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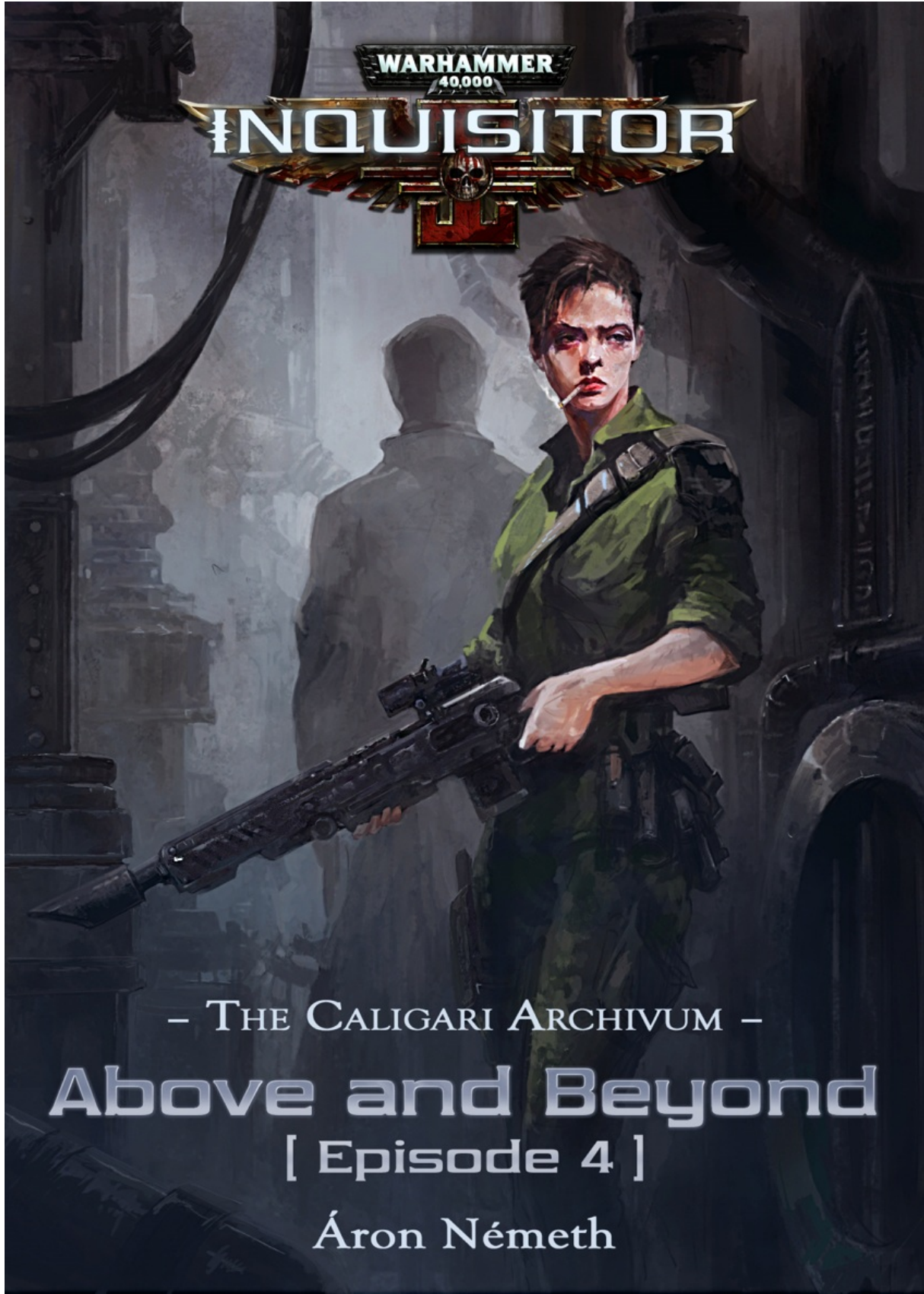


– THE CALIGARI ARCHIVUM –

Above and Beyond

[Episode 4]

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.

The Inquisitors of the Caligari Conclave are the fearless agents of the Imperium who don't hesitate to enter the dark corners of the Sector to investigate mysteries and purge the unclean. The Caligari Archivum is a constantly expanding collection of their deeds. A series of stand-alone short stories and longer novellas in episodic format, written by various authors, all set in the Caligari Sector, the official sandbox world of the upcoming Action-RPG videogame,

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The Caligari Archivum



Above and Beyond

(Episode 4)

by
Áron Németh

The Genestealers opened with a barrage of missiles. His retinue sprinted in the direction of the flyer and saw one its engines taking a direct hit from a krak missile, rendering it inoperable. Another missile punched through the fore armour, and filled the pilot's cabin with a quickly dispersing needle of molten metal. The heat would have even turned their bones into ash, had they been inside. The three holes in the flyer billowed acrid, dark smoke. By the number of hot exhaust trails crisscrossing the gloomy sky, the hybrids had made sure that the flyer would be staying on the ground even if it came at the expense of ammunition: with a swift glance the inquisitor counted at least twenty of them.

Mercer cursed silently for the time he had wasted with the Eldar, but there had been no other way: any direct attempt to calm her down would have been met with yet another bout of anger.

Whoever had orchestrated this ambush knew a lot about them and had timed the attack well.

The Genestealers came in from three directions, dropping in from unarmed suborbital barges. Only the Adeptus Mechanicus had the means of flying these automated beasts from afar, which immediately marked them as heretics – with the exception of those who had assisted them in the Administratum fortress and provided them with those wondrous plasma weapons, the pride of the Mechanicus. They also had access to vast amounts of data, and the means to disseminate information to the Genestealer cult if they managed to identify one of its human contacts. They would also be able to tamper with the Machine Spirits of the Summer Palace. The entire conspiracy unfolded before him, with terrifying certainty: high ranking members of the local Adeptus Mechanicus had been appeasing the very Genestealers who were threatening their entire world with extinction.

The more immediate problem was that they had also provided said Genestealers with transport, although without their Patriarch nearby, the brood would be a lot less effective.

Above the metal fields, the Mechanicus could sneak the barges in close enough to prevent the orbiting Navy vessels firing their lances. The roar of the engines was deafening, the gusts of hot wind shook off the scales from the dead trees, exposing their ashen, diseased bark, showering the retinue with clinking flakes.

The attackers landed far off – as a precaution, otherwise they could have been hit by explosives while disembarking and clustered – but were closing in. It also meant that the brood mind had either made a mistake or been somehow forced to drop the heavy weapons teams farther back, on another plateau. From above,

with that armament, they could have pounded his retinue into tiny, slightly charred bits hanging from the trees.

The good part about a trap is that once it is sprung things get quite straightforward. The world that used to be full of unknowable possibilities suddenly solidifies into two options: either you live, or you do not.

Mercer calculated his chances as he pulled the bead of his plasma pistol on the incoming Genestealers, and found them to be distinctly unfavourable.

The smart thing on the Genestealers' part would have been to form up for a co-ordinated attack, pin his forces down, and keep shooting until there was no more ammunition to spend. What they did instead was to try to rush his team. Mercer was well versed in the ways the brood fought, and while his mentors had always been adamant that they possessed a level of intelligence, these were mindless.

'Stand by for extraction,' a rasping, modulated voice sounded in his vox, but he had no time to answer, and the sender had apparently told him everything they wanted to.

They had not waited to amass, instead rushing as fast as they could - the strike force consisted of first and second generation Genestealers - a disjointed, disorganised horde, baying for blood.

The first blood they tasted was their own as Rydia opened up with her long-las. The mad rush faltered as the coherent beams of light shattered the first runners' carapace.

'Six! Five plodders!

Stolde proved to be a quite capable spotter, having learnt the code words of the regiment Rydia used to serve in. He picked up information with surprising ease - the former guardswoman needed to tell him the expressions only once. He had a good eye, too.

By the time Rydia took care of the first generation runners, the Ranger had decimated the heavy weapons hybrids stationed on the other plateau, forcing them into cover.

'For the Emperor's gold-plated throne, Eldar, at least tell me why you've invited me into this trap!'

'Very well,' he heard right by his shoulder, and something touched his neck. A rush of sensations hit him like a hammer blow, unfurling gently in his consciousness. A shining pillar of void, underground, in a cavern, consuming all light, every thought; even looking at it through his mind's eyes sent his thoughts into disarray. As he turned his mind away, not in fear - never in fear - it faded away, leaving a sense of loss behind, a reminder of discarded possibilities. He saw a pale, foetal form, with four arms and two legs, floating in a giant vat, its

eyes filled with the same emptiness. He recognised a Genestealer Patriarch in that container, hollowed out, its mind gone. Half flesh, half machine men were tending to the husk, ensuring that it did not live and ensuring that it did not die. He knew he would be spending hours later, trying to find a meaning in this vision that had overwhelmed his senses. He catalogued the memories for later use, then shook himself and forced his consciousness to the surface.

He had spent only a few seconds in his reverie, but the situation had worsened considerably in the meantime. Rydia had taken down another group, but the makeshift firebase was about to be overwhelmed. This, on the other hand, put the incoming forces right within the effective range of a plasma pistol.

Mercer silently prayed to the Emperor as he fired. Sun guns, as the guardsmen called them out of the Adeptus Mechanicus members' earshot, were absolutely devastating, but prone to malfunction – given that they heated their own volatile ammunition, the slightest blunder would have maimed or killed the inquisitor outright.

The weapon worked miraculously. Not only it did not explode but its accuracy proved to be excellent. Driven by the righteous fury of Mankind, the glowing bolt of superheated gas landed among the three-armed hybrids. They had apparently lost all higher function and rushed the team with the same slobbering rage as the expendable first generation. Mercer could feel a faint gust of heat rushing past him even from his position as their limbs began to rain down. There was a whine as the weapon's built in fusion core began to heat the next batch of fuel. Mercer saw the next wave and knew for sure that he would not have time to fire again. At this range, he would be cooked by his own shot. He tenderly deactivated the weapon, thanking it for its service and put it back into its holster. Then he reached for his trusty laspistol and began shooting away.

The calls of Stolde, along with the cracking sound when the coherent light beams hit something organic made for an eerie concert. With their brood mind connecting them, the Genestealers did not need to use their voices to communicate and remained completely silent.

They ran and they died, they ran and they died, but each wave got a little closer.

Firing with wild abandon, Mercer closed in to his retinue. Rydia took it as a sign and tossed a few grenades around to clear the area a bit. Mercer saw that this was his cue to rev his chainsword, and he spun around just in time to see a hybrid raising its deadly claws to strike. He evaded the blow and struck back, the sword's engine growling almost contemptuously as its teeth neatly decapitated the Genestealer. Conserving the momentum of his massive weapon, he stepped sideways, attacking a sneakier first generation xenos which had managed to get

near Stolde. Instinctively, he shoved the administrator away, and the creature had only time to let out a surprised hiss before it got bisected by the now screaming chainsword. The prefectus raised his flechette pistol, a laughable weapon against the reinforced carapace of the Genestealers.

This was it, Mercer thought. They would not recover in time, they would get swarmed and either killed, or even worse, turned, and it all was that damnable Eldar's fault who had lured them out here into the open, just to leave them behind as chew toys for the inhuman monstrosities feasting on this Emperor-forsaken, corrupt planet... and now he saw it clearly, the absence of the Ranger from the fight.

They had been abandoned here.

Five Genestealers perished under his frenzied, primal attacks – he was moving purely on adrenaline, his taxed body acting on borrowed energy, but he managed to protect his retinue, while Rydia methodically picked off the ones further away.

Gasping for air, he let his chainsword down for a second. On the bridge of the Stormskipper, he had had neither time nor occasion to train, and those months of idleness now presented their dues – he was a lot more exhausted than he had any right to be. The reprieve would be short indeed. A detachment of more than twenty Genestealers had formed up into a circle around the firebase.

Driven by a final flash of consciousness from the brood mind, they looked aware now, becoming the monsters that were so rightfully despised and feared by the Imperium: their dreaded ovipositors lashed out, seeking new victims to subdue and convert. Their distorted faces radiated otherworldly malevolence.

They began to trot.

'Stand by for rescue operation. You are now free to communicate.'

They disappeared in a quickly moving cloud of metal flakes. Sparks were flying everywhere and tiny explosions bloomed under their feet, as if they had stepped on a minefield of firecrackers. Then came the mighty moan of an assault cannon, far off, near the edge of its effective range, followed by the sound of four oversized engines.

Mercer could just picture Auspex, the one-eyed armsman, the best shot on the Stormskipper, grinning savagely behind the venerated weapon.

Warren had managed to scrounge up those volunteers – the armed shuttle was now banking gently, its side door open, aiming its multi-barrelled main weapon again, drawing another line of death on the ground, then another, with unerring precision. Mercer could faintly hear the screaming laughter of Auspex.

In half a minute, every Genestealer on the plateau was dead or dying, taken out by the sharpshooters of the shuttle. Stolde, as a final act of defiance, shot one right in its open mouth, turning the inside of its skull into a bloody pulp.

Although Mercer found the gargling sounds quite satisfying, he still rounded on the administrator to berate him for his unwarranted heroics.

The last thing he needed was to lose one of his retinue due to a momentary lapse of discipline, he thought.

Then a flicker of movement caught his eyes. He looked down and thought again.

The last thing he needed was a friendly fire incident to rip both legs off a traitorous Eldar, when her four Ranger friends, who had been left out of her scheme, were somewhere out there.

That was the last thing he needed.



‘Captain,’ Rydia warned him as he moved in closer. He glanced back at the former guardswoman, followed her eyes and began calculating trajectories. By the blood spatter, the Eldar must have been hit during the initial run, from the front. Judging by the first points of impact and the altitude of the shuttle the xenos must have been standing right at the edge of the plateau.

There was a moment of blurred movement, and, following Rydia’s example, the shuttle’s crew aimed their weapons straight at the Eldar who was lying in the slowly growing puddle of her own blood. Whoever had designed her armour must have been good – anyone short of an Astartes would have been immediately reduced to chunks by that kind of punishment – but no miracle worker.

It was hard to spot the tiny claws in the rock face, especially after they’d been hit by a volley of high velocity rounds, but they had definitely been there, ready to provide the Ranger with an extraction route.

That was the last piece of evidence he needed.

Mercer aimed carefully and amputated both of the Eldar’s arms with his laspistol. In the absolute silence, everyone heard the twin cracks. Only the torso and the head remained intact.

Some of his crew shuddered. Others grinned.

‘No funny moves,’ he warned. He was surprised by the hint of laughter in his own voice. Being played by a xenos whose kind was notorious for their tricks, and all the while he had believed that the Ranger was being outsmarted by the traitors, and to top it off, he had felt a tinge of sorrow for her... By the Throne! Even this battle-scarred Universe has some sense of humour in it. Rydia took one

look at his face – his skin felt numb for a reason – and began applying blood sealant on the Eldar without a word. At his signal, she injected a generous dose of general purpose psychic suppressant into the xenos' bloodstream.

That one jolted her awake all right.

The Eldar screamed and screamed as the suppressant robbed her of her senses. Convulsions shook her body, but Mercer knew they would pass. He stared at the scene impassively.

The away team helped Stolde back to the shuttle for the mandatory gene-check. No one wanted to stay close for the next part. Rydia did, though – even in a state like this, she considered the Eldar a threat.

'You have played along with Cegorach and lived. Can you hear his laughter?' The Ranger wheezed, trying to struggle upright. After a brief moment of confusion, she found out what had happened and shook her head ruefully. 'Such a childish... tantrum.'

He spread his hands, partly to remind the xenos that he still could.

'If it stops you from turning into a mushroom cloud, I can live with your admonishment.'

A slow, far too wide smile appeared on the Ranger's exposed, bloodless face.

'Why would I kill you now? I have done something entirely different to you. Had they infected you, they would have taken a drink from the Well of Oblivion.'

'So this Well of Oblivion is an infection that stills the brood mind?'

'Finally, you see.'

'Your need for poetic justice very nearly cost you the planet, along with your precious Well. You know that, right?'

Dread clenched his stomach, but he gave no outward sign of it. He had been trained to control even his tiniest muscles, back in the Inquisition's fortress, even while intoxicated, even while injured – during an interrogation, the subject's heightened senses took notice of everything, the slightest waver, the smallest hesitation, and would turn it against him. Not immediately, but inevitably.

But this was about something else. Even with the wonders of Eldar technology, she would be lucky to walk again. The vigilant eyes of the Navy were firmly focussed on the plateau. A search and rescue operation was out for the question, even for four Rangers – not like this.

They would have had a slim chance to spring her from a containment facility, after lengthy reconnaissance, but not here. Of course, she would never be interred, not after what she had done. Survival had no place here, so the Eldar's plan had to be about something else.

The image of the pillar rushed into his mind, unbidden.

Vengeance would be a good motive, he thought. Like the information the xenos had received about him. Mentioning that had been a desperate but successful diversion – he had been ready to make her reveal how to draw out the Genestealers. Force it out of her, if need be.

‘So smart, so distant, so very inquisitorial. Quipping to fend off the sense of betrayal. Filled to the brim with your sacred duty. Is there anything left of you?’

With a wave of his hand, Mercer sent Rydia away, who leaped to obey. There was a limit to what one was allowed to hear, even for the staunchly loyal guardswoman, the one he had instilled with new purpose.

And still, here he was, dancing around with a xenos who was just playing for time, to be able to die without giving anything away.

It was about time for him to change that.

He aimed the barrel of his laspistol under the perfect globe of a gem on the Eldar’s breastplate. Leaning down and growling into her face would have been infinitely satisfying, but there was no need to get into the range of something nasty hidden in her mouth cavity – a poison spitter or a gas emitter, for instance.

‘If you tell me what I want, I won’t proceed by shooting this pretty little bauble off your chest plate, using the entire energy pack, then leave you here for the Navy to use you for target practice.’

The strength that the sense of triumph had given the Ranger evaporated in an instant.

He had no reliable information about the purpose of the stone, but one thing he knew – most, if not all Eldar had them, and they would organise raids, kill, steal, and even barter for them.

‘All right. I have played around with you... long enough, anyway. You tire me.’

The inquisitor swayed a little as the afterimage of the pillar once again returned into his mind.

‘The Well of Oblivion. It fills you with beauty,’ he heard the Ranger. Her voice was full of adoration. ‘It replaces you, makes you whole. It is untainted. We had been tasked to guard it.’

‘All five of you? I know you’re good, but not that good.’

‘We are all who is left.’

There was maddening grief in her eyes, present for a second, gone the next. ‘And it was left here with a reason.’ He had no problem feeling fury, not yet. ‘You connected my mind to that abomination?’

‘Indeed. I hoped it would break you. When you want to forget something... when the burden nearly breaks your mind, just offer it to the Well. It will accept. Like the fog in the morning, it will be gone.’

The Ranger hacked a cough.

‘There must be a lot that a man like you might want to forget. Regret, guilt, pain... By the Craftworlds, I even gave it my hatred, in the end.’

So much for finding out what made her side with the Genestealers against him, Mercer thought. Inner peace can strike at the most inopportune times. On the other hand, it had robbed the xenos of her defiance: she was as compliant as a final phase subject, her will completely broken. Soon she would draw back into herself, becoming unresponsive and thus useless. Every fibre in Mercer’s body, every piece of experience demanded that he end this charade, finish off the Eldar, end the corruption that forced her to go against her very nature. She must have been force-feeding her emotions into the Well once they got too strong for her to maintain control – but something else was given to the Well along with those feelings. Memories, perhaps. Personality. Still, he needed more information. There was no room for sympathy.

‘And this was the psychic phenomenon everyone was talking about. I sure hope that for the Genestealers it wasn’t voluntary,’ he half stated, half asked. He had to check. Truly, it was a devious weapon – one that killed with kindness – exactly the kind of subtle brutality he had expected of the Eldar. The Genestealer in the vat was suspended in an artificial state of serenity, bordering on lobotomy, forced on it by a device which was feeding on emotion. A dark thought emerged: maybe it was even storing the stolen memories.

‘Its builders had something like the Genestealers in mind when they crafted the Well. It is really a pity that a mindless brood is nearly as adept at killing as the ones with central control are.’

‘There must be a shield against it, though.’ Otherwise, everyone would have been wiped out, not just the Patriarch.

‘The thick walls of your filth-ridden hives are strong enough to keep the effects of the Well out.’

Since the Adeptus Mechanicus had not killed off the Patriarch when their experiments were finished, Mercer concluded that it must have been an integral part of the containment, or the servants of the Omnissiah had found another important use for it. Also, it stood to reason that there had been a second Genestealer infestation, one that could hide under the shroud of the hive walls. The Eldar had not deployed the mind-wiper anywhere else, not that he knew of – he refused to call it by the name the xenos had given the device – so it was either prohibitively expensive, or it had failed to achieve its original objectives.

In conclusion, he had walked right into what was basically a long time standoff.

At least he’d managed to set things into motion, even if he understood the

situation too late. That would be a reason for the unaffected brood to come out of their hiding – either to reclaim their lost Patriarch, or to destroy it – if he could present them with an opportunity to strike. There was the button he had been promised.

He stared at the dying Eldar. After a while he dropped a tiny recorder near the body. It had dutifully stored every word since the beginning of the interrogation.

‘Here’s my offer to your comrades. The same offer I would have given to you, had you not turned against me. If the plan works and the Genestealer cult loses its Patriarch – along with any other high ranking members, like a Magus, if there is one – and the Rangers stay out of the Imperium’s way, they won’t be sought out, and they are free to leave once the Warp Storm passes. Through this device they will be able to contact me and tell me their answer.’

He paused, looking up, led by a sudden sense of premonition.

‘This I promise by my rank of Inquisitor, and by my name.’

There was a blindingly bright flash of light. By the time he got up – his body instinctively made him duck and roll into cover – and blinked away the bright dots floating in front of his eyes, most of the smoke was gone, revealing a headless torso in place of the captive Eldar. The stone in the chest plate was cracked – maybe a hidden fault in the crystal had proved to be too much. By the time his crew reached him to form a protective circle around him, the hit squad on the other plateau was long gone.

‘Sand blasted Eldar, was that a yes or was that a no?’



The field command was set up in a repurposed habitat. Under the protective dome of the hive, Mercer finally escaped the Well’s otherwise constant, looming presence in the back of his mind.

The Planetary Defence Force, reinforced by the Imperial Guard and volunteers from the Adeptus Mechanicus priests, had cordoned off the area near the target. The latter group added a measure of friction to an operation which was otherwise proceeding smoothly. The believers of the Omnissiah who had been stationed at the Administratum fortress had proven their loyalty in Mercer’s eyes, but Honstine still had his doubts. The general was staring dourly at Master Prieze. He was still not accustomed to the sight of a ranking administrator in a military operation. The Adeptus Administratum were usually the ones who, according to the Guard, could be found “in the rear with the gear.” The heavily

augmented administrator held his quill almost tenderly, crossing off secured buildings on a map. Guardsmen came and went, handing over written slips which he read and promptly forwarded into the nearby incinerator. Even the map was on a parchment, drawn by the mechanically precise hands of Prieze himself, who, according to his tracker, was still in his fortress. Every unit in the vicinity had been ordered to maintain vox silence under the threat of summary execution. The plan was simple: the building would be isolated, the tech-priests who had been detached to the Administratum would look for sensors and cameras and override them, then the Guardsmen would move in, subdue the inhabitants, genescan them, then shuffle them back to the standby teams for processing. Once done, the process would be repeated until the area was clear. With the strength the Guard had pulled together for this, there should have been mishaps, but so far, there had been none. As much as Honstine had been reluctant to admit it, in the end he told Prieze that the Administratum could neatly design a process once properly motivated.

Warren, who, with the tacit approval of the assisting tech-priests, had appropriated most of the cogitator capacity of the Administratum headquarters, stood vigilant in the makeshift comms hub independently monitoring all communication. The rest of the retinue kept him company until the plan entered phase two, except Stolde, who was now scouring the vast archives of the Administratum about the activities of House Mosinda.

It was a sad state of affairs, though, that everyone was still watching everyone else with suspicion.

‘The buffer zone is complete,’ said Master Prieze. ‘Are you still sure that you will be participating in this action?’

‘For the sake of my longer term plans, I must,’ answered Mercer. He remembered the stony faces of his crew. He could not let that image distract him now, though.

‘There are times when an officer must lead personally,’ Honstine commented, with respect in his voice. ‘Inquisitor Mercer’s men must see him in the fray, see what he is fighting for. If their captain braves the horde, it makes everyone who lags behind a weakling and a coward.’

‘I pray to the Emperor that you are right, General.’

By the look on his face, Honstine swallowed back an irritated retort.

‘Initiate phase three,’ he said instead. His ever-present adjutant jumped to pass the hand written orders to the runners standing by in front of the door. In the cleared out section of the hive, the three could predict the time the couriers would need to reach their destination. Mercer looked at his dataslate, silently counting down.

Seasoned as they were in the art of war, they still held their breath, Honstine and the inquisitor, when the counter reached zero. At first, nothing happened.

Then, with a convulsive motion, the Master of Administratum deactivated his bulky mobility suit.

‘It is on,’ he remarked.

The tech-priests had activated their jammers. They were woefully underequipped for Aetheric Warfare against a fortress full of their brethren, but they were not alone.

With a deep, reverberating growl, the engines of the Guard’s armour came alive. Hundreds of Leman Russ tanks began charging toward the fortress walls. At this time, the commanders were blind to the outside world: they could not risk tapping into the cameras’ feed, because that would have revealed their position to the adepts of the Adeptus Mechanicus, warranting a counterattack.

At first, only the cannon of the tanks were audible. Then came the battle cry of the Guard, the brave and bold. The Guardsmen knew as well as the three in the isolated command centre that this assault would only serve to soften up the defences.

The fortress returned fire.

Outside, loyal men and women of the Guard began dying in droves. Las and plasma fire penetrated or crippled the assailing tanks and obliterated infantry. Flyers were out of the question in the confined space of the dome, but at least the protective shell prevented the use of the Mechanicus’ most devastating weapons, and in the confined space, the hive had grown close to the fortress walls, shortening the distance in open space.

From the arches and towers, fire teams launched their krak missiles, then quickly repositioned. Sometimes they were quick enough. Judging by the sound of an explosion, followed by a brief chorus of screams, somewhere below the command centre, at least one team were not. But each time a bolter nest fired, each time a lascannon projected its deadly beam, the loyal tech-priests got a little closer to finding out where their brethren had linked into the fortress’ systems.

In the meantime, their powerful signals kept the Machine Spirits confused – and in that signal, they broadcast the word of the Inquisition to the defenders continuously, branding everyone who resisted a heretic and a traitor.

Once the message was decoded and understood, most of the defensive positions went silent. The Mechanicus were no fools – they knew if such an order was invoked, the Inquisition’s retribution would be terrible and without mercy, and the usual politicking that could usually keep them under their own jurisdiction would be for naught.

Besides, only those who lived would be able to explain their actions.

The weapons clusters that were being operated by the foolhardy and abominable were quickly silenced by the Guard.

Mercer nodded toward the Master of Administratum and the General.

‘Let’s catch ourselves some Genestealers.’

Rydia and Angelika joined him as he left the command centre. The psyker had been patched up quite diligently, and although the head medicae strongly recommended for her to stay put, she insisted on tagging along.

Using the stairwell – Mercer had not even considered calling an elevator, not this time – they went down. The hurriedly emptied habitats and the backup lights, along with the scrawled maintenance runes gave the place a hopeless, desolate atmosphere.

They trotted by the jagged hole where the unfortunate fire team had met their untimely demise – they had set up a firing position on a balcony and been hit by a barrage of frag missiles. Even though the guardsmen had worn the new, reinforced armour enthusiastically provided by the noble Rengrisian families, this punishment proved to be too much for them.

At every turn, they were greeted by saluting guardsmen.

In front of the towering habitat, they saw what their plan had cost.

Moaning wounded were being removed from the battlefield while burning tanks had become funeral pyres for the courageous guardsmen inside.

The survivors were already repositioning, yelling into their voxes to try to find out where their units were. The barrels of the Leman Russ tanks remained firmly pointed forward – everyone had been briefed about the next stage.

The ceasefire either meant that the Guard had won or they were waiting for reinforcements, both of which gave a window of opportunity for the Genestealers to intervene. This was their only chance to free or kill the mind-wiped Patriarch.

There was a reason the guardsmen had not pumped the sewer system chock full of poison gas.

They took their positions and waited.

Mercer looked at them: Their firm, determined eyes, the rictus of righteous hatred on the faces of the commissars, the hard expression of the veterans, and knew that they would not run. No matter what the xenos threw at them, they would stand and fight. He stared at the grim, towering slab of the habitat where his ground crew watched the unfolding scene. He would not run either.

The tension grew.

His hand clenched on the grip of his plasma pistol.

‘Multiple contacts!’

The Genestealers burst out of the sewers like a tide of carapace and bones.

They immediately parted into two waves: one was headed toward the fortress, the other rushed at the guardsmen, trying to get in melee range and cover their brood-mates.

There were multiple points of exit: this cult was one of the most numerous Mercer had heard of, and they were really bringing everything they had into play. The hybrids tried to mount an assault against one of the habitats but it went slower than the brood mind anticipated: in the short time available the Guard had placed mines wherever possible, which would hinder the cultists' progress even more than the well-positioned bolter nests. Those high grounds would be denied to the traitors of humanity.

The Genestealers had their own nasty surprise, though – they used undocumented passageways and cable tunnels to break out unexpectedly close to the guardsmen. In one instance, they managed to climb onto a Leman Russ armour, which in turn prompted a nearby flamer to douse the xenos with burning promethium. The liquid fire poured down into the open hatch, lit up the turret gunner and ignited the ammunition. By Mercer's estimate that negligence that allowed the promethium to reach the ammo compartment – and which would have prompted a noncom to dish out a serious chewing out – only helped their passing. The howls of the crew were drowned out by thunderous automatic fire as everyone found a target to dispose of, but nothing could filter out the series of explosions.

'Open fire!'

The Guard's formation shifted to deal with the threat. They had the upper hand – although there were casualties, the Genestealers could not break them and the anti-infantry weapons made short work of the xenos' numbers. They kept the infantry behind the armour, with the Leman Russ tanks taking out the tougher Genestealers, so the battle was going well for the Guard.

Their indignant screeches were music to the inquisitor's ears.

The ground shook as the shaped charges the hybrids had placed in the sewers took out several tanks – based on the visual cues of their attacking brood-mates, they were able to place them precisely. Next would come the proper anti-armour mines, which could actually penetrate the underside plating, forcing the Leman Russ formation to move again. This caused the supporting infantry to reposition near the next available tanks, leaving some patches unprotected.

The trouble with battles was, in general, Mercer remarked mentally, that the enemy was also allowed to think.

Some of the Genestealers reached the fortress walls, where they were immediately fried by huge electric coils mounted on immense mechadendrites. The fortress' protectors were apparently not keen to fire at the xenos in the open,

potentially taking out Astra Militarum units and provoking the retaliation of the Inquisition.

This would be the perfect time for the Patriarch to join the fray, thought Mercer, as he took down a group of clustered first generation hybrids with his plasma pistol. He was trying to spare his ammunition and his strength: he had bigger game to hunt.

‘Chief, they’re inside! I repeat, the Genestealers are inside the fortress!’ Warren’s speech was as crisp as ever in the vox, he could clearly hear him over the din. This was disastrous. His brain immediately went into overdrive. If the Genestealers could achieve their objectives in the fortress, it would not matter how many they had lost under the walls.

‘Retinue, on me! Ready the meltabomb! We’ll breach the gates if need be, and take out whoever leads the assault!’

He had to move quickly: upon hearing this development, Honstine would abandon the plan and saturate the battlefield with rocket fire, then ride in with the reinforcements to cut a swath to the fortress. That would be a political disaster, but a necessary one.

He jumped on top of a Leman Russ and nearly got shot for his trouble. Luckily for the inquisitor, the guardswoman behind the pintle-mounted bolter recognised him in time.

‘Ride me to the gates! Now!’

The gunner yelled something into her vox and the armoured vehicle lurched forward, breaking out of the formation. Another moved in immediately to fill the gap, its main cannon aiming at them, then the commander must have got a different order because they did not fire.

The driver accelerated and swerved a little to crush an unwary Genestealer under the treads.

Mercer looked behind and saw his retinue hanging on for their dear lives.

He stood instead, grabbed the hatch and raised his chainsword to the sky. He quickly thought it over once he saw a hulking, alien form rising right in front of them. It was over three metres tall, its razor sharp teeth glinting in the lights of the dome, and a long trail of slimy saliva connected it to the bare metal of the hive. It was the Patriarch, the ruler and most powerful member of the brood.

Mercer felt his shoulder twist and he very nearly cried out in pain as the tank changed course, but the manoeuvre came too late – with tremendous force, the gigantic Genestealer jumped atop the thundering tank and managed to get a hold.

The Patriarch carefully avoided getting in front of the main cannon or the bolters. That left it with two notable sources of threat: the pintle-mounted bolter and the hangers-on. One blade-clawed hand slashed into the turret gunner’s back

– the curved talons tore into the unfortunate guardswoman, obliterating her shoulder blades, penetrating her vertebrae and severing her spinal cord. She fell back into the Leman Russ, gurgling. This gave the inquisitor enough time to retaliate – he slammed the hatch shut and struck with his chainsword.

The Patriarch had thicker armour than hybrids or even other pureblood Genestealers. The sword tore deeply into the arm that held its massive body on the tank, but could not sever it completely.

At that very moment, the driver decided that enough was enough and brought the left tread to an immediate halt. The tread did not snap, but it was a close call. Mercer lost his balance and, in a wide arc, he fell off the violently lurching tank. The ground was even harder than he thought it would be. At least his chainsword had not been activated; that would have been a lot more painful. Rydia fared a lot better – she managed to control her landing, and even grabbed the screaming Angelika before she broke something. Then they both began moving away from the Leman Russ as they were dangerously close to its treads. The tank switched into reverse and backed up to gain some distance. Its forward mounted bolter scored some really valuable hits, stopping the Patriarch from bisecting the inquisitor as he tried to recover. It also prevented the Genestealer from using its terrifying psychic powers.

Mercer sprung up and aimed his plasma pistol. He pulled the bead directly on the living horror's head and fired – but instead of a regular discharge all he heard was a hiss that quickly became louder. With lightning speed, he tossed the overheating weapon aside, jumping the other way. Apparently the Machine Spirit was not happy with the bumpy ride and had ejected fuel to prevent overheating. The dumped fuel was already hot enough to shear through his bones and to cook his eyeballs. That was the downside of sun guns – a cranky plasma gun, if not maintained properly, took out only marginally less friendlies than hostiles.

The inquisitor shielded his eyes, and when he felt the heat through the soles of his boots, stood up again – although slower this time – and saw Angelika firing a bolt of plasma into the side of the Genestealer. It was a solid hit which took out two arms and tore off some of its bestial face, but knowing what the Patriarchs were capable of, he did not count it out of the fight. The xenos shook its head and rushed him. He revved his chainsword and waited.

That was when the first unguided rocket salvo hit, taking out the Leman Russ that had nearly succeeded in pointing its main cannon at the Genestealer. Molten pieces of armour flew everywhere, but the Patriarch took the brunt of it. This rocket was the first of a barrage, though. This time, Angelika took Rydia by the arm, and the two of them – guided by the psyker's unerring vision of the

potential futures – neatly sidestepped an incoming krak missile. The Patriarch's back was perforated by shrapnel from a frag missile, and took another hit from a faraway Leman Russ, but it still held on.

Mercer hid from the rockets behind the Patriarch which was rushing straight at him. Stray bolter rounds ricocheted nearby, but he refused to budge. Another missile hit the Genestealer – this time, it was a leg, but it was still moving, jumping right at him. Looking into his eyes, Mercer saw its vileness. The Genestealer knew exactly what an inquisitor was, and what it would mean for Rengris to lose one. The Patriarch's two remaining arms moved in perfect unison, one toward his neck, and one toward his stomach, so he had to choose between killing and surviving.

He chose killing. The chainsword moved in a blood-spattering arch, hungry to meet Genestealer flesh once again, and he managed to twist away from what would have been an immediately fatal hit to his jugular artery, but knew that the other arm's talons could still eviscerate him.

It did not matter, in the end.

He saw a flash, as bright as the bluest of suns, and the beast's head was gone. The Patriarch's body crumpled lifelessly.

He did not spare a glance to the Eldar kill team – before he could have spotted them they would be long gone, having kept their side of the deal. He made a mental note to try and find out whether the Rangers had done anything on their way to the battlefield to make his day even more difficult. That would have been the perfect parting gift, typical of their traitorous kind.

'I want that gate open! Now!'

Rydia rushed past him and kneeled in front of the front gate that had been sized to accommodate a smaller titan. The sensor banks followed her actions impassively, then briefly shifted their focus onto Mercer's rosette.

They had some time now – with the Patriarch down, the brood became a lot less organised. On the other hand, putting their strongest and eldest into the line of fire was a high cost move from the Genestealers' part, so whatever they wanted, they wanted it desperately.

A mechadendrite reached down and took a closer look.

'And you can get your angry little plasma pistol and try placating its Machine Spirit,' he pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. 'As far as I'm concerned, we're through.'

If the gatekeepers resisted now, having seen the rosette of the Inquisition, they would immediately mark themselves as heretics. Of course, Mercer was painfully aware that those immense coils could turn him into ash, and not even the glorious charge of the Guard, nor the following purge would bring him back

to life.

He counted the passing seconds.

Finally, with a click and a whirr, a human-sized door opened in the gate, and several servitors rushed through to recover the holy artefact. Judging by its thickness, the meltabomb would have been barely enough to punch it through. Mercer was impressed but not particularly surprised – who else if not the servants of the Machine God could build a nearly impenetrable fortress? “Nearly” was the operative word with the Adeptus Mechanicus this day, the inquisitor thought.

Rydia removed the charge with a hint of reluctance – she really wanted to see one in action. She went in first, her lasgun searching for targets, but found none. She held the weapon’s muzzle up all the same.

The corridor had some well-placed covers along its entire length, along with strategically placed bottlenecks and suspicious looking vents, and it was heavily reinforced to withstand explosions. The thick plasteel had such deep dents on it that even the diligent servitors could not completely erase them entirely. The fortress had had, apparently, its fair share of interesting moments.

They met no resistance, however. The tech-priests did their best to stay out of their way. Some doors had been sealed, others were ajar. Warren had told him that unless it was a life or death situation, he would prefer not to try his luck with the systems within the fortress. Butting heads with the followers of the Omnissiah on neutral ground was one thing, but trying to sway the loyalty of the Machine Spirits in their own sanctum would be a great offence in their eyes and could make them side with the traitor.

Rydia kept pushing forward, Mercer was next in line, and Angelika tried to cover their flanks. They were moving quickly and began to catch up with the Genestealers.

The retinue found evidence that the xenos had had previous knowledge of the fortress layout. Every door the tech-priests tried to close, they forced open. The brood did not search for alternative routes, nor did they move to reconnoitre. They always chose the shortest, and not necessarily the safest route. Now that he came to think of it, the Patriarch, or rather, his Magus had ordered their cult’s human sympathisers to keep the fortress under surveillance, or maybe even infiltrate as a supplicant or a supplier. All they were waiting for was someone to stir up enough trouble to make a distraction. They were attracted to the stilled Patriarch, or they saw it as a threat and wanted to destroy it... maybe both.

Seeing the number of their dead, they must have brought the majority of the cult here – especially the hybrids who were able to use Imperial devices, such as breaching charges and cogitators.

The defences of the Adeptus Mechanicus had massacred them but the survivors had pressed forward. Much of the destroyed equipment and combat servitors showed signs of psychic attacks. Soon, Mercer heard the sound of fighting.

He began to run and took the lead, his retinue following him closely.

The tech-priest and the Genestealer were in an indirect duel – neither of them were equipped for direct combat and relied on intermediaries, and both had their own special abilities that made them extremely dangerous enemies.

The fight was taking place in front of a heavily armoured door adorned with warning symbols – even the few that Mercer could decipher threatened those who would dare enter without proper authorisation with excommunication and death.

Bolters and flammers held by dextrous mechadendrites were decimating the assailants, but the very moment Mercer entered the echoing circular chamber, they went limp – the Mechanicus in charge of this section of defence must have figured out what he would think about an “incidental” case of friendly fire.

The melee servitors protecting the tech-priest redoubled their efforts to keep the purestrains off their master - swinging their power swords, cutting off limbs, but they were soon to be overwhelmed. The Genestealer Magus immediately recognised the new threat and let out a reverberating howl. It was infused with the energies of the Warp and the tenacity of the brood mind. The psychic shriek passed by Mercer, but his mental fortitude weathered the storm. Invisible claws still scraped the surface of his defences, but they slid off without finding a hold. The screech subsided with an intense, but quickly passing wave of pain. He winced and had to aim his laspistol again, but he remained conscious and on his feet. Rydia, however, looked the worse for wear – she was clutching her ears, her eyes bulging, and it took only one errant Genestealer to notice her predicament and bring her down. Before the cult leader could decide whether or not it could afford this distraction, Angelika raised her plasma gun. If Mercer resisted the screaming volley of psychic energy, she revelled in it. Psykers, in general, suffered the effects of such violent psychic effects, but she remained in control of her senses, and in that small victory, she saw the holy presence of the Emperor. With a beatific smile, she finished the final words of her short prayer and fired.

The globule of contained plasma sailed above the crouching purebloods who were already turning to get in close to her and shred her flesh, and hit the Genestealer Magus in the chest.

Mercer’s heightened senses let him see the miniature sun form and explode, turning the nearly human body into a rapidly expanding cloud of vapour. Farther

from the explosion, the Genestealers' carapaces charred and the hot wind tore burnt pieces off them. Even farther away, the blinding light smashed Genestealers into the sides of cogitators and pillars. Then the blast wave reached the servitors, whose implants temporarily went haywire and left them either paralysed or shuddering uncontrollably. Finally, it playfully tousled the tech-priest's hair.

He was an imposing figure, with perfectly sculpted muscles clad in pure white, with no visible augmentics. Only his hands, full of wriggling, alabaster tentacles, were different from a baseline human.

Mercer nodded approvingly toward Angelika who took the compliment with a smile and a small curtsy.

With the commanding psychic presence gone, it was really just a matter of seconds until Rydia and Mercer took out the remaining Genestealers.

'I hope you did not want to talk to it, my lord.'

'By the Throne, no. What could it possibly have said? I've seen its cult, there was no future in it.'

The tech-priest stepped forward and froze as Mercer's team shifted their weapons to point straight at him.

'My name is Mechae Moribundus Skozar, Magos Biologis, and I will not...'

'Your name is irrelevant,' Mercer snapped. 'I hereby accuse you of heresy most foul and declare you a traitor – information was passed from this fortress, to the xenos cult. From this sanctum, transport has been provided to the members of this ruinous cult and thus you, or those under your command, have aided them in an attempt on the life of an inquisitor and his retinue.'

A battered door opened, and a gigantic hulk of flesh and coppery metal stomped in. It was almost as tall as an Astartes Dreadnought, covered with a writhing mass of manipulators and mechadendrites. The female face, untouched by augmentics, was contorted by barely contained rage.

'Is this true, Skozar? If it is, and I will not believe that an inquisitor would enumerate such an accusation without good reason, I will open the data vaults before him myself!'

Mercer winced. This was the end of the line, Skozar – as he could remember, Mechae Moribundus designated a high ranking member of the Cult Mechanicus – was all he would get. The tech-priests would deny knowledge or involvement, and would give the Inquisition a convenient perpetrator, one who indeed had probably had a lot to do with the entire mess on Rengris VII. Given that a Magos Biologis' main field of expertise was the study of living matter, he was probably in charge of the experiments conducted on the captive Patriarch. To steer the unaffected brood away, he had to feed selected information to the cult – and,

come to think of it, the Eldar – using them if necessary. Of course, those who had decided to ignore his misdeeds, or even privately encouraged his heresy, would be nowhere to be found. The followers of Cult Mechanicus were great believers in success.

‘You have no right!’

‘You will not talk about these matters in front of people who are not the members of the Adeptus Mechanicus, Skozar. But if you truly believe that I am in the wrong... why have the defences turned against you?’

See, thought Mercer, I get the message loud and clear. Everyone else is innocent, and horrified, horrified that a trusted tech-priest could turn against the holy Inquisition itself. Shocking, truly. All he could muster was a twisted smile that did a poor job at hiding his rage.

The Mechae Moribundus, who was, up to this point, probably a very prominent person in the installation, one at the top echelons, suddenly realised that every weapon in the room was targeting him. The Adeptus Mechanicus had effectively abandoned him. Mercer lowered his pistol, and his retinue immediately followed suit.

The inquisitor could have demanded access for Warren, who would provide him with evidence about degrees of guilt, but he did not want to push his luck. The Cult Mechanicus was jealously guarding their secrets, and they would most likely refuse – and based on the Treaty of Mars, they would be in the right.

The surviving servitors unceremoniously grabbed the fallen Mechae Moribundus and half-escorted, half-dragged him out of the room. From the corner of his eye, he saw that at least four tech-priests, armed and augmented, joined the procession.

He would have felt vindicated but for the knowledge that the real culprits would get away unharmed. Not even by the knowledge that the tech-priests would have to be on their best behaviour from now on, because the moment the Warp Storm passed, a contingent of their own fact finders would set off to determine the degrees of guilt.

‘Respected Magos,’ he inclined his head toward the tech-priestess, ‘let me ask you a seemingly unrelated question.’

‘By all means. Skozar will have to wait.’

‘Do these serial numbers tell you anything?’

He showed her his dataslate, which had miraculously survived the whole ordeal, although there was a large crater on its back plate. The Magos winced when she saw the damage. On the screen, he called up the numbers Rydia had seen on the tech-priest initiate who had given them the plasma artefacts. Yes, Mercer thought. I’ve got to swallow what you’re shoving down my throat – you

calculating heaps of metal, but I can make you dance too.

‘This is an identification code for one of our brethren who is currently serving with the Adeptus Administratum.’

‘In that case, I, on behalf of the Inquisition, would accept the result of an internal investigation, if it were to be agreed, by this properly authorised individual. He comes with my personal recommendation.’

The Magos answered the suggestion with barely hidden amusement. She clearly envisioned the frustration of her fellow tech-priests with this inquiry, but judging by her acquiescing nod, that was a small price to pay. The alternative was years of prodding by the Inquisition and a potentially lethal dressing down by her superiors that would surely arrive once a connection was re-established with the remainder of the sector. Now all she had to worry about was an investigation by a detachment of Magi – and a sanitised report a junior tech-priest was supposed to authorise. Mercer did her no small favour with his proposal.

‘That is high praise from an inquisitor, indeed.’ Mercer knew he had scored a hit. ‘The Adeptus Mechanicus will accept your offer. It would generally be the duty of a Magos Juris, but, since the Imperial Inquisition is implicated, I see no reason to object. In fact, I will personally ensure that he is provided with the necessary privileges to successfully investigate this grave matter.’

‘It is agreed, then.’ A thought came to mind. The Adeptus Mechanicus was an indispensable part of the Imperium, after all, and they had the memory of a cogitator, quite literally. ‘I apologise for the attack, we were forced to flush out the Genestealers. As soon as it is humanly possible, I will arrange for any claims you may have to be settled.’

The Magos clanged closer, her dark eyes staring intently at Mercer for far longer than it was comfortable for him.

‘There is no need for such trivialities. Inquisitor, you, with extremely limited resources and under unfavourable conditions managed to solidify the Imperial control of this world, uncovered a Genestealer infestation, forced it out into the open, and took out its leadership and most of the cult itself. The Machine Spirits who sacrificed themselves for this victory would jubilate if they could.’ She looked as if she were forgetting something, then belatedly added, ‘And so would the guardsmen.’

The Mechanicus’ part in this was already being forgotten, the inquisitor noted. But this was how one made things work in the Caligari sector. The thought made the acid in his stomach rise. Still, he somehow mustered the strength to smile gracefully.

‘Thank you for this generosity.’

‘Think nothing of it. Would you like to see the Patriarch that was at the crux of it all?’

Mercer shook his head.

‘I have had my fair share of Patriarchs for today, if you don’t mind. If it’s not something special, I’d rather return to my ship.’

His body was aching – the sensation from his bruises, cuts and exhaustion hit him like a very slow and very heavy hammer – and he could have killed for a recaff and a hot shower. Looking at his retinue, he saw that they shared the sentiment.

‘Yes, about that, Inquisitor. Have you considered what your next destination will be?’

‘Extensively. Do you have somewhere specific in mind?’

Please tell me that it is somewhere nice, he pleaded mentally.

‘Yes... Captain.’ There was a shadow of a smile on the Magos’ face. ‘I am told that it is, in every respect, very hospitable. You will, I believe, very much enjoy it.’



Epilogue

The freight shuttle was a battered but serviceable flyer. It had originally been a Navy-issue transport ship, long since discarded and later restored to voidworthiness. It had been stripped of most of its armour for increased cargo capabilities, and looked exactly as could be expected from a vessel like the Stormskipper – ugly, but surprisingly sturdy.

All traffic from the shuttleport had been redirected. The sun of the system shone unchallenged by pollution or clouds, glinting on the domes of the hive, and the sky triumphantly showed off hints of blue.

The servitors finished unloading the last containers. Mercer, who was standing by the ramp of the other, armed shuttle, recognised one of them: after his failure, some use still could still be found for Magos Skozar. Seeing the tech-priest’s repurposed body ambling around mindlessly did not give him the satisfaction he thought it would. The inquisitor shuddered at the Adeptus Mechanicus’ placating gesture – it made him painfully aware of the Well of Oblivion which might mean the same fate for himself, without the augmentics. The cargo master and the loaders checked each and every one of them with their own auspex device for

signs of contamination or loss of content. Only then did they begin the process of loading and securing the containers. The tech-priestess leading the servitors took this distrust with the fabled mechanical equanimity of her order and signed off the documents, then walked over to Mercer at a deliberate pace.

She had some augmentics, but not nearly to the level a high ranking Adeptus Mechanicus would be expected to have. With long gloves on and her rust-coloured hood drawn down, in low light she could pass as a baseline human.

The inquisitor turned his calm gaze toward the Enginseer. He made sure that there was not even a suggestion of animosity to be seen, yet the young priestess visibly shuddered as she came close.

‘Captain, your consignment has been officially handed over.’

‘Excellent.’ He knew that he should have embellished his curt acknowledgment with platitudes, but that was all the courtesy the servants of the Machine God would get from him today.

‘Please understand. The Adeptus Mechanicus is taking sincere steps to make amends for any perceived slights of the past.’

‘I’m not the one you should be convincing, Enginseer. It’s them.’

He pointedly did not look at the formation of Imperial Guard armour and infantry who were stationed in a protective circle around the shuttles and the landing pad. Their presence was further reinforced by the Navy fliers that ensured that the airspace remained unchallenged.

‘Luckily for me, that is not my duty. I have been... offered to the Inquisition to escort the sealed container and to ensure that everything remains in working order, should you accept.’

Mercer thought about that for a second. Chances were that she might be an agent of the Mechanicus with her own agenda, but at least with her he knew whom to have watched.

‘You should be aware that there is a convent of Enginseers on my vessel. Their rites have been overseen and approved by the Adeptus Mechanicus as acceptable. I expect you to work with them without friction.’

The tech-priestess accepted this without hesitation.

‘Welcome aboard then. Your servitors, if you need them, may come along as well. If I still have my ship.’

‘Excuse me, Captain?’

‘You’ll see.’

Stark, his second in command, stomped down the ramp, with a voxcaster in his hand. A tall, stringy man in huge combat boots and a longcoat that imitated his captain’s, the man had been his right hand since day one and was loyal in the extreme. He was the only one he was not the least bit worried about. His salute

was impeccable.

‘Captain, the preparations are complete. We’re ready to dust off on your order.’

‘Thank you.’

There was a long silence, which the Engineer took as a cue to board the shuttle. Stark looked after her in askance.

‘Our resident spy, I expect. Remind me to ask her name later. How is the situation on the vessel?’ Mercer asked.

Stark took his time to answer.

‘There were some who were not exactly thrilled about you being with... you know.’ He paused and scratched the back of his head. ‘I’m not even sure if I’m allowed to say it out loud.’

Mercer guffawed.

‘Half the planet knows already. I had to be more flamboyant than I like in order to set things right. On the other side of the storm, though, it’s still a secret.’

‘We’ll find out soon enough, Captain.’ He raised his voxcaster which was hooked up to the high energy booster in the shuttle.

‘This is Stark speaking. We will break from orbit within the hour to secure a new route through the Warp. I will not try and paint a pretty picture. This voyage will be as dangerous as the time we first set out for Rengris. The slightest miscalculation, the smallest waver, and a fate more terrible than death awaits us all. The Stormskipper will not be a place for people with doubts in their hearts. We all know that our captain was harbouring secrets about himself.’

The engines of the Guard armour came to life in the outer circle, and they made way for high ranking officers, and a richly gowned emissary was let through. They were led by Lady Nieslannen, who had been denied her victory party, but was determined to make sure she would be present at his departure. Based on Stolde’s analysis, Mercer had decided that the best course of action would be to leave her with his tacit approval. On the other hand, he had ordered General Honstine and Admiral Hoyal to watch over her. Trying to consolidate her power and collecting the tithes her predecessors had failed to would be a penitence enough for any political manoeuvring she may have engaged in during the times of leaderlessness. With the Administratum records on House Mosinda copied and the originals sealed by his order, he had everything he needed to continue investigating the anomalous shipments. Wherever those led, he would follow – with the help of his retinue only, if need be.

‘It was his right, no, it was his duty to do so,’ Stark continued, unperturbed by the scene before him. ‘And remember! Even in the gravest hour, even in the raging battle with an enemy most foul, he planned, he fought – and was

victorious! He secured us permission to carry House Mosinda's shipments! He filled our coffers with wealth and our holds with cargo of untold value! Even while facing vile xenos, he did what he had to, to keep this ship flying! What more do you need of a captain? What more do you want?'

The fire suddenly went out of Stark's voice, and suddenly he was all business, no hard feelings.

'But those who have lost their faith in him are free to leave ship. They will get their share as agreed, and I will add the share from the income from our current cargo. They are free to forge their own luck on Rengris VII.'

Mercer took note of how Stark had left out the details of him being with the Inquisition – at first he guessed that it was not something his second in command would share over an open channel. Then he realised that it had no meaning on a voidship, none at all. As captain he was already ruler supreme on the Stormskipper, second only to the God Emperor Himself. The rosette changed none of that in the eye of a voidsman, if they accepted his authority.

'I will provide them with a letter of recommendation which will surely earn them a place on any merchant vessel. If you wish to stay behind, make your way to the dock. Transport will be found for you.'

Stark lowered his voice to a near whisper, so the inquisitor had to strain to understand the words.

'I will wait for fifteen minutes. That is all.'

Stark let go the key of the vox, and looked up at the staring Mercer.

'What happened, sir?'

'Nothing,' he said, but he had to clear his throat. That damnable metal dust went everywhere. 'Carry on.'

They waited.

Both of them turned in surprise as a single voice boomed among the Guardsmen.

'About turn!'

As one, the guardsmen turned around.

'Attention! Salute!'

The thousands of boots snapping into place was like thunder. A trio of Navy fighters screamed above the landing pad, with perfect timing. The nobles, along with the governor, removed their hats. Silence grew. Nobody moved. The Rengrisians and the Guard did not know what they were waiting for, but they held their posture, even as the freighter shuttle blasted off. Another ten people about whom Mercer no longer had to worry about.

The vox in Stark's hand crackled. Mercer held his breath as the quartermaster spoke.

‘The dock is empty, sir. Everyone is waiting for the Captain to come aboard.’

With a swirl of his longcoat, Mercer spun around and marched up the ramp. Inside, the away team was looking at him expectantly.

‘Everyone seems to be happy to see us go. Let’s not keep them standing there like idiots! Bring us into orbit. It’s time to get paid.’



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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