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# INQUISITOR



– THE CALIGARI ARCHIVUM –

# Above and Beyond

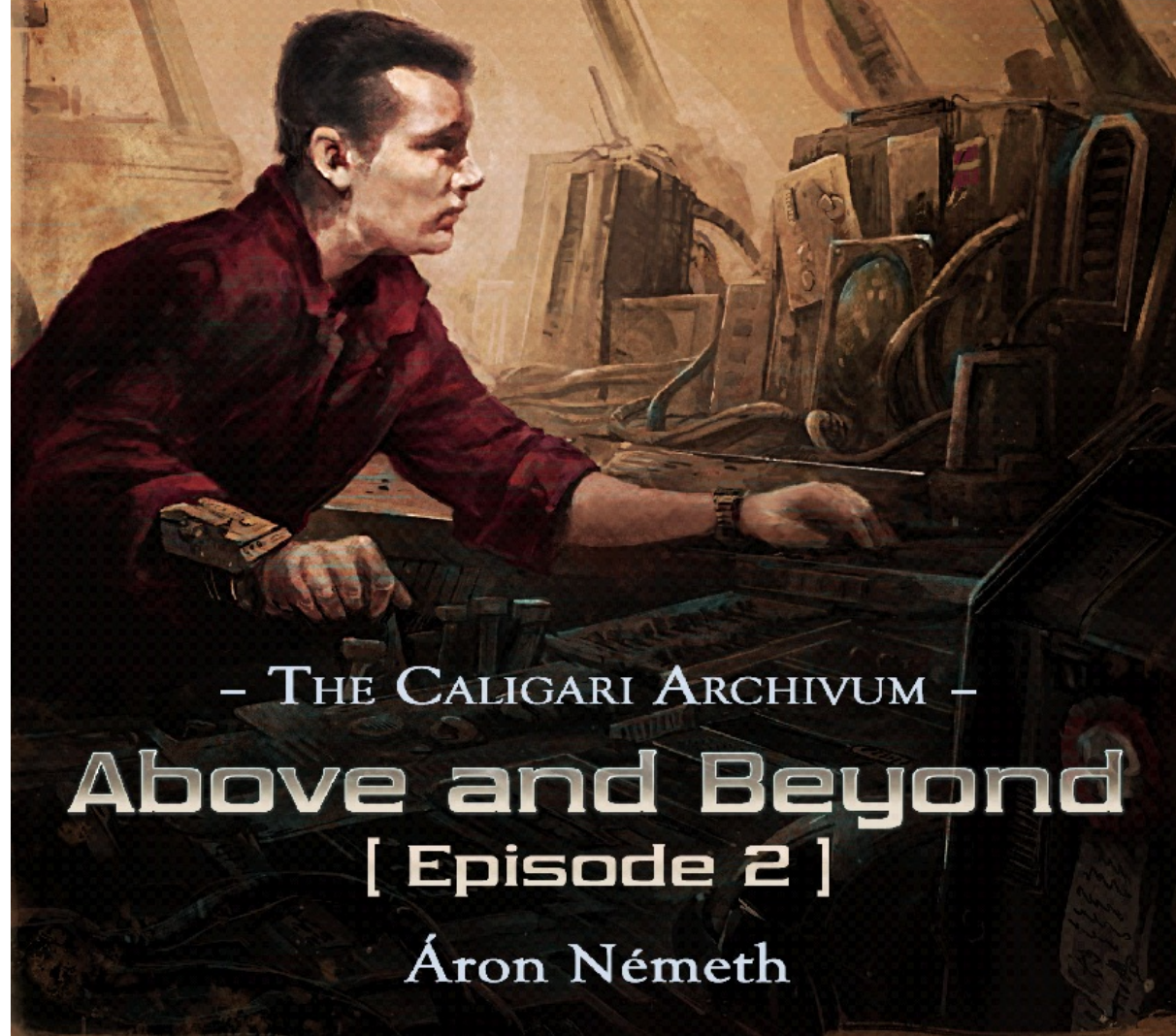
[ Episode 2 ]

Áron Németh





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## **The Caligari Archivum**

**The Caligari Sector – a vast, ancient and forgotten region in the Segmentum Tempestus, filled with shadows that hide hundreds of tainted worlds. A Sector plagued by the mysterious Warpsurges, smaller, but highly unpredictable manifestations of the dreaded Warp Storms. Far from the guiding light of the Astronomican and torn apart by the foul tempests that can twist reality and cut off entire systems for centuries, leaving them ripe for Chaos infestation, the Caligari Sector is a haven for the heretic, the outlaw and the corrupted.**

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**The Caligari Archivum**



# **Above and Beyond**

**(Episode 2)**

by  
**Áron Németh**

Entering the Warp was a risky business to say the least, and in the Caligari sector it was even more so – apart from the calmer systems like the Andrukhov, there was always a chance of a warp storm forming, which could effectively isolate a colony from the rest. Braving a warp storm had not been declared outright heresy in itself, but solely because it was not considered survivable. Of course, a sharp-eyed Navigator, a sturdy ship and the Emperor’s mercy could see a vessel through the insane rages of the troubled Immaterium. Sometimes. Especially if the storm was close to finishing itself off, or going through a relatively calm period.

If a captain could map out a more or less stable path through a storm, he was set for life, albeit probably a short one: selling this knowledge to the Imperium for route rights would result in a guaranteed position with one of the Houses; using it for smuggling would generate unthinkable wealth.

Mercer had originally opted for the first one. Stolde deprived him of that. Had Mercer shared his plans with anyone, he would probably have a mutiny on his hands for contemplating entering the Warp again. This way, most of the crew would be stoked – their share of the proceeds would be a lot higher, and frankly, if they wanted to join a House, most of them could have.

As Captain Mercer stepped on the bridge, at the second-in-command’s bark, everyone snapped to attention. The crew had this subtle way of expressing approval.

Mercer went over to his chair – on a lavishly decorated pedestal, it looked more like a throne than a tall chair – and lifted the vox from its stand, while slowly scanning the bridge. Grizzled, tired yet enthusiastic faces turned toward him, backlit by the glyphs of the on board navigational cogitator.

‘Okay people, listen up! We’re returning to Rengris. Our holds are full of items the Magistrates requested. The price was agreed on during our visit, but I tried our luck with a route permit. Of course, the Administratum decided to sit on our permits – no real surprise there – so we’ll actually honour our first deal. If the pencil warriors ever decide to stop sitting on their hands, we’ll give the Imperium the necessary coordinates and path description to re-establish contact, but if they don’t, we still get paid.’

He grinned to himself.

‘Because we always get paid. That is all.’

Somebody cheered and got shushed quickly.

Attempting to enter the Warp this close to a planet – or to the system’s central star, for that matter – would have torn the ship apart. Mercer ordered half burn until all the checks had been completed again. The checks were successful, and

the vessel then lit up its immense, slow thrusting drives in earnest and began its way to the dedicated exit point.



Days can pass between leaving a habitable planet and arriving at a suitable point of translation to the Warp. The Stormskipper's crew kept their eyes open for suspicious traffic. On Mercer's orders, that encompassed a wide range of voidcraft. The standard reaction was to take a better look at the other vessel. Mercer was sure that their ancient freighter was being watched in return - built ten millennia ago, in an era when merchants could not expect meaningful help from the Imperium's navy, the Stormskipper was too well armed for contemporary tastes. Had passing vessels known how many modifications had been made to the weapons systems, they surely would have opted for evasive manoeuvres, just to be on the safe side. It even had a void shield – not one that it could maintain for a long time, but it was a lot better than nothing.

Stolde managed to keep himself out of trouble, except for one time when some more adventurous crew mates decided to play cards with him. Since all three of them testified later that the Ordinate had not cheated, no one got hurt, but that was the last time anyone offered him a seat at the cards table. Rydia busied herself with physical training and treatises on xeno physiology. Angelika got on everyone's nerves – asking inappropriate questions at inopportune moments – as usual, but the crew had long since got used to her, so Mercer let her. Warren used his time in the most immediately useful manner; he stayed on the bridge, sifting sensor data from the other vessels. At times, when even a generous dosage of recaff could not keep him awake, a bulky orderly had to lug him back to his cabin.

All in all, the voyage proved to be uneventful - in an irritating kind of way for Mercer. The Stormskipper always had something in store for him – nothing major, just enough to make sure that the maintenance teams were still there. He had the urge to make more on-the-spot visits, but that obviously would have made the crew more nervous and disgruntled, leading to a higher chance of mistakes. Frustrated with the impending sense of doom, he maintained his daily routine and invented scenarios where it all would go horribly wrong and made plans for them, stacking them neatly in his mind.

Finally, the arched windows darkened as the protective plates slid in front of them. A klaxon blared, signalling the one-hour warning, then sounded again

every fifteen minutes.

At last, with a lurch, the warp engines tore a hole into the fabric of reality and the Stormskipper translated successfully.



The Gellar field held, naturally – the generators’ runes had been renewed, they had been checked and prayed over countless times, and the stocks of spare components were so full that given time, an Adeptus Mechanicus could have built a new generator from scratch.

Mercer should have felt safe. Of course, he knew that feeling safe in the Warp was the first step to dying horribly in the Warp. Or worse.

The ship’s navigators were among the best in the system, but even so, they needed to muster all their concentration to keep the Stormskipper within the safer currents of the Immaterium. One wayward move, one miscalculation, and the vessel would have ended up arriving centuries late, decades too early, or not at all. And that was without the unwelcome attention from the denizens of the Warp. Mindless, feeding horrors, drifting aimlessly, awakening only to feast on the very souls of the unwary; derelict Space Hulks, floating without purpose, but not necessarily devoid of life; or, worst of all, daemons.

Of course, he was helpless to do anything about any of it.

The Stormskipper had a subdued atmosphere to it by the third day. The crew members were used to warp travel, but this was something else: the unmapped regions of the Immaterium were filled with catastrophes waiting to happen. Stolde was left without company, so he kept himself busy reading the records of their first visit to Rengris VII.

Time had a different meaning here, and only the ticking of the big mechanical clocks reminded everyone that days are divided into stages.

Everyone jumped when a klaxon – a different one, more urgent, shriller – signalled a proximity alert.

Mercer dropped his breakfast and broke into a run.

On the bridge, both Navigators were present: one, Jak Bratlov, ensconced within the ship’s helm-throne, the other standing ready as backup. She could have caught some sleep, but the lingering memories of the tormented Warp gave her nightmares, so she preferred to stay awake. The ship’s sole Astropath was also ready.

‘Report!’

Warren, moonlighting as sensor adept and Stark, his second-in-command,

were pretending that they were not listening intently.

‘Whatever it is, it’s big,’ said Lawin, a muscular, middle aged woman, the off-duty Navigator. ‘I say we let it move by and hope that it doesn’t detect us.’

Nikodemo, the Astropath, a scrawny fellow in black with an impressive, grey beard, scoffed. His blind, full-white eyes were uncovered, mainly to unnerve his crewmates.

‘What, you think we could take it on?’

‘Maybe we should. Our lances are quite powerful; I wouldn’t mind seeing them in action.’

‘Seeing, huh? And risk the Gellar field failing on us? Besides, whatever it is, it’s too big for us.’

‘Has that vessel got a Navigator?’ Mercer finally managed to get a word in. The psykers were almost ignoring him, immersed as they were in technical details, as they regularly did during their debates. With their abilities and the detachment typical of their occupation, they saw the horrors of the Warp more as theoretically intriguing phenomena, not potentially life threatening occurrences.

Now they seemed worried, though.

‘Yes, Captain,’ answered Lawin. ‘Of sorts. It’s... weird.’

‘Weird how?’

The Navigator winced.

‘Too powerful to be human, but it feels human. Parts of it. I haven’t seen anything similar. I wouldn’t welcome a boarding party from them, mind.’

‘Give me something! Is it an Ork fleet?’

‘No... if I had to bet, though, my money would be on Genestealers.’

‘You would win,’ said Nikodemo. ‘This close, I sensed some of their thoughts. By the Emperor, I hope I never hear anything like that ever again!’

‘Close yourself off and take your meds. Then, off to the prayer room with you!’

As the Astropath leaped to obey, Mercer was weighing his options. If this was an entire fleet, full of them... Genestealers were cunning, vicious beasts, intent on subjugating entire planets, infiltrating and weakening defences. Changing their appearances with each generation, an unchecked brood could worm its way in, even to the level of a Governor. Imperial lore held that some of the Genestealers were at least as intelligent as a human, and their level of coordination made it hard to pinpoint them, and much harder to eradicate them once they have taken root.

Angelika burst onto the bridge, gasping for air and sweating.

‘Right on time, dear. It’s priming its weapons!’ yelled Warren. Most of the sensors were useless in the insane geometries of the Immaterium, but they could

still pick up a massive energy spike.

‘Evasive manoeuvres! Stark, I need you at the backup bridge, now!’

‘Aye Captain!’

The Stormskipper had been built with multiple redundant systems and a fully functional secondary bridge. As Stark stomped out, Mercer braced for impact. The artificial gravity began stuttering as the Navigator forced the vessel along improbable vectors to avoid being hit. Mercer could have sworn that they were aiming for the engines and the warp drive, trying to cripple their vessel. Bratlov knew his trade but time, and the fact that he had to keep the Stormskipper in the semi-stable current of the Warp, were working against him. Stray shots began to connect, shaking the ancient trading vessel.

Time, distorted as it was, was running short.

Mercer took a look at Angelika, then at his Captain’s console, his mind full of possible outcomes. As the ship shook again, now more violently, he made his decision. Everyone’s eyes were fixed on the screens. He reached into his breast pocket, and pushed a finger-sized rosette into the receptacle on the Captain’s console. Only Angelika saw, her eyes wide.

‘Open torpedo tubes one, two and thirteen,’ Mercer commanded.

‘Aye sir!’ Warren quickly got to work. ‘Lawin, give me some usable coordinates!’

As the off-duty Navigator began rattling off numbers, Angelika sidled toward Mercer. Her face betrayed a confused mixture of gratitude and worry.

‘My lord, tube thirteen is...’

Mercer raised his hand in a sudden, peremptory movement.

‘Silence. I have made my decision. Your duty is to follow it. And if I order you not to use your powers, you will obey.’

‘Thank you...’

He arched an eyebrow.

‘...Captain.’



Combat in the Warp is extremely rare. Given the dimension and nature of the Immaterium, vessels seldom come into striking range. If it does occur, and the crew are desperate enough, most Imperial vessels prefer torpedoes to lances or cannon. Anything that drew power from the Gellar field was a threat to the lives and the sanity to the crew: if the field even flickered, ravenous warp entities

would invade the fragile bubble of reality.

Apparently, whoever the assailants were had nothing to fear from the ruinous energies of the Warp. Or at least they thought so.

Tubes number one and two contained standard anti-ship torpedoes: quite powerful but not powerful enough against the immense monstrosity the Navigators have been talking about. Number thirteen and fourteen were absolutely undocumented and secured against prying eyes. They had been loaded by Mercer and his three confidantes. The tubes could not be accessed by the diagnostic cogitators or activated without the key: Warren had seen to that. They contained Mankind's final answers to any threat great enough to justify such a response.

Mercer was sure that that the crew had a vague idea about their contents – there was no such thing as a secret on a warpship.

As the three torpedoes flew toward the target, Warren managed to whip up a manufactured image based on Lawin's description and the Stormskipper's warbled sensor data, along with the captured life signals – it looked like an Ork fleet, a hive of vessels crudely chained together... but every single one of them was of unmodified Imperial design.

This only confirmed Mercer's suspicion about the identity of the attackers. There was no doubt in his mind any longer. They were Genestealers, one of the foulest species of xenos, who had probably taken over important strata of the Rengris VII society.

How else could they have taken over such a sizeable fleet?

His hands clenched into fists. How could he have missed the clues?

He forced himself to concentrate on the events currently unfolding. He heard Warren counting down: three, two, one, impact.

The wall of searing, blinding light hit the Stormskipper a second later. The ancient screens flickered and the runes seemed to rearrange themselves into patterns carrying dark secrets, on the borderline of comprehension. Broken hydraulics wept black oil. The wails of the tortured Empyrean reverberated faintly as cackles, screams and passing surges of wild emotions.

'Helmsman!' snapped Mercer as the onslaught subsided, before a conscious thought formed on the bridge. 'Give me a report! Is the Warp still passable?'

'Yes sir! It's balking a bit, but I'm right on top of it! No way back, though...'

'Excellent. Continue. If anyone asks, we scored a penetrating hit with our two torpedoes. Chain reaction. Right?'

Silent looks were exchanged.

'Aye Captain. The Emperor's grace was with us.'

'Praised be His name.'



The Stormskipper weathered the side effects of the torpedo much better than its target: only about a third of her systems were knocked out, and most of those only temporarily. The maintenance and repair teams had to work continuously, but apart from a few non-essential devices they were able to bring the machine spirits back into working order.

The hostile fleet was nowhere to be seen.

As they closed in to the exit point, Mercer handed control over to Stark and called his retinue to Stolde's cabin. It was the best place to talk about the more sensitive parts of their plans, since the residues of the former inhabitant effectively protected the cabin from eavesdropping.

At Mercer's knocking, the Administrator practically tore the heavy door open. 'What?'

The Administrator's face had new creases on it, his eyes were bloodshot, and he had made a serious dent in the former resident's bar. The empty bottles had been meticulously put back in their original positions.

'Good day, Administrator. Are your lodgings to your liking?'

'It is a horror show, as you are probably aware. This constant, high pitched whining is grating on my nerves. Please, do come in and enjoy the concert.'

He shuffled over to his chair and sat down, his limbs hanging lifelessly. As the retinue entered a cabin, he waved in the general direction of the alcohol cabinet and moaned something that Warren instantly translated as permission.

'Get yourself together, Stolde, we've got crises to avert and Merchant Houses to implicate.'

Fredecan looked up with baleful eyes.

'Crises? More of them? By the Emperor, I look the other way for three days, and this is what it comes to?'

'Don't give yourself too much credit; this one has been brewing for quite a long time. The rest is just fallout.'

'Let me guess. We have got a Genestealer infestation on our hands.'

Rydia spat out her drink. This time, unfortunately, she had opted for an Andrukhovian Crystal Mallet. As the burning sensation reached her pharynx, she began choking quietly.

Stolde took a moment to notice Mercer's stare.

'What?' he shrugged. 'Warren gave me the sensor sketches. It was either

Genestealers or Orks, but Orks have a different psychic signature. Besides, they would have tried to board us immediately, and none of the lances went off.'

The Ordinate began looking uncomfortable under the Captain's silent scrutiny.

'It was an educated guess. A filtered, sanitised version of the truth is constantly disseminated to star farers, Captain... and these documents always cross the Administratum's desks. Read enough of them, and you can learn a great deal.'

He closed his eyes and forced himself upright.

'And I read everything.' He smiled wanly. 'Now that it is not the Administratum that selects my reading material, I should revise that policy.'

'Right.'

Mercer began counting on his fingers.

'Now, back to the crises. First, we have a likely Genestealer presence on Rengris VII. The fleet we saw was probably a means of propagation. I believe their plan is something along these lines: travelling together in the Warp, breaking up, dropping out into realspace one by one, and moving to other systems undetected, infesting several planets independently. Second, we have a series of sophisticated clean-up operations at the Administratum. Come to think of it, it may very well be that this is just one crisis.'

'Now there is a scary thought,' said Angelika.

Mercer nodded.

'What we need to determine is how far the corruption goes. I am more than willing to make money on a world that has got Genestealers on it, but I'd much rather avoid meeting one.'

'Once we return, the entire crew must undergo testing, I would say,' said Rydia, and she was not too pleased with the prospect.

'No doubt. I wouldn't want to be the captain who brought these things to Andrukhov III,' shuddered Mercer. 'But I know a guy who's gentle with the probes. We're getting ahead of ourselves, though.'

Mercer began tapping on the table to underscore each point. Stolde stood up with a groan, folded the screen and board of the huge cogitator array in front of him and began calculating. Every half a minute he made a noncommittal sound and nodded to signal that he was, at least partially, listening. Warren was peering over the Administrator's shoulders, sometimes hiding his face in his palms. Soon they changed places and Stolde poked at the screen, showing what he wanted.

'Our plan *here* is to drop out to realspace, scan communications, and try and determine who's relatively safe to approach. Apart from the landing party, nobody gets into personal contact with the locals. At this point, getting cargo is optional. The last thing I want is some xeno bursting out of a spice container.'

‘The crew won’t like that.’

‘The crew won’t like to be indoctrinated by a murderous entity who treats them like disposable packs of meat, especially since they already have me for that.’

‘You very nearly made a jest, Captain,’ wondered Angelika.

‘Yes. But I digress. After we have established first contact and determined whether they can be trusted, Warren, Rydia and Stolde will proceed to the Administratum archive fortress in Skolandra, and get a good look at the shipping manifests.’

Mercer scrutinised the two adepts, who were quietly debating something.

‘I expect a very thorough job during your analyses. More than one planet’s future may depend on it.’

According to his estimates, the Rengrisian Imperial Navy complement was not likely to be of any use. Letting that fleet go was either unacceptable incompetence or a sign of high level corruption. The Emperor willing, the Governor herself was still clean, but the same was probably not true of her administration and her inner circle. The Imperial Guard regiment stationed here, along with the Planetary Defence Forces, were reliable to a degree, but they were military forces, and he needed something else.

‘I recommend that we ask for an audience from the Adeptus Administratum immediately,’ said Stolde, seeming pleased with himself. ‘I would much rather visit a high prestige party once we have established who is who in the hierarchy.’

‘If you can make it happen without turning the governor on us, go right ahead.’

‘Worry not, Captain. I am from the Administratum. People offered to pay good money to make me go away.’

Stolde looked up from the screen, with an expression of sudden interest.

‘By the way, Captain, why are you so interested in the fate of Rengris VII?’ He left Warren to his work, reached for Rydia’s glass, and got away with a disapproving glance. That surprised Mercer. The former guardswoman’s usual reaction was retaliating immediately... with a chair. ‘I thought that in your line of work, getting paid was paramount. Yet you, before witnesses stated that getting paid was optional – none of whom, I might add, was surprised to hear it.’

‘As I said and keep on saying, Ordinate: proving that House Mosinda is connected to the sabotage of the Administratum is a prize large enough to postpone the payday. And for that, I need your help. Let’s just say that the second phase of your plan will cost you nothing... moneywise, at least.’



The Imperial Navy's sensors picked them up as soon as the Stormskipper translated into realspace, and having checked its credentials, they sent out a five-strong formation as escort. The smallest Navy vessel was a cruiser. The gigantic ships moved in perfect harmony, forming a protective bubble around the aging merchant vessel.

'That is the best looking bloody escort I will see until the day we all get executed,' commented Stark to Mercer, ruining the moment a little.

'At least we'll die with our pockets full,' answered Lawin. Nikodemo nodded, even though he was busy communicating with the Navy Astropaths. Surprisingly, all the senior officers on the ships shared a laugh.

After the vox frequencies had been established – the local naval forces implemented new, upgraded security protocols, which was a good sign in Mercer's book – the commanding officer of the escort group hailed them and transferred them the target coordinates.

Mercer was quite sure that if the Stormskipper did anything suspicious, the escorts would obliterate it without hesitation.

The discipline of the Navy officers was still good, at least: although they were probably eager to know about the state of the Imperium, their relatives and the situation in general, no one asked the Stormskipper about these topics, nor had they requested permission to come aboard.

At full burn and with the interplanetary traffic diverted – Mercer winced upon hearing that – they reached the gravity well of Rengris VII in two days.

The Governor's palace then hailed them on a direct vox channel, but this time it was not Mercer who would negotiate with them.

'This is Captain Theodon Mercer on the Stormskipper, Governor, and I am really humbled by our reception here. As I am on an Imperial mandated mission, I am honoured to deliver you Prefectus Fredevan Stolde, a representative of the Andrukhov III Adeptus Administratum.'

'Good day, my lady,' said Stolde, staring right at the screen in front of him. A regal looking, but visibly tired local noble inclined her head. There had been a change of power, apparently, during the previous year.

Stolde was ready for his great debut: several crew members were handy with a needle and they had outdone themselves. He had displaced Stark from his chair but the second-in-command did not seem to mind. The Administrator had been

practicing several levels of haughtiness, but in the end he decided that he would disturb everyone with his usual expression. The contrast between the officious Administratum uniform and the innocent, nearly childlike face was really confusing, even Mercer had to admit that.

‘Good day, Prefectus Stolde, and it is my pleasure to welcome you as the first outside Imperial official to arrive for a very long time ago to the Rengris system. I trust your voyage thus far was uneventful.’

‘Nothing happened that would have prevented the esteemed Captain from delivering me to this beautiful planet, Governor. I heard about the rediscovery of the system with great eagerness. There is much to learn here.’

That sour little smile again, full of possible meanings. Mercer was following the facial expressions of the Governor very closely, and detected hidden fear and barely suppressed panic when she saw that smile.

‘I must ask for your kind patience, though, until we can meet in person, an occasion I keenly anticipate. I have been dispatched on behalf on the Adeptus Administratum, on an affair which is, I am afraid, of utmost importance and of a time sensitive nature. The matter of tithes will surely come up. Yet I am sure that my brothers in servitude to the Imperium will not detain me for long.’

‘I quite understand, Prefectus.’ The woman looked relieved. Tithes were business as usual. She had probably spent the last few nights considering the alternatives. ‘The... unexpected nature of your transport was telling.’

‘I am glad that you understand. You know how it is... the Administratum waits for no one.’

‘Yes, Prefectus. Please inform me immediately once you have finished your Administratum related responsibilities. Until then, the Emperor be with you.’

A twitch stole across her face as she disconnected.

The screen flickered and the portrait was replaced by a cogitator generated image of Rengris VII, along with the most important – and latest available – data about its military and productivity.

The people on the bridge laughed uproariously.

‘You really told a joke to the planetary governor?’ asked Stark, clapping on the Administrator’s shoulder. ‘You really are something else!’

‘I... I did? What? What?’

That only made the crew laugh harder.

‘Nobody tell him! Nobody tell him! Let him go back on the Andrukhov and find the archive where they keep the punchlines!’



The shuttle was descending rapidly in the polluted atmosphere of Rengris VII. The Imperium's automated heavy metal mining platforms had long since eroded the hills, throwing poisonous particles in the air, then scoured the land for the settled metal. The nobility and the important people lived in platform cities, high in the mountains, or on dirigible buildings, while the masses of the Imperium toiled away to find materiel to feed the Imperial war machine. On this heavy industrial planet, trade burgeoned, which made the planet rich as long as it lasted – and that was the backup plan the governor had returned to once the warp storm had hit. They had the raw materials to produce anything, and the capabilities to do so. Rengris VII was a planet of builders.

The Administratum building swung gently on immense cables in the canyon of the river Nasfer, at a safe distance from the noxious clouds of the miner caravans. The entire complex was protected by batteries that had been placed by the Adeptus Mechanicus – based on an ancient accord, the followers of the Omnissiah sent a complement to help the Administrators build and maintain their fortress. What they gained in return, only the two organisations knew – neither of which was famed for being forthcoming with secrets.

As they landed, a small delegation was waiting at the pad. The welcoming party consisted of a frail old man strapped into a techpriest-made mobility frame, a Mechanicus adept and three servitors. None of them looked particularly disturbed by the strong downpour the shuttle was navigating through. They did not even move as the engines' exhaust picked up the rainwater in the form of billowing vapour and threw it in their faces.

They had the decency not to come near the shuttle, and did not send their servitors for the refuelling.

Mercer signalled the pilot to keep the shuttle in the air – not that it could protect them from an anti-air attack, but the last thing he wanted was something hissing and drooling into his ear en route back to the vessel after a successful mission.



'My name is Prefectus Stolde, Master Prieze. I come from the Andrukhov III,

following a case that concerns the Administratum archives.’ Stolde was apparently in a hurry to dive headfirst into the documents.

‘Ah, my, so very direct, so very hurried!’

The ancient Administrator motioned at his guests with a whirring motion then clanked off and into an elevator. Servoskulls were floating around, following the techpriests’ orders. The tall doors moved soundlessly as they closed behind them. Inside, the cold, bright lights of Mechanicus obliterated even the remnants of shadows. Everyone except Rydia began blinking unbidden tears away.

A few Administrators were hurrying about, but the fortress had been planned for much greater numbers, so it seemed nearly empty.

The Master of Administratum led them to a work hall which could have easily housed a hundred scribes. On a wide table, recaff was already steaming, and the servoskull responsible for its presence was scurrying away.

Prieze waved toward the chairs, but he himself remained standing. As his guests sat, the wordless Adeptus Mechanicus priest nodded and left the room. Try as he might, Mercer could not ignore the bolter banks on the ceiling.

‘Thank you for agreeing to meet us,’ said Stolde. On the way here, Mercer had informed him that he would only intervene if things turned sour. ‘We are here to gather information about the status of the planet.’

‘I do not doubt that. I do, however, very much doubt that you are a Prefect. The insignia on your uniform is obviously counterfeit. Impersonating an Administratum official is heresy, punishable by death.’

Stolde was at a loss of words. Well, Mercer thought. That was quick. Even the best crafted disguises must be thrown aside at times. He leaned forward, reaching under his jacket. The sudden movement drew Prieze’s attention. Also, some of the bolters moved.

‘Good eye, Master. Let us see if you can check the authenticity of this,’ said Mercer, and pulled his Inquisitor’s rosette out of his breast pocket. The wizened man’s eyes opened wide. At his signal, the bolters returned to their inert state. ‘Ordinate Stolde was acting according to my directions.’

Stolde’s mouth was agape. So, thought Mercer in grim satisfaction, he had not connected the dots.

‘My lord... if the Inquisition is involved, it is an entirely different matter, of course. We have been praying to the Emperor, but we did not dare hope...’

Mercer nearly burst out into a mirthless laugh. When he had entered the codes for the Exterminatus, the final judgment of the Imperium of Man on any planet, the complete cessation of organic life, he had received several warning messages about the planet being of primary importance. He had overridden every single one of them. If the system was this important, he had even less reason to let it

fall to the ravenous swarm of the Tyranids. If the warp storm receded before his duties were finished, a beacon would light up that would guide the endless fleets of the mutated brood into the system, which in turn would extinguish all life to further strengthen itself. As per the standard doctrine of the Ordo Xenos, no planet would be allowed to fall to the swarm. The Inquisition would rather see a world burn than to let the Tyranids feast on it. The order was dormant now until it could be broadcast to nearby systems that would see through its execution. And only he or another inquisitor would be authorised to rescind it. Once that slow, inevitable process began, it could not be stopped. In the end, the Emperor's will would be done, with the dedication and precision befitting such a grim task.

‘Hope is the refuge of the weak, Magister. The Imperium of Man is interested only in solutions. I hereby officially request the Administratum’s help in assessing the level of xenos incursion. Ordinate Stolde is a member of my retinue, and as of now, the liaising officer between the Administratum and the Inquisition, entitled to access all and every record I have access to.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

After the Master had hurried out, Mercer held the rosette in front of the still stunned Stolde. The three other members of Mercer’s retinue were watching expectantly. Rydia was sipping from Stolde’s recaff, but the Administrator did not even notice.

‘If you have any doubts, Ordinate...’

With a start, the pale man wakened from his stupor.

‘My lord, I... should I kneel?’

Mercer dismissed the notion with a movement of his head. The idea disturbed him a bit, and not only because it would change Stolde’s everyday behaviour, jeopardising his position with the rest of the crew, who, at worst, believed him to be a Rogue Trader in the making.

‘I know of only one man who deserves such humility, and He resides on the Holy Terra. I will, however, require everything else from you. Your talent, your knowledge, your determination... and if everything else fails, your blood given freely in sacrifice. In return I can offer you the knowledge that your death will matter more than your survival would.’

‘Are we to purge the Genestealers from Rengris VII?’

Inquisitor Theodon Mercer thought about that for a while.

‘No. The Governor, the PDF, the Navy and the Imperial Guard will do that for us. The noble families will do that for us. The Adeptus Arbites will do that for us, if their purity can be determined. There are Inquisitors who wield immense personal powers and their task is to bring the Emperor’s justice personally.’

He stood and looked straight at Stolde, who was mesmerised by his words.

‘They strike swiftly and without mercy – they are the scalpel that removes the taint. Our duty is to assist this planet with cleansing itself – we are the antidote. Should we fail, this planet dies and a dozen other will fall. At the very least we must halt the spread of the infestation here. And stop it we shall.’

Mercer tapped on the arm of his chair.

‘This planet is under quarantine. Anything from Rengris that emerges on the other side of the Warp will be terminated with extreme prejudice by the Navy. If the warp storm subsides before we contain the situation, a strike fleet from multiple systems will be assembled to sanitise the system. For that, arrangements are already in place.’

He walked slowly up to Stolde and extended his hand. The Administrator stared at it blankly, then accepted the handshake. The Ordinate’s palm was sweaty, his fingers were trembling, but his grip was firm.

‘Our course is clear,’ said Mercer. ‘I have high expectations of you, Fredevan Stolde. You have proven that when the Imperium calls, you answer that call. Once you have gone above and beyond the call of duty, anything less is treason.’

Stolde nodded sternly.

‘Let us save this planet then, my lord.’

*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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