

WARHAMMER  
40,000

# INQUISITOR



– THE CALIGARI ARCHIVUM –

## Above and Beyond

Áron Németh





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## **The Caligari Archivum**

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**The Caligari Archivum**



# **Above and Beyond**

**(Episode 1)**

by  
**Áron Németh**

There are times when people's eyes fix on something. The trajectory of an Ork vessel in low orbit, the arc of an executioner's blade, the path of an Arbiter dispersion unit on a crowded street. The knowledge of inevitability does not change the instinctive need to follow what is happening.

Such was the case with the man who appeared in Theodon Mercer's field of view like a comet, trailing danger. He was so out of place, so visibly unaware of his surroundings, that it was only a matter of time until someone would try to have what passes here as harmless fun at his expense. The din lowered expectantly; scarred, tattooed heads began to turn, but the newcomer – a big, chunky, middle-aged fellow with pasty skin and a constantly perplexed expression – took no notice.

The place was full of peddlers, ladies of the night, the less scrupulous type of merchant, and there were surely a few Rogue Traders in the crowd. The orbital station above was out of the question for this kind of clientele: with the traffic of Andrukhov III, the station calculated its fees for staying by the hour, so no one in their right mind would spend more time on that fortress than was strictly necessary.

The newcomer's arrival increased the overall status of the bar measurably. Close enough to the planetside voidport to be convenient, but far enough from the nearest Adeptus Arbites outpost to avoid constant Imperium supervision, the dregs of void trade ended up here, or in similar establishments.

An intricate pattern of rails spanned the huge vault, with reinforced crates of fresh drinks zipping along it. The proprietor, disturbingly named Mama Horror, was not a fan of servers, but was keen on getting paid. What she saved on waiters and barkeeps she invested in security, so the Hole was among the station's better joints. This being the Caligari sector, that still did not mean much. Given the sector's troubled past, the general quality of scum was a bit lower than in most of the Imperium.

Mercer took a closer look at the man. He wore serviceable, sturdy clothes, with an acceptable amount of padding –offering some protection against stabbing – but they were so meticulously clean that they had to be brand new, donned for the occasion. Looking at his hand, uncalloused fingers – they even had rings on them – and the man's posture, Mercer ruled out any chance of weapons training. The most danger the fellow posed was probably to a food storage unit, or to Mama Horror's famed blue carpets, by bleeding on the latter.

'You think he's here for us, Captain?' Angelika asked. There was a slight pause before the rank. It could have been involuntary, except it was not. The woman was not entirely fond of the idea of coming here, but it was Mercer who

had made the decision, so she could not argue. That never stopped her from expressing her displeasure, though.

Mercer and his three companions were sitting at a table on a kind of pulpit – probably an indispensable piece of ancient technology no one had dared touch for centuries – separate from the other patrons. Someone stuck a tiny flag into the dent they had to make during their attempt to secure the table, with the Stormskipper's insignia. Angelika resumed puffing from her pipe.

'The other malcontents have a less vulnerable place where they can negotiate,' Mercer answered. He had grown a thick, grey handlebar moustache – he was the only one of the opinion that the captain of a more-or-less legal, long range merchant void vessel should have one – but he had still not got used to it. 'They come here to relax. So yes, probably.'

'Everyone and their mother will want to listen in,' Rydia commented. A wiry, lean woman with cold grey eyes and an impressive amount of weaponry, Rydia radiated professionalism and bone weary tiredness which no amount of sleep would cure. She was clearly managing it – an immense cup of recaff stood on the table, steaming. It was her second. 'It's tough at the top.'

'Let them listen,' Warren shrugged. The young man had the self-assuredness of those who are yet to taste failure. 'The only thing they will hear is soothing music. But hey, it seems they won't have to, what with the guy getting himself killed and all that.'

A hulking figure went up to the newcomer, his face – not visible to Mercer's team – no doubt radiating false friendliness. His body language, however, spoke of barely contained aggression. It seemed that the newcomer's trip was close to an untimely end. Mercer, in the sudden silence, could hear every word.

'Can I help you, friend?' the brawler asked. 'You seem to be lost.'

'Why, thank you!' The newcomer's answer betrayed no sign of fear. Remarkable, thought Mercer, leaning forward. Many of the other patrons displayed similar surprise. 'In fact, I am in need of some guidance. I am searching for a certain Captain Theodon Mercer.'

The brawler barely stopped himself from turning toward the pedestal.

'So, that strapping fellow is the one I seek! Thank you! But of course, there is the matter of the finder's fee, is there not?' the pasty man beamed while rattling off his weird, upscale version of Low Gothic. He pressed a few Caligari Credits into the brawler's gauntleted hand. 'Good man, this is the kind of upstanding citizen our glorious Imperium needs!'

His wide smile was disarming.

So was the mixture of neurotoxins his rings injected into the brawler's palm. There was a soft moan as his muscles tensed, then slowly, inevitably, something

in his body gave, and he lost his balance.

As the burly man gurgled and sank to his knees, someone whistled, another laughed – as far as they were concerned, the show was over. By the sound of the murmurs, they were a bit disappointed with such a quick resolution, but they could not care less about the outcome. The newcomer took back his money unmolested. As he climbed the stairs to Mercer's pedestal, he deftly pocketed his rings.

The moment he flashed that nervous smile at him, Captain Mercer knew that the man meant serious trouble.



‘Welcome, kind stranger! I hear you’re looking for me.’ Mercer’s voice was amiable, but there was a hint of irritation in it.

The disturbance field hummed as the pasty man sipped from a cup of what purported to be Amasec. Judging from his expression, the taste was worse than the price.

Mercer looked at him with patient curiosity, internally counting down to zero, at which point he would be forced to teach him a painful lesson. Appearances were, after all, everything in his occupation. People were watching.

‘I’ve come here to secure a passage on your vessel, Captain,’ the customer said suddenly, maybe sensing the slow change of his mood. His voice sounded less earnest now than it had been with the brawler. Either he was more aware of the danger of present company, or he really didn’t want to see this deal fall through. ‘I am paying in small gemstones. That should help you avoid the exchange problems associated with more... traditional currency. I am willing to pay a generous amount. Also, I am not looking to haggle as long as the fare is within an... acceptable range.’

He pushed a bit of folded paper across the table. Mercer picked it up, read the destination and nodded to himself. By the signature, the name of the passenger was Stolde, which meant nothing to him, but the destination – Rengris VII – was familiar. That could be a problem, he thought. Played right, an opportunity.

‘Following my arrival, I might need your less marketed services.’

As an afterthought, he spoke up again.

‘Strictly speaking, what I intend to do is legal.’

‘And broadly speaking?’ Mercer knew that this was his cue, and that the conversation was being controlled by a potential cargo item, but he took it

anyway. Cross examination could wait a few minutes. Or, come to think of it, hours...

‘After a lengthy process, a very small degree of guilt could be determined. Of course, some people detest bureaucratic procedure and would much rather solve such dilemmas with a bolter round into my sternum, and one into my head.’ The man allowed himself a dour little smile. ‘All in all, let us try and keep it on the down low.’

Mercer’s smile had no mirth in it. Although the onlookers couldn’t have heard a thing, negotiating like this was simply not done around these parts, and he had a reputation to uphold.

‘Yeah, about that,’ he said dreamily. ‘Meeting in a different place than the vantage point of the Hole would have been smarter. Let’s just pretend that the deal went south and meet me at the coordinates I will transmit to you.’

‘Wh...’



By the time the four strong team had finished the final recon in the alleys and placed the last signal traps to detect anyone trying to listen in, everyone was looking quite miserable. The condensed water from the heat exchange system made everything damp and the humidity attracted various kinds of mould, but even the heavy, organic stench could not compete with the sharp smell of disinfectants. Also, Mercer could have sworn that one of the puddles had started eating away at the soles of his boots.

In the distance, gigantic, millennia old valves hissed open, and the entire structure shook. Above them, legions of containers were being moved to the waiting fleet of short-range heavy lifter shuttles, which were in turn headed to the countless merchant vessels by the orbital station.

‘I sure hope that he comes. Otherwise this whole little walk around was for nothing,’ Angelika commented. She was a sanctioned psyker, so she had had her fair share of hardships in her life, and she preferred more comfortable environs than the dank underbelly of the Andrukhov III voidport.

‘I’m pretty sure he will,’ Rydia commented. ‘When the Captain shoved him down the stairs, I nicked his fare satchel.’

She pulled out a small bag and threw it to Mercer. As he peered inside he could not hold back an appreciative whistle. The pasty man had been right: his proposed price was more than generous. Exactly the kind of deal that gets one

killed in the Hole.

‘You did what?’ Warren sounded agitated. He was always a bit old fashioned when it came to breaking Imperial law. The former Guardswoman shrugged.

‘Insurance. No way could a paper pusher like him scrounge up that kind of money, at least not as fast as he was eager to be on board.’

‘Good thinking. You should have told me beforehand, though.’

‘Why, Captain?’

‘First, it’s protocol. Second, if you had told me, I could have anticipated our passenger being a bit more straightforward. Which could lead others to our meeting point. To be frank, the list of our enemies is quite long. Some would disturb the meeting just for a laugh.’

Rydia nodded.

‘I see why they might want to say hello. I’ll vox the crew and have them secure us a route to the vessel.’

‘Go ahead, but be quick about it. What do we know about our passenger?’

Warren stopped poking at a particularly polluted-looking puddle with a stripped copper cable and stood up. Without looking at his personal device, the diminutive cogitator adept began rattling off data in an impassive, machine like voice. Mercer had always wondered how he had eluded the Adeptus Mechanicus’ attention before meeting him.

‘Name’s Fredevan Stolde. Middling adept at the Administratum. Locally born. Accepted to the Administratum at his first try. Presumed prodigy. Quick rise at the beginning, stagnation in the last three years. No major infractions. During this time, mentioned several times in the sector’s Gloria Administratorum missive – never promoted. Lives below his means. Perfect specimen of the quill warriors. No known pastimes, unsavoury contacts – ourselves excluded – or major sign of potential corruption.’

‘I am very much looking forward to finding out why an Ordinate, who is close enough to become a Prefectus, chooses to leave the sacred, dusty halls of the Administratum.’

He had a strong suspicion, though, the kind of suspicion that gets people killed. His vessel had recently returned from this system, and he had filed for acceptance for trading rights, but nothing had come from it.

‘He’s probably running,’ mused Angelika.

‘Probably, but not definitely. Let’s check the choke points again.’



Stolde came, more cautiously but also more determinedly than last time. Whatever his deal was, Mercer mused, was more important than hurt pride or physical danger. The administrator's face had a small bruise on it, but given the situation, the retinue had been quite gentle. He was prepared to travel light: one single duffel bag was hanging from his shoulders. He was wearing the same clothes as he had in the Hole, but had added an impressively looking grox leather longcoat.

As he approached, Mercer pushed forward the satchel.

'Nothing is missing, Ordinate.'

If Stolde was surprised, he hid it well. He took the bag and peered into it.

'If you permit it, I will be the judge of that. But for the time being, I will presume that you are telling me the truth.'

'After all, I could've been long gone with your gems and you could do nothing about it.'

'Among other reasons, yes. I will refrain from asking why you turned against me.'

'Pity. It would be educational. But since we're all here, let's deal. For the voyage, it's three thousand Caligari Credits. That includes transport, your own cabin on our vessel, and three meals a day. It doesn't include extra costs that occur from events that can be tied to your presence. The transportation will end when our shuttle lands on Rengris VII, and we'll escort you up to the excise men's door.'

He paused and stroked his moustache.

'As for the later stage, it depends on the mission, but we're amenable. If you're preparing to do something stupid, we'll deny any connection to or knowledge of said stupidity. And, if we say no, I suggest you drop the idea - take up smuggling or something similarly survivable as a living.'

'That fare is acceptable,' the Administrator said, extending his hand. He noticed how Mercer was looking for rings, and allowed himself a hint of a grin. 'Of course, most of my haggling opportunities are gone now that you have seen my budget.'

'You told me you would not be splitting hairs.'

'And you told me that I was welcome. Everybody lies, I guess. When can we depart?'

'Immediately.'

'Yeah, about that, boss...' Angelika spoke up, massaging her temples, 'let's just say it's a good job that Rydia brought her autogun along.'

Mercer sighed, then reached for his ornate chainsword and his heavily

modified laspistol. Not many people could either afford or wield them around these parts – which helped him maintain his carefully crafted notoriety.

‘To your positions!’



Some in rags, some in tags, some in body armour, Mercer mused as the first pieces of the attackers flew past him. Signal traps were not that hard to rewire as directional mines as long as one had enough mines.

They did not, as it happened, but it was the intention that counted – along with the effect on enemy morale.

As the first scouting party ran into their portion of high explosives, Mercer motioned his people and Stolde to move towards the newly opened exit. As Warren had listened in to the assailants’ vox chatter, they had a general idea of their level of training. It was delightfully low – maybe a local gang had got wind of the happenings on their territory – but they were armed, they were angry and they had superior numbers.

Mercer moved first, followed by Angelika, then the administrator, while the cogitator adept was flanked by an ever vigilant Rydia. The former Guardswoman had her autogun at the ready, loaded up with what she called the Solstice Special: an assortment of various ammunition types. Armour piercing, flak, explosive, incendiary – guaranteed to ruin someone’s day.

Most of the attackers were equipped with homemade melee weapons and injected with underhive stims to make them faster, stronger and more furious, while the higher ranking hivers had stub weapons, chains, hooks and an intimate knowledge of the terrain.

‘Tell me the backup team is already here,’ Mercer growled. The alley twisted and turned – but for Warren’s makeshift map of the area, they would have surely been lost between the junctions and dead ends. Their destination was a loading bay, about three hundred meters away. It suddenly seemed a lot further than that. From the front, four gangers were approaching – they had used the spider web of tubes and cables to get ahead of him. The blades of their knives gleamed nastily in the pale lights. They spat something in Low Gothic at him, so distorted and depraved that Mercer could barely discern their meaning.

It was along the lines of surrendering or dying.

Mercer was in no mood for either, so he charged while they were waiting for an answer.

He was at a disadvantage in the narrow passage with his chainsword – a weapon more suited for open battle. On the bright side, the hivers had no real room to manoeuvre, either. He shifted his attack, moved the blade out of the way, and fired before the gangers could react. The laspistol cracked twice and the smell of burnt flesh filled the air. Despite the multitude of lovingly disparaging names the Astra Militarum had for this weapon, laspistols and lasguns were more than adequate answers to threats like these.

In the back, Rydia opened up with her autogun. Sparing, short bursts, followed by screams – right what Mercer expected, but he could have sworn he had heard something else: a hiss of what he could tentatively identify as a flechette pistol. Some of the bloodthirsty war cries turned into pitiful gurgling.

He did not have much time to ponder about the implications, because he was right in striking range, revving his weapon. One of the gangers tried to parry his attack, and got his right hand smashed into the walls of the metal maze for his trouble. The other tried to move away unsuccessfully. The teeth of the chainsword rent into metal, then leather, then writhing flesh. The spray of blood blinded the last remaining ganger, so, to save ammo, Mercer finished the job, beheading the hostile with a reverse stroke.

As he pushed forward, he heard the hivers' stub weapons opening fire, but he was not worried: Rydia was more than capable of giving him covering fire.

It was then that he heard the warning cries, and by the time he realized that he had overextended and was left with no support to speak of, he had been hit thrice in the back plate of his armour. As he staggered, he awkwardly turned around and returned fire to get the shooters off their perch. Rydia repositioned quickly and pinned the enemies down.

The combined fire of the autogun and laspistol forced the makeshift snipers into cover, crippling one and killing another. A grenade, flying in an improbable arc – Angelika's contribution – finished off the remainder.

Mercer was half angry with himself, half happy about the outcome. If the assailants had had less primitive weapons, their shots could have been lethal. On the other hand, had he been less determined during his push forward, the team could have bunched up, presenting a ripe target for grenades.

The rest of the team caught up with him undisturbed – the attackers were probably regrouping, and calculating their odds.

Shoving the dead stabbers out of the way, Mercer risked a quick look at the loading bay and the wide, adjacent corridors. These loadways were designed to accommodate warpship components if need be.

No one blew his head off and he saw their transport: the bulky armoured personnel carrier had its bay open, and the voidsmen had their lasguns at the

ready. The pintle-mounted lascannon swung to and fro, searching for targets.

Warren sent a vox message to the driver who signalled them to come. The way was clear.

The bad news was that they had to cross more than thirty meters of open terrain to reach it. Mercer had a really bad feeling about it.



They had dealt with the gangers far too easily. No-one in their right mind would have attacked with such numbers, which either meant that reinforcements were coming, or a third party setup. A Rogue Trader, for instance, could easily pull off a stunt like this, creating a disposable harassing force, herding Mercer's team out, then into the perceived security of the vehicle. Then, it would only take a well-aimed missile to blow its tracks off, rendering it immobile... then the negotiations could begin. Alternatively, a few autoguns could easily create a killzone.

'Captain, Angelika says it's a trap,' relayed Warren. So much about a second opinion, then. Her psyker powers were all about divination, and he had long since learned to trust her foresight, as far as psykers could be trusted.

Of course, the corridor and the bay was one of the more important areas of the voidport, so ambushers could not linger indefinitely, with anti-armour weapons out in the open... members of law enforcement tend to be touchy about those. It would only need a wayward patrol.

'Warren, give me your voxcaster.'

'Right away, Captain. Stolde has got an idea, though.'

The Administrator pushed his way forward, trying to maintain a level of decency with Angelika. The psyker grinned at him which made the situation even more awkward. Servants of the Administratum rarely mingled with anyone who did not have a number or a form.

'Captain... I need you to make three different calls to the local Enforcers. I have written up a few keywords to quicken the reaction. If we do it right, we can expect a flyer in two minutes.'

'Enforcers don't have that kind of coverage.'

'They do not, but the Arbites do.'

The Adeptus Arbites did have the capabilities to tap into vox communication, and Warren was probably able to fool even them. If not, however, things could get risky. Anything to do with the Arbites would be risky.

‘Won’t they be intrigued about an armed heavy vehicle?’

‘I expect your paperwork to be in good order. If it is not, I can make a few calls to make the problem go away, for a while, at least. Fair warning: it will come back to haunt you. I am good, but no miracle worker.’

Mercer thought about his options and lesser evils. There would be talk later between him and Stolde.

‘No. The Enforcers will have to do. I will, however, remember your offer.’



The carrier was only a few steps away. It was tantalising.

During the deceptively long wait, only one incident disturbed the tension: somebody activated the improvised mine that Rydia had left behind. The muffled bang and the scream could have belonged to anyone, but the thick accent of the following curses made it more probable that it had been the ambusher’s flanking party which had run into unexpected difficulties.

That just added to the urgency of the vox messages, which, according to Stolde, were probably being listened into by the fearsome Arbites. Choosing between their attentions and crossfire from autoguns was a close call.

The carrier started its engine and began slowly backing up to the hatch where Mercer’s team were hiding. The would-be attackers were probably scrambling to relocate undetected. So far, everything looked like a standard manoeuvre from an overly cautious quarry, but the window was closing, fast.

Mercer was biting his lip. This is not how he would die, hiding and skulking like an underhiver working for a daily fix... not when he could still salvage the situation. Of course, that would make the sacrifice of countless people worthless, turning his plans into a folly.

Mercer steeled himself – doubt was treason in itself in his position.

The moments dragged on.

Warren, who despised being shot at on principle, was close to hyperventilating, the rest of the team – including Stolde, surprisingly – was able to control their breathing.

The corridor remained empty.

Then someone’s patience gave. First came a single crack from a hotshot lasgun, then there was a cacophony of incoming from every direction. The pintle-mounted lascannon was retracted during the interlude between the two: they had to look the victim, the mercilessly pounded, non-threatening target,

otherwise Enforcers may decide that it would be better to dispense justice indiscriminately.

Somebody, somewhere, was preparing a krak missile, a ricochet would send a projectile toward the hatch that hid them, Mercer knew, but there were arguments against running out there and doing something personally against it.

When he heard the loudspeaker of an Enforcer flyer booming off its first and final warning, he drew a shallow breath and silently mouthed a thankful prayer to the Emperor – now it was time to wait until one of the ambushers does something stupid...



As it turned out, in twenty seconds somebody tried to pull a bead on an Enforcer gunship, which in turn shot several rockets at the prospective launching site, then voxed for reinforcements who quickly cordoned off the area. The hail of bullets turned into one-off, desperate pot shots at Enforcers. Most of the attackers ran for it, though, and given how saturated the corridor was with service tunnels and vents, the lawkeepers had not much choice but to let them go.

Those who were slow on the uptake, though, did not have bright futures ahead of them: their options were restricted to joining a penal legion or summary execution. Only a few of them lacked trust in the Emperor's mercy and chose the quick way out.

Mercer and his teammates only heard about this particular outcome, because they spent some time – along with the voidsmen – with their hands on the battered armour of the carrier, while a squad of heavily armed and disgruntled Enforcers checked their credentials. They had been made to discard their weapons, but they had not been frisked, yet.

‘So, Administrator, you’re saying that you’ve met Captain Mercer here for...’

There was a pause, waiting for the unwary citizen to try and fill in the blank. To Mercer's quiet relief, Stolde kept his silence.

‘Very well then,’ Mercer could amply imagine the officer's thin-lipped smile. It would have come as a surprise if Stolde could not falsify travel documents for himself that would withstand a strike team leader's examination. If the Enforcers kept pressing the issue, the Administratum would bury their headquarters in red tape out of sheer orneriness and handle the matter internally. ‘Have a safe journey, Ordinate.’

‘Thank you, Lieutenant.’

Stolde was very careful to ask for permission to reclaim his weapon and he made an effort to appear non-threatening even while boarding the armoured personnel carrier. If the officer thought anything of it, he decided that it was all above his pay grade – he ordered his forces to return to the headquarters or resume patrolling, as the APC started its massive engine and began inching forward.

‘Okay people, that was quite a hot one!’ exclaimed Mercer while they were trundling away toward the voidport.

‘Lux, Thran, you’re the spotters, so you don’t get to drink, but the rest of you, have a swig! The sober ones will have one on me once we hit orbit.’

The voidsmen laughed and cheered as they shared their canteens with the team. Mercer drank with them, clapping shoulders and clinking metal mugs. The toxin filter augmentations would take care of the alcohol anyway, but there was no harm in playing along.

Strangely enough, they even gave a mug to Stolde and made fun of him when he spluttered.



As the shuttle blasted off from the voidport, most of the crew were catching up on sleep. The APC was already being worked on by the technical adepts, whose job was mostly to find out if anything needed immediate replacement. They alternately groaned and chuckled at the dents and craters on the armour, but at least nothing was leaking. As Mercer walked around making random checks – keeping people on their toes always paid off – he was surprised to see Stolde, his eyes glued to one of the diagnostic screens. The hues of the ancient cogitator’s runes gave a ghostly quality to the Administrator’s appearance. The instrument was focused on the Andrukhov III. Most of the flickering screen was occupied by telemetry data, but the man ignored them: his eyes were on the dirty, greenish ball with its amber cobweb surface superhighways and the big blotches of the hive cities.

The shuttle was headed straight toward the airlock of the Stormskipper, Mercer’s vessel of mixed reputation. The Stormskipper, having completed its maintenance and refuelling, was maintaining a geostationary position. The station really did calculate fees by the hour. There was another reason for Mercer to avoid docking at the station: there were too many people who might recognise

his face. Not that anyone would dare to say anything, but they would know, and that was something Mercer did not need.

The pilot deftly flew the shuttle to the hulking mass of the armed freighter, strictly following the instructions of the flight controller. The Andrukhov III orbital was one of the major stations of the Caligari sector: since the system was free of warp storms, its significance only grew with time. The six arms of the station could service a medium-sized Merchant fleet at the same time. Dozens of torpedo turrets and lances were following the movement of each vessel. Mercer could have sworn that the roaring mouths of the grotesquely squat gargoyles also hid anti-ship weapons. The six external and the central citadels housed thousands of armed response personnel, not to mention the void-capable special units. All in all, Mercer encouraged his crew to adhere to the instructions to the letter, and they were only too glad to oblige.

The Stormskipper being an old vessel, and a finicky one at that, everyone checked their readings twice before opening the shuttle's door. The landing team filed out to get back to their officers to be stood down, the APC crew prepared for a chewing out from the quartermaster, Mercer took the deck from his second in command, while Stolde slunk about dejectedly.

'Come on, Administrator,' Mercer clapped him on the shoulder, 'we've got a few things to discuss. Let me show you to your cabin.'

They walked through the bustling crowd: preparing a freighter for warp travel, especially in the infamous, warp storm riddled Caligari sector, was no trivial task. Mercer stopped here and there, looking at one preparation step or another, making mental notes for himself to check up on later. He had an approximate, shallow but encompassing knowledge of how the vessel worked – he had not spent decades on ships like this, but he was learning fast.

He read through the reports from the cargomaster, who was a bit disgruntled with the strict deadlines, and made no secret of it. On the other hand, since the destination was Rengris VII, anything she could buy would probably sell.

When they reached the cabin that would serve as Stolde's lodging, Mercer opened the airtight door and motioned his passenger forward. From his reaction, Mercer could guess that he had expected a lot worse – he did not have to know what happened to the previous occupant of the cabin or why no crew member had aspired to take it over.

As far as Mercer was concerned, the problem had been taken care of, and no one could detect any residual effects, no matter how hard they tried.

'Luxurious, isn't it?' he asked as the Ordinate hung his duffel on a carabiner. The builders in the old days believed in backup systems and redundant features, as well as not having to collect their belongings during an unexpected gravity

system failure. ‘The best cabin three thousand Caligari Credits can buy in the sector, especially if your destination is the Rengris system.’

‘This is the point when you ask me why.’

‘I would’ve settled for a rundown of your plans for Rengris, but to be frank, I’m interested in your reasons, too, if you please.’

Stolde took a bottle of Amasec from the secure display cabinet on the wall, along with two glasses, then sat on a comfortable looking armchair, ignoring the straps. Mercer remained standing.

‘Some people stole from the Administratum, and I need to know who and why.’

‘Do you at least know what was stolen?’

‘Data.’

There was a pause.

‘Elaborate, please.’

‘The Andrukhov III branch of the Administratum received a new record testing tool less than a year ago. It is a Mechanicus made, specialised cogitator that scans documents and numbers of any kind, then shows the results on its screen. As you know, we are... not exactly enthusiastic when it comes to adopting new techniques. I received this cogitator for evaluation, in the hope that it would get forgotten and stop being a problem.’

‘And one day you got bored and tried it.’

Stolde leaned forward and poured himself a splash. He looked up questioningly at Mercer who waved his implied offer away.

‘That is the short version, yes. What I found was that someone had removed entries from several shipping manifests,’ he said, and paused meaningfully, ‘but not changed the checksums.’

‘This sounds serious,’ risked Mercer, with a hint of doubt in his voice.

‘It is serious!’ The Administrator, for the first time since Mercer had laid eyes on him, looked agitated. He was gesticulating with his glass. ‘The entries were not sealed, they were removed! And originally, they must have been entered as weighing zero, occupying zero space, otherwise the total shipped quantity would have differed from the sum of individual entries.’

Mercer saw how this would be an important discovery for one of the Administrators. Or for anyone else, for that matter. He took a seat.

‘So you’re saying that someone falsified the initial logs, the Administratum couldn’t or wouldn’t detect it, and then someone – the same party or a different party – deleted the evidence.’

‘I have got picture evidence if you want it.’

‘No need right now,’ said Mercer. ‘Why couldn’t they simply leave them out

of the manifests?’

‘I have thought about that. My theory is that they used the shipping documents as a means of communication: a proof of receipt, maybe.’

‘Then why remove the items later?’

Stolde shook his head.

‘I do not really know. Sometimes the Administratum chooses an item and begins pulling the string, so to speak: we follow the trail, and see what we find. Given how much materiel moves within the sector, the chances of us selecting these entries is basically non-existent.’

‘Materiel, huh. And they still went to all this trouble. Somebody really didn’t want you to find their tracks. You know who?’

‘The vessels in question all belonged to House Mosinda.’

So this is how Rengris VII comes into play, Mercer nodded to himself. The Rengris system had been cut off from the rest of the Caligari sector by a sudden – and particularly vicious – warp storm more than five years ago. Before that, it was a major hub and local base of operations for one of the sector’s most reputable Merchant organisations, House Mosinda.

‘Do you have any idea how you will gain access to the Rengris Administratum records?’

‘That part is a bit less detailed than I would like,’ admitted the Ordinate. ‘Since you are the only one who managed to contact that world in the last five years, I hoped you could help out.’

Mercer furrowed his eyebrows. Stolde at least had the decency to look ashamed.

‘Yes, Captain. I did intercept your applications. Those that I could find. And they were not exactly destroyed, only misplaced. Temporarily.’

Mercer took a deep breath, forcing the expression on his face to remain calm. He stroked a forefinger on each temple, and only then broke the silence.

‘Ordinate, you’re a man of extreme mental capabilities. You performed well in combat. You stood your ground in the Hole.’

He let the silence lengthen again, then let the indignation that any respectable captain would feel seep into his tone.

‘What astounds me is your absolute, utter failure to comprehend the situation you’re in. You are on my ship, travelling into a raging warp storm, to a world which is unknown to you, under no direct Imperial control, relying on me to get you to a secluded and protected Administratum archive, and you tell me that you’re the one who’s responsible for me not getting filthy rich?!’

His voice rose with each word. Stolde was taken aback, his knuckles whitening as he grimly gripped his glass. ‘Good’, thought Mercer, ‘Let’s switch

to the honeyed tongue.'

'Yet, you interest me. Your theory intrigues me. If House Mosinda is truly implicated, it might be worth more for me than the trade rights. That is the sole reason you're not straight out of the airlock without your void suit on. But please, pretty please, don't be so honest with the Rengrisian authorities once we arrive.'

He practically leapt up out of his chair, startling the Administrator. His smile had something feral about it.

'Enjoy your journey, Ordinate.'

*To be continued*



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Áron Németh** is a Hungarian-born civil servant living in Budapest. He is a history enthusiast, but rather a jack of all trades than a true buff. He has been a fan of the Warhammer 40,000 universe since the early nineties. An avid tabletop RPG player. His creative career so far consists of an extensive background of translation (from English to Hungarian) and a sporadic publication history of fantasy short stories.

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