

The Pantheon Triptych

Preview

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Chapter 1 – The Bonds of Fealty

In Anatol, fealty to Rurik is everything. From those of us in Rurik's inner circle down to the lowliest citizen in the community, it would be easier to stop breathing than to disobey the man who embodies our great land. It is engrained in our souls.

Allow me to introduce myself. Across Anatol, I am known as Steffan, an honoured title passed down the generations from the days of the arkships. Born as Steffanov, from the moment I took my oath to become Steffan, I accepted I would sacrifice my life for Anatol's ruler without hesitation. It has been a privilege to spend my life in his service.

Everything will soon change. I am Rurik's designated heir, and my rite of succession will occur in the coming days, the culmination of everything I have worked towards my entire life. If he were alive, my father might finally be proud of me. I will become Rurik.

Yet, it must not happen. The Rurik inheritance must end.

There is a certain irony that it took meeting Katsu Sumara and Tomlin Gaudy, citizens of our two ancient enemies, to open my eyes. More than that, they gave me the freedom to act for the first time in my life. If only I could decide what to do. The optimal route ahead is hazy. All I know is that I cannot accept the status quo.

Rurik's defences appear inviolable. If I move against him and fail, not only will I die, but so will those around me. Yet, I must choose a course of action soon. Leaving it until I become Rurik will be too late – which only leaves the option to flee. That feels like the coward's way out.

Whatever route I take, I must ensure that our neighbours in Kitara and Temani understand the threat to their future. That is one purpose in writing this account. The other is the hope that, by laying out the threads of my life side-by-side, a way of countering Rurik will be revealed. It will be there. I am sure of it.

Perhaps you must first comprehend the character and lineage of the current Rurik to fully appreciate the danger. My previous loyalty to the man who leads our nation is hard to explain. Father, who was Steffan before me, raised me as he was raised, teaching me from an early age that only through strictest fidelity to Rurik will our continuity of governance be guaranteed. Nothing else matters.

Like all Steffans, father was part of Rurik's inner circle. If I look closely, I can still see reminders of father in Rurik to this day: his precise choice of words, the way he rests one hand on his chin when lost in thought, and his gentle smile of appreciation when approving one of my actions. Father's unacknowledged influence still endures. It is a comfort.

I have been remiss. I cannot assume that my audience will be familiar with the rules of succession on our continent of Anatol. Citizens here learn it at school, but I know from personal experience that residents of Temani and Kitara have forgotten so much. Many do not even remember why our continents are named as they are, let alone why our leader is called Rurik.

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Not only is Steffan both my title and my name, but the same is true for Rurik and Malik, honouring the heritage of how we came to this planet of Pantheon. Malik and I both share a direct lineage to the first of our names, two senior officers who were key to bringing us to our new home on the arkship Anatol. Their bloodline endures.

The credit for our safe arrival goes to the great Captain Rurik, whose strategy saved the Anatol after a drive failure caused us to overshoot Pantheon. The other arkships, Temani and Kitara, abandoned us to our lot, expecting us to drift into the void and die. Yet, the captain saved us.

This history defines who we are. We will never forget Captain Rurik, nor the crimes of the other arkships. More than that, each Rurik takes an oath to hold the descendants of our enemies to account. Retribution has always played second fiddle to stabilising our society, but now, its time has come.

Every generation, the current Rurik nominates one representative from the Malik and Steffan lines as the next Rurik. It is I who will become Rurik next, and Malik's son, Malikovich, will eventually take over from me. The continuity of governance is assured.

At my moment of succession, the generations take one step forward. The current Malik will become Urmalik as Malikovich transitions to the role of Malik. My son, Steffanov, will succeed me as Steffan. The ritual has served every Rurik well.

It is up to me to stop it.

The question of *how* consumes my every waking thought, but my lack of focus has stymied progress until today, when the benefit of writing this narrative came to me. It will tell not only my story but also those of Katsu and Tomlin, whose lives contain as much knowledge vital to my dilemma as my personal experience in Anatol. This triptych will light the way.

In the meantime, my inner misgivings must not become apparent to the outside world. Anatol will see the Steffan it has always known, without a flicker of dissent, while I resolve the uncertainty as to my course of action. Even while writing this, I must be the old Steffan. I am resolute.

Evening has arrived. I sit alone in my quarters in the Citadel, the home of Anatol's government. Pinned above my desk is a series of pictures. One is an annotated orbital photograph of our neighbouring continent, Kitara, taken when they first arrived on this world of Pantheon. The others are all pencil sketches of the coastline of Temani to its south. They are constant reminders of the stories I must write.

Of late, I have found the dim mustiness of my room somewhat claustrophobic. These pictures help ameliorate the effect. I can almost smell the Temani sea breeze. I remember standing beside the gently flowing Kitara river, its light tinkling helping me relax. It all brings me comfort.

Those memories helped change me, for which I have Katsu and Tomlin to thank. I will not neglect their perspectives. The journeys that brought them to my side were often dangerous, always illuminating, and I would not be the man I am today without their influence. Their tales will be told. So will mine.

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I was about to relate how Rurik kicked this all off with my missions to Kitara and Temani, when a knock on my door disturbed my train of thought.

'It's me,' said a familiar woman's voice.

Magritte is long overdue an introduction. Recording our conversation will be the perfect way to familiarise you with my sole confidante in Anatol. In many ways, she is the main character in this story of my life. I have, for too long, only played a supporting role.

Like Rurik, Steffan, and Malik, Magritte's name was a title – even more so in her case. She wasn't born into her role, but recruited from the Anatol community to suit the needs of the day, as with all previous Magrittes.

Magritte is the grease that keeps our government's wheels turning. Officially, Magritte is Rurik's secretary, but that title is historical. She's more than that, organising everything, running the Citadel's offices like a military operation, and serving Rurik's personal needs.

'Come,' I said.

Magritte entered, proffering a mug with steam drifting from its surface, the odour of herbal tea wafting across the room. It was a welcome interruption – as long as it was brief. I was working to an immovable deadline.

'Thought this might help you relax,' said Magritte. 'I reckon you need it.'

I nodded. She moved across to my desk and placed it next to me, smiling gently all the way. That expression was a recent development, so different from my memories of when we first met, way back before I became Steffan. But that's a story for another time.

'Thank you, Magritte.'

I expected her to turn and leave, as was her custom, but she remained looking down at me, her somewhat unreadable smile persisting. I found myself returning her gaze and attempting to reciprocate the sentiment, hoping that would be the end of it. It wasn't.

'Are you ever going to call me Ona again?'

Before she'd taken up the mantle of Magritte, she was Ona Kentova. Convention dictated that she eschewed her birth name once accepting the role. That didn't seem to bother her.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'You know how hard it is to hide who I've become. I can't allow myself the luxury of acting anything other than the Steffan I used to be. Rurik has to trust me.'

'I know,' she said. 'Still, you called Ona by mistake once before all this started. Rurik made no bones about it then, so it doesn't add much risk now. Not compared to everything else.'

I wasn't ready to give way.

'You know what I'm working on. If I'm to write this thing, I need to channel the old Steffan. This is my way of doing that.'

Her smile didn't waver. It appeared as resolute as her frown when we first worked together.

'You should cut me some slack too. I'm in as much danger as you, but I stay because fighting Rurik is the right thing to do. Don't make me feel like I'm still doing it alone.'

I closed my eyes. I'd focused unerringly on myself without due consideration as to what Magritte – Ona – was feeling. That was more a hallmark of the man I used to be. I cannot lose the humanity I have gained.

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Ona Kentova is a contradiction. There is an iciness to her pale beauty, perfectly framed by her immaculate bob of auburn hair, yet of late, an unaccustomed warmth offsets this. It's not just her newborn smile. She betrays the impression that she genuinely cares as to my state of well-being. That is a novel sensation.

Even while playing this role, I must try to reciprocate. Down the years, Ona has helped others at significant risk to herself. I've taken her for granted. Her efficiency has always been unquestionable, but I have overlooked her grace of execution. I appreciate it now.

I reopened my eyes and stared into hers. Her warmly icy smile remained.

'I am sorry, Ona. You are correct. I hope you understand why I must behave as I do, but I am happy to make this one concession in private. Once this is over, I can be myself again.'

'Let's make sure you get that chance,' said Ona. 'I'd like to get to know whoever you are now.'

'So would I. Now, I would appreciate being allowed to continue with my work.'

Ona didn't move.

'Is there anything more I can do for you? Rurik insisted I must fulfil your every need, and I'm not one to shirk my duty. Your wish is my command.'

Her tone betrayed no sarcasm, but I'm sure it was there. Perhaps if I gave her a task, it would accelerate her departure.

'I need nothing other than solitude, thank you. However, would you be good enough to look in on Steffanov for me? I do not believe he has taken the decision to appoint Malikovich as the next heir well, but a friendly ear may help. That's not something I can currently provide.'

'Well, that proves it,' said Ona. 'The new you is a definite improvement. That's the first time I've ever heard you care about your son's feelings.'

'I merely wish to ensure he will do nothing unexpected before we can resolve this. If he is content, he will be of no immediate threat.'

'I believe you,' said Ona, a quirk in her smile inserting a negative. 'Of course I will check on him. He's not the only one who's disappointed in the decision.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's just, well...' Ona paused, her smile widening. 'Malikovich is a bit of an arrogant shit, isn't he?'

'Ona! That's...'

I trailed off. I'd instinctively reacted as I always would. She deserved better. It had never been a secret that Ona disliked Malikovich, but it was still out of character for her to be so forthright.

'Sorry,' said Ona, her tone again belying her words. 'I wanted to see how you'd react. Maybe make you laugh. Relax.'

'Why?'

'Because you're overdoing it. Look at you. Your jaw's clenched, your back's as straight as a rod, you're stiffer than you ever used to be. Try to relax. Let it come naturally.'

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Ona was perceptive – and Rurik would spot the same clues. My self-control had to be perfect around him, but that wasn't the point of her message. She was telling me she cared, that she was on my side.

'I will try,' I said. 'I appreciate your concern. You should look after yourself too. Do not allow your opinion of Malikovich to become common knowledge.'

'You know better than anyone how well I guard my secrets,' said Ona. 'Doesn't mean Malikovich isn't a shit.'

I was ready this time, responding with what I hoped was a gentle smile.

'We all change over time. Remember what I was like when we first met, just before I became Steffan? I don't believe I was dissimilar to Malikovich now.'

Ona let out a snort.

'Good point, although he's worse than you ever were. Maybe the job will mellow him too.'

'It will,' I said. 'Assuming we don't stop it from happening, the oath he will take will focus his mind. My son will gain confidence if he becomes Steffan too. If you remember, the same happened with Malik.'

'True. Pity he didn't gain a personality along the way.'

'Now, now. I would venture to suggest your forthright opinions should not become a habit.'

'Don't worry,' she said. 'I'm not stupid. I'd never have said anything if I didn't believe you needed a distraction. You need to loosen up for your own sanity, even if only when you're alone.'

Loosening up was the last thing I needed. If I allowed Ona to see my latent misgivings, I might not control them around others so efficiently. It was worrying how perceptive Ona had become.

'I cannot do that,' I said. 'However, my current activity of laying out the stories that brought me to this juncture may be the therapy I need.'

Ona nodded, her smile softening into one of sympathy.

'Being blunt with you is my therapy.'

'Just... take care.'

'I have more margin for error than you,' said Ona. 'Rurik values my independence. I'm good at my job because I'm willing to go above and beyond to fulfil my duty in the most effective way. Sometimes it helps to be unorthodox, as you well know.'

'I do not have that luxury. For now, I must remain the Steffan you have always known. Once this is over, I will let everything I have learned from Katsu and Tomlin guide me. Especially the latter, of course.'

I gave her as warm a smile as I could muster, hoping to bring the conversation to a close. Ona didn't take the hint.

'If it's Tomlin who makes you smile like this, then good for him. I'd like to see more of that side of you.'

'Perhaps it is not Tomlin who is making me smile, Ona.'

I allowed my smile to widen, deploying a broad, open-lipped grin that would make Tomlin proud. He would have referred to it as *lascivious*.

'Hey!' said Ona.

I believe that was the first time I've genuinely surprised her. A brief flush on her cheeks told me all I needed to know. I'd annoyed her on many occasions, frustrated her too, but never embarrassed her before. I reverted to my default serious expression.

'Suggesting you should leave was not having the desired effect. I hoped that scaring you into fleeing would be more effective.'

'Okay, okay,' said Ona. 'I'll go see Steffanov. Look, remember I'm here if you need to talk.'

'I will,' I said. 'Thank you, Ona.'

'Right, I'll bring your dinner later.'

'I look forward to it.'

Much to my surprise, I did. Our professional relationship had shifted into fresh territory over the last year, even before meeting Katsu and Tomlin, but now it had lurched alarmingly in a fresh direction. It was disconcerting.

After recording the above conversation, I realised that writing this narrative is already proving beneficial. I hoped it would, but it is gratifying that things are slotting into place, however superficially. It strengthens my resolve to complete this.

Putting the essential lies of Anatol into words has clarified the scope of the problem. So much about Anatol is wrong. The full scale of the deception in our land will only emerge in the telling, but Rurik's oft-repeated phrase, the *continuity of governance*, is central to everything. The only question that matters is: how can that continuity be broken? There is no simple answer.

If not for the inspiration of Tomlin and Katsu, the men who changed my outlook on the world, I could not even ask that question, let alone answer it. It is ironic that Rurik's order to seek information on our enemies led to our encounters. The fateful day he called me into his office to give me the directive is such a vivid memory. It seemed so innocuous at the time.

I sat on the hard chair before Rurik's massive desk, the smell of fresh varnish everywhere. He'd just had his office stripped and rebuilt, with new dark wooden panels around the wall. It looked remarkably the same as before.

Malik was beside me. His destiny was to be my deputy once I became Rurik, and he had all the requisite skills for that role. Malik is a thorough, competent individual, very similar in build and strength to me, even if there was no spark of originality in his brain.

These days, Ona's influence is rubbing off on me, and it's hard to disagree with her conclusions: he's as dull as his son is obnoxious. It's a struggle to stay awake when he embarks on a long sentence. Still, back then, we worked well together.

Rurik's expression told me how to approach the meeting. His mouth curved fractionally into a smile, while his eyes were wide and wrinkled at the corners – both indications that we weren't in trouble. He would listen to our opinions. The tightness of his lips told me it was deadly serious.

I knew him too well.

'We have to face reality,' said Rurik. 'The end of my tenure approaches. I have a few years left in me yet, but there are areas in which you are under-prepared for the future. You need to be ready for the fight ahead.'

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That wasn't a new topic, but there was a fresh urgency in his words. Perhaps something had made him aware of his mortality, most likely Urmalik's failing health. Rurik wasn't one to leave things to chance.

It was easy to overlook Rurik's age. He was still a fit, spritely man, as mentally sharp as ever, although his receding grey hairline was a reminder he was Urmalik's contemporary. Rurik wouldn't want to go on indefinitely.

As his designated heir, I had seniority over Malik. It was up to me to lead our side of the conversation.

'If you would share the nature of our shortcomings, I am confident they can be rectified. I know I am a work in progress.'

From Rurik's scowl, that must have been the wrong thing to say.

'Don't be so damned touchy. I didn't say there was anything wrong with either of you, but that doesn't mean you're ready for the challenge once you become Rurik. Our enemies have got away with their crimes for too long. We need to make plans.'

He'd been hinting as much for a while, but had never stated it outright before, nor said why the long-standing grudge was now a problem requiring action. That wasn't for me to question. I knew my role. He wanted justification for why he was right.

'Perhaps it is now time, sir. Your tenure has completed the stabilisation of our society, as evidenced by our first successful expansion beyond the southern flux.'

I turned to Malik.

'Wouldn't you agree?'

Malik gave a curt nod, taking several seconds to respond. He knew the drill.

'Sigurd is indeed thriving, while our population overall remains within acceptable bounds. That gives us a stable base for... for our retribution.'

Rurik's almost imperceptible nod indicated we were on the right track. There was no point in further speculation. We waited for him to fill in the gaps, which he obliged.

'The problem is, we do not have adequate information about our adversaries to guarantee a successful intervention. They may be unaware of the full scale of our capabilities, but we are equally ignorant of theirs. We must rectify that. We need to identify their weak points and understand how they might respond.'

'I see,' I said. 'Our lack of knowledge is certainly an unfortunate side effect of eschewing contact with our neighbours.'

Malik nodded and agreed in the worst way possible.

'Perhaps in retrospect, that was a mistake. We'd be in better stead if we'd visited them more regularly.'

'No,' snapped Rurik. 'It is not your place to question the decisions of the past. The policy is correct. What you have to do is take steps to fill the gaps in our knowledge.'

I stepped in to protect Malik from Rurik's ire.

'It would seem to me that the best course of action is to send teams of agents to investigate both continents. I can arrange that.'

'You are incorrect,' said Rurik. At least he didn't sound angry. 'Anything more than a small-scale intervention could prove counterproductive. Their discovery would be highly

likely. A sole agent will be more effective, particularly if they are one of our more highly powered individuals.'

'Good idea, sir,' I said. 'I will prepare a shortlist.'

'I already have a shortlist. They're both in this room.'

I glanced at Malik. He stepped up as I hoped.

'I volunteer, sir. I won't let you down.'

'No,' said Rurik. 'Steffan is the obvious choice. He will do this alone.'

No matter how long I've known Rurik, he can still surprise me.

'May I ask why Malik is not the preferred candidate?'

'As Rurik, having first-hand experience of Kitara and Temani will be invaluable in formulating the correct policy to counter their betrayal. What better way is there than to go there in person? And there's nobody with stronger skills to evade detection.'

Malik couldn't hide his disappointment.

'But sir, what if something happens to Steffan? He's next in line.'

'It will be manageable,' said Rurik. 'They don't know who he is. As far as they're concerned, he's just a maverick on a lone expedition, nothing to do with us.'

'I understand, sir,' I said. 'And if the worst happens, Malik will make a fine Rurik.'

'Exactly. However, you will not fail. You know damn well they won't be able to catch you.'

'Of course, sir,' I said. 'It would seem prudent to split them into separate trips. I propose to return here to debrief you after one, and then adjust my plans for the second, depending upon the lessons learned.'

'Yes, yes,' said Rurik. 'Go away and work on a proposal.'

'I will. It will take a while to plan both incursions. There are a lot of unknowns.'

'Give me your initial thoughts by the end of tomorrow,' said Rurik. 'Details can wait.'

And that was it. I left his office in a daze and immediately set to work. Venturing out into the unknown was a daunting prospect, but if we didn't understand the wider world, we were sure to fail. It was up to me to be the first Anatol citizen to travel abroad.

Everything in present-day Anatol has its roots in our isolationism, a decision taken the moment the arkship Anatol arrived at Pantheon a decade after the others. They tried to greet us like long-lost friends. They offered to take us into their established settlements as if the reason so few of us had survived had nothing to do with their abandonment. Captain Rurik would have none of it.

Pantheon's landmass primarily comprises two major continents on either side of the equator, joined by a wide isthmus. A third smaller island continent, long and thin, straddled the equator to the east. Water covers the rest of the planet, with the massive Bosompo Ocean dominating one hemisphere.

The arkship Kitara formed their initial settlement of Khonsu on the northern side of the isthmus, naming their continent after their vessel. Temani did the same, establishing the town of Morrigan south of the isthmus. That left the island continent as the obvious destination for the surviving Anatol crew.

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Our biggest shock upon arrival was learning about the disconcerting experiences of the first settlers in Kitara and Temani. They rapidly developed unexpected abilities, ones their rational psyches took a while to embrace. Psionic powers manifested on this world. The mind itself could have a measurable physical impact.

Even more fascinating was that these powers only manifested in specific locations. At first, the effects centred on healing abilities around the original landing locations. Then, mild telekinetic powers emerged towards the centre of the southern continent. The abilities soon became an integral part of their societies.

By the time we arrived, they had a vague grasp of its cause, if no clue of its true nature. Beneath the surface of the planet were two streams of exotic energy known as flux channels: the health flux and the kinetic flux. Anyone on the surface nearby could use the stimulated psionic abilities, but only on the peripheries. The centre of each flux was unbearable to the human mind. They'd been lucky where they landed.

It was easy for us to extrapolate the course of the two flux channels and realise they would both cross the island continent we were to call Anatol. More than that, they would come closer together there than anywhere else on the planet. We landed and created our first settlement of Zorya directly between the channels on the eastern coast. The second outpost of Brunhild came later to the west.

Zorya was ideally located, giving us access to both the health and kinetic fluxes simultaneously, providing a unique combination of abilities. Even then, Pantheon hadn't finished with its surprises. A third flux channel, unbeknownst to Kitara and Temani, passed off our eastern coast. It was the biggest boon of all, but only once we learned to control its side effects. These combined abilities would keep me safe once I ventured abroad.

It took several follow-up meetings with Rurik to agree on the general approach to my missions, followed by a couple of months planning the incursions into Kitara and Temani. I was determined to understand their societies and propose strategies to punish them, primarily focusing on Kitara first. They were the simplest of the two to infiltrate, based on the out-of-date information I had to hand. It would do. I could improvise.

I will describe how these panned out, starting with the events that led me to meet Kitara's pre-eminent flux expert, Katsu Sumara. The relationship I developed with him told me everything I needed to know about his homeland. My eyes began to open. Then came my trip to Temani, which was when I met their investigator, Tomlin Gaudy. He was the one who fundamentally changed my mind – for the better.

Along with telling the story of my life as Steffan, this triptych will explain why nothing could be the same after meeting Katsu and Tomlin. I liked them. They feel part of me now, colleagues rather than faceless enemies, men whose opinions I respect. I understood their lands as if I'd lived there. We are more like a troika now, working together to bring the Rurik line to an end.

The secret to defeating him is hidden somewhere in these stories, I am certain of it. Even if I fail, the wider world must be warned of the dangers ahead. All must know of Rurik's malevolence, and of those who have already suffered under his dominion. I will not let their

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sacrifices be in vain – even if that is only to salve my conscience. I have been complicit. It will be worse if I become Rurik.

There is no point in simply relating the moments when I met Katsu and Tomlin, then explaining how they shaped who I am. It would make little sense and do us all a disservice. I need to start at the beginning, right back when they set out on their own journeys that would ultimately cause our paths to cross. Only then can you understand my companions.

If I close my eyes, I can hear them so clearly. To do this justice, I will tell you their tales as close to their perspectives as I am able. I remember how they thought, how they saw the world, and how their lives brought them to my side.

As my first encounter was with Katsu Sumara, I will start with his tale, telling it in a manner befitting the man. He understood the flux channels and their history better than any academic on Pantheon. It was only natural that he would be called in when Kitara discovered the third flux.

Chapter 2 – Katsu: The Director

Katsu Sumara hated feeling flustered. He'd only just arrived in Raijin, Kitara's second settlement, when he received a message summoning him to the government offices in Khonsu. He'd planned a day of taking measurements at the very edge of the influence of the health flux around Raijin as part of his ongoing investigation into its underlying nature. Instead he was on the train back home.

It was a surprise to get a response from the government so quickly, even for a pre-eminent flux specialist like Katsu. They rarely acted so fast. He'd only just put in another request for a scientific expedition to Anatol and hadn't expected to hear for at least a couple of weeks. He could learn so much from studying the flux in Anatol, but their isolationism was a barrier he couldn't penetrate alone. It needed sponsorship at the government level.

Something must be different this time. It wasn't the usual outright refusal. The government must have questions that needed answering, which meant his fresh approach was bearing fruit. That was a relief. His decades of investigation after his early flux discoveries had sent him down a path of diminishing returns ever since, but this was one last chance for a breakthrough before succumbing to retirement. He intended to grasp it.

Despite the excitement, the rush back left him feeling tense, making it hard to keep his thoughts straight on the challenge ahead. No matter. It would come to him when necessary. It usually did.

When the train arrived, he jumped in the first available taxi and arrived at the government offices only a few minutes late for the scheduled meeting. He checked in at the reception.

'Ah yes,' said the receptionist. 'Follow me. The director asked me to show you straight to her office.'

'Director Rybacki?' said Katsu.

'We only have one director.'

Rozalia Rybacki was the elected leader of the Kitara administration. That was even more unexpected than the original summons and spoke to a fast-tracking of his request. It had already made it all the way to the top. He was nearly there.

He followed the receptionist and was ushered into the director's office. Director Rybacki wasn't alone. Another woman, probably in her early forties, was with her, seated in an informal area away from the desk. A gesture told him to join them.

Katsu vaguely recognised the other woman. She had distinctive, slightly wavy, light brown shoulder-length hair with aspirations to be red and frizzy. Her freckled skin was as wan as the director's was dark.

'Welcome,' said Director Rybacki. 'Please sit down, Mr Sumara.'

'Thank you. Please, call me Katsu.'

'Of course. Let's all use first names here. I'm Rozalia. You know Indira Tynkinen?'

The name rang a bell, but it wouldn't come to him.

'I don't think so.'

Indira gave an almost imperceptible shrug. When she spoke, her confident tone was familiar too.

'Did you not watch my documentary last year?'

'Documentary?' said Katsu.

'The one about my expedition to the centre of the continent. We were the first to explore there. I thought everyone had seen it.'

That was it. Katsu had put it on in the background without paying much attention once he worked out what it was about.

'I saw some of it,' said Katsu. 'Didn't watch it all. There's no flux up there.'

Indira's mouth twitched. It wasn't quite a smile.

'You only watch things relevant to your work?'

'Nothing personal,' said Katsu. 'I'm often told to switch off more, but I prefer to stick with what I like.'

Indira hadn't finished with the pointed comments. She seemed to have taken the quick route to disliking him, avoiding the delay it usually took most people.

'Does anyone tell you to dress appropriately for official meetings?'

Katsu blinked, then looked down. He was still in his field clothes. They were grubby. He had mud on one leg.

'Ah, sorry,' said Katsu. 'My apologies, director. I was in the field in Raijin when I received your invitation. I came straight here.'

Rozalia gave a gracious smile, an antidote to Indira's scowl.

'I appreciate your promptness,' said Rozalia. 'This is a matter of a certain urgency. It may turn out not to be critical, but I can't let it fester until it's understood. Together, you have the skills I need to investigate.'

'To do with Anatol, presumably?' said Katsu.

Rozalia hesitated, then frowned.

'No. Why would it be?'

'Because I applied for government support to visit Anatol. It's the only place where the fields of influence of both flux channels overlap. Measurements there will help validate my theories. I assumed this was in response to my request?'

'I have no knowledge of that,' said Rozalia. 'And that won't be approved. Anatol prefers to be left in peace.'

He'd convinced himself that this meeting must be about Anatol. That made it feel like a blow, even if the refusal wasn't a surprise. The application was part of his long-term campaign to wear them down through different approaches. Something would work eventually.

Indira inserted herself back into the conversation.

'Don't worry. This still concerns flux channels.'

Katsu was getting fed up with her sarcasm.

'I assumed as much. Doesn't explain why a documentary maker is needed.'

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'I'm an explorer,' said Indira. 'The documentaries simply help finance my expeditions. Although this isn't the one I was planning next, it's in unexplored territory, which is enough to get me interested. Unfortunately, I'll need your advice before I set out.'

Rozalia raised her hands and made a placatory gesture.

'We'll come to that. Please, let's take a step back and start afresh. I want this to be a professional, cooperative meeting.'

'Sorry,' said Indira. 'But you know I prefer to work alone. If I have to cancel my next expedition to do this for you, I'd rather do this on my own terms.'

That sounded like the reason for her irritation. At least it wasn't personal – not yet. It also didn't square with the little he remembered of her documentary.

'You do your expeditions alone?' said Katsu. 'Didn't look like it, from what I saw.'

'Just me and Scanlon, my chopper pilot,' said Indira. 'That's all I need for this – plus whatever you can teach me.'

'Let's not jump the gun,' said Rozalia. 'First, we need to tell Katsu the scope of the problem. Then we can decide the best route ahead.'

Indira nodded. Her voice took on a softer edge.

'Sure. But you know my expectations – and my conditions for doing this.'

Rozalia smiled and matched Indira's tone.

'Understood. Then again, as you intend to go into politics after this, perhaps it would be good practice to work as part of a team. That's my condition for sponsoring your candidacy and giving you my public support. Now, the decision is yours as to what's more important to you.'

Indira chuckled.

'Well played. Let's see what Katsu has to say first.'

Indira turned to Katsu.

'Sorry. Nothing personal. I'm just used to doing things my own way.'

'No problem. I'm the same. I always work alone when I'm in the field.'

'Sounds good to me,' said Indira. 'Maybe we can keep out of each other's way.'

'Perhaps,' said Katsu. 'I still don't know what this is all about.'

'Good point,' said Rozalia. 'Before that, I'd like to ask you a few questions, if I may? Make sure you're the right person for the job.'

'Go ahead. If it's something to do with the flux channels, then you'll find nobody better.'

'You consider yourself our pre-eminent flux expert?'

A little humility might be in order. But only a little.

'Others probably understand the health flux just as well, but none of them know Temani's kinetic flux like me. If you want flexibility, then I'm your man.'

'I understand you helped Temani investigate the kinetic flux. How did that come about?'

Katsu felt himself relax. He was on familiar ground. He'd been younger then, more willing to take ridiculous risks to turbocharge his academic reputation. It had got him noticed.

'When the Temani government wanted to trace the flux's course across the continent, their scientists asked for my help. I had the best kit for measuring the characteristics of a flux, and

a protective suit that allowed me to go closer to its centre than anyone else. I could do things they couldn't.'

'Is that still true?'

'To an extent. Nobody's developed a protective suit as good as mine, but as I've always published all the readings from deep inside the flux, there's been less incentive to do so. Without it, the flux overwhelms the mind. It's impossible to remain conscious.'

Indira interrupted.

'Why can't you just send your monitoring kit into the flux on a drone or something?'

'Technology fails too,' said Katsu. 'I've managed to ruggedise some basic kit to keep it working most of the way in, but that's only part of the reason. The impact on the human mind is just as critical. Personal experience is everything. I'm looking for a correlation between the flux characteristics and the feelings it engenders. There's still much we don't understand.'

Sometimes he felt like a fraud. His main achievements had been in quantifying the fluxes and their effects, not in understanding them. Yes, he'd made more progress than anyone, but there was no scientific basis behind its operation, no overarching explanation that would be his legacy. Sumara's Unified Flux Theory had a nice ring to it. They'd not forget him then.

'Is that why you want to go to Anatol?' said Rozalia. 'To compare what it's like inside both fluxes at once?'

'Exactly,' said Katsu. 'Although I'm fully acclimatised to the health flux, I need to be inside the kinetic flux for it to work for me. I'll learn so much from how the two channels interact. It might help us use our abilities more effectively.'

The most mysterious aspect of each flux was that once you spent a year or two in its direct influence, the abilities gained stayed with you wherever you went. You could heal yourself well away from the health flux. Katsu ached to understand why.

His favourite theory was that a latent field existed everywhere on the planet, powering abilities once the brain became attuned to it by direct exposure to a flux. The nature of this field was beyond him at present, just like the flux itself. All he could detect was the flux's indirect impact on the nearby environment and even the brain itself. He needed more data.

'Interesting,' said Rozalia. 'I may be able to help you there, but I have a few more questions first. I understand you visited the Macha settlement during its establishment?'

'They asked me to check the flux stability there,' said Katsu. 'It was fine.'

'I understand the flux channel runs beneath the surface just off the coast there?'

'Correct. Seawater impedes the spread of its power, so its effects are minimal across most of our territory. That's not true on this isthmus or larger peninsulas like Macha that stick out to the south. I used my readings there to predict the path of the channel further westwards.'

'Your predictions have proven largely correct,' said Rozalia. 'The health flux cuts right across the promontory at the furthest end of the Daucina Sea. We've established an encampment called Isis on its northern side to investigate.'

'Ah, I see,' said Katsu. 'You want me to go there?'

'No. You'll have to stop there, but that's not the final destination.'

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It was getting interesting. Studying the flux from a new location would always yield fresh data, but there was more going on here than met the eye. She was being too cagey, sounding him out ahead of revealing something more significant. He'd be patient and play along.

'Next, I'd like to discuss the flux abilities themselves,' said Rozalia. 'We're all used to being able to sense and heal minor ailments thanks to the health flux – mental as well as physical health. Are you aware of any rarer capabilities?'

'I've come across a couple in my research,' said Katsu. 'I've been told not to publicise them. It's not the sort of thing you want to scare people with.'

'Please, go ahead.'

'As far as I know, there have only been a few cases, but the ability to inflict ailments on others – cancers specifically – is one of them. Another is leeching energy from another person. Psychovampirism, I called it.'

'That matches what I understand,' said Rozalia. 'Anything else?'

'Not really,' said Katsu. 'Abilities don't work for everyone, but they're a tiny minority. Some are even resistant to healing effects when performed by others. In even rarer cases, a few can suppress the healing abilities of anyone near them. I wish I understood how.'

'I didn't know that.'

'Never seen it myself. I've only read about it.'

'What about the Temani kinetic flux?' said Rozalia. 'You have experience there. Obviously, there's the ability to move objects using the power of the mind, but I know little more than that.'

'Telekinesis, yes,' said Katsu. 'Most can only move small objects. Some can lift up to about the weight of a person, but that's very rare. The power can be combined too – a team working in concert can be remarkably effective.'

'I see,' said Rozalia. 'Anything rarer?'

'The only other thing I've heard about isn't so much rare as difficult. You can surround yourself with a telekinetic field to ward off objects – like a force shield – but it takes a lot of practice to perfect. It's not that effective either. Oddly, the native wildlife is better at it than we are. Helps keep predators away.'

'I guess they've been here longer than we have. Perhaps we'll get better every generation.'

'You're not the first to say that. Other than the first colonists developing abilities, I'm not convinced the evidence is compelling yet, but I'm keeping an open mind.'

Pantheon had a rich native biosphere before the arrival of the arkships, with a wide range of creatures that were close analogues to birds, insects, mammals, fish, and other taxonomies, some unique. Most were relatively small and posed no threat to humans, although Katsu recalled that Indira had discovered several larger carnivorous animals in the continent's interior. The species that had evolved closer to the flux channels were more fascinating. Using its power was natural to them.

Rozalia still hadn't finished.

'Do you know of any other abilities, anywhere?'

'Can't think of anything else,' said Katsu.

'Excellent,' said Rozalia. 'Thank you. That confirms my suspicions.'

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'Ready to tell me what this is about?'

Rozalia leant back into her seat.

'There was a reason for the questioning. I wanted to obtain a clear, unbiased view of the current knowledge of the flux channels and their abilities, but I feared that knowing what I know might compromise your answers. Now, I am ready.'

Annoyingly, that made sense. Katsu respected the almost scientific approach to whatever this was.

'Go on. Is this about some new ability?'

'Not quite,' said Rozalia. 'I told you about our new Isis encampment. Well, they recently sent out a small expedition to explore along the coast. That's further than we've gone before, beyond the Daucina Sea, looking out over the Bosompo Ocean to the west. That's where they recorded the first deviance from your prediction of the health flux's path.'

'Go on,' said Katsu. 'I didn't guarantee it would go straight forever, but I had no data to contradict the hypothesis. All I knew was that it didn't deviate significantly on its path beneath the Daucina.'

'It wasn't intended as a criticism. However, as soon as the health flux passes under the Bosompo, it curves towards the southwest. It wasn't long before they discovered a potential cause. A little further up the coast, they encountered what appears to be another flux channel, running just above it and heading towards the northeast.'

'What?' said Katsu. 'It can't be the kinetic flux. That runs almost directly west to east.'

'It's not,' said Rozalia. 'If we're correct, it's a third flux channel crossing our unexplored northwestern territory. Now you can see why you're here.'

'Are you sure it's still not the health flux?' said Katsu. 'It could have meandered back.'

'Definitely not,' said Rozalia. 'It matches neither the health nor the kinetic flux effects.'

It must be a third channel. That was an order of magnitude better prospect to investigate than a visit to Anatol. This was his chance. This was what he'd been waiting for.

'I need to see it in person,' said Katsu. 'You won't get anyone better than me to investigate its characteristics.'

'Or you teach me how to do it,' said Indira.

Katsu ignored her.

'What have you found out so far? What does it do?'

'Good question,' said Rozalia. 'That is at the core of the urgency. We don't fully understand what is happening out there. All I know is that the two individuals on the expedition found it a disconcerting experience. Their descriptions are confusing, but they didn't hang around long enough to find out more.'

'Do you have any specifics?' said Katsu.

'I can read between the lines,' said Rozalia. 'However, I'd rather not speculate. I could be wrong. You need to go there with an open mind and come to your own conclusions.'

It sounded perfect: a wholly unquantified flux to be explored. He'd be the one to discover its effects and write its story. He'd be the one to name it. If it didn't fit into a neat taxonomy like health or kinetic, they might name it after him. The Sumara flux had an even better ring to it.

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'Count me in. When do we leave?'

Indira had been sitting quietly during Rozalia's interminable questioning, ready to make one last attempt at getting things her own way.

'Tell me what I need to know. I can get all the measurements you need.'

Katsu was ready this time. She'd forewarned him.

'It doesn't work like that. If this new flux is like the kinetic one, you can't just turn up and expect my monitoring kit to work. It'll need calibrating to the flux's characteristics, which will take my years of specialised experience to figure out what to do. There's no way I could teach you. And—'

Indira interrupted.

'Okay, okay, I get the point.'

Rozalia brought the debate to an end.

'I need you both involved. Katsu for your flux expertise, Indira for your experience in unexplored territory. No compromises. I want the best people for the job.'

Indira was nearly convinced.

'I assume you want me to make a documentary of it too?'

'Perhaps not a documentary,' said Rozalia. 'But you should record everything. When we're ready to go public with this, it will need delicate handling. A well-known, trusted presenter like you will be perfect.'

'Not a bad way to get my name out there again, I guess.'

'See. Works well for both of us, but first, we need to understand this flux. You work as a team. Are we agreed?'

'Fine by me,' said Katsu.

Indira sighed, although Katsu was sure it was only for effect.

'Seems like it's a done deal. I use my own chopper and pilot for the trip though. I trust him.'

Rozalia nodded.

'Same pilot you used for your last expedition?'

'Yeah,' said Indira. 'Worked with Scanlon for years. Trust him with my life.'

'Great,' said Rozalia. 'A party of three it is. Could you be ready to leave tomorrow?'

'Won't be a problem,' said Indira. 'As you know, we were about to head out to the north coast. Everything was ready for that expedition, but this trip should be a more than adequate replacement – if you agree to sponsor me when we return, of course. Couldn't be a better time to transition into politics after making a name for myself with this.'

'Deliver, and you'll get my support.'

Indira had her own reasons for going along with the mission. That didn't interest Katsu, but having to leave so quickly did. He wasn't ready.

'May I ask why the urgency?'

'It's already causing problems,' said Rozalia. 'The two who discovered the flux have withdrawn just out of its range and set up the Osiris camp as a temporary base of operations. They said they preferred to remain there. I cannot fault their professionalism.'

Rozalia paused as if undecided about what to reveal. Eventually, she continued.

'However, things are somewhat strained between them and the Isis administration. It's hard to follow what's happened from here. You need to talk to them in person.'

That got Indira's attention.

'Is that going to be a problem?'

'Potentially. The Isis leadership wants to get directly involved themselves, but I have ordered them to stay away for now. Make sure they don't interfere until you have worked out what this flux does.'

'Understood,' said Indira. 'I won't take any crap. Sounds like you're worried about this new flux?'

'I worry about anything new,' said Rozalia. 'I have to assume it's a problem until you tell me otherwise. Don't take any unnecessary risks, but find out everything you can. It's your job to set my mind at ease.'

That was where Katsu came in. If Indira sorted out the politics, he'd be free to do what he did best.

'Don't worry,' said Katsu. 'I'll get you all the data you need.'

Indira turned to Katsu and smiled at him for the first time.

'Seems like we're a team. Welcome aboard. As I said before, it was nothing personal. I'm just used to working alone.'

'Don't worry,' said Katsu. 'I'm sure we'll find some way of keeping out of each other's hair.'

'Sounds like a plan,' said Indira. 'Can you be ready first thing in the morning?'

That was going to be difficult, but he wouldn't risk missing out on the opportunity of a lifetime. He'd find a way.

'Sure,' said Katsu. 'Just let me know where to meet you.'

'I'll send you the details later.'

'Excellent,' said Rozalia. 'With that agreed, let's discuss the people you'll meet in Isis and Osiris, and the authority you'll need to get things done.'

'Does this need to include me?' said Katsu. 'I'm happy to leave that in Indira's hands. I've a lot of kit to get ready in time for tomorrow morning.'

Rozalia frowned, but Indira nodded her approval.

'That's fine by me. I'll handle the political side of this. Good practice. Give me the authority to boss them around, and I'll be happy.'

Rozalia sighed.

'There's more to politics than bullying people, you know? However, understanding this is more important than tiptoeing around the Isis leadership. You'll have the authority you need.'

Katsu was only half paying attention. He was thinking through what he'd need to take. He'd left a lot of his kit in storage in Raijin, but his local lab in Khonsu had spare monitoring equipment. Most importantly, his protective suit was in Khonsu, even though the mask he wore beneath had degraded and needed to be replaced. There had been no urgency before. Now there was no time to get a new one.

'You still here?' said Indira.

'Just off,' said Katsu. 'See you in the morning.'

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He'd improvise something. He was good at that.

Chapter 3 – The Source of Authority

Katsu taught me how different Kitara was from Anatol. Anatol had pragmatically adopted an agrarian society, eschewing most forms of technology other than where essential for the efficient operation of government. In contrast, Kitara had embraced technology – yet it was still stagnant, only employing knowledge brought in the arkships. They had developed little new. Much had been lost.

I would come to learn that Temani was similar. Their society had its own unique flavour, yet it was a variation on the same theme. Problems existed everywhere – and things to admire. I found it hard to dislike any of them.

Nevertheless, I knew my duty. I wouldn't let Rurik down. Back then, I couldn't.

One phenomenon intrigued me while recording Katsu's narrative: so many things come in triplicate. Three arkships settled on three continents, with three flux channels running beneath the surface. Katsu travelled as part of a team of three. I'm even relating this narrative from three perspectives.

Now that I've observed the pattern, I can spot it everywhere. Zorya sits near a perfect source of flux equilibrium, which we call the tripartite unity. Although only two family lines rule Anatol, three generations of each are typically involved. Upon succession, Rurik steps back to stand outside the families, ruling as the head of a triumvirate with the new Steffan and Malik. I'm sure there will be more examples.

Katsu would consider that such a pattern, whose repetition stretches the bounds of coincidence too far, must be significant. Maybe so, but Tomlin would tell me to stop wasting time. Coincidences happen. I should be talking about him.

On balance, I agree with Tomlin. Katsu is academically astute, but Tomlin knows the world better. He's smart enough to cut through irrelevancies – and it is indeed irrelevant. However, there is more you need to understand about Anatol before I begin his tale.

At the heart of Anatol's community is Hecate's Chamber. Its discovery shortly after we landed on our island continent allowed Captain Rurik to cement the stability of Anatol's nascent society. Without it, we could not have withstood the side effects of living so close to the three flux channels. It enables the continuity of governance that has existed since.

When the city of Zorya was founded on Anatol's eastern coast, signs of ancient volcanic activity were everywhere. The last remnants of its extinct source formed a small island offshore. We named it Hecate. The chamber was beneath it.

We discovered it by chance. Lava tubes were common around Zorya, many surviving relatively intact. Captain Rurik ordered their exploration. It was more a contingency for his people to hide from danger than anything – the world was new and uncertain to us – but one bore unexpected results. It remained passable along its entire length, emerging in the vast natural cavern that was to become Hecate's Chamber.

A pit in its centre disappeared into the depths of the planet. It glowed, not with heat, but with a luminescence caused by the purest form of the flux leaking from below. We named it the Well of Souls. Captain Rurik quickly learned to manipulate it to our benefit, inoculating us from the flux's deleterious effects.

In addition, the eerie, almost organic light made it the perfect place to hold rituals. Workers excavated and reinforced the tunnel from the mainland, carving an amphitheatre with stone seating into the chamber itself, with the luminous well in its centre. Embossed directly above Rurik's throne was a massive triquetra, the graceful curves of its three entwined arcs chosen by Rurik to be the symbol of Anatol itself. Smaller triquetras adorned the other walls.

All official ceremonies benefit from the majestic sense of occasion the chamber imparts. It is the location of all significant state events. Everyone is invited – indeed, expected – to visit at least once every five years to participate in one of our festivals. It keeps the community together.

That's the official line. Beneath, lurks a darker truth.

It was while attending a ceremony in the chamber earlier today that I realised I needed to write this narrative. It will both help me find a way to bring the Rurik line to an end, and warn the rest of the world of his threat if I fail. There's something about the chamber that frees my mind to think.

The glow emanating from the well's nearly circular opening is hypnotic. A barely discernible column of light shines upwards, ostensibly white, yet laced with subtle pastel shades that intertwine in beguiling, shifting patterns. Across the opening is a light haze, a diaphanous veil warning of the vertiginous drop below. Staring at it helps the tedium of the rituals pass peacefully.

Today's event was an oath-taking ceremony for the latest batch of community police recruits. They are critical in maintaining peace in Anatol, something Rurik takes no chances about. Their oath will ensure their utmost loyalty and obedience.

As is traditional for such events, I stood with Rurik on my right and my son, Steffanov, to my left. On Rurik's other side were the three generations of Malik: Urmalik; the current Malik; and his successor, Malikovich. All dressed in our ornate robes of office, we were the living embodiment of the continuity of governance down the generations.

To add majesty to the occasion, Rurik floated a metre above the floor, buoyed by Urmalik's telekinesis – at least officially. Given Urmalik's increasing frailty, Malik surreptitiously provided most of the effort. Malik will replace him anyway once the mantle of Rurik passes to me.

Rurik had completed the standard litany to open the proceedings and was progressing onto the oaths. We have built up a significant repertoire of rituals for every occasion that the general populace expects and enjoys. This was no different. They were usually variations on a theme.

Rurik intoned deeply.

'In dedicating your soul to Anatol's protection, may Sah guide your actions at all times, may Sekhem give you the power to act, and may Khet provide the security to deliver justice.'

Rurik loved his rituals, building up a mythology around them, couching them in pseudo-mystical terminology. It's the only time any of us hear the official names for the three fluxes in Anatol. When you're living in a region constantly covered by all of them, what's the point of differentiating?

The recruits stood on the opposite side of the Well of Souls and replied as one.

'Our Ka will serve in Rurik's name.'

I tuned out as the back-and-forth continued. I only had to dig into my memories to hear it recited over and over, knowing this time would be no different – other than the suppressed horror I felt at witnessing the scene now. The power flowing from the well was palpable, all control by Rurik. It is appalling.

The oath isn't mere words. Rurik manipulates the flux to coerce them to obey. We've all been through something similar, from the low-level conditioning applied to every citizen, to the strictures of the geas imposed on Rurik's inner circle. It is only now I am free of it that I can act with true independence.

By the time the ceremony ended, I had settled on my plan to record everything in this narrative. I couldn't let my misgivings show. If Rurik suspected I was no longer under his control, I would not survive, so I had to act naturally.

I turned to my son standing beside me. He'd been subdued for the last couple of days since discovering that Malikovich would become Rurik after me. The heir was always one of the Malik or Steffan lines, and Rurik had decided that Steffanov was the weaker candidate. He'd been passed over.

'Are you content?' I said.

'I'm fine,' said Steffanov. 'Don't fuss.'

'You understand I am available if you wish to discuss your future.'

Without answering, he shrugged, turned, and left. It was understandable. All that mattered was that I'd fulfilled my expected duty as a father, one of many roles I play – just like being Steffan.

Rurik approached me next. Malik was with him.

'Let us go to the hall. There are things we must discuss in private.'

'Yes, sir,' I said.

Hecate's Chamber isn't the only space near the Well of Souls. It is the sole publicly accessible area, but a concealed stone stairway at its rear leads down to rooms reserved for government use, primarily by Rurik, and the Steffan and Malik lines. The location sits at a point of equilibrium in the tripartite unity, allowing us to survive significantly closer to its power than would otherwise be possible. The phenomenon fascinated Katsu when he saw it.

When we first discovered the main chamber, a natural fissure at the rear signposted the lower area. It emerged a distance down the well shaft itself, the light of the flux shining into a smaller space. There, we created the Hall of Continuance, the location of our major leadership ceremonies. It is where the rite of succession occurs.

We expanded the fissure leading to it to create the Nursery, comprising a central corridor with rooms off either side. The Nursery is the perfect location to live while being immersed in the strongest possible flux field. Living there for a prolonged period optimises the chance

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of evolving advanced abilities. That is why every Steffanov and Malikovich is conceived, gestated, born, and raised there. We only move out once it is time to take on our adult roles after the succession of the new Rurik.

Rurik, Malik, and I walked through the Nursery and into the Hall of Continuance. It was a much smaller space than the chamber above, empty, other than a gap in the far wall that allowed the light from the Well of Souls to pour in. Carved on either side was the symbol of Anatol, the triquetra.

Rurik got straight to the point.

'It is time to schedule your rite of succession. It will be held at the end of next week.'

I couldn't stop myself from blurting out an objection.

'Already, sir? I thought you'd want longer.'

Rurik narrowed his eyes.

'Is there a problem? You now have all the knowledge necessary. There is no need to delay.'

I'd relaxed too much after settling on my plan to write this triptych. I had to behave like the old, stiff Steffan.

'My apologies, sir. Of course I am ready. It will be the greatest honour of my life.'

He stared at me for a couple of seconds.

'You don't seem yourself of late. There's something different about you.'

My mouth felt dry. I'd got away with it so far, but I had to tread carefully.

'Sorry, sir. It's nothing. Just the lingering after-effects of my trip to Temani. Assimilating the information has proven a distraction that's lasting longer than expected. It won't be a problem.'

'Very well,' said Rurik. 'Make sure it isn't.'

He turned to Malik.

'To prepare for the transfer of authority, we will hold a formal procession through the streets of Zorya before the end of this week. You will organise it.'

'Of course, sir,' said Malik. 'May I ask its purpose?'

'Experience has shown that existing conditioning transfers allegiance from one Rurik to the next more efficiently if I publicly acknowledge my approval of the exchange beforehand. Word of mouth will account for those who don't see me.'

'I see, sir,' said Malik. 'Will the schedule for the community festivals need to change?'

'Not if you do this right,' said Rurik. 'The details are in the records of my succession. Work it out from there.'

'I will. Should Malikovich and Steffanov attend?'

'Not necessarily. Malikovich can attend as next in line, but I don't want Steffanov anywhere near it, not until he stops sulking. He's an embarrassment.'

Rurik turned back to me.

'Sort him out. He still has a role to play, but he's no use to anyone right now.'

I was already feeling a little guilty at my coldness towards Steffanov earlier. He wasn't a bad kid. I had to treat him like that in public to avoid suspicion, but I didn't have the time to worry about him right now. I'd leave it to Magritte. She got on better with him.

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'Leave it to me, sir.'

'Right. Other than the procession, I now relieve you of formal duties. Concentrate on being ready for your succession. Get rid of the lingering after-effects.'

That suited me perfectly. It provided the time needed to write this narrative, and an excuse to keep away from Rurik as much as possible.

'Of course, sir. I won't let you down.'

'Very well,' said Rurik. 'The rite of succession will be held one week after the procession. Your mind needs to be clear by then.'

'No problem, sir.'

'Magritte will administer to your needs in the interim. She understands my expectations and will provide any support you require ahead of the transition.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Despite Rurik's suspicions, that couldn't have worked out any better. I had more time to myself, and Ona had a reason to visit me regularly. I had a feeling I'd need her support. She knew how things worked around the Citadel better than me.

Rurik turned away and strode out of the hall alone. Malik shrugged and followed him. I gave myself a few moments to recover and looked around the hall. This was where the rite would be held. The thought made me shiver.

I took my time to return to my quarters, wandering through the Nursery, lost in thought. Halfway along, I saw the first signs of the new expansion of the Nursery that Rurik had ordered Magritte to arrange. It wasn't the first time she'd done it, but it was something else that had to stop.

It made me think back to the last time the Nursery had expanded. The occasion was also the first time I ever met Ona, and to say our relationship had a rocky start would be an understatement. We clashed heads immediately.

I was still Steffanov, and she was plain Ona Kentova, understudy to the previous Magritte. It was shortly before the current Rurik's rite of succession. I'd just visited the Hall of Continuance to practise my role in the upcoming succession, and was heading back into the Nursery where I lived. Ona was standing near my quarters with the old Magritte, gesticulating towards the triquetra on the wall opposite.

Magritte silenced her as I approached and made the introductions.

'Steffanov, may I introduce Ona Kentova? Rurik has nominated her as the leading candidate to be my successor.'

Ona gave the barest hint of a nod of recognition while holding my gaze. It was neither hostile nor friendly. I came to know that expression well. Unsure what else to do, I copied her.

Magritte broke the silence.

'Rurik has tasked Ona with leading the expansion of the Nursery. The current quarters need renovation, and that will be easier once there are additional rooms available. The plan is to alternate in future.'

It was not unexpected that the woman lined up to become Magritte would be given a project to run. It was a test. Her future would be entirely dependant upon her performance

across all the disciplines required for the role of Magritte. What was more unexpected was the nature of the project.

'Expand?' I said. 'Where? There's no room.'

Ona didn't wait for permission to speak. She pointed to the wall opposite the door to my quarters again, pulled herself even more upright, and tilted her head back before speaking.

'There's a smaller fissure hidden behind that triquetra. It was covered over when this place was built, but it's in the old records. I've checked. We're going to excavate through there. Should be enough space for twice as many rooms as we have now, although we're only building half of them. Don't worry. I know what I'm doing.'

There was no doubting her confidence. Her competence was yet to be seen, but that wasn't what concerned me.

'When is it planned?'

Ona didn't hesitate.

'We'll start opening it up in two days.'

'That's unacceptable,' I said. 'We're still living here. It must wait until we've moved out after the succession.'

'That doesn't work,' said Ona. 'It has to be completed for the mothers to move in. Their conditions must be perfect.'

'And Malik and I need to be well-rested ahead of the succession. That is paramount.'

I could be arrogant and self-centred back then. Ona no was shrinking violet either.

'Rurik agrees with me,' said Ona. 'Everything must be complete before the volunteers arrive for conception. After all, the mother of your son will be one of them. I assume you want that to go smoothly?'

'We should delay their arrival,' I said, annoyed by the note of sarcasm in her voice.

Magritte interrupted, a wry smile on her face. That was in approval of Ona rather than me.

'The timing between Rurik's succession, your accession, and the establishment of the next generation, is set by precedent. If you desire to change that, I suggest you take it up with Rurik. He has approved this plan. I concur with his judgement.'

I was beaten. Unable to think of anything else to say, I turned and entered my quarters. The last thing I heard before slamming the door was Ona's voice.

'Lovely to meet you.'

That was all a long time ago. Once we settled into our roles, we quickly adopted a professionally detached relationship. It was many years before that thawed further, although ironically, the reason it did all dates back to that first project of hers. Without that, we wouldn't be in this mess together.

That's a longer story. First, I must tell of the events that caused me to meet the Temani investigator, Tomlin Gaudy. This all occurred after I met Katsu, but their outcomes are so intricately linked that I will interweave their stories.

Tomlin's journey, which would lead to our paths converging, began with an assignment to investigate prominent Temani citizens who'd begun to act out of character. Tomlin reckoned it was a waste of time. He was wrong.

Chapter 4 – Tomlin and the Presenter

Tomlin Gaudy stared out the window, ignoring the scenery flitting past as the train headed along the coast. It had been much the same since leaving the Temani capital of Morrigan and moving beyond the influence of the health flux. The flat, featureless terrain seemed to have run out of ideas. Its dullness permeated everything. That suited his mood perfectly.

He let his eyes drift shut.

'Been to Marduk before?' said the woman beside him.

Tomlin blinked, trying to bring the world back into focus. His junior partner, Sorrel Dunne, was annoyingly alert. He wasn't.

'Mmm?'

'Marduk,' said Sorrel. 'First visit?'

Tomlin wanted to ignore her, but the keenness in her tone demanded a conversation. He ought to show willing. He was technically her boss, after all.

'Third. All for work. You?'

'First for me. First time in the kinetic flux too. What's it like?'

'Overrated,' said Tomlin. 'So you can move things with your mind. Big deal. That's what hands are for.'

'Well, you're fun today,' said Sorrel. 'Look on the bright side. We're two detectives on a train. Someone's bound to be murdered soon.'

'Stop trying to cheer me up.'

Tomlin ran his fingers through his hair and distractedly scratched his scalp. He needed to snap out of his mood. They had a job to do, but his mind wasn't on it – for a start, he needed a haircut. He'd let his brown curls get way thicker than usual, like a dark mop perched on his head, and his unkempt stubble only added to the air of disarray.

'Sorry for getting you dragged into this. It's a waste of time.'

Tomlin knew Sorrel well enough by now that, whatever he tried, he wouldn't dampen her mood. Her brown eyes sparkled. Her tightly cropped black hair suited her dark complexion perfectly, only adding to her air of professionalism. She was at the start of her career, tough, and full of enthusiasm. It was exhausting.

'Looks an interesting case to me,' said Sorrel. 'Weird, and not sure why we're involved, but it's not every day I get a chance to meet a couple of celebrities.'

'Minor celebrities,' said Tomlin. 'B-list on a good day. We're only going as they don't trust me with anything important now. You'd be better off with someone else as a partner.'

'Oh, stop feeling sorry for yourself. Yes, they were probably fed up with seeing your miserable face around the office, but this could be what you need. A change of scene. Get away from Morrigan for a bit. You're not the first person to get divorced, you know?'

'Going for the blunt approach?'

The Pantheon Triptych

'Being supportive wasn't working,' said Sorrel. She grinned. 'Come on. At least pretend you've got a future. You never know, you might find it somewhere out here.'

She was trying to be a good partner. It was infuriating. She made it hard to maintain his funk.

'Fine,' said Tomlin. 'I'll pretend. Seeing as you asked so nicely.'

'Seriously,' said Sorrel. 'I've been trying to get you away from the office for a while. The break will be good for you.'

'Yeah, yeah. You sound like my ex.'

It was only three months since Sorrel had been assigned as his partner, just after his divorce. It had been a messy affair, all born of him putting his work ahead of his marriage. That annoyed him more than anything. He'd become a walking cliché.

Somehow, Sorrel coped with his moods despite only ever seeing him at his worst. She was sharp, dedicated, and always wanted to go the extra mile – more than he'd ever managed, even when he was her age two decades ago. It all made her incredibly irritating. It also kept him sane.

They both worked in the Department of Investigation, part of a ragtag collection of agents who carried out assignments for various official bodies. Usually tasks were on behalf of the police or other government departments; sometimes businesses hired them; even wealthy individuals could purchase their services, although that was rare. They didn't come cheap.

Their current job was on behalf of the Department of Internal Affairs. It was an odd one. Coincidentally, two relatively well-known individuals – a retired media presenter and a successful boxer – started making out-of-character public criticisms of the government, if very minor. Their complaints were on similar topics, and not something they'd bothered about before.

Temani was easy-going on the whole, and the government took a hands-off approach wherever possible outside of Morrigan, but they still wanted to know what was going on. A few small nudges here and there could fix issues before they got serious. Although as far as Tomlin was concerned, they usually made things worse. That was politicians for you.

In their current case, no crime had been committed. Nobody was in trouble, but with elections a year away, it had spooked the government into worrying that something was bubbling beneath the surface that could pop up and bite them in the arse. A couple of the more idiotic politicians muttered about sedition. As a sop to their concerns, President Nik Versa had asked for a low-level investigation, which confirmed what Tomlin had always known: the president was a dick.

They were to ask the celebrities a few polite questions to see what was behind their complaints, looking out for signs of commonality, keeping things as low key and friendly as possible. It was sure to come to nothing.

Sorrel was right about one thing though. It *was* good to get out of the office after being stuck with desk work for a while. Something as trivial as this assignment would be a gentle way back to active duty. It was just annoying that the only purpose was to dampen the president's simmering paranoia.

Sorrel had carried out all the background research before they'd left. He'd only skimmed it.

'Any sign the two of them have ever met?'

'Once,' said Sorrel. 'Baker appeared on Dacian's chat show a couple of years ago. Nothing other than that, as far as I can see.'

'This Baker's a boxer, right?'

'Yeah. Baker Boyle. Heavyweight champion for a while but lost last year. Currently training in Anand to regain the title. A reputation for being as aggressive out of the ring as in it, but never said anything political before.'

'Aggressive, eh?' said Tomlin. 'Suits my mood. I'll take the lead with him. You can have fun with Dacian first.'

'Thanks,' said Sorrel. 'I've always liked what I've seen of him. Wonder what he's like in real life?'

'Just don't get complacent. The friendly ones are often the worst.'

Dacian Quinlan had started out as a news presenter on one of the officially sanctioned channels before transitioning to chat shows and the like. He always presented a genial persona, everyone's favourite uncle. Perhaps the real man was now emerging from behind that mask.

Although it felt like a safe, routine investigation, Tomlin had insisted they didn't go completely unarmed. He wouldn't have bothered around Morrigan, or even Marduk, but Anand was a different matter. It was better to be prepared.

They both had concealed stunners in their inside pockets, non-lethal devices designed to pacify any assailants without causing serious injury. The weapon deployed fast-acting sedative darts up to a decent range, with the addition of an electrical charge to stun up close. It was for self-protection only.

The journey to Marduk took another hour. Marduk was a small town on the northern side of the Nammu Sea, the first to be established near the kinetic flux. Sorrel would probably call it picturesque. Tomlin preferred twee. They were trying too hard to be distinct from the bigger towns to their north.

'Looks like his house is on the far side of town,' said Sorrel. 'Up the hill near the clifftop.'

'Of course it is,' said Tomlin. 'That's where all the posh houses are. Come on then. Let's get this over with.'

The walk there was slow. It was market day in the centre of town. They had to push past residents meandering between stalls to purchase local produce, somehow easily avoiding each other but bumping into Tomlin. The smell of fish and baking was everywhere. It made him hungry.

'Just the hill to go,' said Sorrel.

Tomlin didn't reply. He was realising how unfit he'd become after the last few months of moping around and feeling sorry for himself. By the time they reached halfway up, he was sweating and short of breath. He stopped and looked out to sea.

'Nice view.'

'Yeah,' said Sorrel. 'What's that island?'

The Pantheon Triptych

She pointed down to a dark strip of land looming in the hazy straits off the coast. The mist obscured the details. That was fine by Tomlin. He didn't want to see all the mansions.

'That's the southern tip of Hera, where the really rich bastards live. It's bigger than it looks, long and thin. Very exclusive.'

'Who'd want to live there?' said Sorrel. 'Must be a pain going anywhere.'

'Not if you've got your own boat and pilot,' said Tomlin. 'Anyway, it's the only place in Temani that gets both the fluxes, if not at the same time. You get the health on the northern tip, if weakly, and the kinetic across the south.'

'What use is that?'

'Bragging rights,' said Tomlin. 'All adds to the property value.'

Sorrel stared out for a few more seconds.

'Aren't you supposed to be able to see Anatol from here?'

'On a clear day,' said Tomlin. 'Not today.'

'Pity. Guess this is as close as we'll get.'

'Hera's closer. But yeah, this is as close as possible on the mainland.'

Sorrel glanced up the hill and then back out to sea.

'Maybe that's what's got Dacian so interested in Anatol. He'll be able to see it from his house.'

'Guess we'll find out soon.'

Tomlin looked up the hill.

'Ready to continue then?' said Sorrel. 'Recovered enough?'

'I'm fine,' said Tomlin. 'I only stopped because I thought you needed a break.'

Sorrel grinned. Tomlin even found himself smiling. It must be the fresh air.

A massive wrought-iron gate guarded the entrance to Dacian Quinlan's property. It wasn't the largest house around, but it was exceptionally well kept. Its stone facade had a fresh lick of white paint, the gravel driveway was weed-free, and the plants were lush and fragrant. The pillar to the left of the gate had an embedded intercom.

'You do the talking,' said Tomlin.

'I'll start with a small white lie,' said Sorrel. 'Nice and gentle should get us inside.'

Sorrel pressed the intercom button.

'Quinlan residence,' said a woman's voice from the speaker. 'Who's there?'

'I'm so sorry for troubling you,' said Sorrel. 'I know a man of Mr Quinlan's stature will be very busy, but we need a moment of his time. We're from the Department of Investigation. One of his former guests is the subject of an enquiry, and we wondered if it would be possible to ask Mr Quinlan a couple of questions about their encounter. We'll be as quick as possible.'

The silence lasted a couple of seconds before the woman replied.

'One moment.'

They waited patiently, then the gate clicked open.

'Come to the front door, please,' said the woman.

They crunched up the driveway.

'I'll play the fangirl,' said Sorrel. 'Chip in, if you feel like it. Just keep it friendly.'

'Naive cop, bored cop,' said Tomlin. 'Got it.'

The Pantheon Triptych

The woman who answered the door appeared to be the housekeeper. She showed them into the lounge, where Dacian Quinlan was waiting. He rose from his comfy armchair to greet them, his customary broad smile in place. Even at home, he wore a suit, a somewhat flamboyant bottle green affair with matching tie and a pale yellow shirt to set it off.

Sorrel hurried across and held out her hand.

'Mr Quinlan, it's an honour to meet you. I'm a great admirer of your work. It's not been the same since you retired.'

'Please, call me Dacian,' he said, shaking her hand enthusiastically. 'That's very kind. And what would your name be, my dear?'

'Sorrel. And this is my colleague, Tomlin.'

Tomlin nodded, keeping his expression as blank as possible. It did the trick. Dacian hardly glanced at him.

'Please, take a seat. Mrs Hardy, would you bring us some tea and cake, please?'

Tomlin hated tea, but he was thirsty.

'Just water for me, please.'

It was a dull choice, but a beer would be pushing his luck.

'Tea's fine by me,' said Sorrel. 'Thank you. You're very kind.'

Dacian waited until his housekeeper had left before letting his smile fade away. He still looked friendly and relaxed.

'May I ask what this is about?'

'I'm so sorry about this,' said Sorrel. 'It's nothing serious. We're on our way to speak to Baker Boyle. You know, the boxer?'

'Yes, I remember him,' said Dacian. 'Not my favourite of guests. It always looked as if he wanted to hit me.'

Sorrel laughed as if it were the funniest joke in the world.

'I think everyone feels like that. Was that the only time you met him?'

'Yes. Why?'

'Sorry, this will sound silly,' said Sorrel. 'Neither of you has done anything wrong, but the government is interested in how the winds are blowing in case there's something they can do to help. Both Baker and you have been saying similar things in support of Anatol of late.'

It was as if someone had flipped a switch. Before Sorrel could complete her question, Dacian's genial expression vanished to be replaced by a snarl. His upper lip curled to reveal clenched teeth.

'I should've guessed. I knew the government would send someone to shut me up. Well, you can't do anything. I'm too famous just to disappear.'

He even surprised Tomlin. They always risked causing upset, wandering into someone's home and asking about politics, but Sorrel had been as innocuous as possible. It seemed such an out-of-character overreaction, there must be something behind it.

Sorrel took it in her stride.

'Please, there's no need to be upset. We're not accusing you of anything. We just want to understand what's behind your opinions to see if we can do anything to help.'

'Yeah, right,' said Dacian. 'You just don't want the truth to get out.'

The Pantheon Triptych

Tomlin decided it was time to cut to the chase.

'So what is the truth? What can you possibly imagine the government has done to Anatol?'

'Well, for a start, we've only got our government's word that Anatol wants to be isolated. I reckon it's us who's keeping them away.'

'And why would that be?'

Dacian seemed surprised at the lack of pushback, but ploughed on regardless.

'Because they're scared everyone will find out the truth. We know their arkship arrived late. Most of them didn't survive. I have it on good authority that something happened that our government doesn't want us to know.'

'Do you have any evidence for that?' said Tomlin. 'You said you had it on good authority. Whose?'

'None of your business,' said Dacian.

Sorrel tried to calm things.

'Dacian, please, this—'

'That's Mr Quinlan to you,' snapped Dacian. 'Now get out of my house.'

'There's—'

'Out. Now! You're not welcome here.'

They exchanged a glance. It had escalated too far, too quickly, for anything to be productive. The best thing they could do was retreat and think again. As they stood, the door opened, and Mrs Hardy entered carrying a tray.

'They're leaving,' said Dacian. 'Make sure they do.'

Mrs Hardy nodded. She looked upset, worried even, but it wasn't directed at them.

'I'll show them to the gate,' she said. 'Come.'

They followed in silence. She didn't speak again until they were standing by the gate.

'I'm so sorry. Please forgive him. He can't help it.'

'I hate to pry,' said Sorrel, 'but is there something behind it?'

Mrs Hardy nodded with obvious reluctance.

'It's why he had to retire. He became prone to angry outbursts, and it was only a matter of time before it happened on air. The doctors said it would only get worse.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' said Sorrel. 'He always came across as such a cheerful man. Is he getting help?'

She nodded again.

'It's so sad. I've been with him for years. He was such a lovely man, and I thought we'd got him back for a while, but it's taken a turn for the worse of late.'

Tomlin had questions he wanted to ask, but let Sorrel continue to see if she went in the right direction. Her more gentle approach would likely pay more dividends with the housekeeper.

'We should leave you in peace,' said Sorrel. 'I've one last question before we go. Do you know if anything triggered his recent concerns about Anatol?'

'Is that what you asked him about?'

'Yes,' said Sorrel. 'He was fine until that.'

The Pantheon Triptych

'It's not the first time. He's been obsessed lately, but hates being questioned about it. It's really not like him. It must be his condition, but I don't understand why he latched onto the idea so strongly. I can't make sense of it. I wish I knew what that woman said to him.'

Mrs Hardy looked on the verge of tears, but they couldn't leave it there.

'What woman?' said Sorrel.

She gabbled out her response, pausing for sharp breaths.

'He met her at this gate when he arrived back from his daily constitutional. Said she was a fan passing through and wanted to say hello. He invited her in for tea. He never does that. I didn't see any harm in it as he was having a good spell, but she must have spent a couple of hours here.'

'And the Anatol stuff started after that?' said Sorrel.

She nodded.

'Did you catch her name?'

'No, sorry,' she said. 'I only spoke to her when I took drinks in. She'd just arrived from Anand. Said she was heading to Hera.'

That caught Tomlin's attention. Anand was where Baker Boyle lived. Perhaps this woman was a link.

'What did she look like?' said Tomlin.

'She was tall, about your height, sir. Dark curly hair, black, similar to you, my dear.'

'Thanks,' said Sorrel. 'That's exceptionally helpful. Anything else?'

'She was very striking. Wore a tight black suit with a white blouse. You couldn't miss her.'

'That's brilliant, thanks,' said Sorrel. 'Look, don't worry. We're not here to cause him trouble, but if he gets too difficult, give his doctor a call. You're not in this alone.'

'Thank you,' said Mrs Hardy. 'I might just do that. He can't go on like this, or he'll have no friends left.'

Sorrel touched her arm.

'I'm sure he'll be fine with a friend like you to look after him.'

She nodded, tears in her eyes, unable to speak, then turned and headed back to the house.

'Well handled,' said Tomlin.

'Thanks,' said Sorrel. 'That was weird.'

'Yeah. Maybe this will be interesting, after all.'

'Always knew it would be. So what's next?'

'Not much point hanging around here,' said Tomlin. 'Doubt we'll get more out of Dacian.'

'Anand then?'

'Yup. What's the odds that Baker Boyle's had a visit from that woman?'

'Pretty high,' said Sorrel. 'I wonder what's going on?'

'I've no idea.'