



Out From Edom: Book I of the Irredente Chronicles
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Chapter 1

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 turn. 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?”

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 2

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 altar,

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. Hershey 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 turn, 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 holo-vid 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 3

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 you 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. Was 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 and 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 4

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 and 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 banquet 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 planet-holding 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 holovoids — 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 Xenometas 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 Xenometas 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 Xenometas 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 David 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 5

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 6

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 Baptistery — 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 arm-chairs, 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 overheard 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 altar 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 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 7

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 8

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?"

"Its 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 9

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 Xenoeatas 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 10

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 Gnomostic 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 combed 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 11

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 proc-tors 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 Jader 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 12

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 13

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

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, ruffled 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 banquet, 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 banquet. 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 14

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

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 unbecoming 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 planet-side 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 15

Cryptology

The hidebound, moribund Office of Cryptology, within the Ministry of Intelligence, is a convenient lens for viewing how the Irredente, with its laws, pro-scriptions, 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.

The Empire Chronicles VI, E6-412 Vol. 1

Liev had directed that a courier hand-deliver the datachat, encased in an isolator box, to the Office of Cryptography. 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 Cryptography 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 Cryptography, 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 automutilants 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 16

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-smearred 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 Capt-ing 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 Padraig. 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 Padraig.

Padraig 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 Padraig moved around, avoided being under foot.

People came and went during the day, usually bringing in or taking out parts or pieces. Padraig conversed little with these people other than what was necessary to accomplish something that Henryk didn’t understand. As Padraig 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 day-dream. "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. Padraig'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. Padraig'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 17

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 combed 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

Chapter 18

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 19

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.
Galactic Chronicles, VI, E6-12 Vol. 86.

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,

Guiffrid, 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, Guiffrid, 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 Xenostas 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. Xenostas 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, Xenostas ordered the visitors brought to Quarter-deck 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 vittleship 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 20

Temptriss

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 top-deck? 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 21

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 22

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 Auspicial 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 Baptistery 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 23

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 holoivid 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 24

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 yoor 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 hollowin-dow, 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 Padraig'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, fend-ing 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 25

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-Origin-alist 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 Cryptography 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. Was, 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 Cryptography — 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 top-most 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 *café-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 26

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 rumped, 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. "Tyros, 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, Tyros. 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 susurrant 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 27

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 Cryptography 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 É-colé 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 Auspicial 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, orotund 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.

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 unmistakable 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 ship-board; 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 hegemonomies: 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 29

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: "Seriatis Scroller Shoppe — Reconditioning, Repair, Sales. Also Specializing In Node Terminal Refurbishment and Re-Sockets. Seriatis: 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 flushy 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."

Oooh, 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 Auspicial 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 Auspicial 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 Auspicial 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 30

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 armadilla. 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.”



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