

PROLOGUE: EUROPA DESCENDING



"Witless turncoats! Petulant children! Treacherous simpletons!"

Ignatius Canticori paced briskly about the small office, his face nearly as dark as his robes, his bristling eyebrows pumping up and down like a seagull's wings. His mouth chewed as-of-yet unformed words into shape, face clenching at their bitter taste. He whirled, a sleeve flowing and flapping along outstretched arm, and thundered, "Fools! Fools, all of you!"

The woman behind the desk sighed. "Yes, of course we are — yet you remind us so often, it becomes difficult to keep track of every infraction. What is the latest indication of our mental deficiency?"

His eyes flared wider. "Constance, do you mock me?"

"Of course not, Ignatius." She adjusted her dark glasses and pointed to the empty spot at the table. "Now please continue your most eloquent tirade from the comfort of your chair."

He stiffened. "This plan carries with it the stench of desperation. The drowning man clings to everything he can, even dragging saviors to the depths in his blind panic. I, however, refuse to be company to your misery. I shan't condone nor consent to this course of action."

Constance tilted her head. "I don't recall requesting either from you."

Meghan tried clapping both hands over her own mouth, but couldn't hide her chortle. Hugh suddenly seemed interested in the intricacy of the ceiling tile. Sunil simply glared at him.

"I shall not stand for this," Ignatius murmured in a low tone.

"Then sit down, asshole," muttered Sunil.

Ignatius quivered. "What did the witch utter?"

"I told you to get back into your damn seat so we can get this meeting over with, you pompous cock."

"Sunil," warned Constance.

"Come on, Connie, it's not like the rest of us aren't thinking it. He's like this every time we want to do anything: always talking to hear the sound of his voice, trying to carve out alliances, drive wedges between us... He plays politics like Hugh plays women, which is to say he's only good at making enemies."

Hugh frowned. "That's rather harsh of—"

Sunil's mouth tightened. "Look, he mixes with this group like a bullet to the back of the head. He wants to return to Horizon? Fine, I say we let him try his luck with the Storm. With any luck he'll dash himself to pieces and nobody will have to put up with his —"

"Silence," whispered Constance, and all sound in the room ceased to be. Sunil's mouth kept moving, but almost immediately the anger in the man's face turned to surprise and he paused mid-sentence. Ignatius noted with alarm that he couldn't even hear the sound of his own heartbeat, or the rush of breath into his lungs.

Calm. Be calm, pulsed a voice at the core of his mind, and he knew it was not his own thought. He saw Constance nod and somehow he knew it was her mind speaking inside him. Sound returned with a dull roar, and he heard himself gasp, reassured at the noise of his own breath.

"It is quite obvious that this discussion has become unproductive," Constance murmured. "I think that all of us need to be elsewhere for a while. Take the rest of the night off. We'll meet again, same time tomorrow. I expect our next meeting to go smoothly and without unnecessary conflict. There is a difference between speaking your mind and minding what you speak. I encourage all of you to determine the difference between the two." She stood and grasped the harness on Clay, her German Shepard, who helped her navigate out of the room.

Sunil glanced at Hugh and Meghan. "I'll bear the anger. Need to work off a little steam," he muttered, standing abruptly and passing Ignatius without looking at him.

"I'm off to a singles' bar to buy alcohol for uninterested women," Hugh called after him. "Truthfully, I'll be at my laboratory analyzing all sorts of transfer methods for a glucose substitute that will either help speed the healing process or make a delightful cereal topping. We'll see by the morrow." He winked and slipped out the door.

"I... I have to go... um, I have to..." stumbled Meghan, before sighing and heading to the door. "I can't even come up with a lame excuse. Fact is that this is awkward and you need to be alone for a bit, so I'll go somewhere else." She paused at the door and turned

abruptly in a flash of red hair. "We don't hate you, Ignatius." The smile she wore was an honest one.

Then she was gone, and he was alone.

...

Ignatius was enjoying the warm Virginia night in the field behind the chantry when Meghan found him.

"You're lucky we don't cut the grass at night," she laughed, squatting beside him. He stiffened and began to rise, but she put her hand on his chest and pushed firmly down. "Stay," she said, and the hard edge to her eyes convinced him not to argue. He lay back, hoping she wouldn't bother him for long.

"I've been wandering," she began, her voice full of caution, "and attempting to divine where I was most needed. The Wheel stopped its turn when I stepped on your elbow, so I'm going to stay whether you like it or not." The smile reached her eyes. He ignored it and looked beyond her to the stars.

"Or not," it would seem." She frowned and looked up. "Cloud-busting at night, huh?"

Ignatius felt her lay beside him, a presence of warmth just to his left. He shifted awkwardly and brushed a bug from his hair.

"What do you see?" she asked. "Up there, I mean."

"Truth," he said, his voice guarded. "I see the pattern of the universe laid out like a surgeon's map. I see the veins of gods, pumping light rather than blood. I see all answers and know that I need only find the proper questions."

She whistled, long and low. "That's beautiful."

They both fell quiet. Only the night sounds and the faint roar of the highway broke the silence. "What do you see?" he asked, awkwardly.

"Lies," she whispered. "I see a warm delusion to keep the Sleepers quiescent and wrapped in a blanket of superstition."

Ignatius looked at her, aghast. "How can you —"

"It's what I think, that's all," she cut him off. "Maybe I'm wrong, but I won't know that until I have a greater perspective. That's the whole point of the plan, Ignatius. We need to broaden our perspective. That's the strength of the Traditions: nine factions, each with opposing viewpoints, all joined together to create something better than the sum of the parts. On paper, we're a bucketful of gasoline looking for a match. In practice, we've lasted for centuries."

"It is impossible to simplify —"

"Sharing perspectives is our strength. Look at me: a Euthanatos taking orders from an Akashic. History says we're supposed to literally be at each other's

throats night and day, yet Connie and I get along fine because we're both working toward the same goal. We choose to keep that in perspective, rather than fighting to the death over the sins of ancestors hundreds of generations past.

"Ignatius, things have changed and we must adapt. We don't know how long before we hear from anybody beyond the Veil. How long do we carry out the wishes of the absentee parent before we realize that we've been abandoned? When do we make our own decisions?"

Ignatius sighed. "You're correct. We don't know. The Storm could end next week or next century. I agree that a certain degree of autonomy is prudent, but how much is too much? What comes to pass when the Storm ceases and our estranged leaders return to find us in bed with the Technocracy?"

Meaghan smiled. "Ours is not to question why, Ignatius. I absolutely hate sounding like the perfect little soldier here, but the Deacon has asked this be done, and now we have to carry out the chantry's wishes."

"Then why not use the others?"

Meaghan arched her eyebrow. "Hugh is better in the lab than the field. We found that out last year when he nearly lost his leg below the knee. Sunil? He gets trigger-happy when he's nervous, which we don't want here. Connie wouldn't go without Clay, and that dog isn't exactly capable of knowing a thing about covert operations."

"Quinn would never have allowed this."

"Quinn's gone," Meaghan murmured. "Constance is acting Deacon until we hear from him or can confirm his death. I know he was a friend, and I think it's a damn shame you were here when the Storm hit. And don't give me that look; I meant that it's obvious you want to be back in Horizon, not stuck with four strangers in a world you left behind years ago."

"You seem to have omniscient insight in regards to my life."

"No, but I'm good at recognizing irrationality. How's this for insight: You take the role of the outsider because you're afraid to get close to any of us. You have the foolish idea that keeping your thoughts and hopes wrapped up with Horizon will help you return that much sooner. Through perseverance and devotion, you'll be rewarded with a trip home."

His silence was damning.

"Lucky guess," she whispered. He felt her hand clasp his own, fingers locking with his in a warm embrace. He turned to look at her. He could barely make out her freckled face in the darkness, but he could see the

sadness in her gaze. He swallowed thickly and cleared his throat. "Please reiterate the specifics."

Meaghan smiled faintly. "All right. The guy's name is Carl Tyler. He lives beyond Manassas, out in the boonies. His house is isolated on a large plot of wooded land — we don't need to worry about neighbors spotting us. He's reportedly out of town until next Monday. This leaves a three-day window. I have entry and egress plans worked out, so follow my lead, keep a low profile, use your mastery of the arcane to keep us unobserved; you know the drill. Oh, and wear your black robes."

Ignatius nodded absently. Meaghan frowned and squeezed his hand. "What's wrong?"

He sought hard for words. "It's just... why were we selected for this petty thievery? Why us?"

Meaghan laughed. "Me? I belong to the Lhaksmist sect of the Euthanatos. You might say I was typecast for breaking and entering. You?" She stared at him. "You're here at my request."

"Your pardon?"

"You're more competent than you would like to admit, and I'd be much more comfortable with you watching my back than going it alone. Water-gated duty might be beneath you, but keeping me alive shouldn't be. Are we clear?"

"Yes."

"Good. Oh, and while we're on the subject of stealing, you need to remember that this Sleeper is dirtier than a pig in shit. When you steal from a thief, you're not breaking any laws. None of the important ones, at any rate. Now, let's get out of this grass before the bug's nest in our ears."

Meaghan dragged Ignatius to his feet and led him back to the chantry.

...

"Was it absolutely necessary to kill the dog?" he hissed.

"It was just an animal."

Ignatius shook his head angrily. "It was a living creature."

Meaghan cocked her head. "It was a living creature that would have torn your throat out had I not stopped its heart. Shut up and toss the study, all right?"

Ignatius took the closets and piles of paper while Meaghan stuck to the two desks. Meaghan snapped pictures of the desk's contents with her digital camera. Ignatius let the power of the stars burn all he saw into the core of his mind. They finished their search before the pit bull's corpse had fully stiffened.

"Only thing left is the computer. You'd think a rich bastard like this would have something better than this relic," Meghan smirked, waiting patiently as Windows for Workgroups booted on the ancient machine.

"Maybe that's why he keeps it," pondered Ignatius. "He's grown familiar with it, and knows that others won't have the patience or the knowledge to deal with something so out of date. It does what he needs it to do, so he sticks with it."

"Or maybe he's just cheap. For a collector, he doesn't know anything about class. It looks like he picked up this furniture at a flea market. Probably — ah, shit," she frowned.

"What?"

"I think I found the files, but he's got them locked down pretty tight. We need to crack 'em to see if they're the right dirt. Impossible for a run-of-the-mill thief. Enough to keep your average NSA mouthbreather decrypting for a decade. Me? I get to cheat."

Meghan took a pale, tear-shaped object from her pocket. Made of cheap plastic and as big as her hand, a hole the size of a half-dollar pierced the thin face.

"What's that?"

"Ouija," she grinned.

"Wee ja?"

"Forget the name. I need your help. I'm going to place this over the keyboard. It will move of its own accord, stopping over the keys that spell out his password. You need to look through the hole and press those keys."

"That's it?"

"Yep. Makesure you remember what it spells so we don't have to go through this again," she warned.

"Understood."

Meghan grasped the planchette with both hands moved it above the keyboard. Her eyes fluttered shut and her teeth clenched. Ignatius moved next to her, close enough that he could hear the soft whisper of her breath. He forced himself to focus, leaning forward to line his eye up with the hole. Slowly at first, then with more assurance, her hands began to move.

...

"This suit is uncomfortable," complained Ignatius.

"You look nice," Meghan murmured.

"It impedes the circulation of blood to my chest and groin."

Meghan laughed. "Let's hope this goes quickly so you can get back into your robes."

The door opened and two men entered the office. The tall black man with the gray suit and glasses took a

seat behind the desk and flipped through the contents of a manila folder. The short white man filled his tan security uniform rather completely, his hat unable to fully conceal wispy brown hair combed over a balding head. Ignatius noted with alarm that the man's hand hovered near the butt of the pistol slung at his waist.

"Chad? Please secure the room," said the man behind the desk, his eyes still on the file.

The security officer nodded and locked the door, removing what looked like a cell phone from his belt. He pushed some buttons, studied the readout and gave a satisfied nod when the object chirped twice.

The man behind the desk closed the file and took a long look at the two people sitting before him. "I'm Special Agent Cedric Green with the Criminal Investigation Division of the IRS. I'm also an Associate with the Syndicate. I understand you sought to speak with us through the proper channels. Though somewhat unorthodox, I have been assigned to hear your concerns.

"As per the Syndicate's Fairness In Reporting Act of October 1999, I must inform you that this conversation will be recorded for internal use. 'Internal use' includes, but is not limited to, voice/stress analysis, data corroboration, vocal patterning, full etymatic reconstruction, and storage for a minimum of 30 calendar years. Also note that Chad's job is to ensure that I leave this room in the same condition that I entered. He is much more capable than his physical appearance would lead you to believe."

Meghan nodded. "Understood," said Ignatius.

"Good." Cedric relaxed slightly. "What brings you folks to DC?"

"We would like to report a massive amount of fraud, possession of stolen artifacts, and corruption," Meghan began.

"Is this a confession?" Cedric asked, arching an eyebrow.

Ignatius snorted. "Hardly, Associate Green. Ms. Gibson and I wish to speak of a matter affecting your organization, not our own."

Cedric stiffened. "That isn't —"

"Possible, Associate Green? I assure you that not only can we expose possibility, but also that we can verifiably demonstrate unarguable fact. We only ask for your time and an open mind."

After a pause, Cedric gave a slight nod. Meghan shifted uncomfortably in her chair and shot Ignatius a look of concern. He winked and turned to Cedric, the faint play of a smile on his lips.

"Allow me to present you with a theory. Four years prior, when our organizations were more directly en-

gauged in their disagreements, an operator sympathetic to our cause managed to infiltrate this building and depart with a large amount of information sensitive to certain elements of the Syndicate."

"The St. Patrick's Day break-in. I remember that."

"Correct. Much of the data was seemingly worthless, but it was retained and distributed throughout our organization. The information was immediately slated for analysis using automated methods and was filed away for later use. Five weeks ago the process reached completion and came to our attention. Much was, of course, woefully out of date or inaccurate following the events of the past four years."

"Does this story have a point?" Cedric snapped. "So far I only hear floating."

"Far from it," Ignatius cautioned. "Most interesting to us were a few anomalies that presented themselves upon corroboration with information of our own. One such anomaly we wish to bring to your attention concerns a Manager named Alfred Trenton."

Ignatius watched Cedric grow very still as he continued. "It seems that Trenton has held a close friendship with a Sleeper named Carl Tyler for many of his fifty years. Trenton's incultation with the Syndicate in 1987 has not affected this friendship, for Trenton and Tyler remain in contact to this day. Not altogether uncommon amongst those of our kind, but you will find most interesting the lengths to which dear friends go to protect each other."

"I speak of activities perpetrated by Tyler, including theft of art and artifacts most valuable, the laundering of funds and the failure to report his illegal property as taxable assets. It seems Tyler has such an appreciation for works of art that he has taken to hoarding them for his own personal use. This predilection doesn't limit itself to paintings or fine vases, for Tyler has authorized the larceny of museum pieces, items of historical significance, and even gone so far as to fund — through intermediaries — the 1997 theft of relics from the Vatican. Current market value of Tyler's known acquisitions exceeds \$700 million in U.S. currency."

"Trenton knows of Tyler's questionable habits and does all within his power to keep them concealed from the IRS and the Syndicate. We are not clear whether Trenton is behind any extortion of his own, but we have irrefutable proof of his inveiglement within your organization. He has 'worked the books,' so to speak. He has kept you blind from the inside to a flagrant violator of your own precepts."

Cedric removed his glasses. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and slowly wiped his glasses clean. His expression remained blank as he polished the lenses with great care. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Another one of those pesky anomalies," Meghan piped up. "Five years ago, an Associate Cedric Jerold Green was assigned to look through Manager Alfred Trenton's laundry and see if any of it came out dirty. He failed to find anything valid and afterward suffered a series of setbacks in his career. Though we could only extrapolate, the setbacks seemed to come at the behest of somebody in upper management. It almost seemed as though somebody was punishing Associate Green."

"What do you want?" snapped Cedric.

Ignatius cleared his throat. "Our wants are many, but we ask nothing. We are prepared to hand over enough evidence to damn Tyler and Trenton. What you do with it we leave up to you, for this is clearly an internal matter that doesn't require our attention."

Cedric replaced his glasses and stared at him. "What's the catch?"

"No catch, Associate Green. By all accounts — particularly those of your superiors, as we learned from the files — you are a moral man. The cynic within says such a thing is impossible amidst either the Syndicate or the Union, but we are hard-pressed to find any mention of you that excises a reference of your tendency to — well, to be quaint: 'to do what you feel is right.' We would only feel confident leaving our findings in the hands of one such as yourself."

"Bullshit. You want something."

"And I maintain that we shan't force you into a position of chasing a carrot on a stick. Meghan? The evidence."

Meghan removed a thick manila folder from her briefcase, five thick rubber bands barely able to keep it closed. Various shades of paper poked from the sides, and multiple bulges betrayed the presence of computer storage media. It fell to the desk with a satisfying thump. She smiled at Cedric and leaned back in her chair.

"All yours," she said. "No blackmail, no bribe. Concerned citizens bringing this to your attention."

"Right," mumbled Cedric. "Is that all?"

Ignatius turned to Meghan. "Our business here is complete, I believe."

"That's it," she nodded.

"Where's the violin?" mumbled Cedric.

"Your pardon?"

Cedric leaned forward, hands clasped, eyes bitter. "If this is all for my benefit, why do I feel like I've just made a deal with the devil?"

Ignatius bristled. He bit back the first three comments that came to mind, and the fourth for good measure. When he spoke, it was with the measured intensity of a frustrated parent.

"I have been to times and places you could neither imagine nor comprehend. I have seen things you would never believe plausible: sin given form, unrequited love, the brilliant sadness of a star bisected at the whim of dancing gods. I slew the spawn of a Nephandic siltwhore and watched the Umbral landscape brighten noticeably as their death rattles filled the air. I spent thirty of this world's years fighting against the widespread standardization perpetrated by the Technocracy, all to have efforts — my efforts — proven for naught in the span of months.

"Now you sit here in a gray suit, filed away in a gray building at the heart of this gray city, and after I swallow thirty years of wounded pride to present you with a gesture of peace and cooperation, you presume to liken me to a vile creature of darkness intent on taking your advantage and offering nothing more than empty deception in return. I assure you, Associate Green, that our feelings in this matter are mutual."

Ignatius watched Cedric flinch and felt Meghan's alarmed stare. He heard Chad move behind him and was reasonably certain the man's hand now rested on the pistol. He forced his body to relax.

"I can also assure you," he continued calmly, "that neither of us is correct. We simply can't conceive a world without attempts at reciprocal destruction. We receive an olive branch and spend weeks looking for thorns. By the time we conclude it's simply an olive branch, the spire has long since grown dry and desiccated. Our paranoia leads us to believe the gesture was a diversion, intended to distract us from secretive manipulations. Soon there comes preemptive retaliation and fighting begins anew.

"This is the foundation of our history, but history is not why Meghan and I sit before you. We came here to lay the groundwork to our future. We came with pure intentions, playing by the rules you set, working within a system you helped develop. Take this branch, Cedric. It bears no thorns and we intend no distraction. We want you to give us a chance, but we will not ask. We leave everything in your hands."

Cedric's eyes fell from Ignatius to the large stack of folders before him. He sat immobile for a long moment, staring at the bulge of papers and disks. Meghan's

quiet cough and the clicking of the old-fashioned wall clock were the only sounds in the room. He slowly unclenched his hands and reached forward, quaking slightly, brow beading with a small amount of sweat. He hesitantly placed them on the manila bundle, nearly flinching at the touch, before he grasped the package firmly and pulled it toward him. Then he removed the rubber band, flipped open the top folder and began to read.

They slipped into the rear of the Metro car, backs pressed to orange plastic seats. Meghan socked Ignatius in the arm, her smile contagious. "Great job in there. You really caught me by surprise. I had no idea where you were going."

"I offer contrition."

"Don't apologize, Ignatius. You knew what you were doing, and more importantly, it worked. I'm impressed."

"Ours is not to question why," he stammered, and was rewarded with the warm sound of her laugh.

"So now we wait," she said, sobering rapidly. "We wait for federal agents to kick down Tyler's door and confiscate his collection, or for Cedric's body to wind up in a ditch by early next week."

"Or for Cedric to blackmail Trenton," Ignatius added, "and leapfrog his own career."

"Unlikely, but two of three options work to his advantage and to ours."

"We have no assurances that he will find us favorable," cautioned Ignatius. "No matter what happens, no matter that we presented this information as a gift with no strings attached, he is a moral man. He already feels indebted to us. It will eat away at him until guilt overtakes his suspicion, leaving him to provide a favor in return, thinking that will discharge his perceived obligation to us."

Meghan studied him. "And how do you feel about doing that to the guy?"

Ignatius frowned. "It's a shame he'll think we're trying to manipulate him, but if we meet each favor repaid with another favor of our own, perhaps he will eventually come around to understanding that we were entirely truthful with him today."

Meghan's smile was slow in coming. "I think you're getting the hang of things," she murmured.

Ignatius slipped his hand around hers. "I have an excellent teacher."

She stared in mock surprise. "Oh, so I'm the teacher now? Whatever happened to the great Ignatius, who



deigned come to earth to tell us all what we were doing wrong?" The soft squeeze of her hand drained the venom from her words.

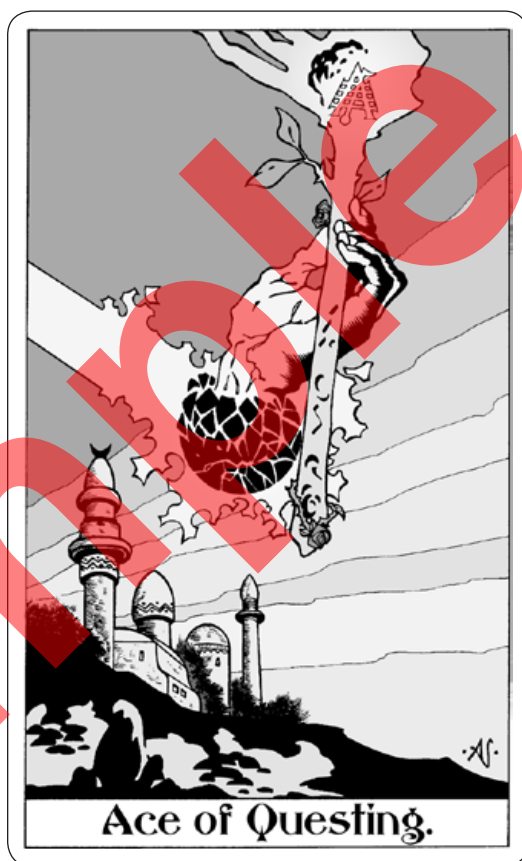
"He stopped staring at the stars," said Ignatius. "He finally took a look around and noticed where he was, rather than stumbling blindly about with his nose in the clouds."

"Wonderful," she grinned. "We've civilized you. Any chance you'll start wearing pants on a regular basis?"

"Not bloody likely," he snorted. "You can teach me new tricks, but you'd damn well better stay away from my wardrobe."

They shared a moment of introspection as the train pulled away from the station.

GUIDE TO THE TRADITIONS



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INTRO⊕DUCTION

YOU HAVE ALWAYS BEEN READY



Do you remember?

Do you remember the sense of wonder at the vibrant colors of your early youth, when discovery still meant dabbing your fingers in the paint and spreading your vision across lines and pictures?

Do you remember the depth of your first love, the one you'd love forever, the one you'd always go back to?

Do you remember the fascination of the first movie you saw? The first faerie tale you heard while being tucked into bed?

Do you remember all of these things?

Because somewhere, down inside of you, there's a part of you that still yearns for them. It's the part that shivers with anticipation when you just *know* that something will never happen, yet you expect it anyway. It's the bit that gazes in wonder when you see something new and magnificent for the first time. It's where you go when stark terror takes away your breath and makes you look inside yourself at the truth, too.

It's not always comfortable or nice. Sometimes it's downright scary. But it's something *bigger*, something you can't ignore; it touches something primal. It's in everyone, and that's why we're all part of it.