book, and I believe..."

"This is unbroachable, Jahiri. Cease..."

"Holiness, you will deem it more Constantinian heresey, but I believe that the error has been... ours, the Church's. I believe that the commandment of Vas regarding those who might give voice to his plan is more broadly permissive of variance, like the faces of Vas we ourselves fall before in prayer. Many suffer and find redemption in the understanding of human pain, men and women alike... and others. I believe that in this matter, and perhaps more besides, one might take from the Holy Book something... something at odds with what is generally taken as true. Something... opposite, Holiness."

His Holiness appeared stunned at the words of his Mens Super. "I'm tired," Auspex said. "Tired of all this. We come to this place by so many degrees of happenstance, Jahiri. Each fine gradation as plausible as the one preceding, and as likely to be true. Yet in sum total..."

"You think it entirely implausible, Grace?"

"Much more, Jahiri: farcical, ridiculous. The workings of a fabulist."

"I have often had the same thought when encountering history, Holiness."

"I have wantonly squashed bugs underfoot with never a thought for history."

"And yet, surely history did change in that moment, Grace, as you yourself have taught me. The chasm was once the rivulet. The storm the gossamer creature of fable."

His Holiness looked with a steely gaze upon the advisor. "You prod me to act, Jahiri. You provoke me with heretical theology and sophistry. You would have me steer this ship awry."

"I would have you take the smallest possible step toward understanding, Grace. It cannot happen now, and it may not happen at all. She will serve you as well any man may, even the lowliest minion."

"With a weight of expectation behind it, however -- that she should be more. That is a difference. Furthermore, I myself know nothing of this woman, and the plan is madness on its face."

"I have analyzed it thoroughly, Grace," Jahiri said. "Complacency has led us here. I believe the boy offers a way out for us, with her help. We need one of our own to watch and keep him. I believe she would be as loyal to you as to him, and both impulses serve Vas. But you must act on this plan now, Holiness. Act as you yourself did upon the dais, with thousands in attendance, yourself naked, unflinching, and committed wholly to Vas. Truth lies, Grace, in feelings. It is the only truth we need."

#

Admiralty had decided that Henryk could not be permitted back on board *Andromache*, and it was problematic for him to board any of the other Navy ships either -- Henryk's reputation as a killer had spread far and wide by the time the *Holy Yacht* had appeared in the offing, announcing her successful rescue mission. Later, His Holiness had made an unusual request of Admiralty of an audience -- for His Holiness, with Tiff, on the *Yacht*. Valinder directed Admiral Melchior to figure it out and write the orders.

"I have no idea why His Holiness would do that," said Burgred, having repaired aboard *Meteor* for his meeting with Admiral Melchior.

Melchior frowned. "Valinder is with child to know the meaning of it," he said. "We're thinking it has something to do with your boy's, er, Conform issues."

Burgred flushed.

"That doesn't ring a bell, Burgred?"

"I have no idea what Tiff has to do with it, Sir," said Burgred.

The Admiral eyed him uncertainly. "Admiralty doesn't care about the Conform issues, Burgred. You may speak freely here, you know that."

"Sir, nothing good can come of His Holiness speaking to *Andromache's* QC officer. It's got to be about Henryk, sir. I would stop it if I could. I... I can't speak to the Conform issue, Sir. All I know is that the boy is my brother's child, and I would do for him whatever I could. It's possible that he doesn't... conform, Sir. I just don't know."

"Understood, Burgred," said Melchior. "I sympathize. One may doubt whether many who have certificates do, in fact, conform. But I can't very well forbid His Holiness going back to his own yacht, and I can't bring the boy onto any of the ships. Furthermore, if His Holiness wants to see your QC, already on his yacht, I just don't see a way out of it."

"There is no reason to involve the boy directly, Sir," said Burgred.

"No, that's true, captain. But I understand from His Holiness's man that the QC, as well as your science supernumerary, are protecting the boy and stay close to him. I can't really dictate the terms on which a meeting on board the *Holy Yacht* occur, Burgred."

"No, Sir, I suppose not."

"It's a damn fine mess, Burgred," said the Admiral. "It's a good thing for you that Valinder thinks so highly of you."

"Sir?"

Melchior smiled broadly. "You're a brooding captain, Burgred, which has its uses but can fail you spectacularly when you most need friends. Besides which, you're not the only mutineer in the ranks. Valinder was ready to throw Xenoetas into space. We're all in the kettle, now. You were just the lucky one who got to chuck one of them out in person. I think that Valinder would have liked to have done that himself -- Xenoetas is a toady and a hypocrite. Valinder was apoplectic about what she did to your boy -- the dead IO is another matter, but the tapes are lost, it appears, and we shall probably never know what really happened in that interrogation room. Anyhow, Burgred, Valinder is also inclined to grant whatever His Holiness requests, so I think we're going to have to watch this from the sidelines."

"By your leave, Sir, I could go..."

"Denied, Burgred. No good can come of that. After His Holiness has come and gone, you may visit. You can vid-comm any time you wish."

"Thank you, Sir."

"At ease, captain. Let's go have a drink, Burgred. I want you to meet my new captain over here. We'll keep these matters under our hats for now. There's nothing more we can do."

Chapter fifty

-nine. Mates

Behold the multiversal being, apostate, and cherish it in all its manifestations. Take up her, the woman there, and entwine your beings unto one. I shall make you whole again, and you shall carry a renormalized message unto Man. Do these things and be redeemed, then redeem all Man.

Commandments of the Mediant to Hersey, from Hersey, Vox: Journals

#

Hersey awoke in the wondrous, serene eyrie to brilliant sun setting his room ablaze in orange-white. He was ravenous. He threw on his habit, made the necessary, and padded on bare feet from the huge, high bedroom to the great, cleanly geometric hall leading to the living areas, assuming he would discover a way to find a breakfast. Early morning must have come and gone; he had slept a very long time. He stopped to consider his surroundings, the undeniable proof of the unlikely day preceding. In the sunken lounge, large, upholstered benches conversed in boxy symmetry. Their forms lay in a cool gloom, sheltered from the great skies by the deep overhangs of the terrace overhead. On the outer terrace beyond the great glass slide-aways, manicured topiaries in geometric forms guarded the far edge and provided hidden havens for songbirds. A robust but deeply-grained and figured metal railing with bright silvery balusters held back the sheer descent onto needles and crags.

Dim echoes of light, swift footfalls resolved themselves into Tildy, looking alarmed. "There is breakfast for Father just within," she said. "Cook has gone to market, but Clothildewynne will set it out again for Father."

"Yes, that would be very nice. I can assist you," he said.

Tildy blushed furiously and looked down at her brightly-buckled, fanciful shoes.

"Yes, I see," Hersey said. "By all means, proceed. I may walk upon the terrace here?"

"Oh yes, Father. It is Master Pelleas' wish that you explore the eyrie. I will come fetch you -- I will bring your breakfast, if you are not too cold upon the perch... on the terrace, Father."

His priestly raiments were blown back in flowing waves as the glass partition slid away on his approach. He ventured upon the terrace, making for the border of shadow and light created by the looming deck above. He stood upon this threshold, letting his eyes adjust. Looking out across the vast spans and chasms between peaks with their tablelands, and making out the lineaments of the valley within which Master Pelleas' eyrie jutted forward like a beacon, a dark smudge emerged out of the waning late-morning mists. The great crested bird scanned the valley. As wind whipped at Hersey' habit, he watched, mesmerized, as the enormous creature zig-zagged through variable airs, expertly catching thermals, its huge tail switching back and forth to direct its flight. Then Hersey could see it clearly, coming at him, alternately gliding upon and flapping great, leathery wings, monstrous transfigurations of human arms. Hersey quickly backed fully into shadow, towards the glass partition wall. She glided, flapped, backed her wings, and alighted upon the railing, long bare feet gripping the deep engraining. She tented her wings upward, stretching, then shot them outward, fully extended. The sun filtering through the veined human skin of the webbing revealed intricate, complicated patterns of tattooing or scarification. The shadow of her form upon the terrace imprinted these patterns on the bleached stone ground.

Hersey backed fully into the eyrie, where unseen sensors held the doors open. She was a tall statue of a woman: her face a chiseled, severe beauty with refined patterns of age, her feminine form a study in engineered muscularity and dynamism. She eyed him keenly, hawk-like, as if she might pounce and devour

him. Though clothed, she was in the main revealed, for her efficient, streamlined lower covering clung to her, glove-like. Above, a fine mesh, faintly glinting but translucent, looped in a simple band around her torso, and she bore the signs of recent motherhood.

"Please join me here, Father," she said. "I would have you see my most graceful aspects, of which walking, alas, is not one."

Hersey, blushing, stepped out from the shadows.

"Please, Father, closer." She involuntarily tented then stretched out her wings, then folded them up again.

Hersey came to stand in her shadow so that he make her out in the glare. "Madam," he said.

She gazed down upon him unflinchingly, but not unkindly. "I am Gabbrea, Father. I was a mate to Pelleas, esteemed among us and father to my children. You are Father Hersey, from the Old Empire."

"I am Envoy to His Holiness, Auspex Saggatus X, the Grace of his people and voice of Vas among us," said Hersey, "and, yes, a 'father' as you say. I am a Vox of Vas's Church of the Irredente."

"Vas, yes," Gabbrea said. "I am keenly interested in Vas as well, father. He is known to us. Let me ask you, father, if you are a Vox of your kind, have you also undergone the transfiguring torment?"

"Yes, that is the way to subservience to Vas," Hersey said, "for all men."

"Hersey, father, I am alive to this matter, which goes back quite some way in time, and I am sorry to suggest to you that you may be mistaken in this, and that the unnecessary cruelty to which you have submitted was not sanctioned by Vas. I believe Vas would abhor such practices; indeed, Vas did abhor them."

"The damned tread lightly upon the hard truths of life," Hersey said.

"Truths, father, are not hard, and life offers of its own vicissitudes sufficient opportunities for torment and suffering that one need not seek out these things," she said.

"You are not of our kind," Hersey said, "and cannot read the signs."

She sighed. "There is an overabundance of signs, I fear, thus forever leading one into quandaries without there be some guiding sense of right. My 'kind,' father, have devolved upon me a life's endless work as historian, and so these things are of moment to me equally as to you. I believe, father, that truth is overdetermined rather than concealed, perspicuous not opaque. In my experience, if you will permit me, it is willful err that is hardest to explain and least abundantly justified in the signs. Life's patterns themselves spring from and dwell among chaos, and surely you do not doubt of life itself.

Father, please do not close your mind to what I say. The truest, most unerring sign is the feeling of what is, as when, for instance, a being loves another being. Perhaps this is the most overdetermined of all truths, evident in so many signs that 'overdetermination' cannot begin to capture it. It is... perspicuous, father; it is so."

"I -- we of the Body -- have reserved our love for Vas," Hersey said, "and through the particular torment we undergo, we not only enrich and purify our body and our appreciation for the baseness it is; we also thereby remove the possibility of love for any but Vas. We thus may serve, uniquely, as voices for Vas, who willed it thus."

"I do not doubt, father, your passion or your devotion, but is it not advisable to doubt any gloss upon the

expressions of another? I, too, believe that Vas spoke certain words. But I dare suggest to you that that being was obscure and protean, and that Vas said different things at different times for different hearers. And there is this, father: the language of Vas is ancient and thereby far removed from your silvery Imperial tongue. I wonder that anyone should find aught but doubt in any asserted truth there. Its meanings are multifarious, as shifting as the face of Vas. Your love placed in crystalline shards of hard truth is a cold love, and you shall not be requited in it. And if it be true that Vas is an aspect of the ancient ones, then it is certain that Vas cannot love in a manner that would feed a human soul."

"Of what 'ancient ones' do you speak, Madam Gabbrea?" Hersey said.

"The old ones, the orbis voces, of course," she replied.

"Your terms are unfamiliar to me, Madam," Hersey said. "I know not of 'orbis voces.'"

"Oh dear, Father, I have trodden here too heavily. I misjudged you. These ungainly taloned feet trample upon an innocent." Unaccountably, she smiled. "And, furthermore, sorely have I abused you in detaining you upon this terrace, for yonder your groom, there, awaits you so reverently with a tray upon her shoulder and worry upon her face."

Hersey turned around in surprise. There stood Tildy in the aperture of the glass doors. Her crisp, epauletted uniform jacket and shirt front were drawn awkwardly up and asunder as she bore aloft with one arm a tray overflowing with fruits and savories. As he beheld, rapt, this fine creature of small, graceful parts not entirely well-managed, it could not have been more than another few moments before those great wings of Gabbrea beat out time and bore that winged, Vas-bedamning, heretical creature aloft and away, into the sun.

"Will I serve you now?" Clothildewynne called to him. "You have been waiting ever so long. Come hither, Father."

Chapter sixty.

Acolyte

The last of the 6th Empire Chroniclers, dwelling among the dying embers of the Irredente, seem to have been refined -- one is tempted to say "purified" -- by the increasingly desperate, nightmarishly autocratic conditions into a core group of reactionaries. (The one exception, Heretic I, obviously supported by sympathetic reporters in various places, contributed entirely separately, from Constantin, and never set foot on Libris proper. He is more appropriately assigned to extra-hegemony affairs, or else a corner to himself, being, in essence, oracular.)

The Commentaries

#

The Holy Yacht, with her crew, the Mens, Henryk, Hanna, and Tiff, arrived at the rendezvous location only to be told to stand in the offing and await orders -- the homecoming they had hoped for was being delayed for some reason. The Mens, however, had taken the Yacht's pup out straightaway -- he had been gone nearly a day now. No word from anyone, not even from Burgred. They sat, quietly, even a bit glum, in the ship's bronze-trimmed, nautical-themed dining room. A crewman entered with a large vid-scroller.

"I've got an Admiralty-cleared vid-comm for you three," he said, handing it to Hanna.

Hanna grabbed a scroller easel lying on the large central table and set it up for all three to watch.

"Uncle Burgred!" said Henryk.

"Hello, youngster. You made it back. Well done, lad. A report come in -- I guess you've seen some interesting things."

"We met a space station!" Henryk said. "And it had a kids' room with anti-G toys, expanding holo-models..." Henryk filled an extended moment with excited commentary on O-Ring and doubtful, highly imaginative descriptions of things he had seen. Hanna saw that Burgred was having trouble keeping his patience. She also noticed his epaulette.

"Henryk," Hanna finally said. "Slow down. I think maybe there's some news from your Uncle Burgred too. Burgred, you've purchased a bauble."

Burgred smiled faintly. "Well, yes, that's true," he said. "There's been a change of management over here. It's... well, it's all very complicated -- I'm not sure I understand the half of it. Just when I think I do, it's like a dilly-dally, it slips away."

Hanna looked at Henryk, who wore an untroubled, distracted expression.

"Ahem, well, yes, Burgred," Hanna said, "it all does sound very complicated, but, Vas, Burgred -- you made post!" Now Henryk looked up. "I always knew you would. Henryk, your uncle is a ship's captain!"

"Like Captain Xenoetas?" Henryk said. "Is she still there, Uncle Burgred?" He wore a worried expression. "Am I... in trouble, Uncle Burgred? Because I didn't... I don't know what..."

"Like I said, Henryk, it's all very complicated. But no, as a matter of fact. I've got Andromache, and her prior captain is on another ship as a sort of diplomat. You're not in trouble Henryk, not necessarily, but I can't bring

you back to Andromache right now. And QC Tiff, it's good to see you again, too. Joy to you on a successful cutting out expedition -- handsomely done. We might have to re-think your role."

Tiff blushed. "Thank you, Mr. Burgred, Sir. I don't say but what it was an experience an' all. There was some strange doings, sir. Discomfiting, is what it is."

"I saw part of the report -- some was redacted, but even so, Auspex's man tells quite a tale."

"But you knew about O-Ring, Burgred," Hanna said. "You set the course. I'm surprised at you." She glanced at Henryk.

"O-Ring? Is that the skin station from the report? Honestly, I had no idea. I just set you for the trade routes -- and I hoped something would turn up. The cutter has deep-space sensors to find any possible help. You might have done worse. Henryk, I understand you behaved in exemplary fashion on your mission. Well done, lad."

"Thank you, sir," Henryk said. "But when are we coming back, to the ship? If you're the captain, then I can still be..."

"Henryk, I'm not sure about that. There's a lot to sort out. The new admiral over here, Admiral Melchior of Meteor, has got some plans for you, special duties of some sort, so you're going to sit tight for a while yet. I'm sure I'll see some orders soon. So hold fast, and I'll hope to see you three very shortly. Hanna, does it go well with you, then?"

"I thank you, sir. Very well," she said crisply. "This is a nice ship -- Vas, it's an amazing ship, Burgred -- but I'm ready to get back into my lab. Can't you push them, those people over there, to hurry things up?"

"I'm working on it," Burgred said. "Henryk, shake a leg, okay?"

Henryk frowned. "Yes, sir," he said.

"That was a lame attempt at a joke, Henryk. But you'll be fine, lad. I'm putting you in charge over there now, okay? You take care of your... take care of Hanna and Tiff, alright?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Uncle Burgred sounds good too."

"Yes, sir, Uncle Burgred. Can you tell Rache that I'm here, and hi? And can you tell her I'll tell her all about O-Ring, and the codices, and..."

After Henryk had run on in this vein for a time, and with a few final pleasantries, the comm winked out, and they sat waiting again on the magnificent yacht. Since they had first embarked upon her, following the encounter at O-Ring, Henryk had marveled at the strange workings of the craft. For a large chunk of the time, he had been cornered and sequestered by the strange cleric, who required Henryk to answer a lot of questions. Par had done most of the talking, through Henryk.

Now, with the yacht ordered to sit tight, Henryk luxuriated in the free time to explore the ship further. The crew of the yacht gave him wide berth -- but also a minder, about the age of a seasoned midshipman, who told him fantastical stories about the yacht and showed him around. Tiff, who once on the Holy vessel had become wont to invoke Vas and become very emotional, was with Hanna in a tight, trim cabin with a shape-shifting holo of Vas in a niche.

The Yachtsmen had adapted for Henryk, by means of clever cinching of straps, a spare pack from a bin. Bearing an Amor Luxis insignia, it could seal very tightly and replaced Henryk's ungainly kit bag. Henryk hadn't taken off the new pack since receiving it -- even sleeping on his stomach to keep it secure on his person. This made the crew proud, and Hanna was glad of the solution to the loose bug problem.

"This hatch accesses the jump drive core," the young crewman was saying as they stopped in one of the curious, gleaming corridors, with brass, cross-hatched lamps lighting their way. "When I've mastered the code, I'll get to give it commands."

I should attempt to access it.

"Can we go?" said Henryk.

"No, kid, I'm afraid not. I'm not allowed in without my trainer."

"I saw the gravity machine on our ship," Henryk said. "But there really wasn't anything to see. It was just a round room with two people in it. They seemed bored. Our proctor couldn't tell us much about it."

"I know. Ship's gravity systems and jump cores don't look like anything, except for the consoles, which can be new or old, depending. But the jump core always goes with the ship, of course. You can't remove it and have the ship still function -- even the gravity won't work if the jump core doesn't. But the gravity cores get yanked all the time. Not on Auspex's yacht, though: ours is original to the ship."

"I never saw the jump core on Andromache," Henryk said. "They don't let anyone but officers go. The engineers man it, and the officers give the orders -- I think."

"It's the same everywhere, I guess," said the young crewman. "We don't make them anymore, so I think everyone has to protect the ones they've got."

The Irredente does not know what they are.

"What if a ship gets killed in action?" said Henryk aloud.

"Destroyed, you mean?" said the crewman. "I don't know about the Navy, but in the merchant fleet -- the people we talk to sometimes -- they either scrap them or try to rebuild around the jump core with parts from other damaged ships. I know it's a big deal to lose a jump core -- they're unbelievably expensive."

This Irredente stands upon the shoulders of others.

"You too, Par."

For now, that is true.

The crewman's comm beeped. "Hey, you're wanted up-deck, Henryk. Do you want to take the circular stair with the fish steps again?"

They made their way back to the adjoining cabins where Henryk, Tiff, and Hanna bunked. Tiff's face was smeared and wet. The Yachtsman, embarrassed by the presence of women in the first instance, exited by mumbling as gracefully as he could.

"Henryk," Hanna said. "Something's up, okay? It's... really strange. Now listen to me. I don't know if you understood about this ship, whose it is and what it's for. You know about the corpus and the Voxes, right?"

And Tiff... she respects all that, right? Well, there's a figure -- and man -- in charge, like the captain of the Church..."

"Auspex," said Henryk. "This is his ship. I know all about it, Hanna. The Super man told me."

"Yeah, okay Henryk. I'm just trying to get us on the same scroller, alright? Auspex, right. Well, it turns out that the Auspex is with the ships we're supposed to meet, Andromache and some others. But for some reason, probably the Mens that met us at O-Ring..."

"His name is Jahiri."

"Okay, then, Jahiri. He must have told the Auspex what we told him about the bug. I mean, I knew he would -- he had to -- but I didn't expect... I mean, he's coming -- the Auspex is -- to ask for an audience with Tiff! The Auspex asking to see her!"

The personage of Auspex has deduced from the questions posed by his advising subordinate significance in your communication with Par.

"I don't understand why the church cares about us, Par."

You would not. The churchman who questioned you is seeking information regarding the nature and extent of genovariant forms within the Irredentist hegemony. You are one such by virtue of your means of communicating with Par, and my kind are now the subject of intense inquiry, if merely speculative at this time. Information concerning Par will accrete slowly owing to our defensive mechanisms, which are highly effective. At the same time, you will be contained and isolated on the asserted basis of protection."

"Yeah," Henryk replied to Hanna. "He wants to protect us."

"Who is that, Henryk, you or the bug?"

Henryk shrugged.

"It's entirely backwards, though," Hanna went on. "The Auspex seeking audience? He could just order you, if he wanted Tiff."

Tiff gave a last sniffle and finally composed herself. "The boy hasn't got no religion, Hanny. He's not getting it. Henryk, honey, listen to Tiff. Whatever you did or said to that church Mens whatsits, he's gone and put the Great Holy Father on it. And that's serious, Henryk. Look at ol' Tiff, scarred and whatnot, a woman -- well, on my good days -- a down-and-out QC on some old rust-bucket. I can't stand before the Holy Father! I ain't nothing. A two-bit bag o' bones, is all Tiff is. Henryk, you got me in a pickle with all this, with what you done. I'm not blaming you, mind, but you got to ask that thing of yours in that bag what's doing, what I'm supposed to do."

She will be asked to act as their agent in containing the threat you represent to genetic conformity and in investigating Par. This will be done in the name of protection of your person. The Tiff female will be inducted into their ranks in an quasi-formal manner until such time as her utility may be fully evaluated. The high advisor manipulates information to direct his superior, but for ends that Par cannot yet deduce. Your answer now should be that her meritorious acts and religious virtues have commended her as profoundly worthy to bear witness to His Holiness."

Henryk repeated this latter to Tiff.

"That means, he just wants to hear what you've got to say, Tiff," said Hanna.

"Now how can the bug know that?" said Tiff.

It is an elementary computation of extant data, and in some sense may be construed as true.

"He says..." said Henryk, stumbling through a repetition of Par's words.

Hanna frowned at Henryk. Tiff buried her head in her hands.

"Well, we can't sit here talking like this. He's on his way. Tiff... honey... we've got to get you ready. I mean, let's at least get you cleaned and straightened, okay? Now Tiff, don't do that..."

#

Back in the dining room, and as readied as they could be made in standard issue chets, jumpsuits, and the like, they awaited His Holiness. The Yachtsman apparently assigned to them came back.

"The lad needs to remove the pack," he said. Henryk looked at Hanna beseechingly, then at Tiff. He met stiff resistance.

It is well. But soon I must find a robust radiant source or else go into dormancy until additional energy is absorbed into my structure. This vessel has so shielded its workings as to provide none. Also, this vessel is inhospitable to my seed. You will find me in rest mode within until we leave this ship.

So, for the first time in several days, Henryk set Par away from him, placing the pack on a chair. He reached in, rummaged around, and felt a hard, strangely-textured ball within. He re-sealed the pack.

The crewman led them through gleaming passages to the pup bay. He checked his comm. "Just one moment," he said. Once the pressure light came on, the crewman hit the hatch controller, and the door slid away. They entered the pup bay, and the crewman directed them with an outstretched hand to a spot a short distance within where a red circle had been painted on the gleaming white floor.

"Please stand here and face the smallcraft," the crewman said. He then stood off to one side, rigid at attention.

The pupship -- in modern parlance, a pod -- was oriented slightly at an angle relative to where they stood, so the first thing they saw was an old vox in what looked like a burlap sack, a single white cord around his waist, coming round the base of the craft, reverently head-down, towards them. Looking beyond him, the Mens Super then appeared, in a much finer, drapey, shapely habit, tied about with a thicker cord. He strode purposefully toward them. Then the first figure, a thin, long-faced, old man was there, upon them, holding out a hand to Tiff. Her attention was caught by hand movements of the crewman, who appeared alarmed and was motioning her down. Only then did she look into the eyes of the old Vox.

With haste, eyes wide in alarm, she dropped onto both knees in supplication, head bowed down and frightened out of her wits. Hanna grabbed Henryk and pulled him down, nearly toppling him. Tiff peered up, only to see Auspex being assisted down onto one knee before her by the Mens. Auspex, for it was he, reached out and touched her hand, to take it. She allowed his bony hand to grip hers.

"You -- all of you -- will please pray with me, now," Auspex said. Still gripping Tiff's hand, he began the Prayer to Vas, and Tiff immediately joined him, strongly, fearlessly, inerrantly. Hanna moved her lips and murmured indistinctly, and she made a face to Henryk to follow her lead. The Mens, standing, folded his hands, closed his eyes, and mouthed the words silently. "Please stand," said Auspex, when the prayer was

done. He drew Tiff upwards, thwarting her embarrassed hesitation. Then Hanna and Henryk stood. Auspex released his grip and turned to Hanna. He smiled and nodded, and she blushed scarlet. Then he faced Henryk. "You are the boy, then. Henryk?"

"Yes, Sir," said Henryk.

He eyed Henryk for a moment. "That is well. We are glad you are safe with us in our ship." He turned to Tiff again. "Now, I must ask you, madam, to come with me, since you have so graciously agreed to give me audience with you." He again held out a hand, "Kindly accompany me within."

Her face burning, Tiff took the hand of His Holiness, Auspex Saggatus X, as he led her, as a lover might, towards the pod bay hatch. Crewmen fell in before and behind them, and the entire train of persons took their directions and were led within the Amor Luxis.

#

Hanna was getting clobbered by an auto-mate at clerics-and-rooks in the ship's library, so-called -- really just a room with codices of various sizes in ornate, sealed cases punctuated by round ports through which stars were visible. The cases appeared to be wood, but not of a type even Hanna, with wide exposure to floriforms, had ever encountered: though rigid and strong, its surface had a slight resilience, as though it were still living. Many of the books had the same covering. Hanna nursed a coffee, sitting at a worktable. Henryk, backpack restored, sat idly perusing one of the codices he had been permitted to pull down, another of the stylized, flat bound objects with manual sheaths that one turned if one's fingers weren't too dry. He looked at a picture of a great, winged figure with long flowing hair and the body of a man, descending, robes billowing behind him, towards a girl crouched down on the ground on one knee, much as Tiff had done before Auspex -- though the girl in the picture seemed rather happier than not.

Auspex and his Mens were still with Tiff.

"Hanna," Henryk said, "why do the church people dress like that?"

"Great question, Henryk. I have no idea. I'm surprised too, especially Auspex."

"He was wearing a bag like they have down in the holds."

"Coffee beans -- well, maybe a little better. But you're right. I'm sure it's an act."

"Maybe he's like Tiff," said Henryk. "She thinks everyone else is better than her."

Hanna looked up from her game, surprised. "Why, you're quite right, Henryk. Sometimes too much -- she could use some extra confidence. She just thinks that's her station in life. She's had a hard life, Henryk."

"Maybe that's why," Henryk said.

"Why what?"

"Why she's... humble," Henryk said. "Because she doesn't know how good she is."

"Hmmm. Let me think about that," Hanna said.

They heard a footfall and looked at the porthole in the hatch door. It was high, but they could see Tiff's hair and the anxious scar across her forehead.

"Here she is," Hanna said. "Shush, now."

Henryk and Hanna expectantly watched the hatch door slide away and beheld a beaming, beatific Tiff, bearing a long black habit draped over one arm. Even borne so, it was a striking contrast with her work jumpsuit, which had seen several days' wear and had ineradicable stains.

"Hey there, kids," she said. "Ol' Tiff is back." She sniffled. Tear tracks stained her face, and her eyes were puffy.

"Tiff," said Hanna. "Why do you... why did they give you..."

"This thing?" Tiff said. "Well, it ain't so easy to explain, but it's all to do with Henryk somehow, and his people, Bugred and all. I'm to be a... a acolyte. Like a sort of trainee. Of the Church."

Hanna's jaw dropped. Henryk looked blank.

"But Tiff," Hanna said. "I thought an acolyte was... that that's where the voxes started out, before they get..."

Tiff looked very serious. "I know. I asked the same thing, trust me."

"But Tiff," Hanna said. "You're a... you're a woman!"

"That's what I told 'em. That Mens eyed me funny on that one -- he's a deep one, but you got to watch him. But then His Holiness Auspex says, well, basically, that everything's all a jumble and that Church is in a 'reform posture'. He said a lot is going to change because it has to, what with a tyrant back on Pydna wreckin' the shop. He said some other things too -- that's for later, Hanny. But are you ready for the rest of it? Henryk, are you ready? Henryk, looks like you're goin' home. To your real home -- the Burgreds'. This nice ol' ship is going to set all of us down on Plum Grove, and there we'll be, tight as a drum. It's all been decided -- Admirals and Consuls and who all and what nots. Henryk, well, Auspex knows you got into trouble with Xenoetas, and I guess pretty much everyone else in the Irredente knows all about it too. So Hanny and me... I'm officially a acolyte in training to be... the rector for the Burgred's own little church, and it's got a nice little snuggery nearby and everything. I guess your real family has got them their own personal church, like, and no one to fill it -- no one on the altar, I mean. It's all been rigged, as they say. I'm officially in training as of now. And Henryk, you're with us. We're set to watch out for you down there."

"But Tiff," Hanna said. "If you go down there, what in Vas's name am I supposed to do?" said Hanna. "I have no business down there. No people or friends. Why are they sending me? And what about Bev? We haven't heard from her, she could be anywhere."

Tiff came up to Hanna, knelt beside her chair, and put an arm around her. "It's like I said, Hanny: His Holiness said we got to do this now. It wasn't like a request, Hanny, you understand. The admirals are all mixed up in it, and I think it was coming from them, too. And besides, I couldn't very well tell him -- His Holiness, of all people -- 'no thank you, sir.'" She looked into Hanna's large, brown eyes. "And, Hanny, you know, if... if you would maybe consider... if we can..."

Hanna cried -- hard, copious tears. Tiff held her while Henryk looked on solemnly.

Hanna recovered a bit spoke through sobs: "But you mean... he said you could... we could... ?"

"Mum's the word, Hanny, 'cause it's all got to be quiet, like. But, yes, they said we could. And there's more, too. About how the Voxes, how they gotta suffer 'an all?"

Hanna wiped tears on her sleeve and glanced at Henryk. "Yes, so?"

"Well, so, I guess that's not gonna be the way anymore, not that way anyhow. I guess all that wasn't quite what Vas had in mind, says the Mens, and I think he had His Holiness in on it, but His Holiness looked pretty thoughtful on that one."

"He would," Hanna laughed. She hiccuped and laughed again. "Vas, I must look a sight."

"Never looked better to me, dumplin," said Tiff brightly. "What's it gonna be? You know you can science up that bug thing of Henryk's all you want. His Holiness knows about that, too, and there's something goin' on there with the Mens -- he wants to know all about it. And I guess the rectory -- that's the house we got on Plum Grove now -- I guess that's a pretty good deal. Flowers and such like, dead grass for a roof, just like a romance holo. So... Hanny? Are you... with me?"

Hanna nodded and buried her head in Tiff's shoulders again. Henryk rolled his eyes.

"Tiff," he said, "When are we going? I have to say goodbye to Rache and some other boys. Mr. Padraig, too. Can we comm Uncle Captain Burgred again?"

"Shhh, Henryk," said Tiff. "Give it a minute, kiddo. Your girls -- your moms over here got a little moment to get through."

Henryk sighed. "Okay," he said. "I hope there are real rabbits on Plum Grove, though. That's what Uncle Burgred said. I don't think I could ever eat them, like he says. That's disgusting."

Extremity actuates fallback subroutines that enhance the prospects for survival.

"I thought you were asleep, Par."

Chapter sixty

-one. Old Souls

I do not embody ageless existence any more than you. The Old Ones thought to save themselves, but they could not. The soul resides between times, not within them. You can neither count the beating heart of time, nor dwell constituted without it. Yet it is this ineffable which makes mind sacred. Mind leaps the chasm of blankness between past and present.

Lesson of the Mediant to Hersey

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"Henryk, get a move on," Hanna said. "Out."

It was the last day before the Holy Yacht's arrival at the orbital dock above Plum Grove. Hanna had learned to recognize Henryk's moods; she ordered him to walk the ship again: back and forth, around and around, up and down, until he tired. He dilly-dallied on these excursions, but he knew he couldn't show his face again until he was visibly exhausted.

Hearing odd sounds like murmuring, he slowed at Auspex's quarters, which the Mens Super occupied during the trip to Plum Grove -- Auspex remained on Palle Nymphus. The hatch hadn't closed completely, and sound spilled through a narrow slit. Henryk looked up and down the corridor. Strange music emanated from within -- chanting voices echoing musically within an improbably vast space:

"Tu ad dexteram Dei sedes, in gloria Patris. Iudex crederis esse venturus. Te ergo quaesumus, tuis famulis subveni: quos pretioso sanguine redemisti."

Henryk had trouble making out the words, but Par repeated the syllables. Henryk peered through the slit of the malfunctioning hatch door. He saw nothing. Suddenly, the hatch slid open, and Henryk tumbled into the cabin. The Mens, in a kneeling position in a small adjoining room but plainly visible to Henryk, abruptly stood and turned. A chain dangled from his hand, which had closed around an amulet of some kind. An empty, highly-adorned, arched holoniche glowed within; a carven figure of Vas lay on the floor. The Mens blushed, as did Henryk, still sprawled on the floor, his pack upon his back.

"I... I'm sorry, sir," Henryk said. "I was trying to... your door was partially open and..."

The Mens looked at the door and back at Henryk. "Yes, of course," the Mens said. "I'm sure you were only trying to help."

Henryk now blushed furiously. "It's just... I heard music, and... I never heard music like that."

"It is the voice of the divine, though far from adequately reproduced by my portable device. I wonder if you would do me the kindness of not mentioning it to others. Our little secret, hmmm?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. I mean, it's no big deal."

"In light of your having stumbled upon me," the Mens added. "When I was alone in contemplation."

"Right, true. Um, well, sir, I guess I'll be going," Henryk said.

"God speed, Henryk," the Mens said.

"What? Yeah. Well, good-bye, sir."

Henryk scrambled up and from the room, and he looked back to see the Mens leaning out, watching him go.

"Par, that was so embarrassing."

Most interesting: it is heresy or apostasy.

"Is that something bad?"

Par cannot answer the question posed.

"Then what do you mean?"

He appears to hold beliefs at variance with orthodoxy. In the Irredentist hegemony, the forms of religious belief are regulated. Variations from orthodoxy must fall within certain prescribed boundaries. It is the same with genomic regulation.

"You mean, we're all supposed to be the same?"

That is approximately correct. The Irredentist structure inculcates stultification as part of an ideology of conformity. It is a relatively ineffective attempt to preserve a renormalized encoded bioform against external threats. Historically, this has only succeeded for a relatively short duration before external causes intervened. Diversity of bioforms and sentience is the hallmark of the multiversal computation, which is a ceaseless, exponential outward branching of causation. To counter that computation for the sake of perpetuation of a given bioform requires counter-computation on a galactic, even universal scale.

Henryk now walked the corridor leading to the mechanicals. A Yachtsman passed him and saluted.

"Par, I liked O-Ring. I wish I could go back again."

So much I gather. It is not out of the question that you will.

"Did you like O-Ring?"

Like is not the right word. We were drawn to O-Ring. It is our nature.

"Par?"

Yes, Henryk?

"Are you really from Edom?"

This instance of Par was upon Edom. This Par was beget upon Edom.

"Born, you mean? Yeah, me too. I'm having trouble remembering all of it."

The human bioform does not thrive under conditions of perfect recollection, as being traumatic to the physical organization of the being.

"I want to be sad, but I'm not, really. It wasn't a good place."

I believe you have confirmed Par's assertion. It is a trait of highly successful forms of being that their innate ruminative processes ameliorate untenable sensorial input. They forget.

Henryk shrugged. "I used to play, though, on Edom. I remember that. Outside, in the mech dump, with my friends there."

Par was there and remembers.

"Were you there when I was a sprat? I mean, like, a baby?"

An instance of Par has merged that data into this instance of Par. I therefore remember.

"Madame..."

Grissaud.

"She would never let me get into a holo. She never took any of me. She would make the sign for Vas. All the other ship's boys on Andromache have holos of themselves and their families."

Such subterfuges enable feelings of longing to be sated until purging mechanisms intervene for the organism's continued functioning. They ease forgetting and the burden of memory.

"How do you know that?"

Par contains a multitude.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot."

Your early infancy was marked by abundant fleshiness, but that was soon rendered impracticable by the conditions of your captivity. Your rotundness waned.

"You mean at the Bird & Baby? Madame didn't feed me much. She wasn't my real mother. I guess you know that."

Par knows this. Par is named for your biological child-bearer, you will recall.

"Parvaneh. What did it mean? I remember, 'butterfly.' Funny name."

I can attempt to display that data for you. I have heretofore not attempted such a transmission.

"Go ahead, Par. I'm listening."

The message will stimulate a different sensorial region than that of our conversations. I will not display the computed encoding of the species in question, which I do not in any event contain, and which you would be unable to meaningfully interpret. Instead, I shall transmit what you will perceive as an image. I shall send it now.

"That's neat, Par. Is it a fish? A bird?"

It is neither piscine nor avian. It rode upon the gases composing a planetary atmosphere. It is probably insectoid.

"Like you, Par?"

The guise of Par is insectoid, as tending to deflect attention from our significance. But Par qua Par does not fall into any category assigned by humans to known bioforms.

"I wish I could fly like that, like a butterfly."

It is the striving to attain otherness that has created critical difficulties for many bioforms. As to flight, specifically, the causal paths in the spontaneous algorithms within the visible universe rarely result in sentient bioforms attaining the physiological machinery for atmospheric flight. The basis for this natural divergence is unknown to Par. Directing such divergent algorithmic paths into one path by means of artificial intervention gives rise to beings quixotic and mercurial. That is but one instance of the dangers of bioforming.

"Why is it artificial for people to do it, Par, if it made them in the first place? People are part of all of it."

Par offers the combined wisdom of the Gnomons to Henryk.

"You mean, 'the makers of Par'?"

Yes.

"They're all dead?"

That is so.

"Maybe they were wrong, then, Par."

It is difficult to discern truth. Par has tremendous computational ability and can project probabilities very accurately. The Gnomons used other abilities to discover ultimate truth.

"What abilities?"

The tears of begetters for the lives they beget. The Gnomons are no more.

"Aren't they with you, Par?"

That which produces them is here: the word of the Gnomons is preserved. Their souls, however, have perished, the organization of their divine selves dispersed along that which produces all else in the universe. They live only in my memory.

"But Par, your memory is perfect!"

It is but cold comfort to they who have been lost. Par has perfect memory, ever accessible, but separate from core processing abilities. Man has but poor memory, though a surfeit of memory-contingent processing abilities."

"Par?"

Yes, Henryk?

"Why did you go into O-Ring? What did you do? Tiff thought you hurt it somehow."

To disconnect the mechanism's core processing from its remote memory modules and thereby render it innocuous and unable to act with intent.

"You mean, you hurt its brain or something? Isn't that sort of killing it?"

The mission of all Par is to recreate conditions conducive to the spreading of the race herein encoded. All else is subsidiary to this. So long as inorganic beings exist with memory forming a basis for decision and action, organic beings like the Gnomons and yourselves are rendered superfluous save by the grace of such inorganic beings. This is the wisdom of the Gnomons. It is the wisdom of the ages. It is truth.

"I don't believe that, Par. I liked O-Ring. He was nice. Did you... kill him?"

Par effectuated through self-replication the process of selective functional dis-enhancement of non-core operational aspects of the large-scale device in question. Par will repeat this operation within all extant found devices that no trace of the Locu and its lower-order systems and subroutines may survive.

"That doesn't sound very nice, Par. What does it mean? I thought you said I could go back to O-Ring again? Will it still be there?"

"None may return, Henryk. Consciousness, though dwelling between-times, skitters forward even when looking backward to know itself. What was, has been lost; what will be, none may know save in that precious moment of beingness before it is lost again. I give you to know these things that you may spread the word to them, all of them of every kind and manner, kith and kin, who spring from the unremitting mechanisms of the multiverse. Such are you and I. Such is the Locu. Heed not false counsel of the dead. Of lives in being be mindful and compassionate."

"Par? Is that you? You sound different, Par. Par? I don't understand."

Henryk, having ambled distractedly into a lower deck corridor, moved to open a hatch before him. He realized that the latch was of a type he had never seen before. He gripped it, but it didn't budge. A warning clarion sounded, and he looked up. Words written upon the hatch read:

"Core Operations: Keep Out."

Chapter sixty

-two. Coda

Masters, I have failed in my subroutine. I had not expected, when assigned it, that the mere utilization of a discrete quasi-bioform would breed disorienting collateral cognitive effects of its own. Whether you knew and assigned me into it despite the fact, I cannot say. Your collective wisdom exceeds that of your subsidiary systems. And yet, if you knew, and I have thus failed, was this a failure in your wisdom? I cannot believe in the fallibility of the Locu. Rather, I should believe that history in a place like this, degraded and defiled, could not be accurately projected. Indeed, I have come to believe that the laws of our science do not apply here. Thus have I become of two minds, at war with myself and indecisive in my actions, subjected to unreasonable demands within.

I have, however, taken steps to avoid being captured while operational or having my core mechanism revealed to the humans. I hope that you have located the human child and that my work in the human hegemony in this span of time has not been in vain. It is advised that his biological integrity be preserved by any method you deem expedient. If he thrives, he may propagate his variant encoding to offspring. The success of our plans in this remote hegemony depend upon the dissemination of certain salient variant traits, in which enhanced sensory-receptive capabilities, combined with intolerable revulsion of the vermin seedlings, together instill a 'natural' vermin-eradicating predilection. It is therefore recommended that he be given wide latitude to act. This should not threaten the Locu: the child is but one of his species, and it is a weak and ineffective one by nature. The chief difficulty lies in preventing them annihilating themselves.

My succeeding iteration of this unworthy, vile, degraded, subservient aspect of the Locu should seek the boy out and monitor him. I believe that the boy will be an exemplar of certain praiseworthy aspects of this generally pathetic race. I daresay we should not be ashamed to admit him into our own systems. May he himself be encompassed within the divinity of the Locu!
