

Christopher Ruocchio – *Empire of Silence* – 1

EMPIRE OF SILENCE

PART OF THE SUN EATER CHRONICLE

BY CHRISTOPHER RUOCCHIO

CHAPTER 1

HADRIAN

#

Light.

The light of that murdered sun still burns me. I see it through my eyelids, blazing out of history from that bloody day, hinting at fires indescribable. It was like something holy, as if the sun were torn asunder and it was the light from the Gods' own heaven that burned the world and billions of lives with it. I carry that light always, seared into the back of my mind. I make no excuses, no apologies, no denials for what I have done. I am what I am, and I know it could have been no other way.

Where to begin?

The Scholiasts might begin at the beginning, with our remote ancestors clawing their way from Old Earth's system in their leaking vessels, those peregrines making their voyages to new and lively worlds. But no. To do so would take more volumes and ink than my hosts have left at my disposal, and even I—who have had more time than any other—have not the time for that.

Do we chronicle the war then? Do we begin with the alien Cielcin, howling out of the cavern of space in ships like castles of ice? Do we begin with thousands of human innocents spirited into darkness to serve as meat and slaves for those Pale monsters? Do I explain for you the politics and the calculus of bloodshed? Do I put the blood of worlds on the scales of Justice, weigh them against the light and fire of the one great and terrible achievement of my tragically long life?

What would be the point of that?

There must exist a thousand iterations of that story from the Scholiasts, historians, and propagandists—from the Priors and panegyrists of the Chantry. The Emperor and His Office, surely, have their version: one which ends in my execution, with Hadrian Marlowe hanged for all the worlds to see. I do not doubt that this tome will do naught but collect dust in the archive where I have left it, one manuscript amongst billions at Colchis. Forgotten. Perhaps that is best—that I am forgotten. The worlds have had enough of tyrants, enough of murderers and genocides.

But you will read on, tempted by the thought of reading the work of so great a monster as the one made in my image. You will not let me be forgotten, because you want to know what it was like to stand aboard that impossible ship and rip the heart out of a star. You want to feel the heat of two civilizations burning and to meet the dragon and the devil of history that wears the name my father gave me.

So let us bypass the epic turn of history, sidestepping the politics of worlds and the marching tramp of Empires and races. Forget the beginnings of mankind in fire and in the ash of Old Earth, and so too ignore the Cielcin rising in air and from darkness. Those are elsewhere recorded in all the tongues of mankind and her subjects. This is not those books. I write not for posterity, Reader, but for you. That you might understand. Let us move to the only beginning that makes any sense: my own. Born the eldest son and heir to Alistair Marlowe, Archon of Meidua Prefecture, Counselor to the Vicereine my grandmother, and Lord of Devil's Rest.

No place for a child, that palace of dark stone, but it was my home all the same, amid the logothetes and the armored peltasts of father's service. But father never wanted a child. He wanted an heir, someone to inherit his slice of Empire and to carry on—not as a man—but as part of the super-organism we call *family*. He named me Hadrian, an ancient name, meaningless

save for the memory of those men who carried it before me. An Emperor's name, fit to rule and to be followed.

Dangerous things, names. Perilous. They begin to shape us, for better or ill, guiding us by the hand or by opposition. I have lived a long life, longer even than the genetic therapies the great houses of the Peerage can contrive, and I have had many names—I have been Demon-Tongued and Halfmortal, sorcerer and heretic. I have been Hadrian the Sun Eater, Hadrian Star Breaker, Hadrian the Deathless. I have been many things: soldier and servant, captain and captive, sorcerer and scholar and little more than a slave.

But before I was any of these, I was a son.

#

My mother was late to my birth, and both my parents watched from a platform above the surgical theater while I was decanted from the vat. They say I screamed as the Scholiasts birthed me, that I had all my teeth in my head, that I bit dear Tor Alma's hand as she washed me. Thus nobility is always born: without encumbering the mother and under the watchful eye of the Imperial High College, ensuring that all our genetic deviations did not turn to defect and curdle in our blood. Besides, childbearing after the traditional pattern would have required my parents to share a bed, which neither was inclined to do. Like the marriages of so many nobiles, my parents wed to secure an alliance. Namely that between my father and his master, my grandmother: Elmira Kephalos, Imperial Vicereine and Duchess of Delos.

My mother, I later learned, preferred the company of women to that of my father, and rarely spent time on the family estate, attending my father only during formal functions. My father, by contrast, preferred his work. Lord Alistair Marlowe was not the sort of man who gave

attention to his vices. Indeed, my father was not the sort of man who *had* vices. Life on my family's estate—and my father's life especially—was a structured, formalized affair.

It did not have to be this way. Many's the palatine in the Empire who parcels out all responsibility to his underlings in order to better enjoy all the amenities affluence and centuries of vigor could offer. My father was no such hedonist. His work was *his* entirely.

By the time I was born, the Crusade had raged three hundred years from the first battle with the Cielcin at Cressgard, but so vast was the Empire that I grew up mostly unaware of it. While my father did his best to impress upon me the gravity of the situation, things at home were quiet, save for the levies the Imperial Legions pulled from the plebeians every decade. Home was far from the front, decades away even on the fastest ships, and despite the fact that the Cielcin were the greatest threat our species had faced since the death of Old Earth...things were not so dire as that.

As you might expect from parents such as mine, I was given into the hands of my father's servants almost at once. Father doubtless returned to his work within an hour of my birth, having wasted all the time he could afford that day on so troubling a distraction as his son. Mother returned to her father's house to spend time with her siblings and lovers—as I say, mother was not involved in the family's bleak business.

That business was uranium. My father's lands sat atop some of the richest uranium deposits in the sector, and our family had presided over its extraction for generations. The money my father pulled in off intergalactic trade through the Wong-Hopper Consortium and Free Traders Union made him the richest man on Delos, richer even than the Vicereine, my grandmother. Though I did not know it yet, I had been born into a family on the rise. Ignorant of

my father's ambitions, I learned to walk and talk and read.

I was born with the silver spoon in my mouth, given all the modified genetic inheritance that was mine by right of blood. I make no apologies for this...I did not ask to be born. Perhaps things would have been different if I had but been the man my father expected of me. Perhaps things would have been better. Perhaps Gododdin and Perfugium, Ascalon and Emesh and all the other atrocities of my life would never have been if I but chose to walk the path I was born to. If I had but believed.

By the time I was two standard years old, my father decided not to rest all his hopes and dreams of dynasty on my slim and boyish shoulders. I was four when Crispin was born, and at once my little brother began to show himself as the sort of heir my father preferred. At two, he was almost as large as I was at six, and by five, Crispin had gained a head on me, and I never made up that difference.

I had all the education you might expect the son of a Prefectural Archon to have; my father's Castellan, Sir Isaac Martyn, taught me to fight with sword and shield-belt and handgun, taught me to fire a lance, and trained my body away from indolence. From Helene, the castle's Chamberlain, I learned decorum: the intricacies of the bow and the handshake and of formal address. I learned to dance, to ride a horse and a skiff and to fly a shuttle. From Abiatha, the old Chanter that tended the belfry and the altar in the Chantry, I learned not only prayer, but agnosticism, and that even priests have doubts. From his masters, the Priors of the Earth's Holy Chantry, I learned to guard those doubts for the heresy they were. And of course there was my mother, who told me stories; tales of Kasia Soulier, of Simeon the Red, and Kharn Sagara. You laugh, but there is a magic in stories that cannot be ignored.

And yet it was Tor Gibson who made me the man I am. He who taught me my first lesson: That learning is what makes a human being truly human. “Knowledge is oft times the mother of fools,” he said, “remember, the greatest part of wisdom is recognizing your own ignorance.” He always said such things. He taught me rhetoric, arithmetic, and history. He schooled me on biology, mechanics, astrophysics, and philosophy. It has he who taught me languages and a love for words. By ten, I spoke Mandar well as any child of the inter-space corporations, and could read the fire-poetry of Jadd like a true acolyte of their faith. Most important of all, it was he who taught me of the Cielcin: murderous, marauding, the alien scourge chewing at the edges of civilization. It was he who taught me a fascination with the alien xenobites and with their cultures, few as they were. More than that, he made me want to be a Scholiast.

I can only hope the history books will not damn him for it.

#

“You look comfortable,” said Tor Gibson, voice like a dry wind in the still air of the training hall.

Moving slowly, I pulled out of the complex stretch I'd folded myself into and flowed into the next position, twisting my spine. “Sir Isaac and Crispin will be here soon. I want to be ready.” Through the small, arched windows set high in the stone walls, I could just faintly make out the calling of seabirds, the noise muffled by the effect of the house shields.

The old Scholiast—face impassive as a stone—moved round into my line of sight, slippered feet scuffing on the mosaic tile work. Stooped though he was by time, the old tutor still stood taller than me, his square face smiling now beneath his mane of white hair, side whiskers

making him look like nothing so much as a lion of the sort the Vicereine kept in her menagerie.

“Looking to put the little master flat on his ass, are you?”

“Which ass?” I grinned, stooping to touch my toes, voice creaking a little with the strain, “The one between his ears?”

Gibson's thin smile vanished, “You'd do well not to speak of your brother thus.”

I shrugged ineloquently, adjusting one of the thin straps that kept my dueling jerkin flat over my shirt. Leaving Gibson where he stood by the mats, I crossed barefoot to the rack where the training weapons waited on display by the fencing round, a slightly elevated wooden disc about twenty feet across, marked for dueling practice. “Did we have a lesson today, Gibson? I thought it wasn't until this afternoon.”

“What?” he tipped his head, shuffling a little closer, and I had to remind myself that, though he moved well, Gibson was not a young man. He had not been a young man when his order commissioned him to tutor my own father, and father was nearing three hundred standard years old. He cupped a gnarled hand to one ear, “What was that?”

Turning, I spoke more plainly, straightening my back as I'd been taught to better project. I was to be Archon in that old castle in time, and speechcraft is a palatine's dearest lesson. “I thought our lesson was later today.” Old though he was, the mental exercises of the Scholiasts ensured that Gibson's mind was sharp as monofilament wire, as the highmatter swords which cut all but the diamond composites of starship hulls. He knew he was early.

Gibson knew and remembered everything in his experience. He forgot nothing, which would have been an extraordinary quality if it were not the basest requirement for being what he was: a Scholiast, human biology's answer to the artificial daimons forbidden by holiest law. “It

is, Hadrian. Later, yes.” He coughed into one viridian sleeve, eyed the hovering camera drone lurking amid the rafters of the vaulted ceiling before continuing, “I was hoping I might have a word, privately.”

The blunted backsword in my hand slipped a little as this request turned over in my head. “Now?”

“Before your brother and the Castellán arrive, yes.”

I turned and placed the sword back in its place between the rapiers and the sabers, spared the drone a glance myself, knowing full well that its optics were trained on me. I was the Archon's eldest, after all, and so subject to just as much protection—and scrutiny—as father was himself. There were places in Devil's Rest where two might have a truly private conversation, but none was near the training hall. “Here?”

“In the cloister.” Distracted a moment, Gibson looked down at my bare feet, “No shoes?”

I smiled, glanced down at my bare feet. They were not the feet of a pampered nobile, but looked more like the feet of some bondsman, with sheets of callous on them so thick I had taped the joints of my largest toes to keep the skin from tearing. “Sir Isaac says bare feet are best for training.”

“Does he now?”

“He says you're less likely to roll an ankle.” I broke off, all too aware of the time, “Our word...can't it wait? They should be here soon.”

“If it must.” Gibson bobbed his head, short-fingered hands smoothing the front of his robe and the belted sash with its bronze medallions woven into the fabric. They were the robes of his order, the garments of a tradition almost as old as the Empire itself. In my sparring clothes, I

felt shabby by comparison, though in truth his garments were plain: simple cotton, but well-dyed to that hue which is more green than life itself.

The old Scholiast was on the verge of saying more when the double doors to the training hall banged open, and my brother appeared, grinning his lupine grin: all teeth. Crispin was everything I was not: tall where I was short, strongly built where I was thin as a reed, square-faced where I was narrow, all sharp lines. For all that, our kinship was undeniable. We both had the same ink-dark Marlowe hair, the same marble complexion, the same aquiline nose and steep eyebrows above the same violet eyes. We were both clearly products of the same genetic constellations, our genomes altered after the same fashion to fit the same mold. The palatine houses—greater and lesser—went to great lengths to craft such an image, so that the learned could tell a house by the genetics markers of face and body as easily as by the devices worn on uniforms and painted on banners.

The craggy Castellan, Sir Isaac Martyn, followed in Crispin's wake, dressed in dueling leathers with his sleeves rolled past his elbows. He spoke first, raising a gloved hand. “Oy! Here already?”

I moved past Gibson to meet the two, “Just stretching, sir.”

The Castellan inclined his head, ruffling his skein of tangled gray-black hair. “Very good then.” He noticed Gibson for the first time, “Tor Gibson! Strange to see you out of the cloister at this hour!”

“I was looking for Hadrian.”

“Did you need him?” the knight hooked his thumbs through his belt. “We've a lesson now.”

Gibson shook his head swiftly, ducking into a slight bow before the Castellan. “It can wait.” And then he was gone, moving quietly out the still-open doors, which shut themselves at a gesture from the Knight-Castellan, sending a temple-hushed *boom* along the vaulted hall. For half a moment, Crispin did a comic impression of Gibson's stooped, lurching step. I glared at him, and my brother had the good grace to look abashed, rubbing his palms over the goat-black stubble on his scalp.

“Shields at full charge?” Isaac asked, clapping his hands together with a dull, leathery snap. “Very good.”

In the legends, heroes are almost always taught to fight by some sun-struck hermit, some mystic who sets his pupils to chasing cats, to cleaning vehicles, and writing poetry. In Jadd, it is said the Swordmasters—the Maeskoloi—do all these things, spending years on inanities when they could be training. While true for them, under Isaac, my education was a rigor of unending drills. Many hours a day I'd spend in his care, learning to hold my own. No mysticism, no nonsense, only practice: long and tedious until the motion of lunge and parry was easy as breathing. For among the palatine nobility of the Imperium—both men and women—skill with arms is accounted a chief virtue, not only as any of us might aspire to knighthood or to service in the Legions, but because dueling served as a safety valve for the pressures and prejudices that might otherwise boil into vendetta. So any scion of any house might be expected to take up arms in defense of her own honor or that of his house.

“I still owe you for last time, you know,” Crispin said when we had finished our drills and faced one another from opposite points of the fencing round. His thick lips twisted into a jagged smile, looking for all the Imperial worlds like nothing so much as the blunt instrument he

was.

I smiled to match his, though on my face I hoped the effect was less swaggering. “You have to hit me first.” I flicked the tip of my sword up into a forward guard, waiting for Sir Isaac's say so. Somewhere overhead and outside, I heard the distant whine of a flier passing low above the castle. It rattled the clear aluminum in the windowpanes and set my hairs on end. I placed a hand on the catch against my thick belt which would activate the shield's energy-curtain. Crispin mirrored me, resting the flat of his own blade against his shoulder.

“Crispin, what are you doing?” the Castellan's voice cut across our moment like a whip.

“What?”

Like any good teacher, Sir Isaac waited for Crispin to realize his error. When it didn't come, he struck the boy on his arm with his own training sword. Crispin yelped, glared at our teacher. “If you rested highmatter on your shoulder like that it'd take your arm off. Blade *away* from the body, boy. How often must I tell you?” Self-conscious, I adjusted my own guard.

Crispin murmured an apology, but the Castellan dismissed it with a gesture. “I wouldn't forget with highmatter,” Crispin said, lamely. That was true. Crispin was no fool, he only lacked that seriousness of person which defines the truly great before their greatness.

“Now listen, both of you,” Isaac snapped, cutting off further argument from Crispin.

“Your father will hand me to the Cathars if I don't make first-class fighters out of the both of you. You're damn decent, but decent won't do you any good in a real fight. Crispin, you need to tighten your form. You leave yourself wide open to counter after every move, and you!” He pointed his training sword at me, “Your form's good, Hadrian, but you need to commit. You give your opponents too much time to recover.”

I accepted the criticism wordlessly, set my jaw.

“En garde!” Isaac said, holding his blade flat between us. “Shields!” Both of us thumbed the catches to activate our shields. The energy-curtains changed nothing where the merely human speeds of swordplay and grappling were concerned, but it was good practice to get used to them, to the faint distortion of light across their permeable membranes. He dropped the blade like the headsman he sometimes was, dull point clipping the floor, “Go!”

Crispin boiled off the line, blade tucked back to put the power of his elbow and shoulder behind it. I saw the blow coming from light-years away, and ducked under it as it whistled over my head. Spinning, I came back to guard at Crispin's right with a perfect angle to strike at his exposed back and shoulder. I shoved him instead.

“Stop!” Isaac barked, “You had a perfect opportunity, Hadrian!”

We continued in this vein for what felt like hours, with Sir Isaac laying into us at intervals. Crispin fought like a whirlwind, striking wildly from above and the sides, aware of his greater range of motion, his power and strength. I was always faster. I caught the turn of his blade against my own, stumbling back towards the edge of the round. In all my years since, I was grateful that my first sparring partner was Crispin. He fought like a freight tram, like one of the massive drone combines whose arms sweep entire fields. His superior height and strength prepared me to do battle with the Cielcin, the shortest of whom stand nearly two and a half meters high.

Crispin tried to trap my blade, to force it down and so allow him time to strike my ribs. I'd fallen for that gambit once already, and under my jerkin knew I'd be sporting a bruise for days. My feet scraped against the wood, and I let Crispin have his way. All the force he had

behind his blade made him slip, and I clouted him on the ear with an open hand. He staggered, and I struck him a blow with my sword. Isaac clapped, calling a halt. “Very good. A bit less focused than your usual, Hadrian, but you actually hit him.”

“Twice,” Crispin said, rubbing his ear as he returned to his feet. “Damn, that hurt.” I offered him my hand, but he swatted it away, groaning as he rose.

Isaac gave us a moment, then he squared us up again. “Go!” His blade clipped the wood floor and we were off again. I circled right as Crispin charged, sweeping to my right and into the first parry to bar his attack as he slipped by me. I grit my teeth, whirling—too late—to strike his back. I heard Isaac expel his breath through his teeth.

Crispin spun wildly, slashing a wide arc to clear space between us. I had known it was coming and leaped away. I advanced on Crispin, sword held low in one hand. I lunged. Crispin slapped my blade down, aimed a cut at my right shoulder. Recovering, I turned my wrist and parried, catching Crispin’s sword with mine. He kept a hold of his sword, but twisted, exposing his back. If we had been fighting with offhand daggers as well, I might have scored a point. As it was, we had only backswords, and mine was too far down and to the right to make use of the opportunity. So instead I grasped Crispin's sword arm below the elbow. I needed to move Crispin's arm aside, to lay his body open to attack.

But Crispin was Crispin, and he overreacted like a child finding a wasp near him at a picnic. He wrenched free and away, dragging me with him.

“Crispin!” The Castellan purpled in frustration. “What the hell are you doing?”

The force of Sir Isaac's voice gave Crispin pause, and I thumped him soundly across the stomach. My brother grunted, glaring at me from under heavy, square brows. The Knight-

Castellan stepped up onto the round, dark eyes fixed on my brother. “What part of 'tighten your form' do you not understand?”

“You distracted me!” Crispin's voice went shrill. “I was getting free.”

“You had a sword!” Sir Isaac shook his open hands before himself, palms up. “You had another hand! Go again.”

This time, Crispin waited for Sir Isaac to shout, “Go!” He sprang off the starting tape, sword high in both hands. I pivoted to the right, slapping hard left to block my brother's wild slash. I cut in, slashing at Crispin's back, but my brother had turned, caught my riposte on counter-parry. His eyes were blazing, his teeth bared. Always so quick to rage, Crispin... He knocked my sword aside and rammed into me with his shoulder, crouching slightly to throw me up and back off the round. I hit the floor, the wind knocked out of me. Crispin loomed over me, six feet of angry muscle dressed all in black.

“You got lucky, brother.” His thick-lipped mouth quirked into that jagged smile. They looked like worms pulled from a lake, all pink and wet. He threw a kick at my ribs and I winced, gasping for air. I ignored him as he continued, saying how if I'd fought fair, I never would have hit him. If Sir Isaac said anything at all, I took no note of him. Crispin was close, towering beside me. He must have finished talking, and turned to go. I hooked one foot around Crispin's ankle and pulled. He came tumbling down, landing face first on the edge of the fencing round. I was on my feet in a second, snatching up my sword. I planted one bare foot on Crispin's back and tapped him on the side of his head with edge of my sword.

“Enough.” Sir Isaac snapped. “Go again.”

CHAPTER 2

IN WAR'S SHADE

#

To this day I cannot remember entering Gibson's cloister cell, stinking of sweat and the practice floor. The narrow windows stood open, looking down from twelve stories upon an inner courtyard where servants tended the bonsai and topiary. White sunlight streamed in from an eggshell sky, casting highlights on the disorganized clutter of Gibson's study. The walls were entirely given over to bookshelves stuffed so to bursting that they leaked paper to the floor like snow, the sheaves fallen amid piles of yet more books. Some shelves held racks of crystal storage and spools of microfilm, yet all of these seemed as afterthoughts, mere concessions to the overwhelming presence of the page.

The Scholiasts read.

Technologic injunctions filed against their order for antique heresy forbid the Scholiasts unfettered access even to the limited technologies permitted the Imperial houses by the Earth's Holy Chantry. They are permitted only the pursuits of the mind, and so books—which are to thoughts as amber to the captured fly—are their greatest treasure and opiate. And so Gibson lived, a crooked old man in his flattened armchair, taking in the sunlight. To me he was a magus out of the old stories, like Merlin's shadow cast forward across time. It was all that knowledge which stooped his shoulders, not the passing of years. He was not to me some mere tutor, but the representative of an ancient order of philosopher-priests dating back to the founding of the Empire and the ancient Mericanii. The Scholiasts counseled Emperors, they sailed into dark places beyond the light of the Suns and into strange worlds. They served on teams that brought

new machines and knowledge into the world, and possessed powers of memory and cognition beyond the merely human.

I wanted that, wanted knowledge like Tor Simeon the Red. I wanted answers to all the questions in the world, and the command of things secret and arcane. For that reason I had begged Gibson to teach me the language of the Cielcin and held close the desire to be more and to see more than was in my father's plan. The stars are numberless, and in those days I felt that Gibson knew them all by name. I felt that if I followed him into the life of a Scholiast, I might learn the secrets hid beneath those stars and travel there, like in the legend of Simeon, and beyond even the reach of my father's hand.

Hard of hearing as he was, Gibson did not hear me enter, and so started when I spoke from his shoulder.

“Hadrian! Earth's bones, lad! How long have you been standing there?”

Mindful of my place, that of the student before his teacher, I performed the half-bow my dancing master once taught me. “Only for a moment, messer. You wanted to see me?”

“What? Oh! Yes, yes...” the old man noted the door shut behind me and tucked his chin against his chest. I knew the gesture for what it was, the deep-grained paranoia of the palace veteran, the impulse to check for camera drones and bugs. Informational hygiene. Privacy and secrecy, the true treasures of the nobility. How rare they were, and how precious. Gibson fixed one sea-gray eye on the brass fixture of the doorknob and shifted language from the Galactic Standard to the gutturals of Lothrian, which he knew none of the palace servants understood. “I shouldn't be telling you this. Orders, you understand...your lord father's forbidden it.”

That held my attention, and I seated myself on a low stool, pausing only to displace a

stack of books. Matching my tutor's Lothrian, I said, "It's a mess in here."

"There's no correlation between the orderliness of a man's work space and that of his mind, Hadrian." The Scholiast flattened his fly-away gray hair with one hand. It didn't help.

"I thought cleanliness was next to godliness."

The old man snorted, "Lip today, is it?" He coughed softly, scratching one bushy sideburn. "Well, enough. I've news as won't wait. I'd only learned last night or I'd have told you sooner." He sucked in a deep breath, then said in measured tones, "There's a retinue from the Wong-Hopper Consortium due here within the week."

"Within the week?" I repeated. My Lothrian was not nearly so good as Gibson's, and I spoke slower even than he. "How is it I've not heard?"

The Scholiast eyed me seriously along the crook of his nose, "The QET wave only arrived a few months ago, they diverted from their usual trade routes to make the trip, you know." What Gibson said next he said without preamble, without softening, "Hadrian, Cai Shen was hit. Destroyed by the Cielcin."

"What?" The word escaped me in Galactic Standard, and I backpedaled, repeating myself in Lothrian, "*Iuge?*"

Gibson just kept looking at me, his eyes intent on my face as if I were an amoeba in some magi's petri dish. "The Consortium fleet received the telegraph from Cai Shen system just before the planet fell."

Strange, isn't it, how the greatest disasters of history feel small and abstract when they brush with our every day lives? A single death, wrote one ancient king, is a tragedy, but a genocide can only be understood by statistics. I had never seen Cai Shen, had never left my own

homeworld of Delos. I had never met anyone from Cai Shen. To me it was little more than a name. Yet Gibson's words carried beneath their surface the death of millions. I took them in without further comment, my initial shock ebbing quickly to numb acceptance. Then something deeper, something cold and pragmatic took hold of me and I said, “They're here for a replacement.”

The Scholiast's ghost-trace of a smile told me I was right even before he admitted it.

“You've been studying!”

“Well what else could it be?”

Gibson shifted noisily in his seat, groaning from some complaint of time, “With Cai Shen destroyed, your father becomes the largest licensed supplier of uranium in the sector.”

I swallowed, leaned forward to rest my chin on my folded hands, “They want to make a deal then? For the mines?” But before Gibson could form an answer, a darker question settled on me, “Why wasn't I informed of this?” When Gibson did not respond, I remembered his earlier remark and breathed, “Orders.”

“*Da.*” He nodded.

“Specifically?” I sat back sharply. “He said not to tell *me*, specifically?”

“We were instructed not to share the news with anyone not cleared by the propaganda corps or without the Archon's countenance.”

I stood, and forgetting myself spoke again in Galstani, “But I'm his *heir*, Gibson. He shouldn't—” I caught the Scholiast glaring at me and returned to Lothrian. “He shouldn't be keeping this sort of thing from me. Why has he had me schooled if not for exactly this sort of thing?”

“I don't know what to tell you, my boy, truly I don't.” He glanced out the window as a maintenance worker ascended on a scaffold past stained-glass in the shadow of a buttressed wall. If I craned my neck I could almost see the vast gray expanse of the Apollan Ocean beyond the curtain wall, stretching away east to the bending of the world. “Just keep acting like you know nothing, but prepare yourself. You know what these meetings are like.”

Frowning, I sucked on the inside of one cheek, “The Cielcin, though? They're sure it was a raid?”

“I saw the attack footage myself, the Consortium broadcast the last news packets from Cai Shen along with their visit announcement via the wave. Your father had Alcuin and myself up all night translating it with the logothetes. It was the Cielcin, and no mistake.”

We sat there a long moment, two slaves in an empire of silence, neither one moving. “Cai Shen's not in the Veil,” I said at last, looking at my hands, long fingers flexing slowly, “they're getting bolder.”

“Latest intelligence says the war's not getting better, you know.” Gibson turned his misty eyes away from me again, out the window and across the deliberately antique merlons and purely symbolic ramparts which hemmed in my family's house. The cleaning servant was still out there, polishing the glass by hand.

Again, silence reigned, and again I broke it. “Do you think they will come here?”

“To Delos? To the Spur?” Gibson eyed me pointedly, bushy brows contracting, “Cai Shen may not be in the Veil, but it's a long travel across the Gulf from the Norman Expanse. I'd say we're safe for now.”

Still in Lothrian, I asked, “Why does father insist on keeping secrets from me? How does

he expect me to rule this prefecture after him if he won't keep me involved?" Gibson did not answer, and as it is the peculiar nature of youth to be deaf to silences, I did not take his meaning or see the answer presented there. I forged ahead, caught in the gravity of a question I could no longer shake, "Does Crispin know? About the Consortium?"

Gibson gave me a long, pitying look. And then he nodded.

