



WARHAMMER
40,000



JOHN FRENCH

THE MISTRESS OF THREADS

A STORY OF THE HORUSIAN WARS



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THE MISTRESS OF THREADS

By John French

The following record entries make up the correspondence and summary documents (grade primus to secundus-beta) from the Stygian archives of the von Castellan Rogue Trader Dynasty relating to the Cytos Purge and the fall of the House Morio.

<entry I>

From: Cressida Syr Morio, Executor of the House Morio

To: Viola von Castellan, Seneschal of the von Castellan Rogue Trader Dynasty

Message delivered by oath-bound messenger

My Most Dear Cousin,

I hope that this finds you well. I am afraid that I must break with the formalities that should begin a letter between kin after such a long time. I am sorry to say that there are matters which must force formality and manners to the side. I must ask you for help, Viola, most urgently and strongly. I know that the circumstances around your family's trouble may have left you less inclined to listen to me, but I hope that the bonds that we shared in childhood will mean that you will excuse me for my current lack of consideration. God- Emperor, but I need someone to help us.

It began with our pact with the Cytos Cartel.

As you may know, it became clear after only a few years that my marriage into House Morio was more than a merger of wealth. As your father counselled my mother at the time, it was clear that House Morio was decaying from within. Its diminishing intellectual and commercial ability and traditions had led to continual loss of station and wealth. While Morio still held the grand supply agreements for Battlefleet Caradryad and the transit bonds for goods coming from the Throneward trade routes, it was within a generation of collapse. My

skills and those of my bloodline were what old Morio wanted when my marriage was brokered. And for a time that worked. My life-bound partner, Osric Morio, continued on the path of dissolution he had been following before our marriage. He had no power in the family anymore and seemed happy with that lot, as long as he had money enough to waste on the turn of a card and to burn in cadula smoke.

I kept him happy in that regard, and turned my attention to salvaging the House's withering fortunes. I was successful, as I am sure that you are aware. For a while it seemed as though there was no wrong that I, or the House Morio, could do. We secured the harvest rights to Persepol, regained the supply contracts for the Askar, Numal and Ventu chartist fleets. The broker houses of Tio and even Bakka were willing to extend credit bonds to us with eager smiles. The flow of wealth went from a rivulet to a torrent that carried us on and seemed bound only for an ocean of even greater bounty.

As executor of House Morio the credit for the return to fortune fell to me, and I must admit that I did not turn away from it. I don't know if you ever knew what it was like being a fourth cousin of a minor blood line bound to the great von Castellans. You were always at the centre of things, in the line of inheritance, control and fortune. We in the shadows knew our place, Viola, and that place was to be grateful for what fell to us. So I relished the power growing in my grasp and the fortune filling my fingers. It has a feeling, an almost physical sensation, doesn't it? Warm, like smooth cut stone under the sun, fluid and flying like soft fabric caught in the breeze, strong as the pull of the ocean tide. It was mine, created by the application of my skill, and mine to protect and wield. The sense of freedom seems almost giddy as I remember it.

I am sorry that during the time of our prosperity misfortunes overtook you and your dynasty. It is a truth, though, that the wheel of fate raises us all up into light and plunges us all back down into darkness. I have learnt that truth well in these last months.

The beginning of our trouble was growing then, though I did not realise it. Shadows were spreading, omens abounded, and fanciful news came with travellers from far places. Storms, rebirth, horrors and devils and dead worlds haunted the loose talk around even high tables. I paid these rumours little attention; there was work to be done, and there have been stories of dire futures told since mankind learned to use its tongue.

Osric, my blessedly absent consort, also began to behave unusually at this time. Ever since our marriage he had been happy keeping himself to his well-financed

life of dissolution. Now I found him haunting the estates and holdings of House Morio, as though uncertain what to do, or like a child caught just after committing a sin that they are considering confessing to. He seemed unusually interested in the details of the House's business and transactions. I humoured him with a little insight into the universe of our trade ledgers.

All thought of Osric's unusual behaviour vanished the moment that the storms broke and cataclysm came. I will not write to you of that moment; you know only too well, as do we all, and we are living in the world that it left to us. Let me touch on it only to say that as the wound opened across the stars and the storms swallowed the Throne's light, my House lost and lost again.

Only a year before, I had made contact with trade enterprises in the coreward sectors. I had hoped to expand the scope of our operations and holdings beyond the Caradryad sector. Our credit, reputation and influence was at a height that made it seem like a modest venture.

The great storms swallowed that optimism.

Ships vanished in the immaterium. Riots on planets burned trade goods. Messages vanished. Suddenly we had reservoirs of promethium but no tankers to move it to the chem-combines who had paid for it. In other places we had trade ships bonded and paid and waiting for cargo that had vanished into the flames. In others... in most places we did not even know what we held or where it was going.

Wealth is a web of chains. Each link is a promissory note, a cargo, a bill of sale or a contract of supply. The credit bonds that pay for a trillion mega-tonnes of grain to be shipped from Caelus are raised on Tio against the contracts sworn with the Administratum that we will supply that grain to the monasteries of Dominicus Prime. The chartist freighters that carry that grain are charged at a rate agreed and paid for by credit raised against the billion tonnes of ore sold to us in advance of it being mined on Gult. On and on it goes, link by link, growing out and out, across drifts of stars and planets and threading the dark with ships crossing the night. But all the chains lead back to House Morio. To me, dear cousin. And for all that they are made of gold, those chains bind.

The storms broke and the promissory brokers and the coin guilders and the families and cartels called in their debts. All of them. First one then another and another, in a great hungry cascade. It was panic, you see. There was fire in the sky, prophets telling of the death of the most blessed Emperor, dreams of blood and darkness. And so people did what they do when afraid that the world is coming apart – they grab hold of whatever they can. For the people in the streets

that meant food and water, and a weapon to keep themselves alive. For those whose world is measured in debit and credit it meant calling in every debt they were owed.

I know you understand these circumstances better than even I do. My mother once said you were the most brilliant seneschal-in-waiting the von Castellans had produced in twenty generations. And so I know that I have explained to you something that you already know, and that when I say that we could not pay our debts, not even begin to pay, that you have already deduced that before I wrote it.

Strange, don't you think, that even in times of the greatest uncertainty and disaster the ability to call in a debt seems to persist? We had nothing. Our remaining assets were seized across the sector. Proxies of our House were imprisoned, some even killed. And it was clear that this was only the beginning. Bounty hunter platoons from the Iron Venators were bound to bring myself and Osric to a cabal of our creditors. Only the loyalty of our household staff saved us from that fate. But there seemed no hope besides exile and life as a vagabond House, living off scraps in the carcass of our broken empire.

It was at that moment that Osric said that there might be people who could help us. Things were so desperate that I barely wondered at how he would know of anyone who could offer us aid. He said that over the years he had made the acquaintance of a number of members of the Cytos Cartel and that they had sent him a message offering to help remove our current difficulties.

I had heard of the Cytos. They were a power in sector trade. Quiet, private, reliable. All its members were said to be bound by the single version of the Imperial creed that they all shared. I had done trade with them, but never met them. Now, despite myself, I agreed to meet their representative.

The one that came to us was called Sonnus, and he said that he had the authority to speak for all the cartel. He seemed young, clean limbed and healthy, clad in the dust pale grey that I would come to learn was the mark of their kind. His eyes were the clearest amethyst I had ever seen. He wore a headdress of gold and beaten bronze set with moonstones and blood carbuncles. Two hulking lifewards accompanied him, their bulk and faces hidden beneath the plates of armoured pressure suits. His voice was like the ringing of a perfect silver bell. He was exceedingly gracious, expressing both great sympathy and willingness to help even without an agreement being reached. His agents had eliminated two bounty capture units and he presented us with real-time intelligence on many more. He also gave me the heads of the bounty hunters in crystal jars.

I confess, I was relieved. Here, somehow, we had a friend. We were not alone. It was a moment before I asked what the Cytos wanted in return for their help.

Sonnus replied that they wanted no payment. They simply wanted to become our partners in future business once our good name and fortune had been restored. They had the means to remove our debts and to help smooth over every other difficulty. All they wanted in return was to count House Morio as the most close associates and partners.

I had enough of my wits left to ask if he was alluding to taking over House Morio.

He replied with a kind laugh, and said no. Though the Cytos Cartel would make privileged use of all House Morio assets and contacts, we would keep complete autonomy. They would not even take a cut of the wealth flow – our profit would be ours.

I should have asked more. I should have looked deeper and thought longer. But the heads of eight bounty hunters were still looking up at me from inside the jars placed at my feet like blood gifts to a ghoulish queen. I did hesitate, but Osric said that he for one did not want to be chained in the gaols of one of our creditors or made into a dancing servitor for their pleasure.

So, I agreed.

And it worked. Our debts were paid, the contracts and bonds we had committed to fulfilled. The storms were still swallowing ships, and worlds were still in chaos, but there was still opportunity for profit amongst the blaze. And we were suddenly placed to take advantage.

The Cytos were very helpful. Their own operations were exceptionally stable and seemed to stand like rocks of order amongst a sea of anarchy. On the Fuzreina moons, the bond houses and fuel reservoirs held by the Cytos remained crewed and defended even as the rest of the populace rampaged through the refinery cities, and that was just one example.

We opened up new contracts, we made profits even beyond what we had at our previous high point. It was unbelievable, as though divine intervention had both saved and elevated us. I was not just relieved. I was elated.

For their part, the Cytos seemed content to simply take advantage of our name and contacts. Only gradually did they begin to make use of the terms they had negotiated with us. Both Osric and I acted as brokers between the Cytos and a number of other organisations and power blocs, in particular within parts of the Imperial power structure. I mediated an agreement that allowed ships carrying Cytos bonded cargo to resupply at Naval facilities in the Amarynth subsector,

and for their agents to move onto and off Gothar without checks under bond to the governor. They made use of our trade routes as they said they would, but only for small, sealed cargos and, above all, personnel.

Did I have misgivings? After a time, I think I did. I found Sonnus increasingly strange. He was deeply charming and charismatic, almost mesmerically so, but the more time I spent with him the more I felt like there was something that I was not seeing, something that crawled over my nerves when my back was turned in his presence. I cannot describe that sensation clearly. The closest thing to it I have experienced before is when Cicero, the old master of beasts on the estate at Xarxis Plethis, would show us the old velocipuma they kept in the wild gardens. You remember how it used to look at us? How, despite the bars and the guards' guns, you could see that it thought of us as nothing but prey, as cattle.

I put aside my feelings and focused on business. That is what you do. Your family taught me well, Viola. But there were other things, small things, barely noticed at the time: deference of Sonnus' guards, the way they never took off their masks, and a smell that lingered after them like... salt water or sugar sap...

All of this was incidental until I was delayed passing through our manse at Mithras. The storms had surged again, and the captain of the chartist vessel we were to take would not send his ship into the tempest. I had not intended on staying there, but now I found myself in residence at the old place for an indefinite amount of time.

I would ask if you remember the Mithras Manse, but of course you do – the lessons of our tutors mean that I am sure that you recall its every room and turret with perfect clarity. It still sits on the northern pinnacle outside Mithras-1, its wings and walls spilling down the mountainside. From the windows and parapets you can look down into the factory piles and see the flash of gunfire as the gangs kill each other down in the sump canyons. We had not really occupied the manse often, or for long periods, and so its stone and iron halls smelled of rust and dust. My servants did their best, but most of the rooms, staircases and wings remained deserted, or haunted by a few servitors with failing joints shuffling through half-forgotten tasks.

For the first day I confined myself with work, then with some of the volumes in the upper libraries, then, as our delay dragged on into days I found myself walking the more obscure parts of the manse. Perhaps like you, I have never been able to sleep well. The memetic and cognitive tutoring broke down my ability to find peace in sleep. Often exhaustion and a blend of chems will send me down into the well of dreams. So it was that I was walking through the north-

east wing's lower levels in the dark hours of the night, a suspensor-held candle bobbing at my shoulder.

The Northern Wing was the least used of the reaches of the manse, even when it was properly occupied. The tastes of its builder had run to long halls crawling with gargoyles and grotesques, statuary in the high mortuary style and narrow, high corridors that seemed to hold the promise of crushing those that walked them. The light of my candle pulled clawed shadows from the sculptures and threw them up the stone walls towards the darkened ceilings. Dust puffed from the rotting carpets beneath my feet. The sound of my breath slid off into the distance to echo in the dark.

I had paused to examine the plaques beneath a row of portraits when I noticed a set of doors that had clearly been opened recently. The dust was disturbed on the floor at the threshold, and the doors' iron panels and hinges bore the marks from where hands had come into contact with them.

I paused, puzzled and intrigued. There had been no entries in the manse's records of anyone visiting in the last ten years. Perhaps the few staff in the place had come here to perform a particular task, but I had absorbed estate-wardens' logs and there had been no activity recorded in the Northern Wing.

I was curious. So, I went to the doors and put my hand on the left-hand one to push it open. It was locked. That was more curious still – many of the locks in the manse were purely mechanical, few doors were actually barred. I had the master key, however, the key that opened every door, key pad and security measure in the place. I slotted it into the lock. I wish I could say that I hesitated at that moment, that some summation of facts held my hand still on the key before it turned. I did not hesitate though, and no thought besides mild puzzlement sounded in my head.

The chamber beyond the door had been a greeting hall, and it extended from the entrance to where dust-covered windows let in a grey haze of moonlight. The floor was stone, bare and unadorned, as though in echo of a church, or the citadel of a feudal world. There was no light source beside my candle, and it took a moment for my eyes to see anything beyond the circle of light.

There were boxes set out on the floor. Plasteel crates, each two metres to a side and one high, the kind used to ship goods from and to every corner of the Imperium. They were not stacked, though, but laid out singly, each one separated from the next by a precise metre of space. The sides of the crates were stamped with the seals of our house, the House Morio crest stencilled beside the details of our bonds and license of commerce.

They were not ours, though. I know every shipment and detail of our commerce down to the last grain and base coin. The crates were nothing to do with us. But here they were in our house, bearing our crest, set down with all the care of reliquaries in a chapel. I shivered then, and looked around, aware that I might not be alone. There was nothing. Just the dark, and the boxes lying silent and still.

After a moment I forced myself forwards. The candle followed with me. The nearest crate hummed with an internal cryo-coolant system. Its lid was cold to the touch. There was a code lock holding it shut, but, like the door, it yielded to the master key of our House. Mist breathed from within as the lock released. I had not hesitated at the threshold of this room, but I did then. The carefree wander through the night of only moments before had fled, leaving a present that felt like it was going to tumble into an unkind future. I could have walked away, sealed the crate and room. I could have done that...

I opened the lid, and let the light of the candle show me what lay within.

Nestled in frost, coiled like a larva at the root of a tree in winter, it lay. Smooth edges and hooked plates like polished lacquer, royal purple fading to black. My eyes and the light found limbs, found claws, found the eye closed in a long skull.

I don't think I moved. I don't think I *could* have moved. It was the purest moment of terror I have ever felt. My instincts screaming but my muscles and thoughts held still, frozen in denial of what was before me.

Then I heard a noise from the corridor outside, and the sound jolted me into movement. I sealed the crate, extinguished the candle and scrambled to the side of the room and the folds of a rotting tapestry.

The door opened. They brought no light with them, but they moved in the gloom as though it was daylight. I saw pale grey robes and gilded head crests, like those worn by the senior Cytos Cartel representatives. Two hulking guards came with them, heads hidden by hoods rather than helms. Each carried heavy cannons as though they were made of paper. One of them stopped on the threshold, raised its head, and for an instant I saw a grin of needle teeth.

It sniffed the air. The others that had come into the chamber froze, each of them perfectly still, eyes shining silver with gathered moonlight. Then, whatever moment had held them passed. They checked the crates were sealed and then withdrew, locking the door behind them.

I waited a long time in the dark, listening, waiting for a sound, eyes moving between the rows of crates. When I moved, I expected every step to summon a shout or a cry. None came, and when I reached the corridor I ran. I ran up and

up, through the manse, until I reached the inhabited wings and the dawn light sliding grey through the windows of the high towers.

That day the storms in the immaterium cleared and our ship made passage. Osric joined me on the ship, and after we were clear of Mithras orbit I asked him if he knew of the Cytos using our manse on Mithras. I do not know why I did not simply tell him what I had found, but I did not. He said that, yes, he knew they were using some of our unused space and transit bonds to ship small, high value cargos of valuables belonging to the cartel away from the worlds on the edge of the storm front. He smiled at me, and said it was the least we could do given what they had done for us.

That was three weeks ago. Since then I have made investigation into the Cytos' use of our House's holdings, but have found little to give comfort. Worse, there are eyes watching me, some amongst my household. In truth, I don't know the difference between fears and realities anymore.

And so, my most beloved Viola, I have written this communique in the old trade cant of our shared lineage and put it into the hands of a messenger that I can trust to bring it safely to you. Please help us. I know that after your brother's fall from grace, you and he formed an association with *parties* that have the means to deal with such problems as I face. Please help me.

Your most loving cousin,

Cressida Syr Morio

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<entry II>

Coded order docket

From: Viola von Castellan

To: Cassius Qualtren, von Castellan emissary-savant, Geresh, Subsector Battlefleet Base

Begin primary and secondary searches – Cytos Cartel, all history holdings and movements. I want to know everything about this outfit, Cassius. Go as far back and wide as you can – in particular, planets of origin and current locales of operation. Oh, and there is an above-the-margin likelihood that they are hostile and dangerous to anyone looking at them the wrong way, so be discreet, all right? But be swift, too. You know the drill by now, I'm sure.

In addition, get me a full trade and operational appraisal on House Morio. Same level of 'no one should know' on that, too, old friend. All of this comes under house cypher condition Stygian, with a priority rating of Aleph-75. I will transfer

funds for operational expenditure.

Viola

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<entry III>

Notary exchanged between Viola von Castellan and Cleander von Castellan undertaken by real time signal on board the ship Dionysia

Cleander: I have received a letter – more of a screaming plea, actually – from Cressida. All raving under a cloak of formality. I am guessing she sent you the same.

Viola: She did. It is in hand. Send me the letter. I will need to sift it for other data scraps.

Cleander: You think there is anything in what she is saying?

Viola: I don't know.

Cleander: Do you know what I would be tempted to do?

Viola: I think I can guess.

Cleander: Come on! Tell me you are not tempted to leave her hanging on whatever rope she has found to swing on?

Viola: I can't ignore this.

Cleander: They did not lift a finger to help us. Our mother took Cressida in, educated and set her up, paid off her father's debts, all of it. But when the time came for them to repay that help, where was she? Where was House Morio?

Viola: I know, brother. I was there, if you remember.

Cleander: They didn't just turn away, Viola! Cressida and that turd Osric gave sacred oaths declaring the severing of all familial bonds to us. It was done in the sight of the Pontiff Maxima on Dominicus Prime. They made a bastard pilgrimage to the most holy place in the sector to publicly wash their hands of us.

Viola: That may be so, but there are things in Cressida's letter that have to be looked into. We have a duty to more than our own wounded honour.

Cleander: True. You think this is something to take to *him*?

Viola: I am not sure, but I will need to tell him. I am deploying our personal resources, but if this problem requires more than that I will need his authority to activate other types of asset.

Cleander: You think it will come to that?

Viola: I don't know.

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<entry IV>

From: Viola von Castellan

To: Inquisitor Covenant

Message delivered by hand by Inquisitorial Courier Venetia

My Lord,

I must apprise you of a matter that has come to light. A full packet of the current intelligence available on the matter is appended to this communique. In essence, there is the possibility that the ancient trade house of Morio, and the Cytos Cartel, have come into contact with, have dealings with, or have come under the influence of a malleus or xenos threat of unknown nature. I am proceeding with first stage information and intelligence gathering.

I must also inform you that the executor of the House Morio is a blood relative of mine and Duke von Castellan's, and that she is our primary source of direct information.

At this stage I am using von Castellan assets and resources, both because the credibility of threat is not certain, and the use of those resources is not likely to be noticed. I will though, with your permission, begin to form and assemble operational components to fit all eventualities.

In faith,

V.

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<entry V>

From: Inquisitor Covenant

To: Viola von Castellan

Message delivered by hand by Inquisitorial Courier Venetia

Proceed.

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<entry VI>

From: Viola von Castellan, Seneschal of the von Castellan Rogue Trader Dynasty

To: Cressida Syr Morio, Executor of the House Morio

Message delivered by oath-bound messenger

My Dear Cousin Cressida,

Your message disturbed me greatly. First let me reassure you that I will do everything in my power to help you. That power may, however, be more limited than you hope. You allude to associations made by my brother after his disgrace,

but I must inform you that such rumours bear little relation to the truth, and we are a House with few and dwindling resources. Your fears that I would refuse you aid because of matters left in the past could not be further from the truth. I am, and always will be, the friend that you had in childhood. I will bend all that I can command.

On that matter, I must admit to being puzzled. Your description of what you found in the Mithras Manse, of Sonnus and the Cytos, is dramatic and distressing, but I am struggling to parse it into clean data. To be direct – are you saying that the Cytos Cartel are using the House Morio’s name and connections to move some form of living creatures between planets? If so, that is no doubt concerning, but the trade in xenos breeds, while frowned on by Imperial authorities, is not a great matter. If you recall, it was the least charge levelled against the von Castellan dynasty during the troubles we encountered. It also seems unlikely that a large cartel would go to the trouble of writing off debts such as those carried by House Morio for the possibility of moving crated creatures about like rare fruits. Take it from me, cousin; the margin simply isn’t there. Might there be a simpler explanation? A simple smuggling operation, or the movement of private goods of a cartel member that might attract thieves? As your mother used to say – ‘why presume grand malice where simple greed will suffice?’

I also cannot help but ask if the state of sleeplessness and cognitive boredom you say you were in while in the Mithras Manse might not have heightened your imagination and compromised your perception? I know first-hand that the conditioning given to us comes at a price. Sometimes I cannot sleep, and when I dream sometimes it seems that I wake.

If I can, may I encourage you to take rest where you can? The crisis in your House’s fortunes has passed, and there is no need to create more phantoms than exist.

Please reply to tell me how you are, and tell me how more I can help you.

Your most loving cousin,

Viola von Castellan

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<entry VII>

From: Cressida Syr Morio, Executor of the House Morio

To: Viola von Castellan, Seneschal of the von Castellan Rogue Trader Dynasty

Message delivered by oath-bound messenger

My Dear Cousin Viola,

I am sorry if my previous letter disturbed you or caused you to worry. You are right, the strain and cognitive drug regime I am using has been causing me to lose full definition between thought and reality. Is it not strange that such things come to us all in time? There is a price in flesh as well as coin for all we do. Please discount the overwrought nature of my last writing. I believe that you can help me, but that the extent of that help might be to act as a reader to my words. I am sure that I have not known a true friend, even one separated by great reaches of space, for too long.

I am remaining in the Sunlight Manse on Viran for now – it is calmer here, and the storms do not blight the light of the stars as they do on other worlds. Perhaps a little time and a little rest will see my mind clear. I look forward to your reply with love and affection.

Your most loving cousin,

Cressida Syr Morio

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<entry VIII>

Notary exchanged between Viola von Castellan and Cleander von Castellan undertaken by real time signal on board the ship Dionysia

Viola: Sevenfold curses from a saint's lips – it's real. Whatever Cressida stumbled on, it's real and the Cytos are watching her closely.

Cleander: How do you know?

Viola: The message I sent her. Not that you would know, brother, but our dynasty's trade cant has a number of deep code phrases for use in messages that you believe might be intercepted. They were used in the old Trade Wars. Simple but effective.

Cleander: Oh, what ingenuity does generations of greed and paranoia create?

Viola: 'Presume grand malice' – means that you must presume that enemies are close and may intercept messages. 'Sometimes I cannot sleep, and when I dream sometimes it seems that I wake' – that is an old proof of safety phrase that demands a response. Cressida used the phrase 'great reaches of space' in her reply, meaning that she was certain that there were enemies close to her. There is more, too, but you get the idea.

Cleander: Fascinating. What are you going to do?

Viola: I will get another means of communication in place. One that's less reliant on archaic code phrasing.

Cleander: I still think it would be fitting to just leave her to whatever judgement fate has finally decided to dump on her head.

Viola: Doesn't fate do that to us all in the end?

</>

<entry IX>

Mission tasking

From: Viola von Castellan

To: Lemaitre Corvae, von Castellan Household Truth Thief

Location:

Viran, Sunlight Manse of House Morio

Parameter:

Infiltrate manse and pass cypher signal transmitter to individual identified as Cressida Syr Morio (target details attached). Target must be 100% identified and pass-off with transmitter must be clean and unobserved. Covert hostiles likely to be active throughout target locale. Once the objective is complete, withdraw and set up concealed signal relay post 100 km from target location. All relayed transmissions encrypted: Stygian, Aleph-75.

Restriction: 0 fatalities.

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<entry X>

Mission report

From: Lemaitre Corvae, von Castellan Household Truth Thief

To: Viola von Castellan

Mission complete. All parameters maintained. Transmission device, concealed as a signet ring, passed to target. Encrypted transmission relay with target, in place and functioning.

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<entry XI>

Encrypted relay message delivered in binary code

From: Viola von Castellan

To: Cressida Syr Morio

What did we call the beast master on the estates from Xarxis Plethis?

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<entry XII>

Encrypted relay message delivered in binary code

From: Cressida Syr Morio

To: Viola von Castellan

The lord of rats and teeth.

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<entry XIII>

Encrypted relay message delivered in binary code

From: Viola von Castellan

To: Cressida Syr Morio

Apologies, I had to be certain that it was you. I cannot risk a drawn out conversation by this method, Cressida, but wheels are in motion. This matter is going to be difficult to resolve and is going to require more of you. A lot more. Above all, I need direct information that only you can supply. First, I need to know about the Cytos in your immediate presence. People you suspect, assets and personnel, all of it – any and everything. Second, I need you to gather all records of your House's activities and trade since the accord brokered with the Cytos. Also, any and all Cytos-related records of any kind that you can access. This transmission device can spindle and send it all in a single blurt. Once that is done, the next steps can proceed.

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<entry XIV>

Header note to report delivered to the rogue trader vessel Dionysia by Household messenger

From: Cassius Qualtren, von Castellan emissary-savant, Geresh, Subsector Battlefleet Base

To: Viola von Castellan

Most honoured and etcetera, Viola,

Well you do like to bring me all the worst and most delicious puzzles, don't you? The full report and info-packets are included in the data cylinders accompanying this note. In summary, the Cytos are a complex beast. On one hand they have an excellent reputation in all their dealings – they are highly efficient, never break a contract or a bond, never play the political or status games that other trade operations do. They pay on time and in full. Always. I don't know about you, but that alone makes me suspicious. They also make large donations to the coffers of the Ecclesiarchy both at a sector and local level.

It's past this point that everything gets a little murkier. They are called a cartel, but I can find no sign of division within their organisation – quite the reverse, in

fact. They are exceptionally homogenous – all members of the cartel have a high degree of uniformity in approach and act with a consistency and cohesion that would make the high prefects of the Administratum green with envy. They act as one and without deviation or fracturing. In an Imperium where three people in a single room will find a way to form factions rather than unite, this uniformity is more than a little unusual.

Much of that uniformity might be attributed to the Cytos' religious nature. It's not that uncommon for an organisation to be bound by adherence to a particular branch of the Imperial creed. But in the case of the Cytos it goes further. Their branch of faith is called the Ascent of Plenty, and proclaims the Emperor as the incarnation of all truth and plenty and unity. As far as I could trace its origin, the Ascent of Plenty sprung up amongst docking clans in the Asoro void colonies, but from there I can trace no recorded path of how it developed. I could also find no one outside of the Cytos Cartel who follows the Ascent of Plenty – the cartel is the creed and the creed is the cartel.

As far as I can tell, the Cytos, like the Ascent of Plenty, began in the Asoro void – the two are intertwined so tightly that it's almost pointless to see them as separate. A minor trade house called Esren and a cargo brokerage called the Volumani seem to have formed the nucleus of the early enterprise. As they grew others have been added: a noble house from Kias, a wealth-arbiter organisation from Dust Scorn, a produce combine from Geo-1. The interesting thing is that the individual identities of all of these parts have vanished completely. There are a few heraldic devices, some names on ancient compacts, but any sense of individual identity is gone, replaced by the culture and faith of the cartel. That would not bode well for House Morio maintaining autonomy in the long term.

And the Cytos are also not without teeth. Though they are firmly on the side of Imperial authority, and spotless as far as conflict with official bodies is concerned, they are not above killing to defend or extend their influence. The docking guilds on Kias tried to force a better rate during negotiations by commandeering Cytos Cartel goods using loader gangers. The Cytos broke off negotiations and sent in their own forces. No gangers survived. I also found an account that, during the fall of Helx, the holdings of the Cytos forces fought off the heretics so effectively that theirs were the only islands of order in a sea of fire and anarchy.

As to the House Morio, well, there is a sorry tale... The work on that was a good deal easier than researching the Cytos. I do not wish to cast aspersions on a blood relative of yours, but Cressida Syr Morio was running an operation that

could hardly be described as watertight – full of holes would be a better description. They were structurally vulnerable from almost every direction, and their fiscal strategy, while yielding great rewards, also left them open to just the sort of events as took place in the wake of the Storm Break. In fact, I have a suspicion that even before then, there were clandestine moves being made to erode their ability to resist a catastrophe, and so increase their vulnerability to just the kind of approach made by the Cytos. If I was prone to betting – and you know that I never am, at least not with real money – then I would place a large sum on the Cytos Cartel secretly owning House Morio's debt *before* they made an accord. Your cousin's House was stalked, marked and snared like a gamebird, my lady.

Full report on the Cytos Cartel and House Morio appended to this missive, but I thought you would like the juicy bits upfront. Oh, and I included a list of all Cytos' holdings and active locations and any information I could assemble to aid in any... direct action that someone might want to take against them. Call it acting on a hunch, but I thought you might find it helpful.

Anyway, if there is anything else, I am yours to command, quite literally of course, but nonetheless. I look forward to when our paths cross again, old friend – the regicide board and a very fine bottle of siliqua stand ready.

Cassius

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<entry XV>

Direct order parameter missive

From: Viola von Castellan

To: Kynortas, Master-at-Arms, von Castellan Household

Take action to augment our household forces with elements prepared for direct action – high intensity, fast assault, void and orbital insertion. Also bring in all the markers we have with any of the Dominicus Prime Death Clans and the Blade Cult on Inx. I want a multi-zone force in place ready to deploy on my command. Gather the primary action elements to the *Dionysia*. Transport ships for the mercenary companies are to be sourced. I will pay promissory bonds at 2% above harbour broker rates.

We might have to get dirty quickly – make sure we are ready.

V. von Castellan.

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<entry XVI>

Encrypted relay message delivered in binary code

From: Cressida Syr Morio

To: Viola von Castellan

Data files appended to message in cypher compressed packet

Here is everything I could get. I managed to get into a set of shared trade ledgers. There was not much, but I could build a picture from what was there. It took a while. They have wormed their way in everywhere. Pay attention to our deep orbital cargo stations of Geresh and Ero, they have been particularly busy there. Also the chartist ships *Tide Bringer* and *Journey of Wonder*.

You need to help Osric and I to get out, right now, Viola. They are watching me all the time. They are everywhere. How did I not see it? Every retainer we hired in the last cycle is theirs – I can feel it. It's true. The new housemistress, Veng, she is like a second shadow walking behind me and there is something in the way she looks at me... like... like I am meat on a platter.

Get us out. Get us out now!

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<entry XVII>

Encrypted relay message delivered in binary code

From: Viola von Castellan

To: Cressida Syr Morio

Cressida – remain where you are. Remain calm. Everything is in motion.

Viola.

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<entry XVIII>

Notary exchanged between Viola von Castellan and Cleander von Castellan undertaken by real time signal on board the ship Dionysia

Cleander: What do you think they are? These Cytos types, I mean.

Viola: I am not sure. I have theories.

Cleander: You always have theories.

Viola: Thank you, brother mine. This is big, though, big and nasty.

Cleander: That's one of your theories?

Viola: That's the part I am certain about. Something very clever and insidious has made the Cytos Cartel into a sort of mask, like a suit of skin. It is using it to further its interests, its assets and its reach across the stars.

Cleander: Lots of things could fit that modus operandi.

Viola: Yes. Yes and no.

Cleander: You know what they are, don't you? Come on, I can tell you are dying to educate me.

Viola: I need corroboration. If I am right, we are going to need to augment the forces I have already mobilised.

Cleander: That's going to be difficult. If the Cytos are as dangerous as your silence suggests, it's a wonder that your truth thief got the transmitter to Cressida. If you want a hard incursion, *and* you don't want the Cytos to realise that we are on to them, well, you are going to have to use some of 'his' assets, aren't you? You are going to have to send in some agents of the Throne.

Viola: Yes.

Cleander: They are already deployed, aren't they? Who did you send? Ianthe?

Viola: Not close enough, and she has been out of direct communication for a while. Xith is trying to track down Talicto's lost apprentice in the tri-storm zone. Sensus-54-Zeta... well, we need precision, not a blood bath. At least not yet.

Cleander: So, Tervaize, then. There is no one else, so it's got to be her, yes? It's all getting a bit 'keeping it in the family', isn't it?

Viola: Tervaize is not family.

Cleander: Not technically, but...

Viola: Technicalities matter.

Cleander: And Cressida? When are you going to get her out?

Viola: Not yet. We aren't ready. Move too early and everything goes to hell. She stays where she is. We might have use for her yet, too.

Cleander: Throne of Immortal Light, and there I was assuming that you were actually going to help her...

Viola: Never assume anything about me, brother.

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<entry XIX>

From: Viola von Castellan

To: Tervaize Astra, Agent of Inquisitor Covenant

Mission Parameter Order – delivered by Inquisitorial courier

Under the authority vested in me for this instance by your master, the most noble Inquisitor Covenant, I, Viola von Castellan do direct and command you to undertake the task here detailed with all haste using any methods you deem necessary and stinting in no degree in pursuit of its completion.

Now that's out of the way, on to the task – all the details we have are attached, my dear. We don't have much time so you are going to have to use that

improvisational streak you have developed. The key thing is that we need a physical specimen – dead is fine, but intact is essential. I think the targets might be very, very dangerous, so bear that in mind, too. And it has to look like something other than a hit. Nothing official, nothing smelling of, looking like, sounding like or feeling like us or anyone else, all right?

Fortune go with you – the Emperor Protects.

Viola

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<entry XX>

Encrypted relay message delivered in binary code

From: Cressida Syr Morio

To: Viola von Castellan

They have taken Osric. He just vanished two nights ago and has not reappeared. The housemistress Veng says he took a shuttle south to go hunting. He didn't. I just know he didn't. They are watching all the time. They know. I just know that they know. GET ME OUT OF HERE.

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<entry XXI>

From: Tervaize Astra, Agent of Inquisitor Covenant

To: Viola von Castellan

Post mission message – delivered by Inquisitorial courier

You said they were dangerous, but you sold them short.

Here is the fast summary of operations – I picked out the orbital dock facility at Carthos from your list of places where the Cytos are active. It is on the storm edge and the guilds there are barely holding order together. Communication is patchy at best. I figured it would be the best place for what we needed to do to go unnoticed.

I took an eight-strong team into orbital dock. They were good too, all people I know, all Throne-bound and hardened. We identified the Cytos. There were thirty-three of them present in the dock. Half of them hiding their faces in void suits, the other half floating around in grey white. There were riots going on down in the low dock levels, but the Cytos did not seem bothered in the least – just went on with their business like nothing was happening. I picked out one of their party that seemed to have a lot of autonomy. The rest went around in groups but this one sometimes peeled off to whisper to dock controllers and cargo masters. He was the definite leader and coordinator.

Anyway, we hit them hard. Fermented the riots up several notches – sorry, we did some damage to the state of law and order, but you said time was short. Diverted a chunk of the fire and violence in the direction of the Cytos while our target was on his own in the dock section. We took him out. That wasn't easy. As soon as the first shot was fired the psy-frost was crawling the walls. All of the dock workers started twitching, then moving like they were on strings, and suddenly we were on the wrong end of a battle with a couple of dozen heavily augmented cargo-gangers.

We did it though. It cost me five people, but we did it. One dead specimen. We got out with the corpse in a stasis chest and delivered it to the Inquisition Bastion on Malence. But you don't need to wait for the dissectors or xenos-biologists to report. I know what that thing was. Not a hair on its skin. Eyes like cut amethyst and a row of ridges under the skin sliding up its brow, barely noticeable unless you know where to look. Near human, but not quite, not really – human with something else buried down in its gene-helix. I have seen the like before, in the Pale Drift a long way away – there they took over cities, raised temples in bone to many-armed gods. Different but the same. It's a *Corporaptor Hominis* infestation. The Cytos are a devourer cult, a nest of the corruptor breed, what the void tales you told me give the name genestealers.

If you are waiting to act, don't. Set the fire to them now.

Tervaize

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<entry XXII>

From: Viola von Castellan

To: Inquisitor Covenant

Message delivered by hand by Inquisitorial Courier Venetia

My Lord,

We have primary confirmation that the Cytos Cartel is a front for a xenos-hybrid cult of the Corporaptor Hominis. The cult is widespread and established. I believe they have been using the name and access granted by House Morio to move their alien primogenitors and other members of their cult out of the path of the spreading storms. They are fleeing the storm's path and searching for new places to infest, and are using the fabric of Imperial commerce to do it.

While it lies outside of the sphere of interest of your ordo, my advice is that you move to deal with it directly rather than pass it over to one of your peers of the Ordos Xenos – the more time and room the Cytos have, the more chance they

have to survive.

I have taken the liberty of gathering intelligence on the Cytos and drawing up a multiple-location purge plan. Forces from your retinues and the von Castellan household are standing by for your order, but given the combat effectiveness of such cults, I would advise that you requisition specialist Imperial assets to augment operations.

In faith,

V.

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<entry XXIII>

From: Inquisitor Covenant

To: Viola von Castellan

Message delivered by hand by Inquisitorial Courier Venetia

The order is given. Begin with all speed. Set the time and begin the count. I will summon Those Who Stand Vigil.

By the will of Him on Terra, who is all and who all serve,

Covenant

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<entry XXIV>

Encrypted relay message delivered in binary code

From: Viola von Castellan

To: Cressida Syr Morio

My Dear Cousin,

I am sorry. I know that what you have endured has been terrifying, and I offer every apology that I can make for not answering you sooner or getting you out. You must trust me that this will all be over soon, but, Cressida, there is one more thing I must ask of you.

The Cytos emissary you call Sonnus will be coming to the manse. It does not matter how I know this, only that you know it is true. He is coming to see you. Your behaviour has them worried and Sonnus is coming to make sure that the cartel's use of House Morio is not in danger. You must wait until he is there and when he is there, when he is in your presence, send this word – Birthright.

Viola.

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<entry XXV>

Direct order parameter missive

From: Viola von Castellan

To: All units on Viran planet, and by proxy to all units involved in the purge operation

Stand by. The sword rises.

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<entry XXVI>

Encrypted relay message delivered in binary code

From: Cressida Syr Morio

To: Viola von Castellan

Birthright.

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<entry XXVII>

Edited transcript of interrogation of Hed-Sut, Servant Attendant 2nd Class, Morio House, Sunlight Manse Estate, after the Viran component of the Cytos Purge

‘Believe me, oh, please by the pity of saints believe me, I don’t know anything. I had only worked at the manse for a winter. There were lots of new people coming and going all the time. I just held the doors and brought the food. I... [weeping]’

[question redacted]

‘I was in the room. I had been ordered to bring refreshment for the mistress while she met a guest. I had... I walked in... They were in the Pinnacle Embassy Chamber. The sun was rising across the sea – from up there you can see right across the bay to the tide towns to the south. The walls on two sides of the Embassy Chamber are crystal, and the manse just drops away beneath it. You walk in, you forget that you are at the top of a big pile of stone and glass. It feels for a moment like you are floating. That must be what it is like to be them, to be like Mistress Morio or Master Osric – floating above the world...’

[question redacted]

‘Yes, he was there, Master Sonnus of the Cytos and five attendants and guards. Huge things, some in void suits, some in those grey robes they like to wear. Big, all of them. I... I didn’t like to look at them too much.’

[question redacted]

‘I couldn’t see their faces. Not then. Not until—’

[question redacted]

‘Yes, I had seen Master Sonnus before. He was a regular visitor to the master and mistress.’

[question redacted]

‘I was alone in the chamber with them for a few seconds before Mistress Morio came in. I bowed to give her the refreshment I had brought but she did not take it. She looked... Well, she looked frightened.’

‘As soon as she was through the doors, the House senior closed them and I heard locks thrown. That was when I started to—’

[question redacted]

‘Sonnus greeted her, yes, but his guards started moving as soon as the doors closed. Mistress Morio did not move from where she stood but I saw her bring her fingers together to press a stud on a ring on her left hand. She was shaking, I saw. The guards had moved to circle the room. I had backed towards the locked doors...’

[question redacted]

‘Yes, it was then that I spotted it. It was just a dot, out on the horizon above the sea. Mistress Morio was really shaking now, like she was in an ice gale. And Sonnus was saying something about debts or it might have been doubts. There was a light in his eyes. And... and I swear I could taste burning sugar and ozone. Then housemistress Veng let out a cry. Sonnus and his guards spun around like they were pulled by cables. The spot was bigger now. Much bigger, and you could see that it was not one thing anymore but several – aircraft flying close together, getting closer with each second.’

‘Sonnus turned back to Mistress Morio, and his eyes were circles of lightning. He had his mouth open and... and there were teeth, teeth like needles of bone that had pushed out of the flesh inside his lips. He did not look... he did not look human.’

‘The missiles hit then. I saw them launch, saw the fire flare on the wings of the aircraft, and for the length of an eye-blink I saw them flash silver in the sunlight. They hit. The whole manse shook. Then the planes were arcing close, and I could see them firing down into the lower levels. One came right at us. It fired. A cannon or something. The glass walls blew out. Veng and Sonnus were shrieking, and I could hear the sound in my head. It went on and on and I think I was screaming too.’

[question redacted]

‘Sonnus’ guards started shooting. The aircraft was flying straight at us. Figures came out of the doors in its front. They wore black. Huge black blurs, jumping

across the gulf between aircraft and shattered window in an eye-blink. Then the aircraft slammed vertical and vanished out of sight into the sky. The roar of the jets shattered the last of the glass. The figures in black... I... I have never... they were so fast. Three of Sonnus' guards were dead just like that. Heads blown off. Red and pink... I don't want to think...'

[question redacted]

'Yes, that was when the last two of Sonnus' guards moved. Their robes tore off as they moved. They were just a blur. Claws and limbs and shining shells like polished bone. The figures in black... the Angels – that's what they were, weren't they? The Emperor's Angels of Death – charged. And Sonnus reached out his hand and there was lightning on his fingers and he, he...'

[question redacted]

'I don't know. The doors just unlocked and there were people from the household, people I knew or thought I knew, with violet light in their eyes and guns in their hands. The Angels did not stop. I saw one of them reach Sonnus and put a sword through his chest and lift him up like a roasting carcass on a spit. He... I...'

[question redacted]

'I don't remember. Someone fired grenades into the room and suddenly I couldn't see or breathe. There were just the flashes and roars through the fog and the shadows of the Angels.'

[question redacted]

'Yes, I think Mistress Morio was alive when I last saw her.'

[statement redacted]

'What is going to happen to me? I want to go home. Please can you tell me when I can go home?'

Interrogation transcript complete.

Hed-Sut was transferred to penal colony Stygos-VI as an acknowledgement of his freedom from taint.

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<entry XXVIII>

Operational summary report from Cytos Purge Stages I-VI

Geresh orbital and void facility targets – Cleansed by five companies of Suraso mercenaries. Three target clusters eliminated on Gerrish surface by Dominicus Prime Death Clans.

Ero system – Void macro storage complex, purged by three companies of von

Castellan Household voidsmen.

Mithras – Strike by Deathwatch Kill Company. All details redacted.

Asoro – Manse of the House Morio destroyed by macro orbital strike. Zero warning given to maximise casualties. Sweep of debris completed by Arbitrator Execution Unit.

Kias – Cleanse carried out by Throne Agent Cadre under Sensus-54-Zeta.

Dust Scorn – Assassination of six target clusters by Inx Blade Cult devotees.

Geo-1 – Assault on Geo Combine harvest machines by the 45th Plethian Dragoons. Total cleanse ratified after seven days of fighting by use of a Primaris Telepathica Cadre.

Trade ship *Tide Bringer* – Destroyed off Ero dockyards by direct fire from the warships *Last Oath* and *Scion of Wrath*.

Carthos – All Cytos Cartel members killed in the detonation of plasma generators on Orbital Dock 56-A.

Trade ship *Journey of Wonder* – Boarded and taken and scuppered by the rogue trader *Dionysia* under the command of Duke Cleander von Castellan.

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<entry XXIX>

From: Cressida Syr Morio, Executor of the House Morio

To: Viola von Castellan

I have nothing. I am a beggar in a universe that does not suffer the weak and where the light of mercy does not lighten the dark. I am alive and for that I suppose I must thank you. I am told that this ship will take me to Bakka, and from there...

Osric is gone. They say that he betrayed me, that he was working with the Cytos from even before the storms came, that he resented me and wanted to take control from me. It is a lie. I will not believe it.

Everything is gone. Even my House's name will mean nothing. That fat priest friend of yours said I am to be a pilgrim – a pilgrim on a journey that may never end to see the light of Sol and the glory of Holy Terra; a journey of penance that I will die on. That is what I get? That is what I deserve?

My mother always said that the von Castellans had cold silver in their veins, and you... you, Viola, are a true scion of your noble line. Did you destroy the Cytos just so that you could do this to me?

You always were a jealous, bitter thing. Don't deny it. Even when we were children you could not bear it that your sister would inherit, that your brother

had freedom, that our tutors liked me more, that you would always be in someone's shadow. You just could not bear it when I rose out of the pit that your family made for its loathed lesser cousins.

Do you know what kept me going all those years of watching you twist into the shape your parents wanted? Knowing that I was better than you all. And I still am, Viola, I still am. You have sent me into an exile of rags. You have your victory, Mistress of Threads. But I will remember what you did and what you are.

Cressida Syr Morio

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<entry XXX>

From: Viola von Castellan

To: Cressida Syr Morio, Executor of the House Morio

Cressida,

You say you have nothing, so let me give you the coin whose value never fades. The truth is that I never resented you – I pitied you. I pitied you when we were children, and I pity you now. In all honesty nothing that I have done since I received your first message was driven by anything other than my duty to the Imperium. You see, I am a penitent, too. I live a penance for the mistakes of my family and the sins of my brother.

Cleander, like you, wants to believe that I have taken revenge on you for your washing your hands of us after our family's fall. He wants nothing more than for your current situation to be the result of my careful design, for it to be just and fitting that you find yourself alone and without friends just as you left us alone and without help. He very much wants to believe that. But the truth is that I don't care enough to make that happen, and while I am many things I am not cruel for my own ends.

You are a bitter and foolish soul, Cressida. You believe your desires and power define the universe. I know that belief is false. I know that my desires and designs are nothing in the play of time and the span of the stars.

Could I have helped you to start again, set you up with wealth and the hope of the prestige you so crave? Yes, I could. But, as I said, I am not cruel without reason.

Walk the path given to you, cousin, and maybe one day you shall see the light of Terra and know that I have given you a freedom and peace that I cannot give myself.

Yours in blood and truth,
Viola von Castellan
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Operational records relating to the Cytos Purge end here.

No further correspondence between Cressida Syr Morio and Viola von Castellan exists in the von Castellan dynastic record.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John French is the author of several Horus Heresy stories including the novels *Praetorian of Dorn*, *Tallarn* and *Slaves to Darkness*, the novella *The Crimson Fist*, and the audio dramas *Dark Compliance*, *Templar* and *Warmaster*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Resurrection* and *Incarnation* for The Horusian Wars and two tie-in audio dramas – the Scribe award-winning *Agent of the Throne: Blood and Lies* and *Agent of the Throne: Truth and Dreams*. John has also written the Ahriman series and many short stories.

An extract from *The Horusian Wars: Incarnation*.



The harvest pilgrims came to the glass tabernacle as they always had. They trod the half-severed stalks down, and sent their prayer smoke into the blue sky, a slowly gathering tide of people old and young, man and woman, all clad in the sacred blue of rain. Thousands of them had already gathered around the tabernacle. They swirled about it, white smoke puffing from their fume pipes, scenting the air with fruit and spice.

‘Credulous fools,’ muttered Ninkurra, as she guided one of her hawks lower over the scene. The creatures were psyber-bonded – their eyes and will hers.

The pilgrim throng was swaying like the crops that had stood where they now walked. Whooping prayers lifted into the air. Inside the tent of glass, the priests were gathering around the altar box. She could see them sway as they sang their secret songs and swung incense smoke around the reliquary. From their point of view, her seeing this would be a blasphemy; she was not of the priesthood, and not initiated into the mysteries of the Emperor’s Eternal Light. The pilgrims who circled the tabernacle would have torn her apart if they had known that she could see a priest open the first leaf of the reliquary. They would have been even more incensed that she could see an acolyte at the back of the group pick his nose. A kilometre away from them, she snorted with laughter.

‘Something diverting?’ asked Memnon.

‘No,’ she said, still watching the priests, ‘not really, just... Don’t you sometimes think humanity is too petty for divinity? If we found the Emperor’s frozen tears someone would give them to a child as a toy.’

‘That is what defines the divine – that it is beyond us.’

‘If you say so.’

‘I do.’

Seen from above, the tabernacle itself was a mountain made of triangular sheets of glass, each one tethered to another, the smallest on the outside just a couple of metres tall, the largest over fifty metres in height. Its apex was a blade point

thrust at the sun. Even though each sheet of glass was transparent, those stood on the outside could see only a handful of layers inside. Rainbows of blinding light scattered from its faces and edges, hiding the sanctuary at its core. Once the ceremony began, only a few of the pilgrims would be allowed inside. There was no straight way to the centre of the structure, just an ever-weaving path between sheets of reflection. If a pilgrim reached the sanctuary itself, they would be able to turn, and – thanks to the precise setting of each glass pane – see perfectly in every direction.

She opened her true eyes and for a moment felt vertigo as the sight from her hawks clashed with the world in front of her. Then the two split and the hawk's eye view receded to the back of her mind.

'I see no indications of the prospect,' she said.

Memnon reached beneath his robes and withdrew a small box of bone. Ash tattoos marched down his cheeks in rows of tiny dots, each one faded to grey. His patchwork robes fluttered in the warm breeze. He alone was not dressed in pilgrim blue, but in the faded and torn cloth that he always wore. Ninkurra had often thought that he looked more like a beggar or an ascetic monk than an inquisitor. He looked young, at least young in the way that people judged such things, maybe no more than three decades to the eye. Ninkurra saw his lips move in silent prayer before he opened the lid of the box. He took a pinch of dust from within, and cast it into the air. The grey powder caught the breeze. Memnon watched it, face impassive, until it had dissolved into the wind. Ninkurra had no idea what he looked for, but she knew that he saw more than dust vanishing on the wind.

'It is coming,' he said at last. 'Order the gunships to come in.'

Ninkurra obeyed, transmitting the command with a thought.

'I am reading low-grade atmospheric interference across multiple spectra.' Geddon's voice was a scratched patchwork of static and voice samples. The auspextra was sweating profusely under the sun's glare. Sweat stuck her blue pilgrim's robe to her hunched body. Bulbous curves of metal gleamed in the gaps between the lank cloth. The heat sinks of her signal and scanning arrays must have been cooking her, reflected Ninkurra. 'Static and moisture levels are rising. Pressure inversion unfolding at one hundred metres above ground level.'

'What does that mean?' asked Ninkurra, glancing back.

'There is a storm coming,' said Geddon.

Ninkurra snorted. 'It's clear blue to beyond the horizon,' she said.

'No,' said Memnon softly, and raised a hand to point up. 'Look.'

Ninkurra followed the line of his long finger. She squinted against the light, raising a hand to shield her eyes. Then she saw it – a smudge of white in the clear air. A gust of air tugged at her robe, and she was aware of the same wind pulling at her hawks as they turned above the tabernacle.

‘You may wish to bring your birds back,’ said Geddon. ‘All readings are spiking.’

Above the tabernacle the patch of cloud was growing, expanding up and out, darkening. She could hear the voices of pilgrims rising in puzzlement. Through the eyes of her hawks, she saw the black dots of the gunships rise from above the horizon. Even the voices of the priests in the tabernacle were faltering. The outer layers of glass shook in the rising wind.

‘Readings across all parameters are reaching paradox,’ rasped Geddon. The hawks spiralled down out of the darkening sky. Ninkurra could feel it now – metal on her tongue, static shivering on the inside of her skin. The mass of pilgrims were looking up at the thunderhead darkening the air above them. Some were crying out, some were already running.

‘*We have targets locked and weapons live,*’ said a voice in Ninkurra’s vox-bead. The gunships were visible now. The sound of engines growled across the distance.

‘Do you have a triangulation?’ asked Memnon, calmly.

‘No, lord,’ shouted Geddon, her fingers clacking the keys of the controls that took the place of her left arm. ‘Phenomenon and paradox traces are changing too rapidly. The prospect is not clear.’

‘Very well,’ said Memnon. ‘Gunships into gyre pattern. Nothing that runs lives.’ He began to walk down the gentle slope towards the tabernacle and the crowd of pilgrims. ‘We will need to identify the prospect directly. There is not much time.’

The hawks on Ninkurra’s shoulders took to the air with shrill cries as she followed him.

Lightning flashed inside the cloud above them. Thunder rolled.

‘Come,’ said Memnon. ‘We must be pilgrims now.’

The Black Priest walked in silence through the *Dionysia*. Midnight robes billowed in his wake. Vials of holy water and silver aquilae hung from his waist, and a heavy ‘I’ set with a rayed skull hung around his neck. Two void-armoured troopers in pressure helms followed him, their shot-cannons held low but ready. If the priest was disturbed by their presence he did not show it. No muscle twitched under the pattern of tattoos which covered his face, and his hands hung

loose beside the pommel of his sword and the butt of his pistol. The guards had let him keep both. It was a sign of trust, but Viola could not help thinking that it, like the threat of the troopers, held little sway on the priest's mind.

'They make them from priests who have seen the truth of the warp,' Josef had said when she had talked of the meeting.

'Make them?' she had asked, arching an eyebrow above her chrome-clouded left eye.

'Don't get me wrong, they are taught and trained, too – litanies of castigation, rites of exorcism, myth and knowledge that would earn a death penalty across the Imperium – they learn it all. A Black Priest is never a fool and often as clever as they come.' Josef had smiled. *'Some of them might be even cleverer than you.'*

She had shrugged away the jibe.

'That's just education, unusual but not—'

'Once they get past that they are tested. Every lie and heresy a daemon can utter is thrown at them. They pass through hunger and thirst, pain and torment, and all the while they hear lies, and truths that are worse than lies. Those who get that far are marked with verses of the books of detestation. The tops of their heads are opened and the inside of their skulls etched with sigils of protection. Only then are they sent out to those of the Inquisition that want them.' Josef had paused and shivered. *'So, yes, they are made, just like you would make a sword, and you have to treat them as if that's what they are – things with sharp edges made to do harm.'*

The Black Priest stopped a pace from Viola. The door at her back remained closed. She met his gaze. His eyes were pale grey, she noticed.

*'I am Viola von Castellan. I bid you welcome to the *Dionysia*.'*

'I know who you are,' said the Black Priest.

'And I you, but there is a politeness to observing the form of things, don't you think?'

He moved his head to look at the door behind her and then back.

'Hesh,' he said. *'That is my name.'*

Viola fought to keep the frown from her face.

'My master will see you.'

She blinked her left eye and the door opened. Hesh waited for a second and then stepped through. Viola followed, sealing the door with another blink.

The space beyond was small, barely five paces across, but its stone walls extended up and up until they met a crystal dome that let in the light of the stars

outside the ship. Candles burned on iron brackets. Covenant stood opposite the door, clad in the plain grey robe of an adept. Josef waited behind him, the head of his hammer on the floor between his feet, his hands resting on the top of the haft.

‘You are Covenant?’ asked Hesh.

‘Yes.’

Hesh bowed his head.

‘You brought me here because you wish to know something. I submitted because I would know how my lord died.’

‘The circumstances of Lord Vult’s death were presented by my lord inquisitor to a conclave of his peers,’ said Viola, moving to stand behind Covenant.

‘Falsehoods,’ said Hesh.

‘You call my lord a liar?’ asked Viola.

‘All inquisitors are liars,’ said Hesh.

‘For the truth will destroy us all,’ said Covenant. Hesh looked at Covenant. Their gazes locked.

‘True,’ said Hesh.

‘You will address him as lord,’ growled Josef. Covenant gave a small turn of his head and Josef went still and silent.

‘You served Vult for five decades,’ said Covenant, ‘you held his proxy during the purges of Lamish, and turned down the calling to be invested as an inquisitor in your own right, did you not?’

Hesh nodded once. Covenant returned the gesture.

‘He is gone, but I have need of you,’ said Covenant.

‘I was my master’s servant, not yours.’

Covenant’s gaze did not shift, but Viola saw the twitch next to his temple.

‘You are anything I decide you are,’ said Covenant softly.

Hesh’s face was a mask, his pale eyes moving across Covenant’s young features. Then he nodded.

‘How may I serve?’

Covenant looked at him for a long moment.

‘What do you know of Horusians?’ he asked at last.

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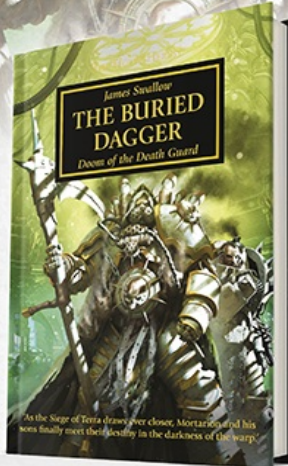
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First published in Great Britain in 2019.

This eBook edition published in 2019 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

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ISBN: 978-1-78999-405-6

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