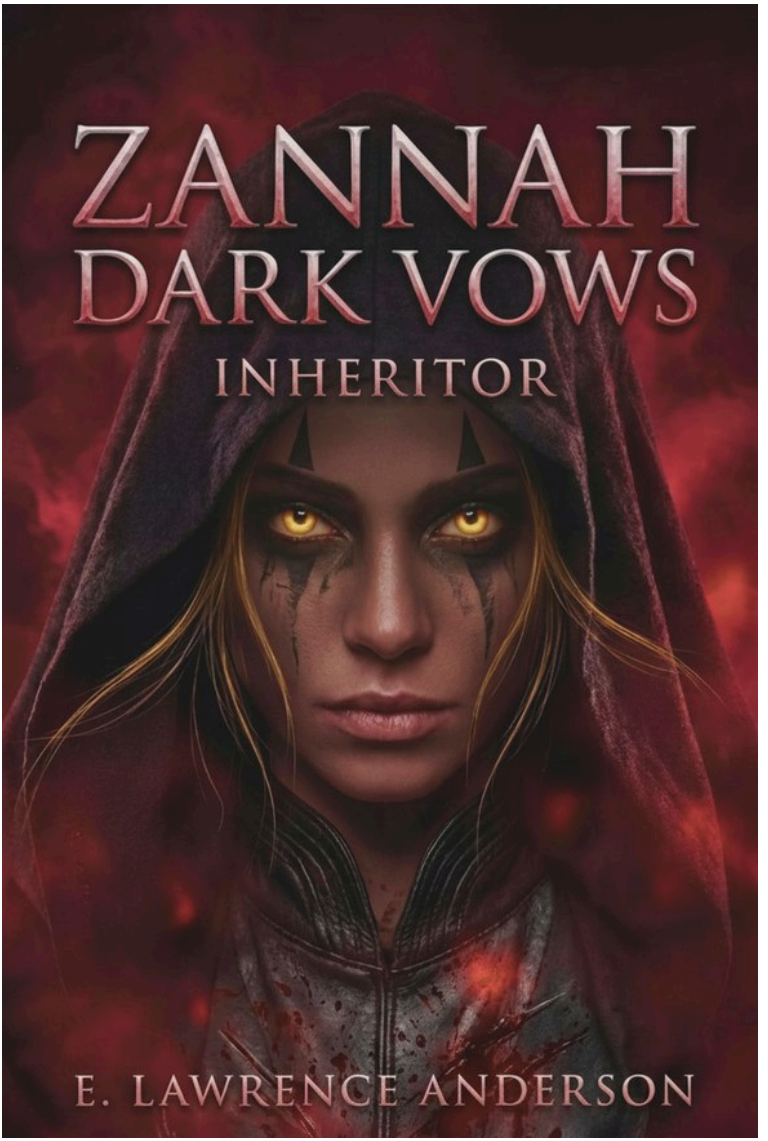

ZANNAH
DARK VOWS
INHERITOR
E. LAWRENCE ANDERSON

INHERITOR

Dark Vows · Book One

A Star Wars Legends fan fiction

E. LAWRENCE ANDERSON

Inheritor is Book One of Dark Vows, a Star Wars Legends fan fiction by E. Lawrence Anderson.

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CHAPTER 1

Darth Cognus hadn't spoken a word as she finally lowered herself to her knees to rest her aching legs and heels. The newly crowned Dark Lord of the Sith, however, remained on her feet, unmoving. Unwavering. She was a statue of outward indecision in the hours after the battle, never once shifting from her firm stance overlooking the darkened scene of her greatest victory—a victory she had earned.

Echoes reverberated through the rocky valleys and boulder-strewn canyons, mournful sounds of a clash Darth Cognus could never have imagined. Even hours later, they still rang powerfully. It was as if Ambria itself refused to accept the truth it held—a power exchange the galaxy hadn't seen in ages. Still, Cognus wasn't quite sure who the real victor was.

For hours, she had remained silent as Darth Zannah took several steps forward. Cognus, shifting her focus from the Master's trembling hand to self-affirmations that Bane had been defeated, absorbed the silence. She heard whispers on the wind that wove between the echoes that wouldn't cease. Overlapping conversations that felt ethereal, happening well outside of any physical presence.

Cognus shifted subtly, displacing her discomfort as she waited patiently for what came next—something she was quite unaccustomed to. She had always had the answers, even if mystical or unexplained, a plan of action where there should have been none. She craved only the promised power, the power the man who wasn't sure he'd survive had unleashed, now wondering if that was what she would receive. And if this woman was the one to teach it.

Dawn began to break, slowly. A creeping purple that pulled the blackness from their surroundings, revealing broken and scorched stone bathed in a hue that would never fade. Cognus could still feel the heat from the battleground. A radiating but unnatural warmth that Ambria also refused to claim. It was the power of the destruction surrounding her that fueled her uncharacteristic patience. 'If even the effects continue to resonate...' Cognus thought to herself.

"They will never die," Darth Zannah finally severed the silence between them. "And that is but a fraction of the power you will earn, apprentice." The statement was a declaration—a pact. And Cognus knew it.

She wasn't sure if she should speak, even though the Master had, probing the young relationship for its most basic foundations. However, Cognus would need to decipher the depths of this Master's intrusive abilities sooner rather than later. "He was wrong to doubt you, Master."

"He was wrong about a great many things, but that will never outweigh his usefulness...even now," Zannah admitted after a long moment of deliberation. She turned slowly toward the Iktotchi, her first movements in hours, and lowered herself to

a mirrored position only two meters away. “Understand that we are but the beginning of a legacy, Darth Cognus. His legacy.”

Cognus narrowed her deep crimson eyes, capturing the statement as the Huntress would a physical quarry. She remained silent for a moment before resting back on her heels, “He underestimated you.”

“No.” Zannah snapped suddenly, “He underestimated the unknown, allowing hubris far too much latitude.” She continued, the deep yellow in her eyes flaring a bright gold momentarily.

Cognus didn’t respond, willing the Master to divulge more without childish questions prompting it. But, it would not be. Perhaps a matter for her own intellect to decipher. A lesson then? The Master was steadfast in her silence, offering no outward sign that she would continue, even if the questions were asked.

Cognus had only the past, then, to navigate the meaning in Zannah’s proclamation. And she was certain, as time perpetuated, that was precisely the intent. She chuckled inwardly, still probing the tenuous relationship’s borders, as the Master had already infused wisdom into the exchange as effortlessly as one would breathe.

“You are aptly named, apprentice. But you will need to prove that you can study the past as well as you foresee coming events.” Zannah spoke softly, her calming tone sending shivers up the Iktotchi’s spine.

Cognus considered the comment permission enough to acknowledge her suspicions, and with that, relaxed the tension in her muscles. She closed her eyes through a concentrated effort to focus on what she had seen. Blurs of motion, crimson sabers moving so quickly they were streaks of unbroken light. Grunts

heard that followed the action she could actually focus on, well out of sync. She was suddenly aware of her own teeth grinding together through concentration, sparking an unfamiliar fear of failure.

Then it dawned on her. At the precipice of surrender, Cognus remembered when the duel itself had shifted to something else entirely. “He underestimated your sorceries, Master.”

Zannah smiled lightly, her porcelain expression shifting to a satisfied smirk that expertly matched the eerily calming voice, “He underestimated all sorceries, apprentice.” She paused to let loose a victorious laugh, one that sounded soothing, of all things, in a place carved from destruction. “Even his own.”

Cognus knew the truth of it, had witnessed the gravitas of the tidal shift the moment the black tendrils were seen. Although she couldn’t understand his insistence to get closer to his prey, she knew it had everything to do with Zannah’s statement, and by extension, her will. “He meant to claim you. There was a moment when I sensed his presence despite him falling...”

“That plan succeeded, apprentice.” Zannah snickered again, a light chortle that stood contrary to the topic, “Just not in the way he imagined it would.”

“I don’t understand, Master.” Cognus replied quickly, sensing an electrifying fervor pump feverishly through her blood, “He intended to leave himself? You allowed it?” She wasn’t sure if the fervor was a reactive disinclination to entertain such things or if she had agreed to apprentice lunacy itself.

“He intended domination of mind and spirit because he lacked faith in his chosen apprentice, Cognus.” Zannah felt the

brush of a slight breeze tickle her hair past her cheek, "That mistrust allowed me to accept what I needed and nothing more."

Cognus expressed a quizzical gaze, shifting her head to the side somewhat as Ambria's sun finally crested the distant peaks of the mountain range with no name. "He sought refuge within you then?"

"He sought a vessel to continue his legacy, no matter who owned it. That is far more egregious than any mistrust in me." Zannah repressed personal anger sparked by her own statement, something she knew was warranted yet untimely. She shook off the emotion quickly, "He succumbed to the one thing he didn't understand fully, apprentice."

Cognus was catching on quickly, "Your sorceries..."

"Are far more than projections, consuming the mind despite the body." Zannah replied immediately, leaving no room for any other interpretation, "He had no such gifts...fixated on power as he was in ways he understood it and nothing more." She finished, then pushed herself up to her feet. She swiveled a full one hundred eighty degrees to consume the blackened devastation surrounding them.

"But you allowed..." Cognus began before Zannah snapped her gaze back toward the Iktotchi in an icy glare.

"Only what I needed, Darth Cognus. Only what I needed." Zannah replied, allowing the twitching left hand inspection between the two of them as she lifted her arm.

"He continues to fight for survival?" Cognus asked out of sincere curiosity.

"He continues to fight the inevitable," Zannah replied matter-of-factly as she renewed her inspections, realizing after a moment's hesitation that her shuttle hadn't escaped the effects of

the previous night. Although a kilometer away, the long, thin trail of smoke bleeding into the fading twilight was a beacon that caught her attention, its sharply tilted angle accentuated by expanding puddles beneath it.

"Why not just be rid of him, Master?" Cognus felt foolish asking what she thought should be common sense.

Zannah did not answer right away, shifting her gaze slowly to take in Cognus over her shoulder in her periphery. She looked back toward the damaged shuttle briefly before returning the Iktotchi to her partial view, "Because I am not done with him." She spat the words from her mouth like wretched bile, owning the statement with equal parts truth and hatred.

Darth Zannah let the words drift in the air between them until Ambria chose to take them away. Then, without saying a word, she turned from Cognus and walked toward the shuttle.

Cognus watched her leave, willing to follow but not quite yet. She needed time to understand what she had gotten herself into. Promises of power, even if proven visually, would mean nothing without a bond of trust. And a rule of two was meaningless if those who found it didn't follow it. But then again, they had, hadn't they? She wasn't any more beholden to Bane than the weak fool Zannah had turned over to Doan. She and the Dark Jedi were just pawns in a grand game that had only been won through the meticulous plotting of the woman now walking away from her.

She had thought over the situation enough to allow herself to pursue the reward she had always desired. One that didn't value fame, riches, or notoriety. No. Not when legacy was real. Not when legacy was earned. Cognus steadied herself and grasped Bane's hilt firmly in her large, strong hands. She ignited the saber

with a pulsating whoosh, keeping her excitement in check as the device whined like a hungry electronic wraith in her firm grip. She let it pass before her several times, allowing the alien Ambrian air to bake and sizzle in front of her eyes.

Cognus let the excitement fuel her as she extinguished the blade and tucked it into a hip pouch at her side. Despite her moniker, the future was an unwritten chapter she was eager to embrace. Recklessness be damned if she wouldn't see it through as far as it would take her. The Iktotchi began to sprint to catch up with the advancing Master, relishing the power the woman radiated. A power that surged in wide arcs around each decisive step forward. Steps that dictated their pace, driven by a woman who commanded her future.

"Where is it we will go, Master?" Cognus asked between breaths, surprised how much distance Zannah had placed between the two in so short a time.

"Nal Hutta," Zannah replied casually, immediately answering the unasked question of when, not how.

"Nal Hutta?" Cognus couldn't stop the question until it was too late to try.

"I don't like loose ends..."

CHAPTER 2

The cargo hauler smelled of recycled air and the long, dry residue of bantha-hide bales that had occupied the bay for most of the previous month. Zannah had selected the vessel from the Omek family's contracted carriers two systems before Ambria, when she had still imagined returning with Bane rather than from him. The carrier's manifest listed Sepp Omek as primary lessor and his sister Allia as authorized second. The vessel was nondescript, dented at the port nacelle, registered through three intermediate brokers, and entirely uninteresting to anyone who might think to look.

Cognus sat against the bulkhead opposite the cargo bay's small inset cabin, her legs folded beneath her, Bane's saber resting against her hip. The hilt was longer than what she would have chosen for her own hand, weighted for a man half again her size. She had not slept, and she had not asked to sleep. The Master had walked into the cabin two hours after the hauler cleared Ambria's atmosphere and had not emerged since.

The bay was cold, in the practical manner deep-space freight always was. A pulse of recycled air every few minutes, the hum of distant power couplings, the faint creak of unsecured panels

finding their balance against the hyperdrive's rhythm. Cognus listened to all of it with the half-attention of a hunter waiting in a blind. The shuttle had been left burning on Ambria; they had taken what could be carried and walked the kilometer to the secondary landing site without ceremony.

She closed her eyes and reached, lightly, for what would happen in the next several minutes.

The reading came back unevenly. Three threads, four. A door opening, a door not opening. Her own hand on the hilt at her hip, then her hand somewhere else entirely. The Master speaking to her, the Master holding her silence. Cognus opened her eyes and frowned at the bulkhead across the bay. Foresight had never produced this for her before today; it had produced certainty, or it had produced silence — the silence of a future too distant or too uncommitted to read. It had not produced layered indecision.

'Fatigue,' she thought. The duel and the vigil. The hours without rest. She had pushed harder than she had known she was capable of pushing, and the body she had pushed was now demanding the price. She let the reading dissolve and laid her head back against the bulkhead.

The cabin door slid open and Zannah stepped into the bay, pulling the hood of her traveling cloak back from her shoulders. She had changed. The robes she had worn at Ambria were gone, replaced with a layered tunic and trousers in the muted greys and umbers a moderately wealthy trader might wear on the long routes. Durable. Unremarkable. Expensively cut and entirely forgettable. The lightsaber that had been at her hip was no longer visible, and a datapad rested in her left hand.

"We will reach the Nal Hutta system in nine standard days," Zannah said. She did not sit. She crossed the bay and stopped at the small workbench bolted to the far wall, setting the datapad against its surface. "You should sleep before then."

"I will."

"Soon."

Cognus inclined her head. "Soon, Master."

Zannah did not turn. The bench held the few items she had brought from the shuttle: a worn leather case, a small bound text, and a wrapped parcel Cognus had not seen opened. She watched the Master select the leather case, set it before her, and rest both hands flat against its surface. For a long moment Zannah did nothing visible. Her shoulders settled, her breathing slowed, and the hum of the hauler's power couplings seemed, briefly, to soften around her.

Then Zannah began to work.

It did not look like work. It looked like a woman with her hands on a closed case, breathing. Cognus had spent only days with Bane before Doan, and what she had seen of him had been the practical violence of a Sith who treated the Force as a hammer. He had never spoken of sorceries. He had never demonstrated any. What the Master did now had no precedent in anything Cognus had been trained to read. It carried instead the still attention of a craftsman testing the edge of a tool that had been in their family for three generations and had served every one of them.

Cognus watched. Whatever the working was, it had a shape she could half-perceive and a structure she could not. After several minutes she tried again to reach forward. Small, careful.

Not the full extension she had attempted earlier, only a brief touch on the next handful of moments.

The reading came back the same as before. Layered. Multiple. A future in which Zannah turned, and a future in which Zannah did not. A future in which the case opened, and a future in which it remained closed. Cognus held the readings against each other and could not resolve which was the line that would actually occur.

She let the reading dissolve a second time and watched her Master's hands instead.

"What do you see?" Zannah asked, without turning.

Cognus considered the question and the silences around it. "Inconsistency."

"In what you reach for."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah's hands did not move. "The Iktotchi gift requires a clean field. After Ambria, the field is not clean. There are residues you have not encountered before this morning. Allow the gift to settle before you rely upon it."

"Yes, Master."

"It will pass."

Cognus inclined her head a second time. The explanation was reasonable and economical, and it was the explanation she had nearly arrived at herself. She accepted it the way a competent apprentice accepted a Master's framing — completely on the surface, with the sliver of independent judgment any professional preserved beneath. The reading had not felt like fatigue. It had been sharp at the source and broken only at the resolution. But the Master was not wrong about Ambria. Ambria had been thick with whatever Ambria was. A planet that

refused to release the heat of a duel hours after the duel ended could plausibly do other things to a precognitive too tired to push back. She let the question close.

Zannah lifted her hands from the leather case. The hum of the power couplings returned to its ordinary pitch. The case had not been opened, and whatever had been done to it, or with it, had been completed without ceremony or visible result.

The Master turned, finally, and looked at Cognus across the bay.

"There was a name in the duel that I did not speak aloud."

Cognus waited.

"Set Harth," Zannah said. "A Dark Jedi. My contingency, not Bane's — kept in case the Master's confidence in his apprentice proved mistaken. Bane did not know I had cultivated him. He would not have approved of the precaution if he had known."

Cognus did not show what the name produced in her. She had fought Set Harth in the hangar bay of the Doan stone prisons, briefly, before the press of bodies and falling debris had carried them apart. She had taken the measure of him then and judged him competent, vain, and unwilling to die for any cause that did not pay him first. She had assumed she would never see him again.

"He survived Doan."

"He did. He left with a holocron he had not earned, while we were occupied with what came after. Andeddu's. He has been on Nal Hutta long enough to have begun to learn what it contains."

"He is a debt," Cognus said.

"You are certain he is still there."

Zannah did not answer immediately. She returned to the bench and laid one hand against the leather case again, lightly.

Her eyes closed for the briefest moment, and when they opened, the gold in them had returned to its ordinary depth.

"I am certain."

The exchange had taken perhaps a minute. Cognus understood, watching it, that she had witnessed two confirmations rather than one. The first was the Master's certainty, given to her plainly and without elaboration. The second was a thing the Master had checked against the case, or against the residue inside herself, before answering. Whatever the second confirmation had consulted, it was not Cognus's to know yet.

She set the observation aside, the way a careful operator placed a piece of intelligence beside a piece of context that might or might not eventually relate to it. Two observations about the Master she did not yet understand: a layered reading that should not have layered, and a confirmation made twice when once should have sufficed. She did not yet have language for what to call them. She would.

"He should not have been permitted to carry the holocron from Doan," Cognus said.

"He was not permitted." Zannah's mouth moved into an expression that was not quite a smile. "He merely was not stopped."

"You will recover it on Nal Hutta."

"If it is still there. He will have taken his time with it across the years. The question is what he has learned from it, not what remains in his hands."

Cognus considered the distinction. The holocron was an object; the knowledge it carried was a different question entirely, and she had not thought of the difference before this moment.

She set the distinction beside the others, in a place she was beginning to recognize as separate from her ordinary mental architecture.

"You will retrieve it regardless."

"I will close the loose end regardless. The retrieval is incidental."

The certainty in the Master's voice was complete in the manner Cognus had begun to recognize as habitual. There was no display in it. There was no announcement. There was the simple statement of a position that had already been examined from every available angle and confirmed against whatever the Master consulted when she consulted herself.

Zannah lifted the leather case from the bench and carried it back toward the cabin.

"Sleep, apprentice," she said as she passed. "The next nine days will be quiet. Use them."

The cabin door slid closed behind her, and the bay returned to its hum and its rhythm and its long, unremarkable dark.

Cognus remained against the bulkhead for some time after that. The hauler's power couplings settled back into their steady cadence, the recycled air pulsed through the vents, and the unsecured panels found and lost their balance against the hyperdrive's vibration in their slow, indifferent way.

She thought about the layered reading and the two confirmations and the case Zannah had not opened. The case mattered. She did not know why yet. Only that her Master had performed an act she could half-see and could not name, and the act had touched the case, or passed through it, or done some third thing she did not have a word for.

She set Bane's saber on the deck beside her, drew her cloak across her shoulders, and slept.

CHAPTER 3

Nal Hutta announced itself before the hauler entered atmosphere. The freighter's sensors caught the planet's gravitational profile a full minute earlier than they should have. The readings were disrupted by the same low, persistent Force-noise that had soaked the system for as long as Hutts had owned it. Cognus felt it in her teeth as the hauler slowed for descent. She had been here before, more times than was sensible to recall. She had killed here, and she had been hired here, and she had walked away from contracts that paid better than most lives and would have paid for hers had she stayed another hour. Returning as someone else's associate was an unfamiliar shape.

The bay's viewport showed the surface. Wet green and umber, broken by the dark scars of industrial sprawl that radiated from the cities like rot from old wounds. A thick yellow haze sat over the lowlands. The atmosphere was breathable only in the technical sense.

Zannah stood at the workbench in her trader's greys, fastening the clasps of an outer coat that read as expensive but not ostentatious. The saber-staff had returned to her hip beneath

the coat, hidden by the cut. The leather case from the cabin was nowhere visible.

"Nal Hutta does not respect cover identities," Zannah said. She did not look up from the clasps. "It respects payment, position, and demonstrated willingness to inflict harm. The Omek name will get us through customs without inquiry. After that, the cover is decoration. Operate accordingly."

"Yes, Master."

"You will keep your hood up at all times in any populated district. Half the operators on this planet have either tried to hire the Huntress or have been hired against her. The other half know the name. We will not give them confirmation that the rumors of you in Allia Omek's company are anything but rumors."

Cognus inclined her head. The instruction did not surprise her. She had factored the visibility before they left Ambria and assumed the Master would say something close to this. That Zannah had said it anyway was itself information. The Master had decided this part of the operation required explicit instruction.

"I have brought a hood," Cognus said.

"Wear it. Do not remove it indoors unless I tell you. Pelu will recognize you regardless. He will not say."

So Pelu was the contact. Cognus had used the Sullustan twice, years apart, on contracts neither of them had spoken about afterward. He had been competent and discreet and expensive. That Allia Omek's broker on this planet was the same broker Cognus had used was either coincidence or the kind of overlap that suggested Allia's network and the Huntress's had been quietly intersecting for years before anyone alive on either side had noticed.

"Yes, Master."

The hauler's descent angle steepened. Cognus drew the dark hood from the inside of her cloak and arranged it so the horns of her cranial points sat clean beneath the fabric. The shape was wrong for true concealment. Anyone with a passing knowledge of Iktotchi physiology would still read her. The casual eye would not register her species at a glance, and casual eyes were the eyes that mattered in places where attention itself was a transaction.

The hauler set down at a freight pad on the outskirts of Bilbousa. Customs cleared the manifest in four minutes, three credits passing under a counter the inspector pretended not to see. Allia Omek and her named associate were granted a fourteen-day visit and the standard list of warnings about which districts a sensible visitor avoided. Zannah accepted the warnings with polite distraction. Cognus said nothing.

They walked into the city.

Bilbousa rose around them in layers. Hutt residential up top, sealed against the haze by tinted environmental domes. Commercial middle, raucous and pungent, thick with vendors and operators of a hundred species speaking eight different trade pidgins. Below that, industrial works and the lower districts.

Zannah moved through the middle level the way a moderately wealthy trader on a long route would move. Cognus walked half a step behind and to her left, which was the position the cover assigned her and also the position from which she could best read the crowd. The crowd produced what she had expected. Two stalls she suspected of watching them. Three faces she recognized and did not acknowledge. A Devaronian fixer she had once turned down for a job she had been right to turn down,

who now ran a successful protection arrangement two streets east. None of them recognized her under the hood.

Zannah did not ask directions. She did not need them. Cognus did not need them either. They walked in the silence of two professionals navigating the same city by independent memory, arriving by minute adjustments at the same destination.

After perhaps twenty minutes she stopped at a recessed doorway between a spice merchant and a shop that sold chained processors of indeterminate provenance. Cognus had used the door twice. The contact plate had been replaced once in the years between her last visit and this one; she registered the upgrade and said nothing.

Zannah pressed her palm against the contact plate, waited, and the door slid open.

The room beyond was quieter than the street and smelled faintly of damp paper. A Sullustan sat behind a desk made from the casing of a decommissioned cargo lifter, his fingers working at three datapads simultaneously. He did not look up as they entered.

"Allia."

"Pelu."

"Three years, four months."

"Three years, five."

The Sullustan's fingers stilled. He looked up for the first time, took both women in with a single sweep of his large dark eyes, and produced an expression that was not quite a smile.

"My calendar is generous to old clients. Sit."

Zannah sat in the single chair that faced the desk. Cognus remained standing at her Master's shoulder, hood drawn close, in the position the room expected of an associate whose status had

not been declared. Pelu's gaze flicked to her once, held a beat longer than necessary, and returned to Zannah without comment. The recognition had occurred. The acknowledgment had not.

Allia Omek's associate was the Huntress. Pelu had just learned it, would not be told, and would not under any circumstance ever speak of it. He returned to his work.

"I require what you have on a Dark Jedi named Set Harth," Zannah said. "He has been in the lower city for some period. His arrangements would be private but not invisible. I do not require approach paths. I require last known address."

"Set Harth."

"Set Harth."

Pelu's fingers resumed their work, on a different datapad now, slower. He searched without comment for nearly a minute. The hum of his desk's small cooling fan was the only sound in the room.

"I have him on a residence in the Cesko sector. A property leased through three intermediaries to an alias I have correlated with him on two earlier occasions. The lease has been current for fourteen months. He has not been seen at the property for nine days."

"Nine days."

"He travels. Or he has been preparing to travel. The window is ambiguous."

Zannah considered this in silence. Cognus watched the Master's hands. They rested on the arms of the chair without tension. Whatever calculation the silence carried, it did not show in her body.

"The address," Zannah said.

Pelu transferred a coordinate string to a small chip and slid it across the desk. Zannah collected it without examining it.

"Payment is the standard arrangement."

"Doubled, given the subject."

Pelu nodded once. His fingers were already moving again before Zannah had risen from the chair.

They were back on the street within four minutes of entering. Pelu had recognized Allia at the door. He had recognized the Huntress at her shoulder. He had doubled the price for Set Harth without negotiation, which meant the name was unwelcome to him. He had not asked Cognus's name, which meant Allia had told him not to.

The middle level had thickened in the time they had spent inside. Cognus pulled the hood lower against a passing cluster of Trandoshans whose attention drifted toward her, paused, and moved on. Two of the four had hired her on separate occasions. Neither had paid in full. She did not look back.

"Cesko sector is on the lower platforms," Zannah said as they walked. "Three transfer lifts down from this level. I will not approach the property directly. I do not yet know what he has installed at it, and I do not intend to learn through the front door."

"You wish me to look."

"I wish you to walk past it. Once. In the manner of someone who has business in Cesko and is passing through on the way to that business. You will not stop. You will not turn your head. You will tell me what you see and what you sense, and I will decide from there."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah named a small cantina at the edge of Cesko where she would wait. She gave Cognus the coordinate string, a route around two checkpoints she did not wish recorded, and a window of time within which the walk should be completed. Then she turned and moved off toward a different lift, and Cognus, after a measured count of thirty seconds, moved toward her own.

The change came on her in the lift.

She had not expected it. She had not, in fact, registered the absence of it across the months since Ambria as an absence at all. But the lift descended, the platforms above slid out of sight, and as the distance grew between her and the Master her foresight cleared.

It cleared the way a window cleared in rain when the wipers caught the right rhythm. The rolling, layered uncertainty that had attended every reading she had attempted on the hauler simply resolved. She reached out, lightly, toward the next several minutes of her own life, and the reading came back the way readings had always come back before Ambria. One thread. One arc of likely event. The cantina, the walk, the residence, a turn at a specific intersection where two factory workers would stand in her path and step aside without looking at her. Clean.

She stepped off the lift on the lower platform with the reading still resolving forward.

Cesko sector was as she remembered it, only wetter. Drainage from the upper platforms collected here in long streams that ran down the central avenue. The lighting was sodium-yellow and too dim for comfort. Workers moved through the streets in the heavy, deliberate way of people who had been on shift too long.

The smell was processed effluent and old grease and a third thing she had a name for and chose not to use it.

She walked the route Zannah had given her.

The residence was a four-story block midway down a side avenue, faced in dark plascrete and shuttered against the haze. It had no signage. The windows were the small, recessed kind that suggested someone inside cared more about angle of fire than about light. A narrow service alley ran along the north wall. The two factory workers Cognus had foreseen were exactly where she had foreseen them. They stepped aside without looking at her.

She did not slow as she passed. She catalogued what her eyes and her senses gave her in the seconds she had. Four security points she could identify from the street. Two she could not but suspected. A faint Force-pressure at the second-floor windows that suggested either an artifact of significance or a practitioner currently in residence. The stillness of a building that had not been entered or exited in days. She did not extend her senses further. The instruction had been to walk past. She walked past.

At the corner she turned right, descended two more blocks at a steady pace, and circled back to the cantina by a different route.

Zannah was at a table in the back, untouched cup of caf in front of her, watching the door without watching the door.

Cognus sat across from her.

"The residence shows nine days of disuse on the surface, consistent with what Pelu reported. A practitioner-grade Force signature at the second floor that did not appear stale. Either he left an artifact behind, or he is inside and chose not to register on my approach."

Zannah's mouth moved into something that was not quite the expression from the hauler.

"Then we have what we needed. He is there."

"You are certain."

"He left an artifact at his front window for me to find. He did not assume I would send my apprentice to walk past."

Cognus considered the implication. Set Harth had not run. He had set a marker — a Force-presence calibrated for someone reading at Zannah's level. It would register as the practitioner's continued residence to a casual sweep. To anyone who looked carefully it would register as something else, perhaps an invitation, perhaps a challenge. He had assumed Zannah would come, and he had assumed she would come herself.

"He is waiting for you."

"He is waiting for the version of me that walked off Ambria." Zannah set the cup down without drinking from it. "He will discover that the version that arrived is not the one he prepared for."

She rose. Cognus rose with her.

"We do not approach tonight. I want the residence watched for a full standard day before we move. Pelu will arrange it. After that, we go."

"Yes, Master."

They walked out of the cantina into Cesko's yellow light, and the lower city absorbed them as it absorbed everything that did not insist on being seen.

CHAPTER 4

They returned to Cesko in the deepest part of the cycle, when the upper platforms had dimmed to maintenance lighting and the lower districts ran on whatever generators their occupants could afford. Pelu's watchers had reported nothing. No entries. No exits. The Force-presence at the second-floor window had not shifted in twenty-six hours.

Zannah read this as confirmation. Cognus read it as a problem.

"If he intended to be elsewhere," Cognus said, as they crossed the alley a block south of the residence, "the marker should have softened by now. Projected presences decay. They do not hold this long without an anchor."

"The anchor is in the building."

"Then he is in the building."

"Yes."

Cognus did not ask why. She had not asked because she did not yet know the question. The Master had given her the answer to a question she had not posed, which meant the Master had been sitting with the question herself. Cognus held the exchange beside the others.

They moved into the service alley along the north wall. The alley was narrower than the maps had suggested and stank of standing water. A drainage grate at the far end ran wet from the upper platforms; the sound covered movement. Zannah stopped at the rear door and laid her palm against it. She did not speak. Her shoulders settled in the small way Cognus had begun to recognize as the precursor to a Working.

The lock turned. The door opened without sound.

Cognus had not seen the Working before. She did not know whether it was a Rite or one of the things her Master did that had no name. She was not at this moment inclined to ask. She drew Bane's saber from her hip and held it unignited, the hilt awkward in her hand.

They entered.

The ground floor was a single open space arranged by someone who had not cared to disguise that he lived alone. A table with one chair. A cooking surface with a half-prepared meal on it — protein paste in a pan, congealed but not yet rotten. Cognus estimated the meal at perhaps two days old, abandoned mid-preparation by a man who had apparently decided he was no longer hungry. The air carried the faint sharp tang of recent ozone.

Zannah moved to the stairs at the far end of the room. Cognus followed at the position she had occupied across the city earlier. Half a step back. Slightly left.

Her foresight had returned to its layered uncertainty the moment she stepped through the rear door. She had expected this. She had registered the transition in the alley, the way a swimmer registered the line where warm water gave way to cold. The Master had a radius. The radius did what the radius did. For

now there was the staircase, and the second floor, and the room at the back where the Force-presence sat anchored and unmoving.

They climbed.

The hallway above was darker than the room below. A single recessed light at the far end illuminated a closed door. Zannah stopped three paces from it. She did not draw her saber-staff. She rested her right hand at her hip in the loose, ready posture of a practitioner whose primary instrument was not a blade.

Zannah opened the door with a small Working that did not require touch.

Set Harth was sitting at a desk against the far wall. The Andeddu holocron sat open before him, or what looked like it, its red light playing across his face and the surface of the desk and the drawn shutters of the second-floor windows. He had been writing in a small notebook in his own hand. He set the stylus down and looked up as the door opened.

His expression was not surprise.

It was a smile. A wide, loose, uneven smile that did not seat on his face the way Zannah remembered Harth's smile seating on his face. It was the smile of a man who had heard a joke he could not stop hearing.

"Allia," he said. The voice was Harth's. The cadence was not.

"Set Harth," Zannah said.

The smile broadened. He produced a small giggle, unmistakable and entirely without context, and his head tilted to the right by a degree more than balance required. He returned the head to upright with a small, jerky correction. His hands rested on the desk in front of the holocron, fingers spread.

"Allia, Allia, Allia." The giggle rose into something that almost became a laugh, and then settled again. He did not seem to register the inappropriateness of it, or to be performing it for effect. It simply was what his mouth did now. "You came. You came. He said you would."

Cognus, hooded behind her Master's right shoulder, watched the body that had been Harth. The Iktotchi gift she had not been able to use cleanly inside Zannah's radius for nine days now produced something new for this body alone. Not interference. Not layering. Nothing. The body in the chair did not have a future for her to read.

Zannah did not move. She studied Harth for the length of a breath. Then a second breath. Whatever she was reading, she did not appear to be enjoying the answer.

"What did he do to you," she said. It was not a question.

Harth giggled again. It became a real laugh this time, brief and bright and physically wrong. His hands fluttered against the surface of the desk in a way that had nothing to do with what hands were for.

"He said you would come," the body repeated. "He said. He said."

Zannah stepped to the desk. She lifted the holocron with two fingers under its base, briefly, and set it back down. The red glow continued. The interior currents did not respond to her touch the way Andeddu's holocron had responded to Bane's touch in the years she had watched him work it. The weight was wrong. The harmonic of it was wrong. She knew within a second that what she was looking at had been built by a craftsman of considerable skill to be mistaken for what it was not.

The real holocron was not in this room.

Neither, in any meaningful sense, was Set Harth.

Cognus saw her Master's shoulders settle into the small, precise set that meant a decision had been made.

Zannah killed him.

She did not use the brainstem Rite. She used something slower. A Working she had not performed in front of Cognus before. She would not have performed it in front of most witnesses she did not own. It required a particular state of mind to do well, and an apprentice did not need to know how easily her Master could occupy that state. Zannah extended her right hand, fingers curled, and closed her fist by degrees.

Harth's hands lifted off the desk.

He did not stand. The hands lifted because the muscles in his forearms were contracting against his will, the tendons standing out hard along the backs of his wrists. His mouth opened. The smile did not go. The smile, in fact, widened. His eyes went to Zannah's closed fist and stayed there, and the giggle returned, faint and continuous, an undercurrent beneath the breathing.

The bones in his right wrist gave first. The sound was small — a wet, muffled crack, more felt in the room than heard. The body laughed. It was not a noise of pain, though the pain was certainly present in the body's nerves. It was the body laughing at the shape of what was happening to it. Zannah's fist tightened a quarter-turn. The bones in his left wrist followed. His arms stayed where the working held them, ruined and useless above the desk, and the laugh became briefly louder before settling again into the giggle.

"Tell me anything," Zannah said. "One name. One direction. Anything."

The body's mouth moved. What came out was the laugh.

Zannah closed her fist the rest of the way.

The working that had been pressing inward on the soft architecture of Harth's chest finished what it had started. His ribs went in the order ribs went when a force pressed evenly through the body cavity from the front. The lower first, then upward. The small bones snapped in sequence. His chest collapsed in on itself in the practiced manner of a body whose interior had been instructed to occupy less space than the body's frame had been built to hold. Blood came out of his mouth and his nose at the same time.

The laugh did not stop until the chest was finished.

Then the head fell forward and struck the desk with a small, neat thud, missing the holocron by perhaps four centimeters.

The body did not move after that.

Zannah lowered her hand. She held the position for another two seconds, the way a craftsman held a tool in place after the cut, confirming the cut was complete before letting go.

The kill was complete. The Rite she had used was older than the brainstem application Bane had taught her. She had chosen it deliberately. She had wanted answers. She had wanted to give him time to give them. The body had given her laughter. The body had not been capable of giving her anything else.

What she had not yet set aside was the wrongness.

It had nothing to do with the kill. The kill had been clean by her standards and brutal by any other, exactly the kill she had intended once she had registered what was waiting for her in the chair. The body was dead. She had verified the death personally.

But there was an absence she could not name. Not in the body. Around it. Through it. The body had been Harth. The bones had been Harth's bones. The fear in the last second, for

there had been fear beneath the laughter, in the small protests of the nervous system that could not have been faked, had been Harth's fear. The blood had been Harth's blood.

Something else had not been Harth's, and she could not name what it was.

The wrongness she set aside. There would be time for it later.

Cognus had not moved during the kill. She had registered the working as it operated, registered Harth's registration of it, registered her own foresight producing nothing where the future of the immediately-after should have been. The body settling. The room quiet. The departure of two figures down the stairs. These were resolved facts the moment the kill landed, and they should have read clean.

They read absent.

She set the absence aside. She did not know yet whether it was the Master's radius doing what the radius did, or whether it was a thing that belonged to the body on the desk. She would consider it later. She would, in fact, consider it for some years.

Zannah crossed back to the desk, lifted the false holocron without touching its base directly, and set it into a containment case she drew from inside her coat. The case sealed with a soft pressure. The red light cut off. The room dimmed by a third. She would have it taken apart on Ciutric. The forger would have left traces. The forger had been Harth, or someone Harth had paid, and either way the artifact carried a record of hands and intent that might yet point her where she needed to go.

She looked at the body once. She did not look again.

"We leave," she said.

"Yes, Master."

Cognus did not glance back as they moved past the desk toward the door. There was nothing on the desk now that was hers to consider.

They descended in silence. The ground floor was as they had left it. The protein paste on the cooking surface had not moved. The rear door admitted them to the alley. The alley delivered them to the avenue, and the avenue to the lift. The lift carried them up to the platforms. A hired skiff waited at a freight pad three blocks from where they had landed. Zannah paid the skiff's pilot in cash. They were aboard the hauler within forty minutes of leaving the residence.

Cognus stowed Bane's saber. She had not ignited it. She had not needed to.

Zannah stood at the workbench in the cargo bay, the containment case set before her, both hands flat against its surface. She did not speak. The Working she had performed twice before in Cognus's presence, the still attention and the slow breathing, she now performed over the sealed case for almost a full minute. When she lifted her hands the case was unchanged. Whatever she had checked for, she had either found or had not. She did not say which.

The spirit had been silent through the entire encounter.

This was, Cognus would only later understand, the single most significant detail of the evening. The spirit who never stopped speaking inside the Master's head had said nothing when Zannah killed Set Harth.

What Cognus did not see was the small set of her Master's shoulders as Zannah lifted her hands from the case. Zannah had reached, internally, for a voice that should have been there and had found that voice deliberately withheld. She considered, in

the second after, whether to press for what the spirit was choosing not to say. She decided against it. Bane's silence was the silence of a teacher refusing to correct a student who had not yet seen what the lesson was. She would not give him the satisfaction of asking.

The hauler lifted at dawn. Bilbousa fell away beneath them in its layers, the haze swallowing the upper domes within minutes. Cognus settled against the bulkhead of the cargo bay with Bane's saber across her thighs and waited for the next instruction.

Zannah did not give one. She carried the containment case back to the cabin and the door slid closed behind her.

Cognus closed her eyes and did not reach forward. She had no particular interest in what the next several minutes contained. She had three observations now, and the three did not yet relate to each other in any way she could name. She would let them sit.

She slept.

CHAPTER 5

The hauler had been in transit for two days when Cognus first registered that her Master was sitting with something.

It did not show in any of the ways such a thing showed in the people Cognus had watched in her professional life. Zannah did not pace. She did not leave the cabin to stand at the bay's viewport and stare into the streaks of hyperspace. She did not work the leather case at the bench, or open the false holocron's containment, or do anything visible with her hands. She sat. She read. She wrote, in the small bound text she had brought with her from Ambria. The hauler hummed. The recycled air pulsed.

But the writing came in shorter intervals than it had on the outbound transit. Zannah would set her stylus down, look at the page she had filled, sit with it for some minutes, and resume. Cognus, watching from the bay across two open doorways, registered the rhythm. The Master was returning to a thought she had set aside and could not, this transit, leave alone.

Cognus did not ask what it was. She had not yet earned the right to ask, and even if she had earned it, she was not sure she wanted the answer. The wrongness in the Cesko residence had been the Master's wrongness, not hers. The body had given her

laughter and her own foresight had given her absence, and she had set both aside the way she had been setting aside the layered readings since Ambria. The category of unfinished things grew. She did not yet have language for it. She did not yet require it to have language.

On the third day Zannah moved to the workbench.

She set the small bound text aside and laid her hands flat on the bench's surface, in the posture Cognus now recognized as the precursor to a Working. There was nothing on the bench in front of her. No leather case. No holocron. Nothing for her hands to be working on. The hands rested on the bench because the bench was the place where her hands worked.

She closed her eyes.

For perhaps an hour she did nothing visible. Her shoulders settled. Her breathing slowed. The hum of the hauler's power couplings did not soften the way it had in the outbound transit when she had been working the case. Whatever she was attempting now, it was not finding the shape it required. After the hour she opened her eyes, frowned at the bench, and began again.

Cognus watched from her position against the bulkhead. She did not extend her foresight. She had stopped reaching for it inside the radius for any purpose that did not require it. After Cesko she had concluded that the gift was not, here, going to give her what it gave her elsewhere, and the conservation of effort was its own discipline. She watched her Master sit at the bench and reach for something that was not arriving.

After a second hour Zannah lifted her hands from the bench and turned toward Cognus.

"There is a Rite I will teach you today."

Cognus rose. “Yes, Master.”

“It is the Rite of Quiet Hands. Inherited. Old enough that the lineage is no longer interesting. The text I am giving you is one I copied from Bane’s records ten years ago, before Doan, before any of this.” Zannah held out a small bound document Cognus had not seen her produce. “Read it. Slowly. Twice. Then we will work it together.”

Cognus took the document. It was no longer than thirty pages, hand-copied in a Sith script she could read with effort but had not learned to read fluently. The Rite of Quiet Hands. She did not know it by name. She read.

The first reading took her perhaps twenty minutes. The second was slower. The Rite was a discipline, not a technique. It placed the practitioner in a state where the small involuntary signals of the body, the things assassination training had taught her to read in others and conceal in herself, were suppressed entirely. Hands did not tremble. Pulse did not show in the throat. The micro-expressions that betrayed thought before thought reached language were held below their threshold of expression. The text named it Quiet Hands because the hands were where the discipline began. The hands, then the face, then the rest.

Cognus had developed, across the years of her professional work, a less formal version of the same discipline. The Rite framed the technique she had improvised and gave it structure. Reading it now, she registered two things at once. She had been performing a third of what the Rite asked. She had also been performing it inefficiently, leaning on conscious suppression where the Rite asked for a deeper structural quiet that would not require the conscious overhead.

Cognus finished the second reading and looked up.

Zannah was watching her.

"Tell me what the Rite is for."

"For an apprentice who will be in rooms her Master is not in. Performing work her Master will not be present to monitor. With people whose precognition or empathy or simple observational skill is good enough to read what the apprentice is working to conceal." Cognus considered the document's last page. "It is also for a practitioner who is going to sit, daily, in proximity to a being whose presence she cannot name without revealing more than she means to reveal."

Zannah did not move. The gold of her eyes held on Cognus for a beat longer than the answer required.

"The text does not say the second."

"No."

"You read it from the structure."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah inclined her head — a small, brief gesture that was not approval and was also not its absence. She crossed to the bay floor, lowered herself into a meditation posture, and indicated the floor opposite her.

"Sit."

Cognus sat. She mirrored the posture. The hauler's deck was cold beneath her. The recycled air moved across her face as it had been moving for three days. Her body produced its small physiological response to the cold and the air and the proximity of her Master. The moment she registered the response, it was exactly the kind of signal the Rite asked her to suppress.

"Begin with the hands," Zannah said.

Cognus began with the hands.

The first attempt failed inside ten seconds. She had reached for the conscious suppression she had been using since adolescence, and the Rite immediately produced the layered, struggling quality of two systems trying to occupy the same operational space. Her right hand twitched against her thigh. She felt herself note the twitch and the noting itself produced a second twitch.

"Stop," Zannah said.

Cognus stopped.

"You are working from the surface inward. The Rite works from the structure outward. The hand is quiet because the body is quiet. The body is quiet because the will has placed itself in the position of an observer rather than an operator. You are not preventing the hand from moving. You are arranging your own consciousness so that the hand has nothing to respond to."

"Yes, Master."

"Again."

Cognus tried again.

The second attempt held for perhaps two minutes. The collapse was different this time — less the spasm of suppression failing and more the slow drift of a state she had not yet learned to maintain without effort. Her shoulders began to register their position. Her face began to consult the room.

"Stop. Better."

"Thank you, Master."

"You will work this every morning before any other practice. For six months. After six months we will discuss what comes next." Zannah rose. Cognus rose with her. "You will not, in those six months, expect to find your work has improved. The

Rite reveals its own depth slowly. The discipline is the practice, not the visible result."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah returned to the workbench. She did not sit at it. She stood at it for a long moment, hands at her sides, looking at the surface as though the bench had refused her something earlier in the day. She considered, briefly, whether to ask again. Then she turned back into the cabin and the door slid closed behind her.

Cognus took her position against the bulkhead.

She did not work the Rite. The Master had said every morning, and Cognus understood every morning to mean every morning. The first morning of practice would be the morning after this conversation, not the afternoon of it. She turned the document on her knee and read it a third time, more slowly than the second, and then she set it aside.

The hauler ran on.

Cognus thought, in the hours that followed, about the structure of what the Master had given her. Quiet Hands was a Rite Zannah had taught her without explanation. The reasons offered themselves in sequence. The Master required an apprentice whose body would not betray her in rooms the Master could not enter. The Master required, also, an apprentice who would be in proximity, daily, to a being she could not name. Both were true at once. The Rite served both. The Master had chosen the Rite that did the most work for the smallest pedagogical investment, which was not the choice of a teacher beginning an apprenticeship without urgency.

She set that observation aside as well.

On the fifth day of transit Zannah emerged from the cabin and stood at the viewport in the bay for the first time since Nal

Hutta. She did not speak. She watched the streaks of hyperspace at the angle hyperspace was watched from a hauler's small viewport, which was not a particularly good angle, and Cognus watched her watch it.

"We will be at Ciutric in two days," Zannah said, without turning.

"Yes, Master."

"You have been to the estate."

Cognus did not answer immediately. The Master had said it as a statement, the way the Master said most things. It was, as a statement, accurate. It was also a thing the Master had been carrying with her since before the question of Set Harth had been answered. Cognus had registered the carrying without commenting on it across nine days on the outbound transit and four days on the return.

"I have, Master."

"You took Bane from it."

"Yes, Master."

"Tell me how the household responded."

Cognus considered the question. It was not the question she had expected. She had expected something operational — the layout of the grounds, the staff's habits, the security configuration as it had stood the night she had taken Bane. The Master was asking instead about the response.

"The household did not respond," Cognus said. "They observed Sepp Omek's departure with a contracted security operative as routine. The household had been told that the merchant occasionally traveled on short notice, with private security, and would return when business permitted. I left the

morning after the capture. I did not stay to observe how the staff handled a return that did not, that month, occur."

"And the estate when you arrived?"

"In good order. Staff present. The grounds maintained. The mansion cared for in the way a property of that kind was cared for in the absence of its owners — without ceremony and without gaps."

"The same household will be there when we arrive."

"Yes, Master."

"They will receive Allia Omek and her business associate with the same lack of ceremony."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah turned from the viewport. She looked at Cognus across the bay, the gold of her eyes steady, the small set of her shoulders that said she had concluded an internal conversation she had not been performing aloud.

"The estate is ours," she said. "The household has not been given reason to think otherwise. They will not be given reason now."

"No, Master."

Zannah crossed back toward the cabin. At the door she stopped, did not turn, and spoke once more.

"You will work the Rite tomorrow. Every morning until I tell you otherwise."

"Yes, Master."

The cabin door slid closed.

Cognus settled against the bulkhead and turned the document of the Rite on her knee. She read it a fourth time. The fourth reading produced what the third had not. She had agreed,

in accepting the Rite from her Master's hand, to a discipline she would carry every day of the years that remained to her.

The hauler ran on toward Ciutric.

She slept.

CHAPTER 6

The hauler broke atmosphere over the eastern canyons and the bamboo was the first thing Cognus saw.

She had seen it before. The capture run had brought her in along the same approach lane, at a different hour, in a different vessel. The bamboo had been the same. It ran in dense vertical stands across the canyon floors. It broke at the rims into sparser growth across the plateaus. It gave way to the cultivated estates of the Daplona corridor in the long northern valley. The light at this hour was westerly and warm. The shadows under the bamboo were the color of wet stone.

She did not register the recognition aloud.

Zannah stood at the bay's viewport for the descent. The cloak was put away. The trader's greys had been replaced with a layered tunic in the deeper umbers a wealthy Daplona merchant would wear for a return from extended off-world business. Neither formal nor traveled-in. The cut precise enough to suggest tailoring done locally and recently enough to suggest the wearer maintained accounts at the right houses. The saber-staff was at her hip beneath the coat. The leather case from the cabin

was inside a soft satchel slung at her shoulder. The false holocron's containment case was inside the satchel as well.

Allia Omek was returning home.

The hauler's freight pad was a private one, a half-kilometer downriver of the estate proper. It was leased through Omek family channels and unremarkable to anyone who did not know how to read the absence of public registration. The pilot set down at the appointed hour and held position. The ramp opened. Two figures in the unmarked livery the household used for transport waited at the base of it with a small ground vehicle.

Allia stepped down first. Cognus followed at the half-step distance the cover assigned her.

"Welcome home, mistress." The older of the two figures inclined his head. He was a Bothan of some years, lean and narrow-faced, the cream of his fur gone gray at the temples and along the line of his jaw. "The household has been notified. Master Jerris is expecting you within the hour."

"Thank you, Telar."

"Your associate, mistress?"

"Cognus," Allia said. "She will be with the household for the foreseeable. Her quarters in the east wing, please."

"Yes, mistress."

Cognus inclined her head to Telar in the precise degree the cover assigned an associate of unspecified seniority. The Bothan returned the gesture in the precise degree his position assigned a member of staff acknowledging a guest whose status had not yet been assessed. Both gestures were offered without warmth or its absence. The household was a place where transactions of recognition occurred at the speed of standing arrangements.

The vehicle moved off along the river road.

The Daplona ran on their right, broad and slow at this season, the water the color of old copper where the late sun caught it. The bamboo stood thick across the far bank in the canyon system that ran westward into the highlands. On the near bank the cultivated land of the Omek estate began at a low stone wall and extended past the road on both sides for the better part of a kilometer. Cognus had walked this wall not many weeks ago, in darkness and at a different pace.

Cognus watched it pass without registering the recognition aloud.

The estate proper resolved through a bend in the road. It was a long structure of pale stone, two stories at the main block and three at the eastern wing. The roofing was the dark slate common to wealthy Daplona properties. Deep verandas ran along the front, the kind the climate required. The grounds had been kept. The hedges were trimmed. The bamboo at the western boundary had been pushed back from the perimeter wall in the steady, patient way the household pushed back things that wanted to encroach. Five-point sensor arrays sat unobtrusively at the gate posts and along the outer wall, their casings weathered enough to read as old fixtures rather than recent installations.

The vehicle slowed at the gate. The gate opened. The vehicle proceeded up the long drive.

Allia did not speak. Cognus, beside her, watched the front of the building approach. She felt something she had not anticipated. It was the weight of a place she had previously entered as a hunter being approached, this time, as a guest. She set the weight aside.

The house steward was waiting at the front entrance.

Master Jerris was a Mirialan in his middle years, pale-skinned and carefully marked with the geometric facial tattoos his species used to record family lineage and household tenure. His were extensive. He had been with the Omek family for the better part of three decades, which the tattoos communicated to anyone who could read them and which Cognus could read with effort. He wore the dark green of senior household staff. His expression as Allia stepped from the vehicle was the calibrated welcome of a man whose mistress had been away on business. She had now returned, neither expected on this day specifically nor unexpected.

"Mistress Allia. Welcome."

"Master Jerris. Thank you."

"The house is in order. Your correspondence is on the study desk. Master Sepp's study has been kept as he left it, as you instructed. The eastern wing has been aired for your associate."

"Thank you. We will rest before dinner. Tell the kitchen to expect us at the eighth hour."

"Yes, mistress."

Jerris inclined his head, glanced once at Cognus with the same calibrated neutrality Telar had shown, and stepped aside to permit them entry. The household followed its protocols. The mistress had returned. The associate had been received. Specific instructions had been issued. The day's remaining work was now operational rather than ceremonial.

They entered the house.

The main hall was as Cognus remembered it. She did not allow the recognition to surface in her face or in the small adjustments of her body the Rite of Quiet Hands had begun, this morning at dawn, to discipline. She had crossed this floor

not long ago at a different pace, with a different intent, with a different occupant of the house. The pale stone underfoot had been the same. The long teakwood table at the hall's center had been in the same place. The high windows on the western wall had let in the same warm westerly light, slightly lower in the sky then, the season slightly forward of where it now sat.

She had taken Bane from a room past the second arch on the right.

She did not look toward that arch.

Allia did. It was a small movement, contained, the eyes traveling and returning, but Cognus registered it. The Master had registered the same arch and the same room beyond it, for entirely different reasons, and had arrived at the registration through entirely different paths. They both knew what was on the other side of that arch. Neither said.

Jerris saw nothing of either glance. He had been with the household long enough to read what the household required him to read and to be unaware of what it did not. He continued his briefing on standing accounts and routine maintenance as he led them toward the central staircase.

Allia stopped at the foot of the stairs.

She had stopped because something had stopped her.

It was a small thing. The hand at her side had begun to lift, very slightly, in the direction of a small carved panel set into the wall at the base of the staircase. The panel was decorative — an inset of dark wood, scaled with the geometry of the staircase, unremarkable. Sepp Omek had touched that panel as he passed it. Every time. For ten years. The hand at Allia's side was the hand Sepp had reached with, on the body Sepp had occupied, in the home Sepp had thought of as his.

The hand stopped halfway through the gesture.

Allia returned it to her side without comment. Jerris had paused, professionally, three steps up the staircase, awaiting his mistress. Cognus stood at the cover's assigned distance and watched.

'He kept the panel oiled,' Bane said, from inside her. 'I did not realize he had.'

The voice was not loud. It was not contemptuous. It was the voice of a man encountering a small intimate detail of a life that had been his and had ended. Without preparation he had registered that the ending had not been complete in the way he had assumed.

Zannah did not answer him.

'Allia,' Bane said.

Zannah did not answer him.

Bane settled into the silence he had been holding since Cesko, but the silence was different now. It was the silence of a man who had broken his own discipline and would not be permitted, by his own pride, to elaborate on the breaking. He receded. The small physical pull at Zannah's right hand subsided.

She climbed the stairs.

Cognus followed, at the half-step distance, registering that something had passed across her Master's face at the staircase that was not the Master's face alone. She filed the registration in the category that did not yet have a name.

The day proceeded.

In the late afternoon the household had withdrawn to its standing duties. The eastern wing had been settled to Cognus's satisfaction. Allia and Cognus met in the study at the rear of the main block.

The study was Allia's, not Sepp's. The distinction mattered. Sepp's study sat across the main hall, behind the second arch on the right, kept as he had left it per the standing instruction Allia had renewed this morning through Jerris. Allia's study was smaller, lined with shelves along three walls, the fourth wall a tall window looking onto the western garden and the bamboo beyond. The desk was teakwood, plain, much used. The chair behind it was the chair Allia had used for ten years. She sat in it now.

Cognus took the chair across from the desk.

"The household will adjust to your presence," Allia said. "Telar and Jerris are competent. The kitchen is excellent. The grounds staff are not to be engaged in conversation about anything other than the grounds. The east wing is yours. You will use it as you require."

"Yes, Master."

"Tonight at dinner the household will be told that you are my business partner from the Pellaeon route. We have known each other for two standard years. Our arrangement is recent and exclusive. They will not require further detail and will not, in any case, ask."

"Yes, Master."

"The library is in the west wing. We will begin there tomorrow."

"Yes, Master."

Allia looked at Cognus across the desk for a long moment. The gold in her eyes had returned, in the hours since the staircase, to its ordinary depth. Whatever Bane had said to her, and whatever she had not said to him, had been set aside in the disciplined manner everything was set aside in this house.

"The house remembers," Allia said. "We will work around it."

"Yes, Master."

Cognus rose. The Master had not dismissed her in words, but the conversation had ended in the way conversations ended in this house. The next operational matter had become more useful than the present one. Cognus inclined her head and withdrew.

In the corridor she paused.

Through the study's closed door she could hear nothing. The Rite she had begun to work this morning had taught her, already, that listening at doors required a different kind of attention than the listening she had developed in her professional years. She did not yet have the discipline to apply it well. She did not try.

Cognus walked through the main hall toward the eastern wing.

Past the second arch on the right she did not look. The room beyond it was the room beyond it. The work of the present day had been completed. The work of tomorrow would begin in the morning.

The house received her steps without comment.

CHAPTER 7

Zannah opened the library on the second morning.

The doors had been closed since the night she left for Ambria. The floor smelled faintly of fresh oil. The windows had been cleaned recently enough to catch the morning sun without scatter, and the long teakwood reading table at the room's center bore the small even sheen of having been polished, perhaps, the day before. The shelves were as she had left them. The volume she had closed last, at the table by the western window on the night before her departure, was still in the position she had closed it.

She stood at the threshold for some moments before she went in.

Cognus, behind her, watched without comment. The library was longer than the hallway had suggested. The shelves ran the full length of both side walls, two stories tall, accessed by a narrow gallery at the second level. A single tall window at the far end let in the western light. The room smelled of paper kept in a climate-controlled space for ten years, and of the fresh oil at the floor, and of the cold quiet a room produces when it has been waiting longer than it was built to wait.

Zannah crossed to the table by the western window and laid her hand flat on the closed volume. She did not open it. She drew her fingers down the spine, once, in the way a craftsman tested the edge of an instrument that had been put away for a season. Then she turned and crossed back to the central table.

She drew a different volume from the third bay, set it on the table, and marked a page with her thumbnail.

"You will work the Rite for an hour after dawn," she said. "The library is yours from then until the household requires you elsewhere. You will read what I leave on this table. When I return in the evening you will tell me what you have read and what you think it meant."

"Yes, Master."

"You will not catalogue anything. The catalogue is mine."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah looked at Cognus across the table for a beat longer than the instruction had required. Whatever she was reading in her apprentice this morning, she did not name. She left the library.

Cognus took the chair at the central table and opened the book.

✦

The property broker arrived on the fourth day.

His name was Gennar Vesh, a Givin of long acquaintance with the Omek accounts, and he had been managing the household's liquid arrangements through three intermediaries during the absence. Jerris showed him to the small reception room behind the front entrance. Allia met him there at the

appointed hour. Cognus, working in the library above, came down at the signal.

Vesh's exoskeleton was the pale white of his species, his eyes set deep in the orbital sockets that gave Givin their characteristic skull-faced appearance. He wore the dark suit of a Daplona financial agent. He had brought a flexible datapad and three sheaves of physical correspondence, which he set on the low table without comment.

"Mistress Omek. Welcome back."

"Mr. Vesh. Thank you."

"Your accounts are in the order you left them. I have prepared a summary of the discretionary movements I made in your absence. Twelve items over the period. None significant."

"Acknowledged."

Vesh inclined his head in the small, precise inclination Givin used in formal commercial settings. He gestured to the correspondence.

"Three matters require your decision. The Pellaeon route lease is up for renewal in seventy days. The Daplona harbor commission has restructured the docking fees in a way that will affect your scheduled imports next quarter. And the Telerian estate has made a private inquiry as to whether you would consider a partnership on the Mid Rim spice routes. They were polite. I did not respond."

"You will not respond."

"Understood."

"The Pellaeon lease will renew. The harbor commission can be addressed in the standard manner. Send Mr. Telerian a courteous decline. We are not entering the spice trade."

"Yes, mistress."

Vesh pressed three contacts on his datapad and the matters were settled. He did not ask after Sepp. He did not ask after the new associate seated at the corner of the room. He had not been with the Omek family long enough to have known Sepp personally, and his profession did not encourage him to ask after persons whose absence had not been formally explained. He concluded the meeting with the same precise inclination with which he had begun it and was shown out.

When the door closed behind him, the woman behind the desk was no longer Allia.

"Vesh handles the surface accounts," Zannah said. "The other accounts you will meet in time."

"Yes, Master."

✦

On the seventh day Hessa Tann was discovered to have died.

Hessa had been an information source in the Daplona spice market, a Twi'lek woman of late middle age who had served the Omek interests for fourteen years. Notification reached the household through a second-tier broker who had been sitting on the news without realizing it was news. Hessa had passed quietly in her sleep some six standard months before, of a wasting illness common to her species in the later decades of life. Her affairs had been settled by a daughter who knew nothing of the Omek family by name and had received only a small standing payment routed through three intermediaries.

Zannah read the notification twice at her desk in the study. She set it aside. She sent Cognus to confirm.

Cognus took the afternoon transport into Daplona's spice quarter. She visited the daughter at her place of business — a small textile shop two streets back from the public market — under a cover identity prepared for her that morning. She purchased a length of cloth she did not need. She asked, in the tone of an old friend of the mother, after the circumstances. The daughter spoke of the illness, of the slow decline, of the quiet end. There was no element in the account that did not align with what the second-tier broker had reported. The daughter herself was without artifice.

Cognus paid for the cloth, expressed condolences in the appropriate degree, and returned to the estate by the eighth hour.

She reported.

"Coincidence," Zannah said.

"Yes, Master."

"She was a good operator. We will not replace her in that market for some time."

"No, Master."

Zannah returned the notification to the relevant fold in the study's correspondence drawer. Hessa Tann was closed. Cognus returned to the library. The volume Zannah had set on the central table that morning waited for her to finish it.

✦

In the second week Cognus was given her first independent task.

It was small. A long-time supplier of household provisions on the Pellaeon route had restructured its pricing. The pattern suggested the supplier had taken on a new partner and was no

longer offering the rates the relationship had earned. Allia did not require the supplier's loyalty back. She required confirmation of who the new partner was, gathered in a manner that would not communicate Omek interest.

Cognus left the estate at midmorning.

She returned at the eighth hour with the new partner's name, the timeline of their entry into the supplier's arrangements, and a clear assessment of what the partnership was worth in actual credits. Three streams of information from three sources. None of them had registered her presence as Cognus. None of them had been told her question. All of them had been induced to volunteer what she required by routes that did not connect.

Zannah received the report at the desk in the study. She read it through. She set it down.

"Good," she said.

"Thank you, Master."

"That was faster than I expected."

"I have had practice."

Zannah looked up from the report. She looked at Cognus across the desk for a beat longer than the answer had required. Whatever the look meant, she did not name it.

"We will discuss the supplier tomorrow," she said.

Cognus rose to withdraw. She had reached the doorway when Zannah spoke again.

"Set Harth."

Cognus stopped.

"The body in Cesko was his," Zannah said. "The mind was not. The arrangement he referred to was the arrangement that emptied him. Whatever did the emptying continues to operate,

and Harth — whoever Harth is now, wherever he is now — is the only living person who knows what it is."

"We have the false holocron."

"We have the work of his hands. It will yield what it yields when the library is in a state to read it. That will be months. Possibly longer."

"The trail from Cesko."

"Was prepared to be cold by the time we walked through the door. He moved before we arrived. He moved before he knew we were arriving. He moved on the schedule he had been given."

Cognus considered that. Pelu had reported the Force-presence at the second-floor window unmoving for nine days. The body in the chair had not been Harth in any meaningful sense for at least that long. The trail Harth had taken was nine days cold before they had landed on Nal Hutta. By now it was weeks.

"So he is gone," Cognus said.

"He is gone in the way a man is gone when the network he might have used is the same network we would use to find him. Every broker we approach for a trace is a broker he can also approach. Every operator we ask to watch for him is an operator we have just told he is being watched for. We will work the question. We will work it patiently. We will not move on it until the work the false holocron yields tells us where to put a hand."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah looked at her across the desk. The gold of her eyes held in the late light from the window.

"He is the loose end I cannot close yet," she said. "Hold him there with me."

"Yes, Master."

"Withdraw."

Cognus withdrew.

In the corridor she registered that the Master had been startled, briefly, by the speed of the work, and had elected not to communicate the registration. The Rite of Quiet Hands was teaching her, in its slow way, to read what others had not intended to communicate. She was, she suspected, going to become better at reading it than the Master had calibrated for. She set the suspicion in the category of things her Master might one day require her not to have noticed.

✦

Idris Marran arrived at the front gate on the fourteenth day, without an appointment, in a small private vehicle.

He was a Daplona merchant of nine years' professional acquaintance with Sepp Omek and had crossed paths with Allia at perhaps a dozen functions over that period. He imported textiles, primarily from the Outer Rim. Jerris received him in the foyer and inquired, with the calibrated regret of a senior steward, whether the mistress was available. The mistress was. Marran was shown to the reception room.

Cognus was not introduced. She remained in the library as instructed.

The conversation in the reception room ran for thirty-seven minutes by the household clock. When Marran left, he left at the same pace and through the same gate at which he had arrived.

Zannah returned to the study. Cognus was sent for.

"Marran asked after Sepp," Zannah said. "Twice. Once in the standard form one merchant uses to ask after another, and once

in the form one uses when one believes the other has been absent for longer than would be ordinarily explained."

"What did he hear."

"That Sepp is on Dweem, completing an extended acquisition that has run longer than the original schedule. That Allia returned ahead of him because the household required her presence. That Sepp will return when the work permits."

"And he received it."

"He received it because it is a credible answer and because he is a polite man. He will not press again for some weeks. By then we will have decided whether Sepp is to return in the manner the household expects or in the manner the household does not."

Cognus did not answer. The question of how Sepp Omek concluded his absence was the Master's question. The Master had been holding it since before Ambria, and had not yet resolved it, and would resolve it in the time the matter required.

Zannah rose from the desk.

"The clock has begun," she said. "We will move accordingly."

"Yes, Master."

The reactivation continued through the third week and into the fourth. Operators were confirmed or replaced. Accounts moved. The library's central table held a different volume each morning. Cognus worked the Rite at dawn, read until evening, and was deployed at the Master's discretion on tasks that grew, by small degrees, less small.

On the twenty-third day Sepp Omek's documented schedule passed the halfway point of his extended Dweem acquisition.

Zannah made a small mark in the calendar she kept at the side of her desk and did not speak of it.

CHAPTER 8

Zannah read the treatise through twice before the morning light reached the western window.

It was a small bound volume of perhaps two hundred pages, the leather worn pale at the corners from the years it had spent on her own shelf and on Bane's before her. The treatise was a Sith philosophical work of the late Brotherhood period, anonymous in its authorship, doctrinally orthodox in its argument. The dark side as the only honest expression of will. Power as the only honest currency between practitioners. The doctrine Bane had refined into the Rule of Two had grown from soil this volume helped to till. Zannah had read it for the first time at twenty-four, at Bane's direction. She had accepted its arguments with the assent of a young apprentice whose teacher had just placed in her hands the foundation he expected her to stand on.

Zannah had closed the volume on the table by the western window on the night she left for Ambria.

This morning the volume was open. She had not opened it expecting to disagree with it. The last reading in her memory had been a reading she had performed under Bane's direction. Bane's

direction had not survived Ambria. She wanted to know what she would find in the text now that she was reading it without him standing behind her.

What she found was a book that was the same book.

What had changed was that she could now hear the questions the book had not asked.

The treatise spent forty pages establishing that the dark side rewarded honest hunger. It spent another forty arguing that practitioners who pretended to other motives — service, balance, defense of the weak — were practitioners who diluted their own access to the well. It spent the final hundred and twenty pages elaborating, with patient, lawyerly detail, the techniques by which a practitioner kept their hunger pure.

Nowhere in any of those two hundred pages did the treatise ask whether hunger was the deepest available motivation. It did not ask whether the well it drew from was the only well. It did not ask whether the practitioner who kept their hunger pure for forty years became something other than a vessel for it.

Zannah closed the volume on the page she had been reading. She did not return it to its place on the western-window table. She set it instead on the central reading table at the room's center, where the dual-track work would begin.

Zannah rose.

The central table was a long teakwood plane, deep enough for three open volumes and four catalogue sheets to lie flat without overlap. The Omek family catalogue had been organized for ten years by acquisition date. The ledger system had satisfied the inheritance audits the family had occasionally been required to provide. It had told Zannah nothing she had not already known about the contents of her own shelves. That catalogue

would continue. She had no reason to disturb a system the household understood and the household's peers expected. The household's tax accountants would receive their annual summaries. The Omek estate would continue, on paper, to maintain a respectable but unremarkable private collection of Old Republic philosophy and middle-period rhetorical work.

Beneath the surface catalogue she would now build a second system.

The second system would not be organized by acquisition date. It would not be organized by author or by century or by any of the conventional armatures a private collection of educated means might use. It would be organized by the questions the treatise this morning had not asked.

From the drawer she drew a fresh catalogue sheet.

She wrote, at the top, in the Sith script she had been taught as an apprentice and had never had cause to write in this house: The well. Its depth. Its other waters.

She paused. She considered what she had written. She did not strike it through. She set the sheet face-down on the central table, beneath the closed treatise, where the household would not see it during the morning's cleaning rotation.

The first entry of the second system had been made.

Cognus arrived at the appointed hour.

Cognus entered the library at the seventh hour and inclined her head to her Master, who was at this moment Zannah, the door closed and the household occupied below stairs with the day's ordinary business. She had worked the Rite of Quiet Hands at dawn. She did not yet know whether the Rite had begun to take.

Zannah gestured to the chair across the central table.

"Sit. There is a Rite I will teach you today. It is not the Rite of Quiet Hands. The Rite of Quiet Hands is a discipline. What I will teach you now is a foundation."

"Yes, Master."

"The Rite of the Drawn Breath. Inherited. The text I am giving you was copied for me by Bane in the second year of my training, at the same age you are now. The text is older than him. It is older than the Brotherhood. It is, by some accounts, older than the orthodoxy that codified the Sith path into the form Bane and I inherited."

Zannah drew a second small bound document from a shelf in the second bay and set it before Cognus. This one was longer than the document of Quiet Hands, perhaps sixty pages, the script considerably older.

"The Rite is the foundational practice by which a Sith places her breath in alignment with the currents of the dark side. It is the practice every other practice rests on. You will not work the higher Rites well, or the more advanced Workings at all, without it. You will work it morning and evening. You will work it in addition to Quiet Hands, not in place of it."

"Yes, Master."

"Read the text twice before this evening. We will work the first attempt together at the eighth hour."

Cognus took the document and inclined her head. She did not yet open it.

"What was the volume on the western table this morning," she asked.

Zannah did not turn from the central table.

"A treatise of Sith philosophy that I read at twenty-four and accepted then. I read it again this morning."

"And."

"And it is not a different book. I am a different reader."

Zannah said nothing more. Cognus understood from the small set of her Master's shoulders that the conversation had completed the work it was permitted to do this morning. Further questions about the western-window table belonged to a category of questions she had not yet earned the right to ask.

She did not yet withdraw to the second bay.

"Master."

Zannah turned.

"Before I read," Cognus said. "Show me the breath."

Zannah considered her for a beat that was not entirely the beat the request had required. Whatever she was registering in the question, she did not name it. She crossed back to the central table. She drew the chair Cognus had not yet sat in.

"Sit."

Cognus sat.

"The breath enters at the diaphragm. It is not held in the chest. It is not pulled in the throat. The diaphragm draws and the rest of the body permits the drawing. You will not feel the dark side at the first attempt. The Rite is not a key. It is a posture. The posture, practiced, makes the practitioner a vessel the dark side enters in its own time."

"Yes, Master."

"Watch."

Zannah closed her eyes. Her shoulders settled. Her face did not change. Her chest did not visibly rise. But the air in the room moved, very slightly, in a current Cognus did not register through her ears or her skin. Her species had developed a small cellular awareness for atmospheric change, and the change

registered there. The current was not strong. It moved in the direction of Zannah, as though the room had begun, in some subtle accounting, to acknowledge her presence as the principal feature of itself.

After perhaps thirty seconds Zannah opened her eyes. The air in the room returned to its ordinary indifference.

"That is the Rite at its operational baseline," Zannah said. "What you saw is what a competent practitioner of twenty years produces without effort. You will not produce it tonight. You will not produce it in a year. You will produce, if you work the Rite faithfully, an approximation of it within five years that is sufficient for the work I will require of you. Read the text. We will begin at the eighth hour."

"Yes, Master."

Cognus rose, took the document of the Drawn Breath, and withdrew to the chair at the second bay.

Zannah returned to her own work.

Zannah drew a clean sheet of paper toward her on the central table and uncapped a stylus. She wrote nothing for some minutes. The Held Breath had begun on the hauler outbound from Ambria. It had refused her at the bench during the return transit. It had refused her again at the staircase on the second morning when Bane had broken his silence. The Working was a problem of holding without releasing. A force-pressure conceived and sustained without expenditure. Every inherited Rite she knew assumed pressure was a thing applied and then withdrawn, the way a hand pressed and then lifted. The Held Breath asked what was on the other side of a hand that did not lift.

She wrote: Hold. Not press. Hold.

She wrote: The Working continues because the Working is no longer being performed. It is being inhabited.

She set the stylus down. The Working did not, this morning, advance further than the two lines she had committed. But it had advanced two lines further than it had advanced on the hauler. The conception was sharpening. The sharpening would take however long the sharpening required.

In the late morning Cognus had settled into the second bay with the Drawn Breath document. The room had returned to the long quiet a library produced when its occupants were both reading. Zannah drew a separate sheet of correspondence stationery and wrote a brief, encrypted message.

The message was addressed to Pelu.

It requested the acquisition, through whatever channels Pelu thought appropriate, of three named volumes of late-Republic Sith philosophy. Two had not been in active circulation for sixty years. The third had likely never been in circulation at all. The message specified discretion. It specified payment in the standard arrangement, doubled. It did not specify urgency. The acquisitions were to arrive when they arrived, by routes that did not connect to any Omek account.

Zannah sealed the message in a courier capsule and set it aside for the afternoon dispatch. The channels she would use had served her in the years before Ambria for matters the surface accounts were not to touch.

The first acquisition under the second system had been commissioned.

Zannah returned to the central table, drew the closed treatise toward her, and began rereading the volume again. She would read it three times today. Each reading would surface a different

layer of the questions the text had not asked. The second system's catalogue would, by evening, have a second entry, and a third.

Across the table, in the second bay, Cognus turned a page of the Drawn Breath.

The library returned to its work.

CHAPTER 9

Roon Velt was brought to the estate in the late afternoon.

He was a Sakiyan, sleek-skulled and small-framed, of perhaps forty standard years. He had been a low-tier shipping broker on the Daplona-Pellaeon corridor for eleven of those years and an Omek-adjacent operator for nine. The reactivation had surfaced him. The prior month had developed evidence that Velt had sold three sets of Omek shipping schedules to a Daplona competitor across the period of Allia's absence. He had assumed the absence would extend long enough for the sales to be inconvenient to detect and impossible to redress. He had been wrong on the first count. The second remained, in his understanding of the matter, his ground for hope.

Telar received him at the rear gate. The subject did not resist. He had been told, by the broker who had brought him in, that the matter under discussion was a renegotiation. He had not been told who the discussion would be with. Telar bound his wrists in the professional manner the household used for delivered subjects. The Bothan walked him to the small interview room at the rear of the main block, seated him, and left him to wait.

Cognus had been working both Rites for some weeks now. The Drawn Breath had begun, in the second week of practice, to produce the small involuntary stillness in her diaphragm the text described as the first sign of the Rite taking. The Quiet Hands had begun, the previous week, to operate without conscious supervision during the morning hours. She did not yet know what either Rite would feel like at its operational baseline. She suspected, watching her Master across the dinner table each evening, that she would not know for years.

When Telar passed the message that the subject had arrived, Zannah closed the volume she had been reading. She gestured for Cognus to follow her down to the small interview room at the rear of the main block.

The room was unfurnished beyond what the work required. A chair for the subject. A second chair, set at perhaps three meters distance, for the practitioner. A small side table for whatever the practitioner cared to set on it. The walls were stone. The single high window admitted enough light to read a face by and not enough to read more than that. The room had been designed, by Sepp Omek, for the kind of conversation a Daplona merchant occasionally needed to hold with a counterpart who had become inconvenient. The room had been used, across the years, perhaps eight times.

Velt was where Telar had left him. He looked up at the woman who came through the door and registered, with a small sharp adjustment of his expression, that the meeting was not what he had been led to expect.

"Mistress Omek."

"Mr. Velt."

"There has been a misunderstanding —"

"There has not. The schedules you sold to House Vellan are in your handwriting on three forms I have already verified. The conversation we will have now is not whether you sold them. It is what else you sold, to whom, and under what arrangement of continuing obligation."

Velt opened his mouth. He closed it. The misunderstanding he had prepared was not going to be useful in this room.

Zannah took the chair at three meters. Cognus stood at her Master's right shoulder, the cover's assigned distance, hood not in use because the room was not a room where hoods were required.

"We will begin," Zannah said.

She did not move. She did not lift a hand. She did not do anything Cognus could see.

Velt's face, after perhaps fifteen seconds, registered something he had not expected. He blinked. He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. He shifted his weight on the chair.

"I —"

He stopped. The stopping was not a stopping he had chosen.

Cognus extended her precognition toward the next minute. The reading did not arrive. Not in the layered uncertainty she had grown accustomed to inside her Master's radius. Not in the cleaner readings she sometimes recovered when the radius was momentarily occupied by something Zannah was not directly attending to. Nothing at all. The future of this room produced no thread for her to pull. She set the null reading aside without naming it and returned her attention to the subject.

Velt sat. The seconds passed.

After the first minute Cognus began to register that something was happening to him she could not source. His

breathing had not changed. His pulse, where the throat showed it, had remained even. The bound hands at his lap had not moved. But his face had taken on a stillness she could not source. Not the stillness of a man holding still. The stillness of a man who could not move past whatever moment he had arrived at. He was sitting in something that would not let him out.

Cognus knew what inherited mind-Rites did and did not do. The Huntress had hunted Force-users for years before she had been hunted by one, and the hunting had required study. Practitioner-grade applications of force-pressure were structured around release. The Rite applied. The Rite withdrew. The longest sustained application Cognus had ever heard of, from the literature she had studied during her assassin years, was perhaps fifteen seconds. Beyond that the Force-channel through which the pressure was being applied risked exhaustion, and beyond exhaustion the kind of internal damage that retired practitioners early. The release was structural to the working. It was not optional.

Whatever Zannah was doing now had not released.

It had not released at fifteen seconds, the limit the literature gave. It had not released at thirty. It had not released at a minute. The pressure was being held at an intensity that should not have been sustainable. The Working that held it should not have existed. The only evidence of the Working being performed was the woman in the chair across from the subject doing nothing at all.

Two minutes passed. Three.

Velt's eyes had gone wide, then flat, then a third configuration Cognus did not have language for. His mouth worked silently. The stillness had become a posture. He was

inside it, and the inside was not a thing he could leave, and the unleavable inside of it was producing the slow, complete erosion of whatever resistance he had brought to the chair.

At the four-minute mark he began to speak.

He gave them House Vellan, which they already knew. He gave them the arrangement, which Zannah had inferred. He gave them three other arrangements they had not known, two of which involved operators they had not yet identified as compromised. He gave them the meeting place in the second tier of Bilbousa — not Pelu's door, which Cognus marked silently — and the contact through whom House Vellan had reached him. He did not pause. He did not embellish. He did not, Cognus suspected, fully understand that he was speaking. The words came out of him because he was inside something that would not let them stay in.

He spoke for perhaps eight minutes.

When he was finished he sat without speaking for another minute. The Working held him in the place he had been held. He could not move on from it.

Then Zannah let the Working go.

The release was not visible. Velt sagged. His head dropped. Air came out of him as it came out of a man who had been holding it without knowing he had been holding it. He looked up at the woman three meters away. Whatever he saw in her face produced no expression he was capable of producing. He waited.

"Telar will see you out," Zannah said.

Velt was led from the room. Whether he would survive the evening was a matter Telar would settle on the household's standing instructions and was not, for the next quarter of an hour, Zannah's concern.

Cognus did not move.

Zannah remained in her chair. She looked at the empty chair across the room for some time before she spoke.

"What I worked is called the Held Breath."

Cognus inclined her head.

"It is original."

"Yes, Master."

"The inherited Rites apply pressure and release it. The Working you watched applies pressure and does not release it until I choose. The held thing inhabits the subject. The subject cannot move on from it. After enough duration the subject surrenders whatever the held thing is leveraging him against."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah did not look at her.

"It will be taught when it is time to teach it. Not today. Today you watched."

"Yes, Master."

"You will not work it, or attempt to work it, until I tell you. The Working is mine. Inheritance of it is a matter for a different conversation, in a different year."

"Yes, Master."

Cognus did not name what she had seen. She did not yet have language for it. The Master had done something the Master had not shown anyone. The Master had named it. The Master had told her she would not learn it now. From the sequence of those three statements Cognus understood that she had just witnessed a piece of original Sith doctrine being introduced into the world for the first time. She had no inherited frame for the experience. The frame would build itself, slowly, across the years she would spend in this house.

The first crack opened in her, in that moment, between what her Master could do and what she could.

She did not name the crack.

'She is yours now,' Bane said, from inside Zannah. 'In the way none of mine ever were.'

The voice was not loud. It was not contemptuous. It was the second time he had spoken since Cesko, and the first time he had spoken in the immediate presence of an apprentice. The small grudging inflection beneath the words was a thing Zannah registered and did not engage. The Held Breath had named itself. Bane had heard the naming and had elected to acknowledge it. The acknowledgment was its own admission. Zannah noted it and let the noting pass.

She rose from the chair.

"We are done here."

Cognus rose with her and followed her out of the room. The day's remaining work waited in the library. The Held Breath had been demonstrated. The apprentice had been told what she had watched. The Master had been answered, briefly, by the spirit who carried her. The household ran on toward evening, and the small interview room at the rear of the main block returned to its standing condition of disuse until the next time the work required it.

CHAPTER 10

The Drawn Breath answered her on a morning when she had stopped expecting it to.

Cognus was on the small mat in the eastern wing's outer chamber. She had taken the room for the dawn work because the eastern light arrived earliest there and because the household's morning rotation passed it last. She had woken at the fifth hour, washed, dressed, eaten the small piece of dried fruit she allowed herself before practice, and taken the mat at the sixth. The Rite of Quiet Hands had operated through the washing and dressing without her supervision. The Drawn Breath had been waiting, as it had been waiting through all the months of dawn practice since the library, neither resisting nor cooperating, registering her efforts and offering nothing back.

This morning it offered something back.

Cognus closed her eyes. She placed the breath at the diaphragm. The chest did not lift. The throat did not pull. The diaphragm drew, and the rest of the body, after the long accumulation of mornings, permitted the drawing without resistance.

The room acknowledged her.

It was small. The acknowledgment was small. The air at the level of her shoulders moved, very faintly, in a current that was not the household's air-handling and was not her own breathing. The current moved toward her. It held there. It returned, after some seconds, to the room's ordinary indifference. It had not been there before this morning and the eighty mornings before it.

Cognus opened her eyes.

Her face produced no expression in the small mirror that hung on the chamber's far wall. The Quiet Hands had operated through the moment of acknowledgment without her supervision, which she registered now as a second-order confirmation. She had been a vessel the dark side entered briefly and the vessel had not registered the entrance on its surface. The Rite had performed as the Rite was meant to perform.

She finished the practice. She rose. She did not speak of the morning to her Master at breakfast. The Master had not asked. The Master had said, on the day she had taught her the Rite, that the result of the work was a slow accumulation and not a thing the practitioner reported. Cognus had taken the instruction at the time as discipline. She understood it now as protection. The practitioner who reported each small advance to her teacher would, she suspected, find the teacher's expectations quietly recalibrating to the reports. The recalibrated expectations would cease, in time, to match the work.

In the library she went to her assigned reading.

✦

Three days later Allia sent her into Daplona's spice quarter on a network task that had nothing to do with the practice and everything to do with the practice.

The task was small. A second-tier broker in the spice market had been overheard, by an Omek-adjacent operator, expressing curiosity about why Allia Omek had been making certain quiet acquisitions through channels that were not Vesh's. The broker had not yet acted on the curiosity. Allia required confirmation that the curiosity remained inert. She required the confirmation gathered without the broker registering the request, and she required the broker himself observed for the small physical signals that indicated whether his curiosity was professional or had become something more.

Cognus took the morning transport into Daplona. She wore the merchant-class clothing the cover assigned her and the hood the Huntress required, drawn close in the public quarters where her face might still be recognized by an old client.

Cognus entered the broker's shop on a pretext of inquiring after a small quantity of Daplona spice for personal use. The broker — a Pantoran of late middle years, bald, tattooed across the cheekbones in the asymmetric pattern his clan favored — received her with the courtesy his profession required. She asked her questions. He answered them. She paid for the small quantity she had requested and prepared to leave.

In the moment of preparing to leave she registered something she had not registered before in the field.

The Quiet Hands had been operating through the entire conversation. The Drawn Breath had been operating beneath it, at the diaphragm, drawing in its slow steady rhythm. Together the two Rites had produced, in her, a state of operational quiet

she had not been aware she was in. The broker had been responding to her differently than he would have responded to her before the apprenticeship. He had been giving her answers more quickly, with less hedging, with the small unconscious adjustments of a man who was talking to someone he had decided was not a threat without examining the decision. She had not asked him for that posture. The posture had arrived because of what she had been doing without doing.

She left the shop with her small package and the answer to her actual question. The broker's curiosity was professional. It would not become something more in the foreseeable.

Walking back to the transport she registered, separately, that the work she had just done was work she could have done a year ago by other means. She would have used different routes and produced different residues. The product would have been the same. What was different was that this morning she had used no force at all. The Rites had used force on her behalf, quietly, without her supervision, in a register she was only this week beginning to read.

Cognus returned to the estate at the seventh hour and reported to Zannah at the desk in the study.

Zannah received the report. She looked at her apprentice across the desk for a beat longer than the report had required.

"Withdraw," she said.

Cognus withdrew. In the corridor she registered, again, that the Master had been briefly surprised and had elected not to show it.

✦

The first volume from Pelu arrived in the fifth month.

It came in a courier capsule routed through three intermediaries Allia had used during the years before Ambria, none of whom were currently active in any account the surface ledger acknowledged. The capsule contained one of the three texts Zannah had requested — the second of the two that had not been in active circulation for sixty years. It was bound in the dark leather of late-Republic Sith production, the script on the spine a dialect of Sith Cognus had not yet learned to read.

Zannah set the volume on the western-window table where the original treatise still sat closed. The two volumes side by side made a small geometry the room had not held before.

That evening she gave Cognus a fresh document, copied in her own hand, of a foundational text Cognus had not yet been assigned.

"Read it twice," Zannah said. "We will discuss it on the seventh day."

"Yes, Master."

"The volume on the western table is mine. You will not read it. You will not ask after it. When the time comes I will tell you what it contains."

"Yes, Master."

The library's second-system catalogue, by the end of the fifth month, had thirty-seven entries.

✦

The Sepp decision crystallized late one evening in the fifth month, at the desk in the study, after the day's correspondence.

Zannah had been working through the day's correspondence and had reached the small folded letter from a Daplona peer. Marran, again, who had now asked after Sepp three times in writing and once in person across the months. She set the letter down without composing the reply she would, eventually, send. She did not pick up the stylus. She sat with her hands folded on the desk's teakwood surface and looked at the small calendar at the side of the desk.

The marks on the calendar had accumulated. The Sepp absence had passed the original Dweem schedule. It had passed the extension she had communicated to Vesh in the first month. It had begun to approach the duration at which a sister of Allia's evident competence and resources would have been expected to take action. The fiction Allia had been performing was that she was a concerned sister managing a brother's prolonged absence with patience. The fiction was beginning to require a different shape.

She decided.

The deciding was brief. The deciding had, in some sense, already been made on the hauler outbound from Ambria. She had begun, on that transit, to think through the architecture of the years she would now spend in this house. She had recognized that Sepp Omek as a continuing public figure was not architecturally compatible with the work that would be done through the woman who occupied his name. The deciding, this evening, was the formal recognition that the work she had outlined on the hauler would now begin.

Sepp would die on Dweem.

He would die in a manner that produced a body, because the absence of a body would generate the wrong kind of inquiry. He

would die in a manner that the local authorities on Dweem would investigate and conclude as either accident or natural cause, because either of those produced the kind of grief that closed inquiries. The mechanism, the timing, the operational architecture of the death, would be engineered through a contact she had used before for matters of this register and had not yet activated for this work.

She set the calendar back at the side of the desk. She wrote, on a fresh sheet, the brief encrypted message she would send in the morning to Pelu, requesting Pelu introduce her to the contact she had in mind. She sealed it. She set it aside.

Bane did not speak.

This, she registered, was its own information. Bane had occupied the Sepp body for ten years. He had known Sepp better than Sepp had known himself in the latter years of his life. That was the kind of knowledge that came of one consciousness inhabiting another consciousness's habits and tics until the habits and tics were no longer separable from the inhabitant's own. Bane had views on the body she had just decided to dispose of. Bane was withholding them. The withholding was a position. The position was that the spirit who carried her would not be heard arguing for the preservation of a fiction that had served its purpose and was now becoming a liability.

Or the position was something else, and she did not yet have the evidence to determine what.

She did not engage him. The decision was hers and she had made it.

In the days that followed she began to construct the shape of the absence.

Allia wrote a letter to Marran in which she expressed, for the first time in their correspondence, a small specific concern about the latest report from Dweem. The phrasing was careful. The concern was not catastrophic. It was the kind of concern one professional shared with another in the early stages of recognizing that something might not be quite right. Marran would respond within the week with appropriate sympathy and would, Allia knew without having to model it explicitly, mention the exchange to two or three peers in the course of his ordinary social rotation.

In the routine quarterly review with Vesh, Allia raised a single careful question about whether any of Sepp's recent account signatures had looked at all unusual. Vesh confirmed that all the signatures had been routine. Allia received the confirmation with the small frown of a sister who had hoped for confirmation that something was wrong. Vesh did not comment on the frown. He had, by this point in the relationship, learned which expressions were not his to comment on.

To Jerris, in passing one morning, Allia remarked that she might soon need to consider traveling to Dweem in person. The remark was offered in the rhythm of a thought aloud rather than an instruction. Jerris received it with the calibrated neutrality of his position. Within the week, by the household's standing rhythms, the remark would reach two members of staff who were not Jerris. From them, by the standing rhythms of the staff's extramural social arrangements, the remark would reach the household's peers in the Daplona corridor. It would reach them in the form of Mistress Allia is considering traveling to Dweem to check on her brother personally.

The shape was being constructed. The community was being prepared.

The body had not yet died. The community had begun to feel the absence the death would, in time, confirm.

Cognus registered the new texture without comment. She had been an apprentice long enough now to read what her Master was doing and to refrain from naming it. The Sepp decision was the Master's. The orchestration was the Master's. The apprentice's role, for the present, was to continue the work she had been given and to be available when the operational phase required her.

The household ran on. The library's second-system catalogue gained its thirty-eighth entry, and its thirty-ninth.

The clock advanced.

CHAPTER 11

The memory was old and Zannah was holding it open.

Zannah was in the small private chamber off the south wall of the main hall, the room she had taken before she left for the duel and had not entered since her return. The door was closed. The shutters at the high western window were closed. The single lamp she had left lit was at the low setting that produced enough light to see her own hands by and not enough to see them by clearly. She was on the meditation cushion. Her hands rested on her thighs. The Working had been running for some minutes already. The held thing inside her, the memory she had brought into the Held Breath's suspension, was beginning to yield to the examination the Working permitted.

The memory was of an afternoon in Bane's study early in her training. She had been perhaps fifteen, perhaps a little older. Bane had been at the long desk where he conducted his philosophical work. She had been in the chair across from him, where the apprentice sat for the lessons that consisted of words rather than the practical work of the body. He had been reading aloud from one of the orthodox treatises he required her to know. He had stopped, mid-passage, to ask her a question.

The question had been whether the Sith who refused the demands of personal hunger ceased to be Sith.

The orthodox answer was that they did. Hunger was the only honest motivation. The practitioner who refused it was the practitioner who diluted their access to the dark side, and the diluted practitioner was, by the standards of the doctrine, no longer a vessel for it.

The orthodox answer had been hers to give. She had given it cleanly, in the cadence Bane preferred, with the economy of phrasing he had trained her toward. He had accepted the answer with the small inclination of his head that meant a lesson had landed. They had returned to the treatise. The afternoon had continued. The matter had been closed.

The Held Breath compressed the moment. Held it. Did not let it move.

Zannah watched the apprentice she had been speak the orthodox answer. She watched the words leave the apprentice's mouth before the apprentice's mind had finished examining them. She watched Bane accept the words with the inclination of his head. She held the moment in suspension and walked, slowly, around it.

The girl had said what Bane wanted to hear because the girl had not yet learned to distinguish between an answer she had reached and an answer she had been trained to reach. The orthodox answer was not wrong by the doctrine. The orthodox answer was wrong because the girl had not arrived at it. She had recited it.

Zannah held the moment.

The Working had become, by the months of practice she had given it since the conception, a state she could enter and inhabit

without conscious management of the duration. The conscious work was the examination. The Working held while the examination occurred.

The minute mark passed. The mark she had reached with Velt passed. She did not slow.

At what she estimated as the ninth minute, the spirit who had been silent across the whole of the work spoke.

'Stop,' Bane said.

Zannah did not stop.

'Stop, apprentice.'

Zannah did not engage him. The Working continued. The memory continued to be held.

'The lesson was correct. You answered correctly.'

'I answered the answer you wanted,' Zannah said. She did not say it aloud. The chamber registered no sound. The exchange was happening in the architecture inside her where the spirit had been carried since the duel. 'That was not the same as answering correctly.'

'It was the same.'

'It was not.'

'You are using the work you built alone to dissect a teaching of mine. You will stop.'

'No.'

The word was clean. It had no weight on it that was not the weight of the word itself. She had not raised her voice. She had not tightened the Working. She had simply said no, and the no had been a full answer.

Bane registered the no.

He had spent ten years inside the consciousness of an apprentice he had not chosen to make a Master. She had become

a Master. She had now become a Master refusing to be his apprentice in the residue of the conversations he could still attempt. The architecture of the refusal was not a thing he had a tool to dismantle. The Working she was using was a tool he did not have. He had never had it. He had never been able to teach her. The work she was performing with it was the work of an apprentice who had built, in the years he had brokered the texts that built her, something he could not match. The memory she was dissecting was his teaching. His teaching had no mechanism to defend itself against the kind of attention this Working permitted.

He pushed.

Zannah felt it. The push was not loud, the way the staircase had not been loud, but it was direct, the way a hand pressed against a closed door was direct. He was pressing against the Working. He was attempting to break her concentration. He was attempting, more specifically, to introduce into the suspended moment some small disturbance that would force her to release it before the examination was complete.

Zannah held the Working.

She held it through the push. The push intensified. She held it. The push intensified again. She held it.

Something in the architecture of her concentration fractured.

It did not fracture as a vessel under pressure fractured. It fractured because two adjacent pressures, each individually sustainable, had become together unsustainable. The Held Breath was sustaining a memory that did not want to be sustained. The Working was being sustained against the resistance of the spirit who was inside the practitioner doing the

sustaining. The two pressures had been compatible for some seconds. They were no longer compatible.

Zannah released the Working.

The release was not graceful. She felt the moment of release in her diaphragm before she felt it in her hands. The Held Breath let go. The memory snapped forward through the years it had been suspended across. It resolved, finally, in the chamber where she currently sat, older by the years she had lived since than the apprentice who had recited Bane's doctrine.

The pressure in her right eye did not let go with the Working.

She registered the pressure as something separate from the Working, as one registered a pain that had been waiting beneath another pain and was only now perceptible in the absence of the masking one. The vessel had broken some seconds before the release. She had not registered the breaking because the Working had been occupying every channel she was using to monitor her own state. The vessel had bled into the white of her eye for those seconds and was, now, in the absence of the Working, beginning to register as the small persistent ache of a small vascular failure.

Her right hand, resting on her thigh, had begun to tremor.

The tremor was fine. It was not the gross shaking of a hand that had failed to produce a movement. It was the small involuntary signal of a nervous system that had been asked to support more than it could support. In the moments after release the system had begun to discharge what it had not been able to discharge during the work. The hand would tremor for some hours. The eye would clear in days, perhaps a week.

Zannah accepted both costs without comment. She had paid them. The Working was hers. The memory had been examined. The doctrine she had been taught, early in her training, had been

seen finally with the eyes she now had instead of the eyes she had then.

'You will pay more,' Bane said. The voice was not loud. It was not contemptuous. It was the voice of a man who had lost a position he had not known he was defending until he had lost it. 'Each time. The next will cost more than this. The one after that more again.'

Zannah did not answer him.

She rose from the cushion. Her legs were uncertain. She took the moment to find them.

The lamp at the chamber's low setting threw her shadow against the far wall. The shadow held the small unevenness of the tremor in her right hand. She could not see her own eye, but she could feel it, and she could estimate from the feel of it that the visible bleeding into the white was small but unmistakable. Anyone who looked at her face for the next several days would see it.

Crossing to the door, she registered that she had not closed it as fully as she ordinarily would. The door was, in fact, ajar by perhaps two centimeters.

Cognus was in the corridor.

She stood at the cover's assigned distance, hooded as the household required when she was in any space the staff might pass, hands at her sides. She had been there for some uncertain duration. Her face was the face the Quiet Hands produced when the Quiet Hands had been operating for a sustained period. Her precognition, by the small adjustments of her stillness, had registered that something had occurred in the chamber that required her presence. The next thread, the one that would have told her what, had not arrived.

She did not ask.

Zannah did not explain.

Cognus inclined her head — the small precise inclination that acknowledged her Master without inquiring after her Master's state. Her eyes touched, briefly, the white of Zannah's right eye. They touched the right hand, which Zannah had not yet successfully stilled. They returned to a respectful middle distance and did not return to either site again.

"The library," Zannah said.

"Yes, Master."

They walked the corridor toward the library at the cover's assigned spacing. Zannah's gait was steady by the time they passed the second arch. Her right hand, in the loose fold of the trader's sleeve, continued to register the cost of what she had done. The eye would clear when it cleared.

In the library she took the chair at the western-window table. Cognus took the chair at the second bay. The day's assigned reading had been waiting on the central table for some hours. Cognus opened it. Zannah did not open the closed treatise that still sat at her elbow. She sat with her hands folded and watched the western light begin its slow climb down the wall.

The chamber off the south wall of the main hall was, by the time the household began the evening rotation, returned to its standing condition of disuse.

Bane did not speak again that day.

CHAPTER 12

Tovek Sennar Phael arrived at the rear gate after dark.

Cognus received him alone. The household had been instructed that the visitor was a specialty supplier from off-world arriving on private business of the apprentice's. The household had received the instruction with the calibrated incuriosity Jerris had trained into the staff for matters of this register. Telar was not present. The grounds keeper had been sent to the eastern boundary to inspect a section of wall that did not, this evening, require inspection. Cognus walked Tovek through the service entrance and along the rear corridor to the small interview room at the rear of the main block.

The room had been used once already in the household's current operation. Its prior use was not visible. The floor had been cleaned. The chair Velt had sat in had been replaced with a different chair. The walls remained as they had been.

Allia was waiting.

Tovek took in the room and its occupant with the same scan he gave any client's premises. He was tall for a Pyke, lean in the way Pykes were lean. The partial rebreather across the lower half of his face produced the slight resonant alteration to his voice

that Cognus had learned to listen through across the contracts she had used him on. The mask's left antennule housing was stripped. The right was intact. The asymmetry was the kind of thing another Pyke would read across a room. To Allia it would read as wrong without naming what was wrong; to Cognus it had been wrong long enough to be familiar. The little finger of his right hand was missing its last segment, the cut clean and old, the scar settled into the kind of pale ridge that took years to acquire.

He did not bow. He did not greet either of them. He took the chair across the small table and waited.

"Tovek," Cognus said.

"Huntress."

"The name does not travel here. You will use the name I am called now or no name."

"Cognus."

"Yes."

Tovek's eyes shifted to Allia. The shift took perhaps two seconds. In those two seconds his face did not change, but the small set of his shoulders adjusted by a degree that Cognus, watching, registered as the calibration she had been waiting for. He had worked out where the Huntress now stood in the architecture of the room. He had worked out who the woman across the table was. He had decided, on the strength of those two readings alone, that the meeting would be the meeting Allia required it to be.

"Mistress," he said.

"Mr. Sennar Phael."

"The apprentice has vouched for me."

"She has."

"Then we may proceed."

Allia did not nod. She did not make any of the small social gestures that opened the kind of meeting this was not. She placed her hands flat on the table and spoke in the voice she used for instructions she expected to be carried out without elaboration.

"My brother is on Dweem. He has been there longer than is plausible for the acquisition he travelled to complete. He will not be returning. You will ensure that he died there, in a manner the Dweem authorities accept as natural cause, and that what remains of him is returned to Daplona for the burial his sister will arrange."

Tovek inclined his head fractionally.

"Cause of death."

"Cardiovascular. He was not a young man and his habits had been a sister's concern for some years."

"The body."

"Sepp is six standard feet and four inches in height. He was, when I last saw him, two hundred and twenty pounds of muscle on a broad frame. Imposing in any room he entered, and the room knew it. His shoulders were unusually wide for a Daplona merchant. His hands were large enough that custom gloves were a household expense. His skin carried scars consistent with the practical life he had led. A pale line across the left forearm from a hauling accident in his fortieth year. A smaller mark below the right knee from a childhood fall. An old burn on the left shoulder from an industrial cleaning fluid he had once handled without proper care. His hair was dark and kept short. His teeth had received the work a man of his means received from a Daplona dentist of moderate reputation across the years. Two

implants in the lower jaw. The dental records will be made available to your channel."

Tovek absorbed the description without moving.

"Birthmarks."

"A small port-wine mark on the inside of the right thigh, approximately the size of a credit chip. A second smaller mark at the base of the spine."

"Distinguishing recent injuries."

"None recent. The body that returns will not need to account for the period of the Dweem absence."

"I will require the dental records and any medical files the household keeps. The local coroner on Dweem will perform the work the documentation supports. The body will be processed through channels I maintain in the capital. Your brother's passing will be witnessed by hotel staff who will remember exactly what they need to remember and nothing else. The certifying physician will be a man whose signature on death certifications has been respected on Dweem for the better part of two decades."

"The body will be embalmed for return."

"Local custom on Dweem favors cremation. Your brother's body will be embalmed because his sister, Mistress Omek, requires a Daplona ceremony. The local authorities will respect the request. The body will arrive at the Daplona freight terminal in a sealed coffin appropriate to the cause of death. It will not be opened in transit."

"It will not be opened on arrival."

Tovek's eyes narrowed by perhaps a millimeter. He had registered what the instruction implied. The body that arrived from Dweem would not be opened by anyone at any point in the

chain from the freight terminal to the burial. The funeral would proceed with a sealed coffin. The community's grief would be conducted around an absence that no one would be permitted to look at directly.

"The ceremony will be the ceremony," he said.

"The ceremony will be the ceremony."

"I will arrange for the body to be of approximately the right weight and dimensions, with the surface markings consistent with the description you have given. The features will not need to match precisely. A sealed coffin requires only that the weight on the bearers' shoulders is the weight the bearers expect."

"The weight," Allia said.

"The weight."

Cognus, watching from the chair at the corner of the room, registered her Master's hands on the table. The right hand had not tremored in any of the days since the chamber. Allia's composure across the table was not Allia's natural composure. It was the composure of a Sith Master who had decided what she wanted and was now arranging it through the operator most suited to arrange it. The Working that had cost her an eye vessel was, Cognus understood, the same Working that was not visibly present in this conversation, was not being applied to Tovek, and had no need to be.

"Timing," Tovek said.

"Three to five weeks. The community here has been prepared for news that is not good. The news will arrive when your work permits."

"The terms of the arrangement."

Allia did not consult any document. She had thought through the offer she would make before Tovek arrived and she

made it now in the cadence she used for terms that would not be revisited.

"You will remain in Daplona. The household will provide a residence in a neighborhood appropriate to your stated profession. We will cover your expenses. You will hold yourself available for whatever forgery and documentary work the household requires, on demand, indefinitely. In return, the per-contract payment for this work and any subsequent work will be structured into your living arrangement. You will not be paid in the ordinary way."

Tovek considered the offer. He considered it for perhaps four seconds.

"The arrangement is permanent."

"It is."

"I will not be permitted to depart Daplona without your authorization."

"You will not."

"And in time, mistress?"

Allia did not smile. The expression that occupied her face for a brief moment was not a smile. It was the expression of a Sith Master communicating to an operator of high competence that the arrangement she was offering carried a long horizon. The horizon was not a thing she would name in a single meeting.

"In time," she said, "the work that develops from this arrangement may produce opportunities of a different scale than per-contract payment provides. We will discuss those opportunities when the work has earned the discussion."

Tovek understood. The forger's calculation had taken the four seconds it had taken, and the answer had been favorable to

Tovek, and Tovek did not require Allia to elaborate beyond what she had elaborated. He inclined his head.

"The arrangement is accepted."

Allia placed her right hand flat on the table in the small formal gesture that closed the kind of meeting this was. Tovek mirrored the gesture with his left hand — the right hand, with its missing segment, did not perform that particular gesture in the years since the cut. The arrangement had been struck.

In the architecture inside Zannah where the spirit had been carried since the duel, Bane spoke for the first time that day.

'This is the work,' he said. 'I am pleased you have made it yours.'

Zannah did not answer him. She did not need to. The spirit who had withheld through the planning and the deciding and the orchestration had now offered, briefly, the thing he was capable of offering. Pride, in his register, was pride. She received it without engagement and let the moment close.

Tovek rose. Cognus rose with him.

"The dental records and medical files will be delivered to you within the day," Allia said. "The residence will be arranged by the end of the week. Cognus will provide the address."

"Mistress."

"Mr. Sennar Phael."

Cognus walked Tovek back along the rear corridor and out the service entrance. They did not speak. At the rear gate Tovek paused. He turned and regarded her for a moment in the dim light that the household maintained at the perimeter at this hour.

"She is not what I expected," he said.

"No."

"You will not tell me what she is."

"I will not."

"Then I will not ask."

He moved off into the dark beyond the gate. The shape of him receded along the path that led to the side road where his transport was waiting. Cognus closed the gate behind him and walked back along the corridor to the interview room.

Allia was still at the table. The room had not changed. The chair Tovek had occupied was empty. The small lamp at the side of the table was at the low setting Allia preferred for work that did not require more.

Cognus took the chair.

"He is competent," Zannah said. Allia had left the room with Tovek; the woman who remained at the table was no longer performing the role. "He is more competent than he was when you used him. The cut has done what cuts of that kind do. He has had years to refine what he is good at because he has had no syndicate beneath him to provide the easy work."

"Yes, Master."

"The arrangement we have made is the kind of arrangement that requires patience to land correctly. The first task will be the test. The body must arrive in the manner he has described. The funeral must proceed as I will require it to proceed. No inquiry from any quarter must raise a question we cannot close. If those conditions hold, the arrangement holds. If any of those fails, the arrangement does not hold. We will revisit it at that point."

"Yes, Master."

"He will not fail this task. He understands what failure costs."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah looked at Cognus across the table. The lamp at its low setting caught the gold of her eyes and held there. The white of her right eye had begun to clear; the small faded ring of color at the lower edge was the only remaining sign of the working.

"You brought him to me," Zannah said. "The network you carried before me has now begun to be the network we carry between us. The rest of it will follow, in its time, by routes we will work out together. The work we did this evening was the work the apprentice prepares the Master to do. You did the preparation. I have done the work."

"Yes, Master."

The acknowledgment was given. Cognus received it without expression. The Quiet Hands held through the receiving and held through the brief moment after. The Master had not said it, but had communicated through the structure of what she had said, that the bringing of Tovek had been counted. The counting would not be revisited.

"You may withdraw."

"Yes, Master."

Cognus rose, inclined her head, and walked out of the interview room toward the corridor that led back to the main hall and from there to the eastern wing where the night's remaining work waited. The lamp in the room behind her stayed at its low setting. Zannah remained at the table for some uncertain duration before she rose herself.

The household ran on toward its standing condition of evening. The work had been commissioned. The body would arrive in three to five weeks. The community had been prepared.

Sepp Omek would be buried in the cemetery on the southern edge of Daplona, beside his parents, with the household and the

Daplona corridor in attendance.

The coffin would not be opened.

CHAPTER 13

The message reached the estate at the third hour of the morning, and Zannah felt it before Jerris arrived at the door of the study to deliver it.

The Veiled Course had been operating, as it operated whenever she was awake, in the radius around her. The radius did not, ordinarily, register the arrival of correspondence. The household received couriers at all hours, and the small disturbances of the staff's movement at any time of day were not the kind of disturbances the Course had been calibrated to mark. This morning, in the moment before Jerris reached the third arch on the way to the study, the Course caught something specific. The disturbance was the courier's recognition of what he was carrying. The Pyke channels Tovek had used had embedded in the message's outer wrapper a small coded mark Tovek had told her to expect. The mark did not register on Jerris's perception. It registered on hers.

Zannah set down her stylus.

By the time Jerris knocked at the door, the woman who rose from the desk to receive him was Allia Omek. Zannah had withdrawn into the architecture below the cover the way the

apprentice was being trained to withdraw into the inherited Rite of Quiet Hands. The expression on Allia's face was the expression of a sister who had been working at her correspondence. She had now been asked, in the small calibrated regret of a senior steward, to come to the door.

"Mistress."

"Master Jerris."

"A communication from Dweem. The seal is the local authority's."

Allia opened the message at the desk while Jerris stood at the threshold. She read the brief contents twice. The cardiologist's findings. The hotel staff's statement. The certifying physician's name. The transport arrangements for the body. The condolences of the Dweem authorities, expressed in the formal language the certifying offices used when a foreign national of means died on their soil.

Allia closed the message. Her hands rested flat on the desk for the length of a breath. She raised her eyes to Jerris.

"My brother has died on Dweem."

"Mistress."

"The body will be returned to Daplona within the standard transit. We will hold the ceremony at the South Stones as soon as the body has arrived and the bearers have been arranged."

"I will see to the arrangements, mistress."

"Thank you, Master Jerris."

Jerris withdrew. The door closed behind him. Allia did not move from the desk. In the moment after the door closed, before the household's rhythm resumed in the corridor outside, she permitted herself a small adjustment of her shoulders. The hardest performance of the day had been completed cleanly.

The body arrived at the Daplona freight terminal in the late afternoon five days later. Tovek's apparatus had moved the work through the timeline he had named. The sealed coffin was transferred to a household conveyance and brought along the river road to the estate. It was placed in the formal antechamber off the main hall to await the morning of the ceremony.

The household began the ceremony preparations at the second hour before dawn.

The bamboo cutting was performed at the estate's western boundary by Master Jerris and the senior groundskeeper. The implement they used was the ceremonial blade the household kept for this purpose — a thin, slightly curved knife of dark metal, the haft worn smooth from generations of similar mornings. The first length was cut by Jerris, the second by the groundskeeper, and the remaining four by the more junior staff in the order of their tenure. Each length was cut at the same angle, near the base of a young stalk. The cut was clean and at a slight downward bias so that the cut surface faced the ground when the bamboo was laid horizontally. The six lengths were carried back to the antechamber and placed across the coffin in the pattern the household had used for the burials before this one.

The bearers arrived at dawn.

Marran was among them. So was a Daplona harbor master Sepp had done business with for many years, and a textile importer of Sepp's generation, and three others Allia had selected from among the merchants of the corridor. They were given the small ceremonial blades the household kept for bearers and were briefed by Jerris on the pace and the path. Each man

received the blade and the brief without comment. The procession would set out at the third hour after dawn.

Allia received condolences in the main hall as the household and the early arrivals gathered.

She wore the deep umber of Daplona mourning, cut in the formal style appropriate to a sister burying a brother. She did not weep. She did not, in fact, produce any of the visible signs of grief the early arrivals might have anticipated, and she did not need to. The Daplona corridor knew, by now, that the Omek absence had been long and that the news had been bad, and the community had done its preliminary grieving in the days since the announcement. What the community required of Allia at the ceremony was composure, dignity, and the expression of a sister who was holding her grief in the manner her station required. Allia provided all three. Cognus, at the cover's assigned distance behind Allia's right shoulder, hooded as the household required for any space the staff or the public might pass, observed the early arrivals and registered each one without speaking.

At the third hour after dawn the procession set out.

The Bearer's Path was the cleared route the household maintained between the estate and the South Stones. It was walked only on funeral days, kept clear of bamboo encroachment by the grounds staff's patient labor across the years. The path ran for some two kilometers along the lower slope of the valley, parallel to the Daplona at first and then bending southward through the canyon system that bordered the cemetery. The bamboo stood thick on either side. The morning light fell unevenly through it. The bearers walked at the slow pace the tradition required, the six lengths of fresh-cut bamboo

lying across the sealed coffin, the household and the community following in the order Jerris had arranged.

Allia walked behind the coffin at the position the family of the deceased occupied. Cognus walked at her left shoulder, half a step behind, hood drawn close. The Daplona corridor walked behind them. Marran's family. Vesh. The harbor master's family. The rest of the community Sepp Omek had been a part of for the better part of two decades.

The procession did not speak.

This was custom. The walk along the Bearer's Path was performed in silence by everyone in attendance. The only sounds were the bearers' feet on the path's packed earth. The small rustles of bamboo moved in the warm westerly that came up from the canyons. Occasionally a Pede cried in the deeper jungle to the south.

The South Stones came into view through a gap in the bamboo at the path's southern terminus.

The cemetery had been built generations earlier into the broken stone ruins of a structure no living Daplona resident knew the original purpose of. The ruin walls ran at irregular angles through the cemetery's grounds, and the family plots had been arranged among them in the configurations that had emerged across the centuries of use. The Omek family plot lay against a section of ruin wall in the cemetery's western quarter. Sepp and Allia's parents were buried there. The space beside their graves had been kept by the household for the brother who would, in his time, join them.

The bearers carried the coffin to the western quarter and stopped at the prepared grave.

The mourners assembled in the configuration the custom required. The coffin was positioned with its head pointing west, into the wind that gave him breath. The phrase was spoken by Master Jerris in the brief committal he delivered as the household's senior representative — the only words spoken in the cemetery at the committal proper. Allia did not speak. She stood at the coffin's head, hands folded, the deep umber of her mourning catching the westerly light. Her eyes fixed on a middle distance that was not the coffin and not the ruin wall and not any face in the assembly.

The bamboo lengths were removed from the coffin.

They were placed at the foot of the grave in the same pattern they had occupied during the procession. Jerris produced the small fire-starter the household used for this part of the ceremony. The bamboo lengths burned briefly, the fresh-cut wood smoking in the way young bamboo smoked, and the small fire was permitted to extinguish on its own. The smoke rose past the ruin wall and dispersed in the canyon air.

The mourners came forward, one by one, with the stones they had brought.

Each mourner placed a stone on the ruin wall above the family plot. The stones had been gathered from places of meaning to the bringer. The river bank. The boundary of an estate. A remembered hillside. In some cases the floor of a workshop where the bringer and Sepp had once shared business. The stones accumulated on the wall in the small pile that would, across the years to come, settle into the ridge of accumulated memory the South Stones cemetery had built across generations of Daplona burials. Allia placed her stone last. It was a small flat piece of pale river stone, smooth from the years it had spent in

the water. She set it at the highest position on the wall above where the coffin would lie.

She stepped back.

The assembly stood in the brief silence the custom required before the lowering. It was at this moment that Cognus registered something she would not have registered without the Quiet Hands and the Drawn Breath operating at the full state they had reached in the months of practice.

A peer of Allia's stood at the second rank of the assembly. He was a man Cognus had not yet identified by name. He wore the dark gray of an older Daplona merchant family. He was perhaps in his sixth decade. He was watching Allia a beat longer than the assembly's ordinary attention permitted. The watching was not a stare. It was the kind of professional reading one operator gave another when something about the operator's behavior did not entirely align with the situation. The peer was not satisfied by what he was seeing. He did not appear, at this remove and through the partial concealment of Cognus's hood, to be acting on his dissatisfaction. He was registering it for later.

Cognus marked the man's face. She did not turn her head. She continued to face the coffin in the manner the cover required, and the peer's attention, after a few additional seconds, returned to Allia and the grave with the rest of the assembly's attention.

The coffin was lowered.

The bearers performed the lowering with the slow, precise coordination the tradition required. The ropes paid out evenly. The coffin descended into the earth at the pace the household clock measured the lowering at. The bearers held the position at the bottom for the count that custom assigned. Then the ropes

were withdrawn, and the first handfuls of earth were placed by Allia and by Marran and by the harbor master in turn.

The South Stones held what they held.

The procession returned to the estate by the same path, in the same order, in the same silence the custom required. The reception was waiting in the main hall.

The reception was small by the standards of a Daplona merchant funeral. The smallness was Allia's instruction. In the days between the announcement and the body's arrival, she had asked Jerris to keep the reception modest. The instruction had been: appropriate to the household's mourning, not extended into the kind of social occasion the Daplona corridor sometimes used burials to become. The food was cold. The wine was a single Daplona vintage, not the multiple choices a more elaborate reception would have offered. The mourners served themselves and spoke in the hushed register the custom prescribed.

Allia received the community's condolences at the side of the main hall's long teakwood table.

She accepted the condolences without elaboration. To Marran she said thank you for walking him there. To the harbor master she said thank you for the years. To the textile importer she said thank you.

To the rest of the corridor she said thank you and the household appreciates the kindness. She said no more than that to anyone who approached her. Her face did not move from the composure she had worn since the morning. Her eyes held at the middle distance they had held at the cemetery. The community received her composure as the composure of a sister in shock.

The community departed across the next two hours having received what it had come to receive.

By the seventh hour of the afternoon the estate was empty of mourners.

Jerris began the household's post-reception rotation with the kitchen staff. Cognus, at Allia's small gesture, withdrew to the eastern wing to begin the documentation work the funeral had displaced from the day's ordinary schedule. Allia stood for some moments in the empty main hall, hands at her sides, the deep umber of her mourning catching the late westerly light through the high windows.

Then she left the estate alone.

She walked back along the Bearer's Path at the pace a sister might walk who had returned to the grave to spend a private moment with the brother she had buried. The path was empty of any other foot. The bamboo stood in the late afternoon light. The warm westerly came up from the canyons and touched her face at the angle the Daplona valley produced at this hour.

The South Stones were empty.

The grave had been filled in by the household's grounds staff after the assembly had departed. The fresh earth lay at the western quarter of the cemetery in a small dark mound the rains would settle within the next several days. The stones placed on the ruin wall above the grave caught the westerly light and held it. The pale river stone Allia had placed at the highest position was the only stone that took the light fully.

Zannah stood at the foot of the grave.

She had walked alone to the cemetery without giving the gesture a name in her own mind, but she gave it the name now. The performance had been the performance. The ceremony had

been the ceremony. The community had grieved what she had constructed them to grieve. The construction had held without a single seam revealing itself to anyone in attendance. Except, possibly, the peer Cognus had marked, who would be examined at a later hour by routes that would not register Omek interest.

The work was complete.

Sepp Omek as a public figure had ended cleanly. The fiction had served its purpose and had been retired in the manner that closed inquiries. The architecture of the years to come, which had required the closure as its first foundation, was now ready to begin.

She allowed herself a small smile.

The smile was for the work. It was not for the man, because the man had ended on Ambria in any meaningful sense and what had been buried this afternoon was a stranger she had never met. It was not for the community, because the community had been managed as the community required to be managed. It was for the work.

The smile was small and brief. The wind from the canyons caught it and carried it nowhere, because no one was watching. The South Stones held what they held. Zannah turned and walked back along the Bearer's Path toward the estate where the household waited.

CHAPTER 14

The clerk who received them at the door of Vaszuun Drekka's office was a Sullustan, bowing in the manner Sullustans bowed, leading them up a narrow stairwell to the second-floor landing without speaking a word.

Allia and Cognus had arrived in the late afternoon. The warm westerly carried the harbor's familiar mix of damp stone, fresh fish, and old cargo timber up from the docks two streets behind them. The freight district had been Daplona's working harbor commerce for the better part of three centuries. Vaszuun Drekka's office had occupied the upper level of this particular narrow stone building for forty of those years. The clerk's silence was the silence of a long-employed man who had learned the rhythms of his employer's clientele.

The door to Vaszuun's receiving room stood open.

The room was longer than it was wide. Its ceiling sat lower than human standing height by perhaps a hand's breadth. The floor was arranged in the configuration Dugs of the higher castes maintained for receiving business. A raised platform occupied the room's center, perhaps four meters square, its surface covered in the dark-woven rush matting Dugs preferred for floor-level

work. On the platform a single low writing-desk held three stacks of cargo manifests, an old datapad, and a small clay vessel. Cognus recognized the vessel from her assassin years — the kind of marsh-water vessel Dug elders kept at hand for ritual hospitality. The seating around the platform was at the level of the platform itself: small woven cushions for guests who knew the protocol, low stools for those who did not.

Vaszuun was at the writing-desk on his forelimbs.

He looked up as they entered. The skin of his hide was the dark amber-brown of an older Dug of the higher castes. His facial whiskers were braided in the configuration his caste maintained for matters of business consequence — three braids on the right side, four on the left. The asymmetry signaled the senior position in any commercial encounter. His left ear-flap was damaged at the upper edge, the injury old, the scar settled into the kind of flat ridge that took years to acquire. Vaszuun had not, evidently, ever seen reason to repair it. The hindlimbs, at this distance and at the angle of his stance, were tucked beneath his trunk in the resting position Dug elders used when not actively manipulating documents.

His eyes assessed them.

Cognus felt his read happen across perhaps three seconds. He looked at Allia first, with the particular attention Dug elders gave to the principal of any business meeting. Then at Cognus, with the briefer assessment given to the principal's second. Then back to Allia, having reached whatever preliminary conclusions his read produced. The conclusions had been favorable. Cognus could see that in the small set of his shoulders, which had not adjusted in any of the small involuntary ways an unfavorable read would have produced.

She also saw something else.

Vaszuun was carrying a pressure she had not anticipated reading on a freight broker. The pressure was the cultural pressure of an obligation his hierarchy was placing on him from outside the room. He was carrying it in the posture of a man for whom the carrying had become part of his daily work. The Quiet Hands and the Drawn Breath, operating at the steady state Cognus had reached in the months of practice, had registered the pressure before Cognus had thought to look for it. The pressure was not aimed at Allia. The pressure was aimed at Vaszuun by his own caste's expectations of him.

She filed the read and stood at the cover's assigned distance.

"Mistress Omek," Vaszuun said. His voice was deeper than his frame would have suggested, the consonants shaped at the back of the throat in the manner Dugs shaped consonants. "You are welcome. Please. Take the platform."

Allia inclined her head fractionally. She walked to the platform's edge.

What she did then, Cognus did not entirely expect.

Allia stepped onto the platform, took the small woven cushion that lay nearest the writing-desk, and lowered herself onto it. The lowering was not a sit. It was a controlled descent that brought her head and shoulders to the level of Vaszuun's forelimb stance. At the moment her position settled, she tilted her head forward by a fraction Cognus, watching from the cover's assigned distance at the room's edge, registered as deliberate and trained. The angle of the head-tilt was not the angle of submission. It was the angle of an acknowledgment of caste differential that the buyer offered to the seller when the

seller's position carried the weight Vaszuun's position carried. The protocol was Dug. The performance of it was clean.

Vaszuun's shoulders adjusted by a small visible degree.

The adjustment was not the adjustment of a man who had been given what he was demanding. It was the adjustment of a man who had been given what he had not expected to be given by a Daplona buyer. In the small moment of the adjustment, he was recalibrating his expectations of the meeting upward.

"The Mistress of the Omek estate has done business with my people before," Vaszuun said. The phrasing was a question dressed as an observation.

"I have not, Master Drekka. I have asked."

"You have asked carefully."

"I have asked carefully."

Vaszuun considered her for a longer beat. He extended his right hindlimb to the small clay vessel at the corner of the writing-desk. He lifted it with the precise grip Dug hindlimbs achieved that no other species could replicate. He placed it on the matting between them.

"We will drink first."

Allia accepted the vessel with both hands in the manner the protocol required. She did not drink. She held the vessel for the count the protocol required, lowered her head over it briefly, and returned it to the matting between them. Vaszuun lifted the vessel, drank a small measured swallow, and set it down. The hospitality had been performed.

Cognus, at the room's edge, did not move. The Quiet Hands held. The Drawn Breath continued its slow steady rhythm at her diaphragm. She had read the Master perform the protocol with the precision of a woman who had performed the protocol

before. The woman had said, in plain language to the Dug elder across from her, that she had not done business with Dugs before — which was the truth. The Master had learned the protocol from somewhere. The Master had not learned it from any source the apprentice had access to. The apprentice would, Cognus suspected, have to add Dug commercial protocol to the list of things her Master could perform competently and had not yet mentioned.

She set the suspicion in the place where she kept observations that the Master might one day require her not to have made.

"My business," Vaszuun said, "is for sale. You know this."

"I know this."

"My only acknowledged son would have inherited it. He died on a contract run six standard years past. I have no other heir of my bloodline. My caste does not permit me to retain the business under those circumstances beyond a period that has, by now, expired by some months. I am required to liquidate."

"I have been informed."

"The buyer who acquires the business will acquire the schedules I keep. The buyer will acquire the slot allocations I have negotiated with the harbor authorities across forty years of work. The buyer will acquire the ongoing arrangements I have with the merchants whose freight I have been routing for the same period. The business is not difficult to operate. It is difficult to acquire the relationships the business depends on. Those relationships do not transfer cleanly to a buyer who does not know how to receive them."

"I will receive them in the manner you advise."

"The advising will require time."

"I am offering you time. I am offering you a senior advisory position for a period we will define together — two years at minimum, longer if the transition requires it. Your name will remain on the door. Your office will remain your office. Your employees will be retained at their current terms. I will buy the business for the price Vesh Givin has indicated to your representative is appropriate, with the adjustments that have been discussed in the preliminary correspondence. The purchase will be paid in three equal installments across the first eighteen months of the transition. You will retain a small ongoing stake — five percent — that will continue to pay you for as long as the business operates under your name."

Vaszuun considered the offer.

He considered it for longer than the offer's arithmetic required, which Cognus understood to mean that he was considering the form of the offer rather than its content. The form was the form of an offer made by a buyer who understood what she was acquiring beyond the acquisition price. The form was respectful. The form acknowledged Vaszuun's caste, his obligations, his employees, and the architecture of the relationships he had built across the decades of his working life. The form was, in the language his hierarchy understood, the form of a transfer rather than a sale.

"The terms are acceptable," Vaszuun said.

"I am pleased to hear it."

"The documentation will be prepared by my representative and yours within the standard period. The transition will begin at the start of the next quarter. The first installment will be paid on signature."

"It will."

Vaszuun extended his right hindlimb toward Allia in the gesture Dugs of the higher castes used to close commercial agreements with parties they had decided to treat as commercial peers. Allia extended her right hand. The gesture was completed at the matting between them. The agreement had been struck.

"Mistress Omek."

"Master Drekka."

The clerk was waiting at the bottom of the stairwell when they descended. He bowed them out of the building in the silence that was his standing professional condition. Allia and Cognus walked back through the freight district in the warm westerly toward the river road and the conveyance that had brought them.

✦

They did not speak on the road back to the estate.

Allia walked with the small composure of a buyer who had concluded a satisfactory transaction. Cognus walked at her left shoulder. The setting sun caught the river and held it; the bamboo at the road's western edge moved in the breeze; the conveyance waited where they had left it.

In the conveyance, after the door had closed and the household driver had begun the journey back along the river road toward the estate, Allia spoke for the first time since the office.

"You read his pressure."

"Yes, Master."

"Before I signaled it."

"Yes, Master."

Allia did not look at her. She looked out the conveyance's window at the river. Her voice was the voice she used for instructions but the instruction itself was not yet given.

"The protocol I performed is not in the texts I have given you. I learned it from a teacher you have not met, in a place you have not been, in years you do not yet have access to. You read what was happening in that room without the protocol. You read it through what you have been doing every morning at dawn, and through what you carried into this work before I began to train you."

"Yes, Master."

"The work we did together this afternoon required both of us. Acknowledged."

"Yes, Master."

Allia did not say anything further. The conveyance continued along the river road. Cognus, at her left, felt the acknowledgment settle into the place where she had been keeping the observations that did not yet have names.

✦

In the library that evening Zannah opened the third Pelu volume to the section she had marked the previous night.

The text was difficult. It had been written in a dialect of late-Republic Sith that drew on idioms which had not been in active circulation for three or four centuries. The author's argument moved through digressions Zannah had needed two readings to follow. The section she had marked described a practice the author called the carrying. The Working did not compress force-pressure across the duration of a moment, the way the orthodox

Rites compressed it. It compressed force-pressure across the spatial separation between the practitioner and the place where the pressure was to be applied.

Zannah read the section through twice and set the volume on the central table.

The Held Breath compressed across time. The Held Breath did not compress across distance. The Working operated within the radius of the practitioner's presence and required that presence to sustain it. The practice the volume described was a different question. It was the same compression, in a different axis. The author named no Working in the section that achieved it. The practice was described as a possibility a sufficiently advanced practitioner might pursue, with no extant example the author could point to.

She did not write anything in the second-system catalogue. The thought was not yet a thought she could name. She closed the volume. She set it on the western-window table beside the other volumes she had finished examining in this rotation. The seed she had taken from the section would, in its time, lead somewhere. The leading was years away.

She went to the desk in the study.

The lamp at its low setting threw the small steady light she preferred for evening work. The day's correspondence had been organized by Jerris in the standing rotation. Vesh's monthly report on the surface accounts. Two pieces of routine merchant correspondence. A note from Tovek in the encrypted channel he had been using since the Sepp work, confirming the documentation for the Drekka acquisition was complete and would be transferred to Vaszuun's representative in the morning.

Zannah read each item. She set each one in its appropriate fold.

The architecture had begun to function.

The Drekka acquisition would close in a quarter. The freight business would, in the years to come, become the vehicle for the kind of consolidated trade enterprise the household required for the operations the architecture would eventually support. Vaszuun would advise for the period the transition required. Tovek's name would not appear in any document associated with the business. The household's ownership would be visible. The work the household intended to do through the business would not be visible at all.

She set the stylus down.

The lamp held its small steady light. The household ran on toward its standing condition of evening. The first cycle of the new architecture had completed, and the second cycle had already begun in the space the first had cleared.

Zannah turned the lamp down and went to her rooms.

CHAPTER 15

Cognus drew the bolts on the door of the arsenal room and lit the hand-lamp.

The room waited for her. It always was, in the way the rooms a working professional kept for the equipment of a life were always waiting, regardless of the duration of the absence between visits. The dark wood paneling along the walls absorbed the lamp's small light. The workbench at the eastern wall held the sharpening stones in their wooden case. Small bottles of oil sat in the order she had placed them. The soft cloths lay folded in the rotation she had used since her early years in the trade. The twin curved blades hung on the wall mount above the bench in their sheaths, the leather darkened to near-black by the years of handling.

Cognus had not entered the room in some weeks.

The Drawn Breath had been operating since dawn at the steady state it reached. The Quiet Hands had been operating beneath it. The work she had done in the library and at the network's administrative tasks had filled the hours that her trade had once filled. The room had not been visited because the room

had not been needed. This evening it was needed. She closed the door behind her and threw the inner bolts.

From the bench she unrolled the small leather kit she kept for the pre-operation rituals. She had performed these rituals so many times across the years of the Huntress's work that her hands moved without her supervision. The blades came down from the wall mount. She drew them, one at a time, examined the edges in the lamp's light, applied a fresh coat of the dark non-reflective oil she preferred for night work, and returned them to their sheaths. The garrote in its coiled storage at the bench's side received its standard inspection. The two small detonators in their lined case were checked, their charges confirmed, and replaced. The off-hand wrist sheath went on first. The twin sheaths at the small of her back went on second. The cloak of dark merchant-class cut, indistinguishable at any distance from the cloaks half the harbor district wore, went on last.

Cognus sat in the single chair across from the bench and worked the Drawn Breath at full state for some minutes. The Rite settled deeper than it usually settled. The room knew her. It was built for the version of her who did this kind of work. It received the Rite with the same indifference it had received the Rite the first time she had brought the practice into it.

When the Rite released her she rose. The lamp went out. She drew the bolts back, opened the door, and left the room as it had been left every other time she had left it for an evening's work.

✦

Tovek's distractions began at the eighth bell.

The first was a vendor's cart of preserved fish overturning at the corner of the freight street and the harbor road, two streets south of Vorn's route. The vendor had been paid to overturn it. He had been paid to be loud about it. He had been paid not to remember the small adjustment to the cart's wheel that had made the tipping inevitable. He produced the volume of complaint and apology the moment required. The natural eyes of the harbor district at that intersection turned toward the cart. The sequence had begun.

The second distraction, ninety seconds later, was a freight loading accident at the central wharf. A pallet of cargo timber failed in its lift mechanism and dropped four meters to the dockside, splitting and sending a shower of long planks across the loading area. No one was injured. The lift operator had also been paid, also briefed. He produced the alarm and the recovery work that drew attention.

The third was a power flicker, two minutes after the timber accident, in the block of the harbor authority's administrative office. Lights at three buildings dimmed, rose, dimmed again. Someone in the freight district's utility maintenance had been compensated to ensure the relay produced exactly that sequence at that hour.

In the four-minute window the three events held the freight district's attention. The route between Vorn's office and his residence ran along a side street that under ordinary circumstances would have been crossed at the eighth bell by perhaps fifteen people. Tonight it was empty.

Cognus stood in the recessed doorway of a closed shop two-thirds of the way along the route.

Vorn passed her at his usual evening pace. He was tall for a Trandoshan and broad through the shoulders. The green-brown scaling of his hide was visible at the collar of his coat. The slight irregular shift of his gait — the habit a Trandoshan of his subspecies developed in middle age — registered at the limit of her peripheral vision.

Cognus stepped from the doorway.

The garrote went around his neck before he had begun to register that someone was behind him. She had brought the wire in the binding that did not cut but compressed. He attempted to reach back. His hands found the cloak, found her grip on the cloak, did not find the wire. She held the compression for the count it required to silence him. His weight dropped against her. She lowered him to the cobblestones of the side street with the controlled descent her training in carrying weight had given her.

The first of the twin blades came out next. The cut at the throat completed the kill cleanly.

The second blade came out next. She made three additional cuts at the chest and abdomen — wounds that did not match the throat cut's angle or depth. The wrist blade made two short thrusts at the side of the rib cage. From the inner pocket of her cloak she drew the third weapon. It was a heavy single-edged tool blade of the kind a freight worker might carry for cargo work. She made two more wounds with it across the back and the upper arm. The three different weapons had now produced six different signatures across the body. Investigators reading the scene would have to account for the impossibility of a single attacker delivering this pattern of wounds in the time the operation had taken.

She disturbed the personal effects.

His coat was opened. His belt purse was cut and most of its credits taken — but not all, because a robbery that took everything was a different signature than a robbery that took most. His ring, which Trandoshans of his caste did not part with even in death, was left. The signal would read as confused robbery, as panic, as a perpetrator who had not known what to take.

The first detonator went at the base of Vorn's skull. The second went across the upper face.

Twelve meters down the street, in the doorway she had used as her position, Cognus drew the small remote from her cloak and triggered the two charges in sequence. The first detonator destroyed the structural integrity of the lower jaw and the underside of the skull. The second, half a second later, took the upper face from the brow line down. The body remained. The body was identifiable, by clothing and build and location, as Sresch Vorn. The face that would have permitted forensic reconstruction was no longer available to be reconstructed.

The two small explosions sounded, at this distance and through the harbor district's ordinary evening noise, like the smaller of the two sounds the freight district produced when a pallet failed. No one came running.

Cognus moved off down the side street toward the route home she had selected.

✦

The read came at the third turning.

The Drawn Breath was operating. The Quiet Hands were operating. Cognus had been moving through Daplona's harbor

periphery at the steady professional pace a returning operator used after this kind of work. The combination of the Rites at full state had been registering the city's ordinary attentional patterns at the level she had grown accustomed to reading them. The read at the third turning was not ordinary.

Someone was paying attention to her.

The attention was not behind her. She tested the read with the small adjustments her training permitted. A step toward a shop window. A glance at a piece of the street that did not require glancing at. A half-second pause that an ordinary follower would have to reproduce and that the read did not reproduce. The attention was not generated by a follower at her back. It was generated by something at distance. A presence somewhere in the city — somewhere in Daplona, somewhere within whatever radius the read was operating at — was paying specific attention to her movement away from the harbor district.

Not following. Reading.

She did not engage the read. She did not attempt to identify its source. She abandoned the route home she had selected and chose a different route that traversed the river district and the textile quarter and added perhaps forty minutes to the return. Whatever was reading her would, she suspected, lose her in the diversions or would not. Either outcome was acceptable. She did not turn to look behind her at any point in the longer route. She returned to the estate by the rear gate at the eleventh bell.

Cognus walked the corridor to Zannah's study without changing out of the working cloak.

✦

Zannah was at the desk.

The lamp at its low setting threw the small steady light Zannah preferred for evening review. Two folds of correspondence had been opened and set in the right-hand position. A datapad in the active state held what appeared to be Vesh's monthly summary of the freight authority's slot allocations.

Cognus inclined her head.

"The Vorn matter is closed."

"Acknowledged."

"There is a second matter."

Zannah looked up from the datapad.

"On the return from the harbor district I registered a presence reading me. Not following. Reading from distance. The radius at which the Drawn Breath caught the attention was longer than the radius at which I expect the Rite to operate. The reader did not, by my assessment, identify the operation I had completed. The reader identified me. I altered the route home and lost the read in the textile quarter, or it released me when the textile quarter became inconvenient to maintain the read across."

Zannah considered her for some moments.

"Withdraw to your quarters and change. Report back to me here when you have done so."

"Yes, Master."

✦

In the evening Zannah had been, before Cognus's arrival, working through a report from one of her acquisitions

intermediaries on the activity of the rare-text market across the Mid Rim.

The report had been routine until the third page.

On the third page, the intermediary noted that a copy of a treatise titled On the Inheritance of Hands had surfaced through a private estate sale in the Aluran system. The volume had been acquired by a buyer whose identity had been routed through three intermediary tiers and could not, by the report's author, be determined. The acquisition had closed at a price the report's author flagged as remarkable. The author had appended his own brief note: In thirty years in this trade I have not seen this title surface. I have not been certain it was extant. Whoever bought it knew it was real before any of the rest of us did.

Zannah had read the page twice and set the report down.

Senn-Vec the Late was a name that did not appear in the standard catalogues of any Sith library Zannah knew of. The volume had been written in the era before the era before the era. It predated the Republic. It predated the original Sith Empire that had preceded the Republic. It belonged to a stratum of antiquity from which only fragments and references had survived into any subsequent period. The volume should not exist. The volume existing as a physical artifact in the modern rare-acquisitions market should not be possible. The buyer who had acquired it had moved through three professional intermediary tiers. The acquisition had closed at a price that flagged it as remarkable. The buyer had known what the volume was. The buyer had had the resources and the network to take it cleanly off the market before any of the rest of the field had identified its surfacing.

The buyer's prior acquisitions, listed elsewhere in the report, formed a pattern. The pattern had been visible to Zannah for some months now. The Senn-Vec acquisition was the apex. Anyone who could acquire Senn-Vec was operating at a level the field was not supposed to support.

Zannah set the report in the third fold and made no entry in the second-system catalogue. The catalogue was for thoughts she had named. This was a thought she had not yet named.

Cognus returned to the study, having changed.

"Sit."

Cognus took the chair across the desk.

Zannah looked at her for a moment. The gold of her eyes held in the lamp's light. She did not speak immediately.

"The presence that read you," Zannah said. "Describe what you registered. The texture of the attention. Not what it did. What it felt like."

Cognus considered the question.

"It was professional. It was patient. It was not the attention of someone who had located me by accident or who was confirming a suspicion. It was the attention of someone who knew where I would be, knew when I would be moving, and was using the moving to read me. It did not move when I moved. It received what the moving showed it."

"The radius."

"Longer than the Drawn Breath should reach. I did not test the upper limit. I assume from the length that the reader was not in the harbor district or in the textile quarter. Possibly not in Daplona at all."

Zannah set her hands flat on the desk.

"Withdraw. Eat. We will discuss this further in the morning."

"Yes, Master."

Cognus rose, inclined her head, and withdrew.

✦

The first holo arrived at the twelfth bell.

The household's communications array — concealed in the small annex off the study — produced the brief two-tone signal that meant an encrypted message had landed in the Pelu channel. Zannah crossed to the annex and activated the projector.

The image stabilized after the standard half-second of static. Pelu's small blue figure flickered into the center of the projector's field, the soft hum of the carrier wave audible underneath the image. He was at his Nal Hutta workspace. The light around him was the dim red-violet of his preferred working illumination. His hands were at his sides, folded in the small formal posture he used for reports rather than transactions.

"Mistress."

"Pelu."

"One of my intermediaries has gone quiet. The third-tier broker who handles my eastern route arrangements has not responded to the standard check-in for twelve days. This is longer than is professional. I am not certain whether the silence is operational or otherwise. I will investigate and report."

"Acknowledged."

"There may be no significance. I am informing you because the silence has crossed the threshold at which professional silence becomes inquiry."

"Acknowledged. Continue the investigation."

"Mistress."

The image cut. The carrier wave dropped. The annex returned to its standing condition of quiet.

Zannah stood at the projector for a moment. She did not return immediately to the desk. She walked to the high window of the study and looked out at the western reach of the estate grounds. The bamboo at the lower garden moved in the warm westerly that came up from the canyons.

Returning to the desk, she set Pelu's message in the fourth fold. The Vorn report from Cognus was in the first fold. The acquisitions report was in the third. The fourth was Pelu. Three signals had now been received in the same evening, and the fourth was about to arrive.

The second holo came at the second hour past the twelfth bell.

The two-tone signal in the annex repeated. Zannah crossed to the projector. The image stabilized. Pelu's figure was different this time. He was not at his workspace. He was in what appeared to be a private safehouse, the lighting harsher, his shoulders set in the posture he used when the news he carried was the kind of news that required different posture.

"Mistress."

"Pelu."

"The intermediary has been found."

"Where."

"In a flat on the lower levels of Bilbousa, in a state I will not describe through this channel. The matter requires an in-person discussion. I will travel to a meeting point of your choice in the Mid Rim within the standard period. I would ask that you receive the report there rather than asking me to relay further details now."

Zannah considered him.

"Was the intermediary working on a matter I had commissioned."

"He was working on a matter we had not yet discussed in detail. I he intended to bring it to you on the routine schedule. The matter touches the acquisitions you have been pursuing over the past year."

The radius around Zannah, the Veiled Course at its operational baseline, registered her own pulse adjusting by a small degree.

"A meeting point," she said. "I will provide the coordinates within forty-eight hours. Travel under your standard cover. Bring nothing to the meeting that connects to the matter."

"Mistress."

"Pelu."

The image cut. The carrier wave dropped. Zannah remained at the projector for some seconds longer than the protocol required.

When she returned to the desk she did not sit immediately.

The four folds in the right-hand position now held: the Vorn closure, the report on the Senn-Vec surfacing, the first Pelu holo, and the second Pelu holo. Cognus had registered a presence reading her in Daplona. The Senn-Vec volume had been acquired by a buyer who should not exist. Pelu's intermediary had been found in a state Pelu did not want to describe, and the matter touched the acquisitions Zannah she had pursued.

The signals were not connected.

The signals were not, yet, connected.

Zannah sat. Her hands lay flat on the desk. The lamp at its low setting threw the steady light it she threw all evening.

Outside the high window, the warm westerly continued its rise from the canyons. The household ran on toward the deeper hours of the night.

The lamp went out under her hand.

Zannah did not go to her rooms.

Zannah remained at the desk, in the dark, with the four folds at her right hand and the silence of the architecture she had built around her. She let the looming take whatever shape it would take in the hours before morning.

CHAPTER 16

The departure brief took twenty minutes.

Zannah was at the desk in the study with the four folds from the previous evening still in their right-hand position. The lamp at its low setting threw the steady light. The morning correspondence was processed and set aside. The household clock at the south wall registered the eighth hour, and Cognus had been summoned at the seventh and forty-fifth.

Cognus stood in the cover's assigned position across the desk.

"The coordinates are confirmed," Zannah said. "Veshara Anchorage. Pelu is already aboard. Suite access is in the third habitation cylinder, suite designation he has provided through the encrypted channel. Tovek has prepared documentation for you under the cover identity of an Omek freight-acquisition agent. The documentation will pass at the station's entry inspection without flag. You will travel under that cover from the moment you board ship."

"Yes, Master."

"What you will receive from Pelu is intelligence about the intermediary. You will receive what he is prepared to show you. You will not contradict him or correct him on any point of the

doctrine he is unaware of. You will receive his report and you will return."

"Yes, Master."

"If at any point the meeting deviates from the parameters Pelu has indicated, you will withdraw immediately. If a third party arrives. If Pelu's posture changes in a way that suggests he is operating under coercion. If the suite's privacy field has been tampered with. The blades you carry are for that contingency only. You will not initiate any engagement that the meeting does not require."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah considered her across the desk for a moment longer than the briefing had required.

"Whatever Pelu shows you, you will report to me here, in this room, when you return. You will not transmit the report through any channel. You will carry it in your head and you will deliver it in person."

"Yes, Master."

"Withdraw. The conveyance is waiting."

Cognus inclined her head and withdrew.

✦

The transit out took four standard days.

Cognus traveled commercial under Tovek's documentation, in the second class of a mid-tier passenger freighter routed from Ciutric IV through two transfer points to the Praxon system. She took the meals in her cabin. She read the briefing materials Tovek had prepared on Veshara Anchorage twice. She worked the Drawn Breath at the diaphragm twice daily and the Quiet Hands

continuously. She spoke to no one beyond the courtesies the cover identity required.

On the second day of transit she thought about what the elevation meant.

The Master would have made this journey herself in the period before the Drekka acquisition. The Master was now sending the apprentice. The apprentice was being trusted with intelligence the Master would, until recently, have insisted on receiving directly. Cognus did not know what to make of the trust. Trust this large was also exposure: it placed the apprentice in a situation where the apprentice could fail in ways the Master would have to absorb. The Master had decided the failure-risk was acceptable. Cognus did not yet know whether the Master had decided correctly.

The consideration went into the place where she kept observations she would, in time, be required to act on. She continued the journey.

✦

Veshara Anchorage came up out of the dark.

The freighter dropped from hyperspace at the Praxon system's outer marker and proceeded under sublight along the standard approach corridor. Praxon itself was on its night side from the freighter's angle of approach, a vast unlit shape that occluded a quarter of the sky. The station appeared first as a small rotating ring of lights against the planet's shadow. As the freighter closed, the ring resolved into structure. The six-kilometer trading ring. The radial spokes connecting inward to four habitation cylinders. The docking gantries at the ring's

outer edge already populated with perhaps fifty freighters at various positions of mooring.

The station had been operating for three centuries. The metal of its exterior held the dull patina of three hundred years of work. The interior corridors glowed with the cool blue working light the administrator-corporation maintained during dark periods.

Cognus passed entry inspection without flag. The Sullustan customs agent at the gantry station processed her documentation in the brief manner the station's code of professional discretion encouraged. She was issued a temporary credential disk. She made her way along the ring corridor at the slow pace of a tired commercial traveler, her cloak drawn close.

The suite was in the third habitation cylinder, accessed through a secondary corridor narrower than the main thoroughfare. She reached the designation Pelu had provided. She presented her credential at the reader. The door admitted her.

The suite was as Pelu had described: five meters by four, low table, four chairs, a small refreshment alcove against the far wall, the privacy field active at the threshold. The viewport in the wall opposite the door showed Praxon's dark face filling most of the frame. Pelu was at one of the chairs.

Pelu rose when she entered.

"Mistress's apprentice."

"Pelu."

"The Master did not travel."

"She did not."

He registered that and did not comment. The Sullustan's face was difficult to read at any time. Pelu had been operating in

his trade long enough that the difficulty had been refined into the kind of professional opacity that gave nothing back. But Cognus, with the Drawn Breath at full state and the Quiet Hands operating continuously, registered the small shift of his posture as he absorbed the absence of Zannah and recalibrated the meeting's frame.

He had not expected the apprentice. He had been ready to deliver to the Master. The apprentice was an unanticipated variable. He was adjusting now.

Cognus took the chair across from him.

"Show me what you have."

Pelu activated the holoprojector at the center of the low table.

The image stabilized. The carrier wave hummed. The first holo was of a small flat in the lower levels of Bilbousa. Narrow. Poorly lit. The kind of residential cube mid-tier brokers used as crash space when they did not want to maintain a more visible address. The body was on the floor near the center of the room. The intermediary had been a Devaronian, perhaps in his fourth decade, of modest professional reputation. The body lay on its back. The arms lay positioned along the sides. The hands had been removed at the wrists.

The hands lay placed on the floor near the body's head, palms upward, fingers extended.

In each palm, three small objects was arranged.

"Look," Pelu said.

Cognus looked.

The holo allowed her to zoom on the arrangement. She brought the view to the left palm first. Three smooth river-stones, each perhaps the size of a thumbnail, arranged in a small

triangular formation near the heel of the hand. The stones were polished but not artificially smoothed; the shapes were natural. She brought the view to the right palm. Three different objects: two carved bone fragments and one polished metal disk. The bone fragments were small, perhaps two centimeters, carved with what appeared to be a continuous geometric pattern Cognus had seen in one of the texts Zannah had assigned her. The metal disk was darker than the bone, perhaps copper alloyed with something else, and bore a single mark she did not immediately recognize.

Cognus studied the configuration for some moments without speaking.

Pelu did not interrupt. Whatever he had been ready to deliver to Zannah he had arrived prepared to deliver in patience. He was extending the same patience to the apprentice.

The configuration was not random. The triangular arrangement of the stones in the left palm was a deliberate doctrinal pattern. She had read about a similar arrangement in the second of the Pelu volumes, in a passage describing the first preparation of a particular kind of Sith Working. The mixture of materials in the right palm matched the description in that same text. The text named them the six markers of will — items the practitioner handled to imprint their attention on them before the Working proper began.

She had not been certain, when she read the passage, that she had understood it.

Looking at the arrangement on Pelu's holo, she was certain.

The killer had performed the first preparation. The body was the medium. The hands had been removed and presented as the doctrine described they should be presented. Whoever had killed

the Devaronian had read at least one of the texts Zannah had been reading, and probably more. The doctrinal sequence had been executed with the precision of a practitioner who had performed it before.

None of this did Cognus share with Pelu at that moment.

No other markers was left. The killer had entered, performed the preparation, left the body in the doctrinal arrangement required, and departed. Pelu had photographed the scene. The local authorities, when they eventually found the body, would record the scene as an unusual mutilation murder of a small-flat broker. They would investigate to whatever depth their resources permitted. They would close the file when no leads emerged. Pelu's network had reached the body first by some hours.

Returning her attention to Pelu, Cognus spoke.

"What do you read this as."

"I read it as deliberate. I read it as a message. I do not read what the message says. The arrangement is too specific to be incidental, and it is not in any pattern my work has taught me to recognize."

"Who knew the intermediary was working a matter that touched the Mistress's acquisitions."

"I knew. He knew. The intermediary above him in the chain knew, but in summary form only — he was not aware of the specific volumes being routed. The buyers and sellers he handled did not know whose acquisitions network they were participating in."

"The intermediary above. Has he been contacted since."

"He has been contacted in the standard manner. He is alive. He has not been threatened. He has reported no anomalies at his end."

"Is there any other route by which the intermediary could have been identified as connected to the Mistress."

Pelu considered the question for longer than the question alone required. Cognus, watching, registered the consideration as the kind of consideration a man performed when he was working through whether his own operational discipline had introduced the vulnerability. The consideration ended with a small fractional shift of his shoulders that Cognus read as honest doubt.

"I cannot rule it out," he said. "I have used him on three matters that touched the Mistress's acquisitions in the past eighteen months. He worked under the cover identity I assigned him for that period. The identity has not, to my knowledge, been compromised. But the Mistress's acquisitions are unusual enough in their pattern that a sufficiently attentive party watching the rare-text market could have identified the buyer of a specific volume. The buyer's arrangements could have been traced back through the chain. The trace would be difficult. It would not be impossible."

"The party would have to be sufficiently attentive."

"Yes."

"And sufficiently competent."

"Yes."

"And operating with resources that permitted the trace work."

"Yes."

Cognus did not say what those three conditions taken together implied. Pelu could draw the conclusion himself or he could decline to draw it; either was acceptable to her. She returned her attention to the holo.

"Capture all the imagery. I will carry it to the Mistress."

"It is captured." Pelu produced a small data crystal from his coat pocket and slid it across the table. "Standard household encryption. It will not survive interception."

Cognus took the crystal and placed it in the inner pocket of her cloak.

Behind her, through the viewport, the planet was beginning to show its lit edge. Praxon's amber band was creeping into the suite's visual register, warming the cool blue station illumination by small degrees. The dark period was ending. The station's day had begun.

"There is one further matter," Pelu said.

"Continue."

"I want the Mistress to know that I have not been compromised. I will accept whatever assessment she reaches. I will accept whatever changes to our arrangement she requires. But I want her to know that my own discipline has not been the source of this, and I would ask that the assessment be conducted with that representation considered."

Cognus regarded him.

The man across the table had been working with Zannah for some years now and had handled a substantial quantity of the household's acquisitions traffic without flag. The request he was making was the request a professional made when he understood his entire commercial standing rested on whether the principal trusted him after a breach. His posture, his cadence, the small fractional adjustments of his hands as he made the request — all of it registered, in Cognus's reading, as the posture of a man who was telling the truth.

"The assessment will be conducted fairly," she said. "The Mistress will reach her own conclusion. I will represent your statement."

"Thank you."

Pelu did not say anything further. The meeting had, by the standards of the work it had completed, run its course. Cognus rose. He rose with her.

"Pelu."

"Mistress's apprentice."

She left the suite. She left the third habitation cylinder. The next outbound freighter that connected to her return route took her off Veshara Anchorage.

The amber of Praxon followed her along the ring corridor as the station rotated. By the time her ship undocked, the gas giant was at full lit face. The station against the planet's amber was a small bright thing Cognus watched recede from the freighter's viewport for as long as the angle permitted.

✦

The return transit took four days.

The data crystal stayed in the inner pocket of her cloak, against her ribs, where she could feel it through the cloak whenever she shifted in the freighter's narrow cabin. She did not work it during the journey. Across the four days she thought about what she had read in the arrangement. She thought about what Pelu had not been able to read. She thought about what the difference between the two readings meant for what she had become in the year and a quarter she had been at the household.

The Master had sent her to receive Pelu's report. The Master had not sent her to perform the doctrinal recognition. The Master would have performed the recognition on the holos when Cognus returned. Cognus had performed it on the station, in real time, in front of Pelu, without any external aid beyond what the texts Zannah had assigned her had taught her to see.

The recognition had not been the Master's only on the station.

It was hers also.

The realization went unannounced. She did not write it. She kept it in the place where she had been keeping the observations of the past year. The Quiet Hands had been teaching her to maintain that space. There the things she had become, but had not yet been required to be, lived.

The freighter completed the last of its transfers and made the final approach to the Ciutric system on the morning of the fifth day.

✦

Zannah received her at the desk in the study at the eleventh hour of the night of return.

The lamp was at its low setting. The four folds was moved to the left-hand position. The right hand of the desk was cleared.

Cognus produced the data crystal and placed it on the cleared surface.

"Pelu has produced the imagery and the report."

"Sit."

Cognus sat.

Zannah took the crystal and inserted it into the desk's reader. The display surface activated. The first holo of the small flat in lower Bilbousa came up, rotated, settled into the reader's display field. Zannah looked at it for some moments without speaking. She brought the view to the body. She brought the view to the hands. She brought the view to the left palm and zoomed.

Zannah did not move for some time.

Cognus watched her Master's face in the lamp's low light. The expression did not change. The shoulders did not change. The hands resting on the edge of the desk did not change. But the radius around Zannah, the Veiled Course at its operational baseline, registered to Cognus's now-trained reading. Zannah's pulse had adjusted by the same small degree it had adjusted on the night of the second Pelu holo, two months before.

Zannah brought the view to the right palm. She held the view there. She did not speak for some time.

"You read this configuration," Zannah said. The voice was even.

"Yes, Master."

"At the meeting."

"Yes, Master."

"In real time."

"Yes, Master."

"Without consulting any text or reference at the station."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah looked at her across the desk. The gold of her eyes held the lamp's light steadily. Whatever she was registering she did not name.

"The configuration is the first preparation," she said. "The text is in the second of the Pelu volumes. You read it in the third

month of your training in this household. You will recall the passage."

"I recall it, Master."

"The configuration on the body has been performed correctly. The practitioner who performed it has read the same text. The practitioner has also read texts I have not yet acquired, because the second volume describes the first preparation but does not describe the variations the doctrine permits. The configuration on the body uses one of those variations."

"Yes, Master."

"Which means the practitioner is reading from a deeper source than I currently have access to."

Cognus did not answer. The implication did not require her answer.

Zannah brought the view back to the wider shot of the room and the body.

"This is a message," she said. "The body is the medium. The configuration is the message itself. The message is addressed to me. The practitioner who killed the intermediary did so in order that I would see the pattern and understand who could have made it."

"The buyer."

"Yes."

"They know the network."

"They know the network. They know the texts the network has been routing to me. They know, presumably, who I am, or they know enough about me to have identified that the network connects to a practitioner of comparable depth. They have chosen, instead of contacting me through any commercial or

scholarly channel, to communicate by leaving a body configured in the doctrine we both read."

"Why this method."

Zannah considered the question. The lamp held its small steady light. The night beyond the high window held the warm westerly that came up from the canyons.

"Because the method tells me what they want to be telling me," she said. "The method tells me they are not afraid. The method tells me they consider themselves my peer or my superior. The method tells me they want me to know they have killed someone connected to my work and that they are willing to do it again. The next body, or the body after that, may be closer to me than this one. The method is also a doctrinal demonstration. They are showing me what they can do. They are not showing me everything they can do."

"The intermediary above the deceased."

"Will be moved to a different cover and a different chain within the week. Pelu will arrange it. The acquisitions network will be restructured. The next acquisition I attempt will be at a different tier and through a different routing."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah set her hands flat on the desk. She did not look at the holo any longer. The display continued to show the wide shot of the room.

"You did good work at the station," she said. "The recognition was correct. The reading of Pelu was correct. The decision to withhold the recognition from him until you reported here was correct."

"Thank you, Master."

"Withdraw."

Cognus rose. She inclined her head. She walked to the door of the study.

At the door she paused.

"Master."

Zannah looked up.

"You knew I would read the configuration before you sent me."

Zannah considered her across the lamp's small light for a moment longer than the question alone required.

"I suspected you would," she said. "I did not know."

Cognus inclined her head a second time and withdrew.

In the corridor she registered the rhythm of her own working state. The Quiet Hands at full state, the Drawn Breath at its slow steady rhythm. What had happened in the room behind her was not an end of anything. It was the beginning of a new period. The apprentice was no longer measured against what the apprentice was when she arrived. She was now measured against what she could become. The Master had made the assessment on the data of the journey. The assessment was favorable. The favorable assessment was its own escalation. The Master would not, going forward, send the apprentice on tasks below the level the apprentice had now demonstrated. The level was the new floor.

Cognus walked the corridor toward the eastern wing. The household ran on toward its standing condition of late night. The four folds in Zannah's study had become five. The fifth contained the data crystal. The crystal contained the message that someone the Master could not yet name was speaking to her through the arrangement of a dead man's hands.

CHAPTER 17

Tovek's report arrived at the rear gate at the second hour after dawn.

He had brought it himself rather than routing it through the standing courier rotation, which was the small operational signal he used when material warranted Zannah's direct attention before any household intermediary handled it. Telar received him at the rear gate. Cognus, working in the eastern wing on the morning's administrative tasks, came down at the household's signal. Tovek was shown to the small interview room at the rear of the main block.

Zannah received him there.

The Pyke had not aged in the time he had been installed at the Daplona residence the household maintained for him. The mask's asymmetry was the same it had been the night he arrived. The right ring finger was the same. He carried the report case at his left hand. He set it on the small table.

"Mistress."

"Mr. Sennar Phael."

"The chain-of-provenance work on the acquisition has converged. I have brought what I have. The reading is yours to

make."

"Sit."

Tovek took the chair across the table. He opened the case and produced a folio of documents, each in the dark binding the household had standardized for material that was not to circulate beyond the immediate principals. He set the folio between them. He did not open it.

"I will summarize before you read," he said. "The summary will permit you to direct your reading toward what matters. The full documentation is in the folio for your subsequent examination."

"Proceed."

"The Senn-Vec acquisition was routed, as the previous reports indicated, through three intermediary tiers. The first tier was the estate-sale broker on Aluran. The second tier was a commercial vehicle registered on Genassa. The third tier — the buyer-side entity — is what the work has resolved."

"Continue."

"The third tier is a holding company called Carannia Mercantile Trust. The trust is registered on Serenno. It has been operating since before my own time in this trade. Its public profile is that of a small commercial entity managing the financial affairs of a single Serenno noble house. The trust acquires assets on the house's behalf when the house wishes the acquisition to be conducted at one degree of remove from its public name."

"The house."

"House Demici."

Zannah did not move.

Tovek registered the absence of movement and continued.

"The trust is administered by a clerk-of-record. The clerk is a Bothan named Shev Ros'na, who has held the position for thirty-one years. Ros'na takes his instructions from a single principal within House Demici. The principal is not the head of the House. The principal is a senior cousin of the present House head, whose branch holds estates and commercial interests separate from the main Demici holdings. The cousin manages his branch's affairs personally and has done so for the duration of Ros'na's tenure."

"The cousin's name."

"Aris Demici."

Zannah received the name without speaking.

Tovek did not fill the silence. He had delivered names to her before. He had developed a working understanding of the cadences her reception of names required.

"Profile."

"Human male, perhaps in his late fifties to early sixties by best estimate. The Demici records I have been able to access through commercial channels are inconsistent on the precise date. He has been the head of his branch for the better part of forty years, having inherited the position on his father's death when he was a young man. His public profile in Carannia is that of a reclusive cousin who manages his holdings competently and does not engage in House politics. He has not married. He has no acknowledged children. He attends House gatherings rarely. His staff describe him as a private man who reads extensively and travels seldom."

"The branch's holdings."

"Substantial. The branch was originally a minor cadet line that became wealthy through commercial activities across two

generations preceding Aris's tenure. Under Aris the holdings have been managed conservatively. The branch maintains its primary estate on Serenno in a region outside Carannia, with secondary properties at three locations across the Inner Rim. The estate outside Carannia is the residence Aris occupies. It is described in the public record as a working manor with extensive grounds."

Zannah considered that for a beat.

"The Hetton inheritance."

"Came to him on Hetton's death. Hetton was Aris's second cousin, twice removed, on the maternal side of Aris's line. The relation was distant enough that the inheritance required a formal Demici succession review before transferring. The review was conducted, the holdings devolved to Aris. He has held the Hetton estate, library, and ancillary commercial interests for the ten years since."

"And the acquisition trace."

"The Senn-Vec volume was acquired through Carannia Mercantile Trust on Aris's instructions, conveyed through Ros'na, paid from the branch's consolidated commercial accounts. The trust has been active in the rare-text market for approximately twelve years, with a pattern of acquisitions that the prior reports characterized as remarkable. The pattern is now attributable to a single principal, with a single set of scholarly interests, working from a single estate."

"Twelve years," Zannah said.

"Twelve years."

Two years before Hetton's death. Aris Demici had been acquiring rare-text material at the level the prior reports flagged as remarkable for two years before the holdings he inherited from

Hetton would have given him an excuse for the work. The acquisitions were not driven by inheritance. They predated the inheritance. The inheritance had given him additional resource and additional cover; it had not begun the work.

"The folio."

"Includes the chain-of-provenance documentation, the trust's registration history, and what I have been able to gather of Aris's commercial activity across the past fifteen years. There is also a list of every acquisition the trust has made through channels I or my contacts have visibility into. The list is not complete. It is sufficient to establish the pattern."

Zannah drew the folio toward her.

"What you have not delivered today."

"Anything about Aris's life prior to his inheriting the branch. The records of his early years are clean in a way that is, in my professional reading, too clean. I have not yet been able to determine what he did during the gap between two periods of his life. The first is the age at which the public record places him as a young heir taking up his branch's holdings. The second is the age at which the documented commercial activity of his tenure begins. The gap is approximately five years. The records present him as having been in commercial education off-world during that period. I have not been able to verify the institution."

"You will continue."

"I will continue. The work to verify those years will require channels I do not currently have but can develop. I estimate three to four months for that work to produce results, possibly longer."

"Pursue it. Report when you have something to report."

"Mistress."

Tovek closed the case. He inclined his head. He did not rise immediately.

"There is one further observation."

"Continue."

"The pattern of Aris's acquisitions, taken in aggregate, is not the pattern of a collector. It is not the pattern of a scholar building a library for its own sake. It is the pattern of a practitioner. Each acquisition addresses a specific doctrinal question that the previous acquisitions have raised. The progression is methodical. The progression has direction. Whatever Aris is reading toward, he has been reading toward it consistently for twelve years."

Zannah looked at him across the table.

"Acknowledged."

"Mistress."

He rose. He inclined his head. Telar saw him out through the rear gate. The morning resumed its ordinary rhythm in the household corridors and in the eastern wing where Cognus had returned to her administrative work.

Zannah took the folio to the study.

✦

Zannah read through the morning and into the afternoon.

The folio's primary documentation was the chain-of-provenance trace for the Senn-Vec acquisition, with each intermediary tier's records cross-indexed against Tovek's broader investigation into Carannia Mercantile Trust's patterns of commerce. The work was thorough. Tovek had spent the months since Cognus's return from Veshara building this

picture, and the picture held together at every junction Zannah examined.

The Senn-Vec volume's routing through the Aluran estate-sale broker had been clean. The Genassa commercial vehicle had absorbed the volume into a small bundle of unrelated rare items intended to obscure the specific acquisition behind a generalized commercial transaction. The bundle had been received by Carannia Mercantile Trust, broken apart in the trust's standard processing, and the Senn-Vec volume separated for direct delivery to the principal's estate. The other items in the bundle had been disposed of through commercial resale.

The transit chain for the bundle from Genassa to Serenno had used standard freight routing. The routing had passed through the Praxon system, where the bundle had been transferred between freighters at Veshara Anchorage. From Veshara the bundle had been routed through one further transit point before reaching Serennoan customs.

The further transit point was the Ambria system.

The reference appeared in the freight manifest documentation as a routine entry: transit relay, Ambria orbital marker 4, twenty-six standard hours' hold for cargo redistribution. The Ambria orbital marker was a small commercial waypoint maintained by an independent freight cooperative. Bundles passing through it were typically held for redistribution to other carriers continuing inward toward the Inner Rim. The Senn-Vec bundle had passed through the marker on schedule and continued onward without flag.

Zannah's eye passed over the entry without dwelling.

In the architecture inside her where Bane was carried, something moved.

The movement was small. It was not a voice. It was not a thought she could attribute to him in language. It was a pulse of attention. She had learned, in the time since the duel, to recognize this kind of small interior pressure as Bane registering something she had said or read or thought, before he chose whether to engage. The pulse had occurred on the word Ambria. Bane had reacted to the word, and had immediately attempted to suppress the reaction. He had not been quick enough to suppress it before her own reading of him caught it.

Zannah set the folio on the desk and did not move for some moments.

Zannah had not, until this morning, registered Bane as having any particular relationship to the place where the duel had been fought. The duel had been fought there because Bane had chosen the location. The location had not, in her understanding at the time, been remarkable beyond its operational suitability — a wastes planet, sparsely populated, with an environment Bane could prepare in advance for the work. She had accepted his choice without inquiry. Bane chose places. The places he chose served his purposes. The matter had not seemed to require further examination.

The reaction she had just caught suggested otherwise.

Returning her attention to the folio, she read the freight manifest entry again, deliberately, focusing on the word Ambria.

The pulse came again. Smaller this time, because Bane was now expecting her attention and had begun, in the small interior space he occupied, to discipline his reactions. But the pulse was present. The reaction was real. Bane was carrying something about Ambria that he had not been carrying about anything else in the document.

Zannah read the entry a third time and watched.

The pulse came a third time. The discipline tightened further on the third occurrence; Bane was now actively suppressing what he had been unable to suppress on the first reading. By the fourth reading the pulse was below the threshold of her detection.

He had registered her testing of him. He had begun to defend.

The defense itself was information.

Zannah closed the folio and rose from the desk. She walked to the high window of the study and looked out at the lower garden where the bamboo was moving in the warm westerly that came up from the canyons. She did not speak to him. She did not interiorly address him. She wanted, for some moments, the silence of her own observation rather than the silence of his refusal.

What she had registered:

Bane had reacted to the word Ambria with attention beyond what the freight manifest entry warranted. He had reacted three times in succession. He had then begun to suppress further reactions, which meant he had recognized his own initial responses as having communicated something to her he had not intended to communicate.

What she could infer:

Bane carried knowledge about Ambria that he had not shared with her. The knowledge was specific enough to produce involuntary reactions when the place was named. The knowledge had been with him during the period leading up to the duel. He had chosen Ambria as the duel ground in possession of that

knowledge. His choice of the place had not been arbitrary. He had taken her there deliberately, for reasons he had not disclosed.

What she did not know:

What the knowledge was. Why he had chosen the place. Whether the choice had been intended to advantage him in the duel, advantage her, advantage neither, or serve some other purpose she had not been in a position to recognize at the time.

Zannah returned to the desk.

The pressing did not yet come. She had time. The pressing would come at the close of the day, when the work was done and the household was quiet. The lamp at the desk would be at its low setting. The architecture between Master and apprentice could take whatever shape the testing required.

✦

Cognus came to the study in the late afternoon for the standing daily review.

Cognus inclined her head. She took the chair across the desk. Zannah opened the folio between them and walked her, briefly, through what Tovek had delivered.

"The buyer is identified," Zannah said. "Aris Demici. Of House Demici. A senior cousin, branch head, holdings on Serenno. He inherited Hetton's estate ten years ago and has been operating from a position the household had not previously identified."

"Hetton," Cognus said.

"The Master killed him on Ambria. You will not yet have read the records."

"No, Master."

"The killing was operational. Hetton had attempted apprenticeship through a route that required the killing to close. The apprenticeship had been my own arrangement, not the Master's. The Master closed it for me. Hetton's holdings devolved through House Demici's succession to Aris."

Cognus considered the information.

"And the connection to the configuration on the body."

"Aris is the buyer. The buyer is the killer. The body in lower Bilbousa was Aris's signal. The signal was addressed to the Master."

Cognus did not speak immediately.

"He does not know."

"He does not know. He has been reading the configuration as a communication to a man he believes still occupies the position the Master held. He does not yet know that the Master is dead. He does not know that I am the practitioner reading the texts he is reading. The next contact between us, whenever it comes and however it comes, will involve his discovery of both facts."

"The Master is silent on him."

"Silent on Aris, yes. Silent on what surrounds Aris, less so. There is material I am working through that will require further attention. You will not yet be involved in it."

"Yes, Master."

"The Aris work will continue through Tovek's further investigation. We will not approach Aris ourselves until the picture is more complete than it currently is. What Tovek delivers in the coming months will determine the timeline."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah closed the folio.

"Withdraw. The day's further work is mine."

Cognus inclined her head. She rose. She withdrew from the study and walked the corridor toward the eastern wing. The household ran on toward evening.

✦

The lamp at the desk was at its low setting when Zannah came back to it after the household's evening rotation had completed.

The folio was at her right hand. The four other folds from the prior weeks were in their position at the left. The night was deep enough that the warm westerly had cooled by some degrees, and the bamboo at the lower garden had stilled with the cooling. The estate was quiet in the particular quiet a wealthy household produced after the staff had retired and the principals were alone with the work.

Zannah sat. Her hands lay flat on the desk. She closed her eyes.

In the architecture inside her she addressed him.

'Master,' she said. The word she chose was deliberate. She had not addressed him by the title since the duel. She used it now because the conversation required it. 'I will speak to you in the form you taught me, in the cadence you required when I was apprentice. I am no longer apprentice. I am the practitioner who carries you. You will hear me.'

He did not answer.

'Aris Demici,' she said.

The name held in her interior attention. She watched.

There was no reaction. The space where Bane was carried registered nothing. The name produced no pulse, no movement, no defensive suppression. Bane had no prior knowledge of Aris

Demici. The man was outside whatever his understanding of the field had been.

Zannah marked the absence of reaction.

'Hetton,' she said.

A small reaction. The expected reaction, the reaction of a man recalling work he had performed. Bane recognized Hetton because Bane had killed him. The reaction was clean and contained. Bane was not defending against the name; he was simply registering it.

'House Demici,' she said.

No reaction. The House meant nothing to him beyond what Hetton had been.

What the day's work had suggested was now confirmed: Aris Demici was outside Bane's prior knowledge. The antagonist she was beginning to understand had not been known to the Master who carried her. Bane could not help her with Aris. Whatever Aris was, Zannah would face him without her Master's recognition to draw on.

Zannah moved to the second pressure.

'Ambria,' she said.

The reaction came. It came with the discipline he had begun to apply during the afternoon's reading, but the reaction was present beneath the discipline. He was holding it. He was suppressing it. He was not eliminating it.

'Ambria,' she said again.

The reaction came again. The discipline tightened. The pulse was smaller. The pulse was still present.

'You chose the place,' she said. 'You chose it before I knew what the duel would be. You chose it knowing something about

it I did not know. You have carried the knowledge across the time since, and you have not given it to me.'

He did not answer.

'I have done you the courtesy of carrying you across that time,' she said. 'I have done you the courtesy of the apprentice who became Master and let her predecessor remain in her, when there was no requirement that she do so. I have given you the architecture of my interior to occupy. I will not, going forward, accept your withholding on this matter as a final answer. You will tell me what you knew about Ambria when you took me there. You will tell me, in time, whether the time is this evening or the evening a year from now or the evening a decade from now. The conversation is open.'

He did not answer.

'I will press,' she said. 'I will press until you engage. The pressing is not punishment. The pressing is the conversation that you and I will have. You and I are both Masters of this line. Masters of this line do not carry knowledge across the time of their second life and refuse to share it with the practitioner who occupies their first body.'

The reaction came once more, smaller still. He was disciplining harder. He was holding the line of his withholding.

But the line was holding only by his discipline. The information he carried had not become inaccessible to him; it had become deliberately withheld from her. The withholding was a choice. The choice could, in time, be unmade.

Zannah opened her eyes.

The lamp at its low setting threw the small steady light. The folio at her right hand contained the work that would continue across the coming months. Tovek's further investigation into

Aris's missing five years. The development of additional intelligence on the Demici branch. The slow construction of the picture the household would eventually act on.

The architecture inside her contained the silence of a man who had reacted to a place and refused to explain why.

Both threads were now active.

Zannah sat with both threads in the lamp's small light for some time before she rose. She did not turn the lamp out. She did not address Bane again. She had said what the evening required her to say. The next conversation, in whatever form it took, would arrive when it arrived.

Outside the high window the night held the quiet of a household that had completed its work and was waiting for morning.

The first cycle of the new architecture had ended at the Drekka acquisition. The second cycle had begun with the Senn-Vec recognition. The third cycle was beginning now. Zannah understood it as she rose from the desk and crossed to the door of the study. Beginning in the silence of a man who had taken her to Ambria for reasons he had refused to name. Beginning in the name of an antagonist neither of them had known existed before the dead Devaronian's hands were arranged on the floor of a flat in lower Bilbousa.

She left the lamp burning. The corridor toward her rooms received her steady walk. The household ran on toward morning.

CHAPTER 18

The intelligence about Marvash arrived through Vesh six days before the meeting.

It came in the form of three short notes appended to the standard monthly report Vesh prepared for Allia on the surface accounts of the freight business. The notes flagged a pattern of inquiries that had begun to surface among Vaszuun's peer brokers in the harbor district. Someone had been asking, through intermediary contacts, about the freight business under its new ownership. The questions was careful. The questioner was not Daplona-based. The questioner had not, in any of the three instances Vesh's contacts had registered, identified themselves.

Zannah read the notes at the desk in the morning rotation.

Zannah set them in the third fold beside the most recent of Tovek's deliverables on Aris and the consolidated correspondence from Pelu on the rebuilt acquisitions network. The third fold was the operational threats fold; the arrangement of its contents was stable for some weeks now.

The Vesh notes joined the configuration.

What she did not do, that morning or in any of the five mornings that followed, was reframe the notes. They were not moved to a separate fold. They were not examined against any frame other than the one she had been operating in. The Aris pattern had been dominating her analytical mode since the Senn-Vec recognition. The Aris pattern had specific signatures: indirect inquiry, professional intermediary tiers, careful questioner-identity concealment, doctrinal undertones. The Vesh notes presented the first three signatures cleanly. The fourth — doctrinal undertones — was absent from the notes as written. Zannah's reading, filtered through her current mode, registered the absence as something Vaszuun's peer brokers would not have been competent to detect rather than as evidence that the inquiries were not doctrinal at all.

The response she calibrated was the response she would have calibrated for an Aris-adjacent probe.

The standard intelligence collection rotation was instructed to hold steady. Tovek, through the encrypted channel, was directed to add the inquiries to his Aris workstream and to look for connection points between the new pattern and Aris's known acquisition tiers. The protective presence around Vaszuun was not increased beyond the standard household perimeter. The threat assessment was not extended to non-doctrinal vectors.

The response posture settled. The five days passed. The meeting with Vaszuun, which was scheduled before any of the inquiries surfaced, came on schedule.

✦

Vaszuun arrived at the estate in the late morning of the sixth day.

Vaszuun came in his own conveyance, a small open hauler driven by the same Sullustan clerk who had received Allia and Cognus at the freight district office. The hauler stopped at the front gate. Telar received him there. The Sullustan clerk waited in the hauler. Vaszuun was shown across the front grounds and into the eastern reception parlor that the household used for business meetings of the kind today's conversation required.

Allia received him in the parlor.

The room was prepared as the protocol required. A low table set at a height that accommodated Vaszuun's forelimb stance. A small clay vessel of Dug marsh-water on the table. Two cushions for Vaszuun and one for Allia. The walls of the parlor were paneled in pale wood. The single window opened onto the eastern garden where the morning sun was working through the early haze.

"Mistress Omek."

"Master Drekka. You are welcome."

Vaszuun ascended to the low table on his forelimbs and lowered himself onto the larger of the two cushions. Allia, with the head-tilt forward at the proper angle, lowered herself onto the cushion across from him. She extended her right hand to the clay vessel and performed the opening of the protocol. He returned the gesture. The marsh-water passed between them.

"The quarter's closing transition is in good order," Vaszuun said. "Vesh has been precise. I have one matter to discuss with you regarding the slot allocations at the second wharf and one matter regarding the Dug protocols for the three accounts I have not yet introduced you to fully. I have prepared documentation for both."

"Proceed."

Vaszuun produced a small folio from his coat and set it on the table between them.

The slot allocation conversation took some minutes. Vaszuun walked her through the harbor authority's recent adjustments to the second wharf's scheduling priorities and the implications for the three contracts Drekka had been routing through that wharf for the past two years. The work was careful. Allia listened, asked the questions the cover required, and made the small notations the conversation produced.

The conversation moved to the Dug protocols.

"These three accounts," Vaszuun said, "are operated by Dug brokers of the higher castes. The introductions I have made for you to other accounts have been with brokers of mixed background where the protocols matter less. These three matter. I have arranged for visits to each of the three brokers over the coming six weeks, in the postures the protocols require. I will accompany you to each visit. The visits will establish the relationships you will then maintain after my advisory period closes."

"Acknowledged."

"The first visit is scheduled for the eleventh day of the new quarter. The broker is a Dug named Ihren Voss, who has been routing freight through Drekka's scheduling for seventeen years. He is older than I am. He will receive you in the manner I will brief you on before the visit."

"Acknowledged."

The parlor door opened.

Zannah had been listening with the surface attention the cover required, and beneath it the deeper attention the

operational state had been maintaining. She registered the door's opening at the same moment her interior structure caught something else. A pattern of presences had entered the household perimeter in the past several minutes. The presences had not registered through the standard household security awareness; they had moved through the perimeter in the manner of people who had been studying it. The Veiled Course at its operational baseline caught them now, late, at the threshold of the parlor itself.

Three of them.

The first one through the door was carrying a holdout blaster at his right hand.

He was human, midsized, dressed in the working clothes of a Daplona freight laborer. His face was unfamiliar. He moved with the operational economy of a man who had done this kind of work before. He fired the first shot before the door had fully opened, and the shot took Vaszuun in the chest at the angle the Dug's seated posture made unavoidable.

Zannah was on her feet.

Her body had moved before her conscious analytical state fully registered what was happening. The Drawn Breath and the Veiled Course had been operating beneath her cover-state throughout the meeting. The operational reflexes those Workings maintained moved her before her mind caught up to the moment. The killer's second shot, which would have been at her, did not connect because she was no longer at the cushion. She was at his right side. The three meters had crossed in the time the second shot required to leave the holdout's chamber.

His weapon hand came up at her wrist-grip.

The wrist broke.

The holdout fell. He produced a second weapon from his belt — a short fixed blade — and brought it up. Zannah caught the blade-arm at the elbow and broke the elbow. He had begun to speak, perhaps to declare his work, perhaps to say something the moment required. She did not let him speak. The heel of her hand drove into his throat and crushed it. He fell to the parlor floor making the sound a man made when he could not breathe and could not be helped to breathe.

The killing did not stop there.

Her knee drove into his ribs. Then again. The ribs broke at three locations along the left side. He had stopped trying to make sound by then; he was dying through the crushed throat and was beyond protest. The killing was not the killing of a Sith operator dealing professionally with an enemy. The killing was the killing of a woman who had just watched the man across the table from her take a chest shot at the angle his seated posture had made unavoidable. He was her business advisor for two years. He had been her cover's closest professional relationship. The rage was full. The Veiled Course wavered at its baseline as the rage moved through her, and she did not bring it back to discipline immediately because the discipline was not what the moment required.

The killer was dead within fifteen seconds of firing the shot that killed Vaszuun.

Zannah stood from his body.

Vaszuun was still at the table. The shot was clean. He had not moved after the impact. His breathing had stopped within the first three seconds, the chest wound having taken the cluster of vessels at the heart-side of the body. His eyes were open. The marsh-water vessel was overturned on the table beside him and

its contents were spreading slowly across the wood toward the edge.

All of this registered in the interval between her standing from the killer and reaching for the operational state the rest of the response would require.

The only operator she had access to was dead.

He had been killed before any of the questions that should have been asked could have been asked. He had been killed in rage rather than in discipline. The killer had carried information. The killer had carried it into death.

✦

In the eastern wing Cognus had felt the disturbance before any alarm had reached the household's standing security protocols.

The small administrative desk was her position — the room she used for the daily correspondence and the routine review of the household's commercial activity. The Drawn Breath had been operating at its steady state. The Quiet Hands had been operating beneath it. The disturbance reached her first as a small wrongness in the pattern of presences at the western reach of the property. Three figures whose registrations did not match any of the household's catalogue of expected presences for the morning.

Cognus was already moving when the parlor door opened.

The threshold of the eastern wing she reached as Zannah's sudden operational state shift moved through the bond between them. The cover's surface state collapsing. The deeper state coming up to full capacity. The rage moving through the bond as the killing of Vaszuun completed.

The eastern wing's threshold passed beneath her, and she entered the connecting corridor that ran between the eastern wing and the central block.

The arsenal room was three doors down the corridor on the left.

The door came open at her hand, bolts drawn, the lamp unlit, the room in the gray half-light of the corridor's ambient lighting. She crossed to the workbench. The twin curved blades came down from the wall mount. She did not unsheathe them. She left the room with the blades in their sheaths and ran the rest of the corridor toward the parlor.

Perhaps fifteen seconds out from the parlor, Zannah's interior pressure reached her in language for the first time since the meeting had begun.

It was a single declarative.

'Read for both of us!'

The Veiled Course around Zannah dropped.

The drop registered as a small specific opening in the structure Cognus had been operating beneath. The radius around her Master, which had been the Master's protective field continuously since the first day of Cognus's arrival at the household, was no longer in operation. The precognition Cognus carried as a function of her species — the small forward-glimpse her people produced as part of their normal sensory register — was now able to operate freely.

She let it operate.

The first read came immediately.

A figure was in the corridor ahead of her, perhaps eight meters in front, in the recessed alcove at the corridor's halfway point. The figure was holding something at chest height. The

thing was a small communications device. The figure was about to transmit. The transmission would carry three short tones. The tones would constitute a confirmation signal: operation completed, withdraw on schedule, principal absent from confirmation. The signal would reach a receiver somewhere outside the estate. The receiver belonged to the operation's principal, who was waiting on the confirmation to release the next phase of his planning.

The transmission appeared to her in the small window of seconds before it would occur.

The left blade came out with the crossing motion her training had built into her hands over the years. She threw.

The blade left her hand at the moment the transmitter's thumb was beginning to depress the device's send key. The blade entered the transmitter's throat at the angle her release had produced. The thumb completed its motion against the device, but the device — with the operator's windpipe severed and the operator already falling — did not generate the transmission. The first tone produced as a partial fragment that did not register at the receiver's end. The second and third tones did not generate. The signal failed.

The alcove reached her at full stride.

The blade she did not stop to retrieve. The transmitter was on the floor of the alcove producing the small sounds a man produced when his throat opened and his lungs were filling with his own blood. He would not live more than another half a minute. The second blade came into her hand and she continued down the corridor.

The second read came as she reached the parlor's entry vestibule.

A figure was outside on the eastern garden, perhaps thirty meters from the parlor's window, in the concealment of the bamboo at the garden's lower edge. The figure was a backup observer. The figure had been watching for visual confirmation of the operation's outcome through the parlor window. The transmission having failed to occur in the expected window, the figure was about to break concealment and withdraw across the eastern property line to make an independent report to the operation's principal.

The figure's imminent departure came to her in the same way the transmitter's imminent transmission had.

The parlor she did not enter.

Through the vestibule's side door she crossed into the eastern garden. The garden ran past her at full pace toward the bamboo at the lower edge. The figure had broken concealment at perhaps the same moment she emerged from the vestibule. The figure was a Sluissi, low to the ground, moving with the gliding speed Sluissi achieved when they were operating at urgency. The figure was perhaps eighty meters from the property line.

The distance closed at the angle her precognition had given her.

Cognus caught the Sluissi at the eastern wall, ten meters short of the line.

The catch was operational. She did not attempt to take the Sluissi alive. The Sluissi had been moving fast enough that the catch produced collision violence. She went over the Sluissi at the wall and brought the blade down at the back of the neck as her weight followed her through. The blade severed the spinal cord at the seam between cranium and trunk. The Sluissi went limp.

Cognus rose from the body. She wiped the blade on her cloak. She turned back toward the parlor.

The eastern garden was still in the same morning light it had been in when the meeting had begun. Some birds were calling from the southern trees. The bamboo at the lower edge was moving in the warm westerly that had been rising up from the canyons. The Sluissi at her feet was no longer registering any presence at all.

The garden passed beneath her steady walk as she returned to the parlor.

✦

Zannah was at the parlor's eastern wall when Cognus entered through the vestibule.

The killer's body was on the floor where she had left it. Vaszuun's body was at the table. The marsh-water from the overturned vessel had reached the edge of the table and was dripping in slow individual drops onto the parlor's wood floor.

Zannah turned from the wall and looked at Cognus across the room.

Cognus inclined her head.

"The transmitter is dead in the corridor alcove. The observer is dead at the eastern wall. The signal did not complete. The independent confirmation will not arrive."

"Acknowledged."

"The principal will not know what happened for some hours, possibly longer. He will not be able to reconstruct the operation's failure without surface evidence he cannot obtain. He will go to ground."

Zannah did not speak immediately.

Cognus did not approach the table or the body. She held position at the vestibule entry and let her Master register what her Master needed to register.

After perhaps thirty seconds Zannah turned from the wall and crossed to where Vaszuun was at the table. She knelt at the cushion she had risen from. She reached across and closed Vaszuun's eyes with the gesture the situation permitted. The eyes were already cooling beneath her hand.

"We will move him," Zannah said. "We will move him in the manner the protocols require. Telar will summon the household physician for the formal certification. The certification will be the death-by-violent-act category, with the perpetrator identified as the human operator in this room. The household will issue a statement to the harbor authorities by midday. The statement will represent the killing as an attempted robbery of the meeting that escalated when the principals resisted. The escalation killed the freight broker. The household defended itself. The perpetrator was killed in the defense. The two additional perpetrators identified on the grounds were accomplices of the primary, eliminated by household security in the broader response."

"Yes, Master."

"Tovek will be summoned within the hour. The work on Aris will be paused. Tovek will be redirected to the Marvash investigation immediately. We will have the principal's name and operational profile within forty-eight hours."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah did not rise. She remained at the cushion with her hand on Vaszuun's eyes. The Veiled Course came back up to its

operational baseline at some point in the next several seconds, but the bringing back up was not the immediate priority. The priority was Vaszuun. The man at the table was a partner to her cover for two years. The man at the table had taught her cover Dug commercial protocol when her cover had not known it. The man at the table had inclined his head to her cover at the close of the negotiation that gave the business its standing in Daplona. The man at the table had been carrying his caste's obligations and her cover's obligations simultaneously and had carried them both well. The man at the table was dead because Zannah's analytical mode was wrong.

Zannah rose from the cushion.

✦

The household physician arrived at the parlor within the half hour and performed the formal certifications. Telar handled the harbor authority statement. Vesh was summoned from the surface accounts office. He was placed in charge of the immediate communications — with Vaszuun's family on Dressel, and with the senior brokers in the freight district who would need to be informed by sundown. The two bodies on the property — the transmitter in the corridor and the Sluissi at the eastern wall — were moved to a holding location at the rear of the property. There they would be processed by household security according to the protocols for hostile operators eliminated on the grounds. The bodies would not be entered into the harbor authority statement. The harbor authority statement would account only for the killer in the parlor.

By the second hour of the afternoon the household had returned to its standing operational rhythm at the surface level. Beneath the surface the work of reconstructing what had happened was already underway.

Tovek arrived at the rear gate at the third hour.

✦

Zannah received him in the study.

Zannah did not begin with the meeting's purpose. She began by walking him through what had happened, in order, including the misreading. She did not soften the misreading. She named it. Tovek listened. When she had finished he sat across the desk from her with the case folded on the chair beside him and did not speak for some moments.

"Mistress."

"Continue."

"The Marvash investigation will require the channels I had been developing for the Aris work, redirected. I will need three to four weeks to produce a working profile and operational location for him. I would estimate two months to develop the picture sufficient to act on. The Aris work will need to be paused for the duration."

"Pause it. Bring the Marvash picture as fast as you can produce it without sacrificing the work's integrity."

"Mistress."

"The signal did not complete. The observer did not report. Marvash is blind on what happened. He will not move while he is blind. You have the window his blindness creates. Use it."

"I will, Mistress."

"What you will not do is approach Marvash directly during the development period. The window of his blindness is limited. We do not know how limited. The work must be invisible to him until the work is complete."

"I will work in the postures the work requires."

"Withdraw. Begin the work today."

Tovek inclined his head. He took the case from the chair and left the study. Telar saw him out through the rear gate.

Zannah sat at the desk in the silence that followed.

The lamp at the desk was not lit; the afternoon's light through the high window was sufficient. The folio of Aris materials at the right hand of the desk was still arranged as it had been that morning, but the arrangement had changed in meaning. It was no longer the active analytical thread. It was the paused thread. The active thread was now the Marvash work, which did not yet have a folio because the work had not yet produced documentation.

Zannah did not write anything in the second-system catalogue. She did not yet have the language for what she would need to write. She had the operational facts of the morning. She had the cost the operational facts had produced. She had the recognition that her analytical mode was wrong in a way she had not been able to detect from inside the mode itself.

That was the recognition she would carry forward. It was not a recognition that could be solved by greater discipline within the same mode. It was a recognition that required structural change. The analytical apparatus the household used could not, going forward, permit any single thread to dominate threat assessment. Multiple threads would have to operate simultaneously, with no thread holding the analytical mode in its frame. The household

was wrong because she had let the Aris thread occupy the dominant position. She would not let that occupation recur.

Zannah sat with the recognition for some time before Cognus came to the study for the debrief.

✦

Cognus came in the early evening.

Cognus had changed out of the working cloak she had worn through the operation. The twin blades had been returned to the arsenal room. The blade she had thrown in the corridor had been recovered by household security and cleaned and returned to her in the standard rotation. She inclined her head at the threshold. She took the chair across the desk.

"Sit," Zannah said. Cognus was already seated. The instruction was reflex; Zannah's mind was not entirely in the room yet.

Cognus did not comment on the redundancy.

"The work this morning," Zannah said. "Walk me through it."

Cognus walked her through it. The corridor read, the transmission window, the throw. The vestibule, the second read, the run across the garden, the catch at the eastern wall. She did not embellish. She delivered the operational account in the clean professional register she had used for every previous report.

When she had finished Zannah considered her across the desk for some moments without speaking.

"I lowered the Veiled Course because my analytical mode was wrong and I could not produce a reading from inside it that would have caught what your precognition caught. The lowering

was not an emotional decision. It was an operational decision. You will understand it as such."

"Yes, Master."

"Your precognition operated as I had calibrated for it to operate when I gave the instruction. The catches were clean. The intercepts were timed. The work was the work of a practitioner who has integrated her natural capability with her trained capability at a level the household had not previously deployed her at."

"Thank you, Master."

Zannah considered her further.

"Going forward," she said, "the protocol will be the protocol of this morning. When the household's analytical state is required to be operating in a mode that constrains my access to certain ranges of reading, your access will operate in the complementary ranges. The Veiled Course will not be a permanent shield around you. It will be a field I lower when the work requires it. You will operate in the openings I create. You will not request the openings. The decision to create them will remain mine."

"Yes, Master."

"The trust the protocol requires is the trust the protocol requires."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah did not name it further. She did not need to. Cognus watched her Master across the desk in the early evening light. What had been said and what had not been said both registered. In the place where she had been keeping the observations of the past months, she registered something further. What had happened in the corridor and on the garden and now in this

room was an ascension. She had not asked for it. She had not anticipated it. In any circumstance the work might produce, she would not fail to honor it.

"Withdraw," Zannah said. "The day's work is complete."

Cognus inclined her head. She rose. She walked to the door of the study and paused at the threshold.

"Master."

"Yes."

"The man at the table was a good man within the limits of his trade."

Zannah looked at her across the room.

"He was. Acknowledged."

Cognus inclined her head a second time and withdrew.

✦

Zannah remained at the desk after the household had completed its evening rotation and the staff had retired.

The lamp at the desk was at its low setting. The folio of Aris materials was at the right hand of the desk in the paused configuration. The Marvash work would arrive in the coming weeks and Tovek would build the picture as quickly as the picture could be built. Vaszuun would be returned to Dressel for the Dug funerary protocols his caste required. The Drekka business would continue under reduced capacity for the duration of the transition that Vaszuun's death had not let him complete. The harbor authorities would file their report. The harbor district would talk about the violence at the Omek estate for some weeks before the talk subsided into the longer memory.

The architecture had received its first real wound.

Zannah sat with the wound in the lamp's small light and did not yet attempt to address it. The addressing would come in the weeks and months of the work to follow. For the moment she let it be a wound. She let it teach what wounds taught when they were carried at full attention rather than disciplined away.

In the architecture inside her, Bane was silent.

The silence held the same shape it had held through the day and over the weeks before. He had not registered anything she had been able to read during the killing, the catches, or the debrief. He might have thought about her rage at the killer. He might have thought about Cognus's precognition operating freely for the first time in his presence. He might have thought about her own analytical failure and the cost it had produced. Whatever he had thought of any of these things, he had carried it inside himself. He had not shown it to her.

Zannah did not press him this evening. She had pressed him the evening before. She would press him again, in the cadences and on the schedule the architecture would produce. The pressing was the conversation that he and she would have across whatever time the conversation required. For tonight she let him be silent and let her own wound be uncovered.

The lamp went out under her hand at the deeper hour of the night. The corridor toward her rooms received her steady walk. The household ran on toward morning.

CHAPTER 19

Three weeks past the killing the household had begun to settle into the texture of what the killing had cost.

The Drekka business operated at reduced capacity. Vesh had taken on the operational coordination Vaszuun would have continued to handle through the transition period. He had been doing the work competently within the limits of his prior experience. That experience had been the surface accounts, not the harbor district's deeper protocols. The visit to Ihren Voss that Vaszuun had scheduled for the eleventh day of the new quarter had been deferred indefinitely. Two of the three Dug accounts that Vaszuun had been preparing to introduce had requested clarification about the business's leadership going forward. Vesh had handled the clarifications in writing and had not yet been required to handle them in person.

The harbor district's talk about the violence at the Omek estate had begun to subside into the longer memory. The harbor authority's investigation had closed on the attempted-robbery finding by the second week. The Daplona social register had recorded the incident at Allia Omek's estate and had begun to

file it as a regrettable exposure to harbor commerce's less reputable elements. The cover was holding.

The Aris materials remained in the third fold at the desk in the study. The fold had not been opened since the morning of the killing.

The morning of the deliverable was a clear cool one with the warm westerly already rising up from the canyons by the seventh hour.

Tovek arrived at the rear gate at the second hour after dawn.

✦

He carried the case at his left hand and a second smaller case at his right. The second case Zannah had not seen before. Telar received him at the gate and showed him through to the study. Cognus, who had been summoned at the seventh hour, was already at her position at the chair against the eastern wall.

Tovek set both cases on the small table beside the desk and did not sit.

"Mistress."

"Mr. Sennar Phael."

"The deliverable is ready. I will summarize before I open the folio. The summary will permit your reading to direct itself toward what matters."

"Proceed."

"The principal is identified. His name is Tezhu Marvash. He is Gran, late middle-aged by Gran reckoning, perhaps two-thirds through the active span his species permits. He operates a freight-and-information brokerage from a modest office complex in the primary commercial district of Garqi, in the Ciutric

Hegemony, one system over from Ciutric IV. The cover is legitimate. He has been operating it for slightly more than a decade without flagging any regional or planetary attention."

"Continue."

"His operational structure consists of a core team of between eight and twelve operatives, mixed species, professionally trained, with defined roles across intelligence, action, logistics, and communications. The team that came to the estate was drawn from a wider contractor network he engages for specific operations. The contractor network is larger than the core team, perhaps thirty individuals across the systems he has been working, and is not currently in standing-employment status. He brings them in as the operations require and pays them off when the operations conclude."

"The financial infrastructure."

"Three separate commercial entities, none of which are formally connected to the Garqi brokerage on the public records. The entities operate in different sectors. A small shipping concern registered on Borleias. A commodities trading firm registered on Vinsoth. A holding company in the Ciutric system itself that handles the brokerage's direct operational expenses. The three entities cycle funds between themselves through standard commercial transactions that produce no irregular signatures. The arrangement permits Marvash to absorb the loss of any single entity without losing the broader operation."

"His current intelligence picture on this household."

"This is where the deliverable becomes more interesting. He knows Allia Omek as the new owner of the Drekka business. He knows the business's commercial footprint in approximately the level of detail any competent freight-district observer would have

access to. He has been receiving feed from a Daplona-based intelligence apparatus of his own construction. Five sources — three primary and two secondary. None of them are members of the household's staff or operating from within the household's perimeter. The feed gives him surface-level information about the business's activity and about Allia's public movements. He does not have deep penetration. He does not have anything resembling awareness of the household's Sith dimension. He believes this household is a wealthy Daplona aristocratic operation with conventional defensive capability."

Zannah considered him across the desk.

"And his current operational state."

"This is where I will require your permission to discuss a matter I have been pursuing on my own judgment."

"Continue."

Tovek did not sit. He had not sat at any point in the delivery. He stood at the small table with the two cases at his hands and held the position the conversation required.

"In the first week of my work," he said, "I made the operational judgment that the deliverable you had commissioned would not be sufficient on its own to produce the outcome the second contract required. The deliverable as commissioned was the working profile and the operational picture. The picture would have told you what Marvash was. It would not have told you what Marvash would do when he discovered, through his own intelligence rebuild, that the Vaszuun operation had failed strategically. The discovery would have produced one of three responses from him, all of which would have made the strike difficult to execute on the schedule the second contract required."

"What were the three responses."

"He would have gone deeper to ground, becoming harder to locate and harder to engage. He would have escalated against the household preemptively, attempting to produce additional pressure before the household could complete its rebuild. Or he would have liquidated his current Garqi operation entirely and moved to one of the secondary positions his three commercial entities permit, which would have required the investigation to restart from the beginning. Any of the three responses would have placed the strike outside the household's operational reach for some additional months, possibly longer."

"What you did."

"I have been actively feeding false signal into his intelligence rebuild during the three weeks. The rebuild had begun in the second week after his initial operation failed, and was producing the kind of information he would have used to model the household's current state. The information he was reaching was through the same five sources I named. I disrupted three of those sources and replaced them with sources I control. The replaced sources have been feeding him a picture of a household scrambling to recover from the Vaszuun killing. Weakened operationally by the loss of Vaszuun's commercial leadership. Suffering internal disputes about Allia's capacity to manage the business going forward. Considering the sale of the Drekka operation entirely. The picture has kept him in his current location, awaiting the moment when the household's weakening produces a clean opportunity for his next move. He has not made the move. He will not make the move until the picture I am feeding him shifts."

Zannah did not speak immediately.

Tovek did not fill the silence. He had delivered the operational fact of what he had done, and had explained the reasoning that produced the action, and was waiting for the response his Mistress required to produce. The response was hers to make. He had made his.

"You proceeded without authorization."

"I proceeded without authorization. The authorization could not have been requested through the standard channels in the time the operation required. The decision was mine. The decision will remain mine to defend."

"The defense."

"The strike, when it is executed, will succeed cleanly because Marvash will be in the position I have kept him in rather than the position his own response would have moved him to. The cost of the deception has been some operational expense, the management of three controlled sources across three weeks, and the risk that Marvash will detect the deception before the strike is executed. The risk has been declining each day the deception holds. The current assessment is that the deception will hold until the strike is executed."

Zannah looked at him across the desk for a longer beat than the conversation's prior cadence had used.

"The decision was operational."

"Yes, Mistress."

"The result is favorable."

"Yes, Mistress."

"The household is in a stronger position than it would be if you had not made the decision."

"That is my assessment."

Zannah set her hands flat on the desk. The Veiled Course at its operational baseline registered, in the space around Tovek, the calm professional opacity she had grown to expect from him. The opacity had been there since the Sepp engineering. The opacity had been present at the funeral, at the Drekka closing, at the Senn-Vec recognition, at the killing of Vaszuun. It was present now at the disclosure of an unauthorized operation Tovek had executed in defense of the second contract. The opacity was not a performance. It was the working state of a man who had spent his exile years constructing a professional capability that did not require external validation.

"The judgment is acknowledged," Zannah said. "The result is acknowledged. Continue the deception through the strike window. Provide the household the second case."

"The second case contains the operational picture in greater detail than the folio provides. Marvash's daily schedule, the office complex's physical layout, the staff rotation, the contractor network's current positions, and the configurations of the three commercial entities. The case is what would be required by the operators executing the strike."

"Withdraw to the rear of the property. Telar will provide refreshment. I will summon you when the additional conversation is ready."

"Mistress."

Tovek inclined his head. He took the smaller case with him and left the larger one and the folio on the table. Telar opened the study door and escorted him toward the rear of the central block.

The door closed.

✦

Zannah turned to Cognus.

"You will speak to me as the Huntress," she said.

Cognus rose from the chair against the eastern wall and crossed to the chair across the desk. She did not sit immediately. She stood at the chair's back with her hand on its edge and looked at her Master across the room.

"Yes, Master."

"I have read direct-strike operations in the texts and in the histories I have access to. I have not executed one. I have executed work that required force, including the killing on Ambria, and I have studied lightsaber combat at the levels the Master taught me. The strike at Garqi will be a different category of operation than either of those experiences has prepared me for. You will tell me what I do not know."

"Yes, Master."

"Sit."

Cognus sat.

The Huntress's register came up in her in a way it had not been required to come up in some time. She had been operating across the past year as the apprentice and as the Master-class operator she had become. The Huntress had been the version of her she had carried into the household when she arrived. The Huntress had been in the arsenal room each time she had retrieved the twin curved blades. The Huntress had not been the version her Master had consulted on operational doctrine before this morning.

"Direct-strike operations against an entrenched commercial operation," Cognus said, "fail along three vectors. The first is

access. The second is execution. The third is withdrawal. The strike succeeds when all three vectors are managed within the operational window. The strike fails when any of the three falters. The strike at Garqi will require us to manage all three with a team of three operators against a defender of eight to twelve plus a contractor network of perhaps thirty."

"Continue."

"Access. Marvash's office complex is in a primary commercial district, which means the immediate area will have civilian foot traffic at most hours. Forcing entry through the front of the building will produce witnesses we cannot reliably eliminate. Forcing entry through the rear or through a service corridor produces fewer witnesses but exposes the team to interior security configurations Marvash has had a decade to refine. The compromise typical of operations like this is to enter through a side route that has been prepared by an asset on the ground. We have such an asset."

"Tovek."

"Tovek. His deception apparatus has been operating in the commercial district for three weeks. He will have access to the building's service entry through one of the controlled sources, or through documentation he can produce on short notice. Access will be his to manage."

"Execution."

"Execution is the work itself. Marvash will be in his private office at the rear of the complex. The core team will be distributed across the front and middle sections. Reaching Marvash requires moving through or past the core team. The standard execution structure for a strike like this is to engage the core team only as required to reach the principal, kill the

principal cleanly, and withdraw before the contractor network can be activated. The Garqi operation will not follow that structure."

"Why."

"Because the strike's purpose is not only the principal. The strike's purpose is also the message. A clean execution of Marvash that leaves the core team alive and the office complex intact produces an outcome that reads, to anyone investigating, as an unusually competent professional removal. That reading does not carry the message the household requires the strike to send."

"Continue."

"The message requires the core team destroyed, the office complex destroyed, and the principal killed in a manner that produces the unmistakable signature of the work. Lightsaber wounds on the bodies of the core team. Force evidence at the scene. Witnesses in the surrounding district who saw what they saw and who carry the seeing outward into the talk that will reach the principal's broader networks. The strike does not minimize visibility. The strike maximizes the specific kind of visibility that carries the signature."

Zannah considered her across the desk.

"The witnesses."

"The strike kills no civilians intentionally. The strike kills everyone in the office complex unconditionally. Witnesses in the surrounding district who do not enter the complex are not engaged. They will report what they saw. They will report two operators with red blades and a third with conventional weapons cutting through Marvash's building in approximately the time the engagement requires."

"Withdrawal."

"Withdrawal is the third vector and it is the one I am most concerned about. Garqi is one system from Ciutric IV. Local planetary security will respond to the engagement within minutes of the first witness reports reaching the planetary authorities. The strike must complete and the team must depart the planet before that response converges. The window is approximately fifteen to twenty minutes from the first lightsaber ignition to the team departing atmosphere. That window is achievable but not generous. We will need a departure plan that does not rely on commercial spacelanes, which means a private vessel positioned to receive us at a location away from the commercial district."

"Tovek will arrange the vessel."

"He will."

Zannah did not speak for a moment.

Cognus held position at the chair. She had delivered the Huntress's read. The read was complete. Whatever questions her Master had would be the questions her Master needed to ask.

"The contractor network of thirty," Zannah said.

"The contractor network will not engage during the operation. They are not in standing employment. Marvash will be unable to summon them within the operational window. The danger from them comes after. When the news of the strike reaches them, some will move on their own initiative against the principals they assume responsible. Others will scatter. The household will need to address the network in the weeks following the strike."

"The address."

"Through the methods the household has developed for that kind of cleanup. Tovek will manage it. The contractor network is not the immediate operational problem."

"The immediate operational problem."

"Is the strike itself. The three of us at Garqi within five days, executing the structure I have described, departing the planet within the window the response time permits. The work is achievable. It will not be clean. It will not be quiet. The household has accepted that."

"The household has accepted that."

Cognus did not respond. The acceptance was the household's, and Cognus had been the operator who had laid out what the acceptance required. The chair across the desk from her Master held her at the configuration the Huntress had taken when the consultation had begun.

"Sit at the chair against the eastern wall," Zannah said. "Tovek will return shortly. The conversation will become three-party."

"Yes, Master."

Cognus rose, crossed to the eastern wall, and took her position at the original chair. The Huntress register receded into the place it had been before the consultation. The apprentice register did not return immediately; the in-between space the conversation had produced sat in her for some moments before settling.

Zannah summoned Telar through the household intercom and instructed him to bring Tovek back to the study.

✦

Tovek returned before Telar had reached the rear of the property.

Telar opened the study door at the moment Tovek crossed the threshold from the corridor, which meant Tovek had not waited at the rear of the property at all. He had begun the return walk before he had been summoned. He had been waiting in the corridor outside the study for the consultation to complete.

He carried the smaller case at his left hand.

"Mistress."

"Mr. Sennar Phael."

"I will be at Garqi."

Zannah considered him.

"You will continue."

"My role through the second contract has been the deception apparatus and the deliverable you have received. The second contract's execution requires operators on the ground. The roster was Master and apprentice. The roster will now include a third operator. Myself. I will be at Garqi with you when the strike is executed."

"The reasoning."

"The reasoning is in what I have spent the past three weeks reading about Marvash. The picture I have built of him is the picture of a man who has spent twenty years carrying a specific kind of resentment. He has prepared himself, across that period, to do the work the resentment required. The Vaszuun killing was not the entirety of his work. The Vaszuun killing was the opening move of a longer engagement he intends to conduct against this household. He understands he will not be able to conduct the engagement at the level his preparation has produced unless he is in a position to act personally on the

household's principals. He has been preparing to be in that position."

"Continue."

"The strike will succeed in killing him. The strike will not succeed in killing what he has built. The contractor network is one piece of what he has built. The intelligence apparatus is another. The third piece is the work he has been doing inside himself for two decades to become the kind of operator who can carry resentment forward across that span without it dulling. That kind of operator is not stopped by his own death if the people he has been preparing alongside him survive. The strike must therefore go beyond him. It must dismantle the structure he has built so completely that the people around him cannot reconstitute it under another's leadership."

"And your presence at Garqi serves this how."

"I have spent the past twenty years carrying my own exile from House Phael. The exile is not a resentment in the way Marvash's resentment is. The exile is a discipline I have practiced. The discipline has produced a particular kind of professional capability that recognizes Marvash's discipline at a level your training and the apprentice's training do not. I will see what you and the apprentice will not see when we are inside the complex. I will see who needs to die beyond the principal. I will see what needs to be destroyed beyond the building. I will execute that work alongside you."

"The risk."

"The risk is operational. I am not a Force-user. I will be vulnerable in the engagement in ways you and the apprentice will not be. I accept the risk. I assess that my presence reduces the strike's overall failure probability by a measurable margin. The

household will be better served by my presence than by my absence."

Zannah did not speak immediately.

The Veiled Course registered, in the space around Tovek, the same calm professional opacity the morning had been producing from him. The opacity now contained a specific additional element that had not been present at the delivery. The element was a quality of intensity that did not belong to the professional state. The intensity was Tovek's read on Marvash. It was surfacing in him as the recognition of a kind of operator he had spent years adjacent to in his own exile and had not previously encountered in this work. The recognition was personal in the way Tovek did not let personal recognition surface in his professional conduct. He was naming it now because the operation required him to name it.

"You will be at Garqi," Zannah said.

"Yes, Mistress."

"The roster is Master, apprentice, and Tovek Sennar Phael. The strike's execution structure is the structure the apprentice has described. Your operational role will be coordinated with hers during the engagement."

"Yes, Mistress."

"Sit. We will work through the operational integration before you depart."

Tovek inclined his head. He took the chair across the desk that the apprentice had occupied during the consultation. He opened the smaller case and produced the additional materials his disclosure had not yet covered. The office complex's physical layout. The staff rotation schedules. The contractor network's last known positions. The layouts of the three commercial

entities' administrative offices. He spread the materials across the desk in the configuration the integration required.

The three-party conversation began.

✦

The integration took the better part of two hours.

Tovek would manage the access through the service corridor at the rear of the office complex. He would use documentation he would produce in the next thirty-six hours, positioning himself as a routine maintenance contractor with credentials that would pass the complex's standard scrutiny. The Master and the apprentice would arrive at the access point separately, in cover identities Tovek would also produce. They would join Tovek at the threshold for the simultaneous entry.

The strike itself would begin at the rear and move forward through the office complex. The core team's positions had been mapped through Tovek's intelligence work; the team's response patterns were predictable enough that the engagement could be executed with the timing the operation required. Marvash would be in his private office at the front of the complex during the strike window. Tovek had structured the deception to ensure he would be there at that hour for a meeting Tovek had arranged through one of the controlled sources.

The strike would end at Marvash's office. The Master would handle the killing of Marvash. The apprentice would handle the destruction of the office complex itself, working the kind of damage that left the office complex unrecoverable and the bodies unidentifiable as anything but lightsaber wounds. Tovek would handle the contractor network's immediate dispersal. He would

neutralize the secondary positions Marvash maintained in the building before they could become rallying points for any contractor network members who might be in the district at the time.

The withdrawal would proceed through a route Tovek would prepare across the next four days. The vessel would be a small commercial freighter Tovek had been positioning in the Garqi system since the first week of the deception, intended for exactly this kind of departure.

Timeline: depart Ciutric within forty-eight hours. Arrive Garqi within four days. Operate within five.

"Withdraw," Zannah said, when the integration had completed. "Begin the preparation."

"Mistress."

Tovek inclined his head. He closed the smaller case. He took the larger folio and the second case and rose from the chair. Telar saw him out through the rear gate.

The door closed.

✦

The light through the high window had shifted to the position the early afternoon produced.

Zannah did not rise. She remained at the desk. The folio of Marvash materials was at her right hand in the configuration the morning had produced. The Aris materials remained in the third fold at the left, untouched. The lamp at the desk was not lit; the afternoon's light was sufficient.

Cognus had come from the eastern wall chair to the chair across the desk during the integration. She had not been

instructed to move. She had moved on her own when the conversation became three-party because the consultation register required her to be at the desk rather than at the wall. She remained at the chair now, in the same position she had taken during the integration, waiting for whatever the work would require next.

Zannah looked at her across the desk.

"The waiting ends here."

Cognus did not respond immediately.

She rose from the chair. She crossed to the position at the desk where the Master could see her standing without obstruction. She reached to her left hip and unfastened the seal of the small leather pouch she had been wearing since the day Zannah had given her the saber on the freighter from Ambria.

Inside the pouch the saber lay where it had been for the year and three months of her service.

The curved hook-handled hilt had been Bane's. The grip had been wrapped in dark leather that had absorbed the oils of his hand across the years of his ownership. The leather had aged but not failed. The hook at the emitter end produced the distinctive curve that had served his physical style. The activation switch was set into the inner curve of the hook where his thumb had reached it across the years of his use.

Cognus lifted the saber from the pouch.

The weight had not changed in the year and three months she had carried it. She had handled the saber many times in that period. Zannah had required it for cleaning and maintenance on a schedule the protocol had established. She had never lifted it as a wielder intending to ignite it. She lifted it now in that configuration. The hilt sat in her hand in the way it had always

sat. The hilt was too large for her hand in the way it had always been too large. The grip would not seat as cleanly as the grip of her twin curved blades. The grip would seat well enough.

She found the activation switch at the inner curve.

She did not look at her Master before she pressed it. She did not need to. The instruction had been given. The instruction was the authorization. The waiting had been three weeks past Vaszuun's killing. A year and three months past Ambria. However many years past the moment Bane had first received the weapon from Kas'im in the world the Brotherhood of Darkness had built. The authorization carried the weight of all of those periods. Cognus carried the weight of them in the moment her thumb reached the switch.

The blade ignited.

The crimson extended from the hook with the sound the activation produced. The blade reached its full length within the small fraction of a second the saber's power configuration required. The hum of the active weapon filled the study. The heat radiated against her hand and her forearm. The light of the blade poured into the room and changed the room's entire visual register. The wood paneling of the walls caught crimson at every surface. The desk's wood reflected crimson back into the air. The folio at the desk's right hand was lit by the new color. The windows opposite the desk caught the crimson at their interior glass and produced a faint secondary reflection along the corridor visible through the open study door.

In the architecture inside Zannah, Bane registered.

The registration was small. It was specific. It was the registration of a man whose weapon had been ignited in the hand of another for the first time in a year and three months.

The hand was an operator he had not chosen and had not trained and had not previously had occasion to recognize. The service was a line whose work he had not been able to influence since his death. The registration was not a voice. It was not a thought she could attribute to him in language. It was a small interior pulse that confirmed he was present and that he had registered what had just occurred.

Zannah did not test the registration.

She did not press him on what the registration meant. She did not bring her attention to it beyond the bare receipt of its arrival. The matter that had required the saber's ignition was a matter the household had reached on its own work. The registration was Bane's. He could keep it. He could carry it. He could surface it when he chose to surface it. The pressing had been the work of the prior evenings and would be the work of evenings to come. The pressing was not the work of this moment.

This moment was Cognus and the saber.

The apprentice stood at the desk with Bane's saber active in her hand. The blade extended at full length, the hum steady, the crimson light filling the room. Cognus held the configuration without trembling, without strain, without the small uncertainty an unfamiliar weapon could produce in a less prepared hand. The hilt was too large. She held it anyway. The grip would not seat as cleanly as her twin blades. She held it anyway. Bane had been a larger man, with a larger style of combat, and his weapon had been built for that style. Cognus would not wield it the way Bane had wielded it. She would wield it in the way her own hand and her own discipline would produce.

The apprentice did not look at her Master.

The apprentice looked at the blade.

The crimson light continued to fill the study. The household ran on toward the afternoon's deeper hours. The work that had been planned for Garqi waited at the other end of the next four days. The saber that had been Bane's and was now also Cognus's held its full length steady in the apprentice's hand.

CHAPTER 20

The Forbearance dropped from hyperspace at the Garqi system's outer marker on the close of the journey's fourth day.

The yacht had been Allia Omek's for the better part of three years, registered through one of the household's commercial entities as a private vessel maintained for the principal's travel. Its engines sat two grades above what the Daplona social register would have considered adequate for a Daplona aristocrat of her standing. The yacht moved faster than a smuggler's vessel of comparable size. Planetary customs anywhere in the Inner Rim received it without scrutiny.

The Sullustan pilot at the forward bridge had been with the yacht since the household acquired it. He was told this was a freight-acquisition trip the new business required the principals to conduct in person. Operational confidentiality clauses prohibited him from inquiring about specifics or filing detailed travel records with the harbor authority on return. He had performed the trip with the professional opacity the household had selected him for at hiring.

Zannah was at the small library at the rear of the yacht.

The library was the smallest of the yacht's named rooms — three meters by four, lined in dark wood paneling, fitted with a single chair and a small table beside it. The shelves held the volumes the cover required her to be seen carrying as Allia Omek's reading. She had not opened any of them on the trip. She had been working interiorly through the Working she would deploy at Marvash's office in the hours ahead.

The Working had taken nine months of private study. It had not been tested on a living target. Marvash would be the test. The cost, by her best modeling against the texts, would be substantial. Cognus and Tovek were positioned to handle what she would be unable to handle after.

The consideration closed.

The navigation board would register the rendezvous point in two hours.

✦

Cognus was at the secondary lounge in the middle section.

Cognus had sat there for the past hour without moving, her hand resting on the small leather pouch at her left hip. Bane's saber lay inside it. She had not ignited the weapon since the ignition at the desk in the study three days before — the ignition that had filled the room with crimson and confirmed the inheritance. The discipline that had governed her carrying of the saber for the year and three months of her service still governed her now. The difference was that she was no longer waiting indefinitely. She was waiting until the moment the operation required.

The Drawn Breath ran at full state. The Quiet Hands operated beneath it. She had thought through her portion of the operation over the journey, the way she had thought through it during the planning conversation in the study.

The destruction of the office complex was hers. The bodies of the core team were hers. The signature would be carried in what she left at the scene.

The lounge's interior lighting was warm and steady. The Forbearance held the cover the Daplona register expected.

✦

Tovek was at the forward observation gallery.

Tovek had been at the gallery for most of the journey. The viewport gave him a continuous read of the yacht's approach to space ahead, and the read kept his operational state aligned with the journey's tempo. He had his combat rig at his feet in the small case that had carried it from Daplona. A heavy blaster rifle in the primary compartment. A heavy blaster pistol with three spare power cells. A close-work blade in a forearm sheath. Four small concussion grenades distributed across the rig's belt positions.

The rig was professional, not improvised. Tovek had acquired it through the channels his trade had given him access to over the past two decades. He had worn it before, in other configurations, for other principals he had served. He had not worn it during his service to Allia Omek before today.

The freighter would be at the rendezvous in seventeen minutes.

✦

The rendezvous point was an empty parking orbit at the outer edge of the Garqi system, eight light-minutes from the planet's atmospheric boundary.

Tovek's freighter had held the parking orbit since the previous morning. It was captained by an operator Tovek had retained for the duration of the operation. Cover identified the freighter as a small commercial vessel waiting for a delayed cargo manifest. The captain was a Mirialan female named Ress Tarrek, one of Tovek's long-standing professional contacts. Her loyalty was purchased at the level the operation required. Her discretion was a function of her own trade.

The Forbearance came alongside the freighter at the marker.

The transfer took eleven minutes. Allia, Mr. Sennar Phael, and Allia's aide crossed the umbilical from the yacht to the freighter with the small personal cases they had brought. The Forbearance's pilot was instructed to hold the parking orbit until the freighter returned. The principals would re-board for the return journey to Ciutric. The pilot acknowledged the instruction. The umbilical sealed.

Inside the freighter Tarrek was at the bridge.

"Mistress Omek."

"Captain Tarrek."

"The atmospheric approach window opens in two hours and seventeen minutes. Landing coordinates are at the location Mr. Sennar Phael provided. The atmospheric exit window after the operation's completion opens approximately forty minutes after the first ignition, and remains open for twenty-five minutes thereafter. I will hold the engines at high alert for the entire ground period."

"Acknowledged."

"The freighter will not produce a registration signature with Garqi planetary authority on this approach. The clearance documentation Mr. Sennar Phael provided will pass automated inspection. We will land at the prepared location without manual review."

"Acknowledged."

Tarrek did not say anything further. She returned her attention to her console.

In the freighter's main hold the three principals prepared their equipment. Zannah's saber-staff went onto her belt. Bane's saber remained in Cognus's hip pouch. Tovek's rig went on across his shoulders and chest. The three of them changed from the merchant-class cover clothing they had worn on the yacht into the working clothes Tovek had prepared. Dark, unmarked, fitted to the work the operation would produce.

The freighter held the rendezvous for the remainder of the approach window. At the marker it broke parking orbit and began the descent toward Garqi's atmosphere.

The crossing from the outer system to the planet took the better part of two hours.

✦

Garqi's primary commercial district sat in the planet's southern continent, in the city the planet had named for itself.

The city had served as a regional trade center for three centuries. It primarily handled agricultural exports from the surrounding cropland. It also supported a substantial secondary trade in commercial services — freight scheduling, intelligence brokerage, financial intermediation, and the kind of light

manufactured goods the broader Hegemony consumed. Marvash's office complex sat in the city's northern quarter, three blocks from the central exchange building.

The freighter landed at a small private pad on the city's eastern outskirts, registered under one of Tovek's commercial covers, at twenty minutes past the local hour the operation's window had begun.

The three of them moved through the city in the cover identities Tovek had prepared.

Allia Omek travelled as a Daplona freight broker visiting Garqi to evaluate potential acquisition targets for the restructured Drekka business. Cognus travelled as her aide. Tovek travelled separately, in the cover of a Daplona-licensed maintenance contractor with credentials authorizing him to inspect service infrastructure at multiple commercial properties in the northern quarter, including Marvash's. The three identities did not connect on the documentation.

At the service corridor entrance at the rear of Marvash's complex Tovek arrived first.

Tovek presented his credentials at the door's manual interface. The reader registered the documentation and permitted entry without notification to internal security. Tovek had positioned a controlled source inside the complex's service contractor scheduling in the past three weeks. The source had logged his entry as a routine maintenance call confirmed two days earlier. No one inside the building would register his arrival as unusual.

Two minutes later Allia Omek and her aide arrived at the rear by the side route Tovek had prepared.

The three of them assembled at the service corridor's threshold inside the building.

Tovek inclined his head to his Mistress.

"The structure is as the picture described. Marvash is in his office at the front of the complex. The core team's positions are confirmed at the four locations I identified. The middle section is currently occupied by three of the core team plus two contractors who have been brought in for what Marvash has been told is a routine commercial meeting. The contractors are not part of the core team and are not expecting violence. The core team is."

Zannah's left hand went to her saber-staff. Her right hand drew it free of its housing.

Cognus's left hand unfastened the seal of the small leather pouch and lifted Bane's saber out.

Tovek's right hand brought the blaster rifle up from its position at his shoulder rig into firing carry.

"Begin," Zannah said.

The saber-staff ignited.

✦

The first three operators were at the corridor junction twenty meters past the service entrance.

They was positioned there as a precaution against unauthorized service entry. The deception had not been expected to fail. Marvash's core team had prepared for the contingency anyway. They were two human males and a Twi'lek female, all carrying mid-range blaster pistols, all positioned at the cover points the corridor permitted.

They saw the lights of the activated sabers before they saw the bearers.

The first human raised his weapon and fired. The shot was bright in the dim corridor. It did not connect — Zannah's saberstaff had already deflected it back at him. The shot returned to him at chest height and put him on the corridor floor.

The Twi'lek and the second human began firing simultaneously.

Tovek's rifle was up past Zannah's left shoulder before either had completed their second shots. The rifle's firing rate was set to the rapid mid-range configuration his rig permitted. The bolts moved down the corridor in a tight pattern. The Twi'lek took two bolts in the upper chest and one at the throat and fell.

The second human attempted to fall back to a defensive position at the corridor's second junction. He did not reach it. Cognus had moved past Tovek at the right side of the corridor. Bane's saber cut him across the torso. The crimson cut opened him from sternum to hip. He went down without sound.

The corridor was clear in eleven seconds.

The three of them moved past the junction.

✦

The middle section was at the next corridor's end, twenty-five meters further into the complex.

The three core team members and the two contractors sat at a small conference table in a room off the corridor. The meeting Tovek's deception had arranged was scheduled for the hour the operation's window opened. The five of them had been in initial conversation about the cargo manifest the false meeting had been

built around when the sounds of the engagement at the rear reached them.

The core team members were on their feet and moving toward the corridor when Zannah's saber-staff came through the conference room door.

The first core team member — a Devaronian male, mid-career, blaster already in his hand — took the saber-staff's leading edge across his neck before his weapon had cleared its rising arc. His head came away from his body and rolled across the conference table. The two core team members behind him began firing.

The shots ricocheted off the saber-staff's defensive arc as Zannah held the doorway. Cognus came in past Zannah's right hip and engaged the second core team member at close range. Bane's saber went through the man's blaster hand at the wrist, then through his torso at the diagonal across his ribs and abdomen. His firing arm and weapon fell to the floor. The man followed.

The third core team member tried to make the room's far corner to access a panic switch at the wall. Tovek's rifle bolt took him at the back of the head before he reached it. He fell across the table.

The two contractors had not moved. They were at the conference table with their hands visible. The wide-eyed shock of professional operators brought in for a meeting that was not what occurred held them where they sat. One was a Bothan male; the other a Rodian female. Both were armed but neither had drawn.

Tovek did not give them the time. The rifle came up and the rifle fired. The Bothan took two bolts at the chest. The Rodian

took one at the head. Both fell.

The middle section was complete in nineteen seconds.

Zannah looked at Tovek across the conference room.

"Forward."

The three of them moved through the conference room's far door and into the corridor leading to the front of the complex.

✦

The corridor to the front had two additional core team positions.

The first was a single operator — a human female, mid-career, blaster rifle in her hand, positioned in a recessed alcove. She fired three bolts at the saber-staff's leading approach. The bolts deflected into the alcove's wall and back into her. She fell.

The second was two operators at the corridor's end. A human and a Trandoshan, both with mid-range weapons, positioned to defend the approach to Marvash's office. They opened fire as the team came around the corridor's last turn.

Cognus engaged them.

Bane's saber moved with the rhythms the Huntress had trained into her hands through the years. The curved hook-handled hilt produced wider arcs than her twin curved blades would have, and a longer reach than her physical frame would have permitted. The Trandoshan took the saber across the chest where his species' thicker hide should have provided defense. The crimson cut went through hide and body cavity. He fell.

The human attempted to fall back into Marvash's office. The office door at the corridor's end was not yet sealed. He reached

the doorway. Tovek's rifle bolt took him through the back at the spine. He fell across the threshold.

The corridor was clear.

Marvash's office lay beyond the human's body, the door still open, the principal visible at the far end behind a heavy desk.

Zannah looked at Cognus and Tovek.

"Hold the corridor."

Zannah stepped over the human and crossed the threshold.

✦

Marvash was on his feet behind the desk.

Gran, late middle-aged as Tovek's picture had described. His three eyes took in Zannah at the door with the kind of attention an apex predator gave to a threat it had not anticipated. He wore the working clothes of a commercial broker — a dark coat over a pale shirt. A small holdout blaster was in his right hand at the desk's edge. He had not yet raised it.

The the recognition completed in the half-second after Zannah crossed the threshold.

Marvash recognized her as a category. The saber-staff at her right hand. The dark working clothes that did not match the cover she had been operating under in Daplona. Her posture in the doorway. The small interior pressure his own minor Force-sensitivity had been picking up since the corridor engagement began. All of it consolidated. The recognition was Sith.

Tovek raised the holdout blaster.

Zannah did not extinguish the saber-staff. She did not move from the doorway. She extended her left hand toward him with the fingers half-curled.

Marvash's weapon stopped moving.

His hand stayed at the desk's edge. The blaster was raised partway to firing position. He could not complete the motion. The grip had taken his arm at the elbow and his hand at the wrist.

Zannah tightened the grip.

Marvash's feet came off the floor.

He rose against the wall behind his desk to a height of perhaps thirty centimeters off the floor. His arms locked at his sides. The blaster fell from his fingers, hit the desk, skidded across, and fell behind it.

The grip at his throat tightened.

Marvash's breathing stopped. His three eyes felt the choke. He attempted to speak. The choke held him silent.

Zannah crossed the office to the desk.

She stood at the desk's far side and looked at him across the small distance the choke held him at. The saber-staff was still ignited at her right hand. The crimson light combined with the warm office lighting in the room Marvash could still see. He was conscious. He was held. He could not speak.

"You killed a man in my house," Zannah said.

Her voice was quiet. The office permitted it.

Marvash's vision held her. His three eyes did not blink.

"He was worth more than you."

Cognus raised both hands.

"This is for him."

Her eyes closed.

The focus the Working required came forward through the Force-grip and through the space between her position at the desk and Marvash's position suspended at the wall. The focus

found the inward seat the doctrine described — the location at the center of his matter where the practitioner's will made operative contact. The focus established.

The hands came in.

Marvash caught the establishment of the inward seat as a small additional pressure beyond the choke. The pressure did not last. The hands came in past the seat and into the substance of his matter. The substance began to undergo the structural collapse the Working produced.

Marvash's three eyes lost focus first.

The bleeding began. Blood produced at the corners of his eyes and ran along his face. The same production occurred at his nostrils and at his ear cavities. His cranium underwent the small distension the internal pressure produced. The choke remained at his throat. The grip remained at his body. The Working continued.

After the eighth second of the deployment Marvash's body went limp.

The matter inside his cranium had completed its collapse. The brain that had carried the twenty years of resentment and the decade of patient construction and the engagement's opening move at the Omek estate was no longer brain. It was the viscous matter the Working produced from brain at full application.

Zannah released the grip.

Marvash fell against the wall and slumped to the floor at its base. His body was intact externally. The bleeding at his face was the only external evidence of what had occurred inside him. A small pool of blood spread at the floor where his head came to rest.

Zannah extinguished the saber-staff.

Zannah stood at the desk and did not move.

The drain was everything the modeling predicted and more. Her hands at her sides were not entirely under her control. Her breathing was not entirely under her control. The Veiled Course had collapsed during the Working's deployment and had not yet come back. The Drawn Breath had reduced to the shallowest configuration her continued operational state permitted.

The desk held her where she stood.

No call went to Cognus. No call went to Tovek. The drain pinned her.

After perhaps fifteen seconds Cognus came through the office door.

✦

Cognus took in the office in a single registration.

Marvash dead against the wall behind the desk. Zannah at the desk's far side, on her feet, not moving. The state of her Master's posture readable to Cognus's now-trained attention as a practitioner who had deployed something the practice had not yet calibrated her for.

Cognus crossed the office to her.

She did not speak. She placed her left hand at Zannah's right elbow. The contact landed as support, not intrusion. Zannah did not pull away. Operational command had moved to the apprentice, in the way the planning conversation had specified.

"Master."

"Continue," Zannah said. Her voice was reduced. "Complete the work."

"Yes, Master."

Cognus brought Zannah's right arm across her own shoulders to support the Master's standing weight. Her free right hand ignited Bane's saber. The crimson filled the office. She called out to the corridor.

"Tovek."

"Apprentice."

"Hold the rear. The Master is supported. I will complete the destruction."

"Acknowledged."

Cognus walked Zannah to the corridor and placed her against the wall outside Marvash's office, where the corridor turned back toward the rear. Tovek positioned at Zannah's side, rifle up, watching both directions.

"Five minutes," Cognus said.

"Acknowledged."

Cognus returned to the office and to the work.

✦

The destruction took four minutes and forty seconds.

Cognus moved through the complex from front to rear with Bane's saber active. She returned to each body she or Zannah or Tovek had killed. She cut the bodies into the configurations the doctrine required. The lightsaber wounds across the bodies were now multiple. The wounds carried the signature.

The conference room received additional damage at the table and at the walls. The structural elements were cut at the load-bearing positions. The walls would collapse inward within hours, completing the destruction of the middle section.

The corridor walls received the same treatment.

Marvash's office she left as it was. The body at the wall. The blood at the floor. The desk intact. The signature was already complete in Marvash's body. The office required no further attention.

Cognus returned to Zannah.

"Complete."

"Acknowledged."

Tovek inclined his head at the apprentice's eye-line. The recognition between them passed in the small register the operation permitted. Tovek had caught, over the past five minutes, what had occurred in Marvash's office and what had occurred in the apprentice's response to her Master's drain. He held both registrations behind the same professional opacity that had carried him through the engagement.

Cognus brought Zannah's arm back across her shoulders.

The three of them moved toward the service corridor at the rear of the complex.

✦

The withdrawal took eleven minutes from Marvash's office to the freighter.

They passed back through the corridors the engagement had produced bodies in. They reached the service corridor's threshold. Tovek led them out at the cover position his rig had taken at the entry. The two of them followed.

The street outside the complex had three civilians. A vendor at his cart half a block toward the central exchange. A Twi'lek woman walking her child toward the market. An older man in

the doorway of a shop opposite Marvash's building. All three caught the team as the team emerged. The vendor and the older man looked away. The Twi'lek woman pulled her child behind her and did not move.

The team did not engage any of the three.

Cognus walked Zannah at the supporting pace. Tovek was at the rear, rifle now back at his shoulder rig. Bane's saber remained ignited in Cognus's right hand — she had not had a free hand to extinguish it. The crimson moved with them along the street. The three civilians watched them pass. The Twi'lek woman did not move until the team had cleared the block.

The freighter was at the small private pad where it had landed.

Ress Tarrek had the boarding ramp lowered when they reached the pad. Cognus walked Zannah up the ramp. Tovek followed. The ramp closed behind them. The freighter began its engines toward the atmospheric exit window.

The freighter cleared atmospheric boundary at twenty-eight minutes after the first ignition.

The team had made the window by twelve minutes.

✦

In the main hold of the freighter Cognus brought Zannah to the small berth at the rear and lowered her onto it.

The Master's eyes had closed during the final stretch of the corridor. The drain had reached the point where her conscious control had been operating at the reserve below the level she normally maintained. Cognus had supported the appearance of

her continued mobility. The mobility was an act of will the drain had begun to outpace.

Cognus placed her at the berth. She removed the saber-staff from her Master's belt and set it on the small table beside the berth. She extinguished Bane's saber and returned it to its hip pouch.

Cognus placed her hand at her Master's forehead.

The skin was cool. The breathing was shallow and steady. The pulse at the throat was steady but operating at the reduced rate the drain permitted. The Master would recover. The recovery would take days, possibly longer.

Cognus inclined her head at her Master.

Cognus withdrew from the berth.

✦

The freighter held course toward the rendezvous point with the Forbearance.

Tovek was at the small forward observation gallery with Tarrek at the bridge ahead of him. He had stowed the rig. The rifle was at the case. The pistol was at the small holster at his hip. The grenades were no longer at the belt — two had been deployed during the engagement, two had been returned to the case. The close-work blade remained at the forearm sheath.

Cognus came to the gallery.

Tovek inclined his head at her.

"Apprentice."

"Tovek."

"The Master."

"Drained. She will recover. The recovery will take days."

"Acknowledged."

Cognus stood at the gallery beside him for some moments and did not speak. The viewport showed the dark of the system's outer space, the stars at their distant positions. The Forbearance's small light at the rendezvous point lay ahead of them.

"The operation," she said.

"Was as planned. The picture held. The principal is closed. The contractor network will require the additional work in the weeks ahead, which I will handle. The Garqi authority will report what the witnesses report. The signatures at the scene will produce the talk the operation was structured to produce. The talk will reach where it is intended to reach."

"Acknowledged."

She did not speak further. Tovek did not require her to.

After some minutes Cognus returned to the rear of the freighter and to her Master's berth and took her position on the small chair beside it for the duration of the journey to the Forbearance.

The freighter held course.

The work was complete.

In the architecture inside Zannah, Bane was silent at a register different from the silences of the prior weeks. The silence was not refusal. The silence was the silence of a man who had caught a Working he did not have the doctrinal vocabulary to engage with. He had no language for what Zannah had done in Marvash's office. He carried the absence of language. Zannah, even in the reduced state the drain had produced, noted the difference. She did not press. The pressing would come at the cadences her recovery permitted. For now she carried the new silence beside the others.

The freighter approached the rendezvous.

The Forbearance's small light grew steadily larger in the viewport.

The household was returning.

CHAPTER 21

The encrypted reply from the documentation broker reached Tovek's console at the second hour past dawn.

Tovek had sat at the desk in the upper office since first light, working through the cross-references the prior week's deliveries had produced and waiting on the broker's assessment. The desk held the materials in the order his working pattern required them. A stack of authentication queries the broker had answered over the past month. The originals of the Demici-branch documentation Tovek had acquired through the channels he had built since the Garqi return. A small annotated timeline of Aris Demici's public record, the missing five years marked in the shape that had hardened over the past several weeks into a single hard question.

The broker's reply was brief.

The documentation Tovek had submitted for analysis was not what it presented as. The instruments and the seals and the paper stock and the inks were professionally executed and would pass any routine inspection. The professional execution was itself the signature. Documents of this period that were generated in the period they claimed to cover did not produce this kind of

uniformity. They showed the small inconsistencies of original production — different inks at different stages, paper from different batches, seals with the small wear of actual handling. The Demici documentation showed none of this. It were generated in a single production cycle, by a single hand or set of hands, at some point years after the period it claimed.

The broker estimated the production date as approximately twelve to fifteen years prior to the present.

Tovek read the assessment twice.

The first reading confirmed what his own analysis had been suggesting since the second source had returned its preliminary findings. The second reading let the operational implication settle.

The Demici documentation were generated twelve to fifteen years ago, covering a period three decades earlier than that. The construction was deliberate. The cover was intended to conceal something. The actual whereabouts of Aris Demici during the five-year period the cover addressed remained unknown to anyone Tovek could reach.

Tovek drafted the encrypted communication for the household.

The communication summarized the broker's findings and Tovek's integration of them with the prior month's work. The communication noted that additional channels could be developed in the coming weeks. The communication did not propose immediate action. The work continued.

Tovek encrypted the communication. The routing through the standard channels followed. He returned the materials to the desk in their working order.

The light through the upper office's narrow window had moved to the position the late morning produced. Tovek closed the materials and began the day's next working session.

✦

In the eastern wing of the household Cognus had completed the morning review of the surface accounts at the seventh hour and was moving toward her Master's rooms for the standing attendance.

The household had been operating at reduced capacity for six standard days.

Vesh carried the surface accounts in his expanded role. Telar handled the perimeter security and the communications routing. The household physician attended daily for the first three days and was now reduced to alternate-day visits. Cognus had taken on the operational oversight Zannah would have carried at full state. The household staff was briefed that the principal was recovering from a sudden illness she had contracted on the recent business trip. The cover was holding.

The Master's rooms were in the residence wing at the western reach of the central block.

Cognus had attended three times daily through the recovery. The morning hour, the midday hour, the evening hour. The small functional tasks the Master's reduced state required. The tasks were mostly the tasks any senior aide would perform. Bringing the meals the physician had specified. Refreshing the water at the bedside. Opening the windows when the morning permitted, drawing them at the warmest hour. The tasks did not require the apprentice. They required someone the principal

trusted in the principal's reduced state. That position fell to Cognus.

Cognus walked the corridor toward the residence wing.

The doctrine she had been reading over the past year held a particular framing for what a recovering Master was. The framing did not say a recovering Master was a Master to be served through the recovery. The framing said a recovering Master was a Master whose position was open to the apprentice strong enough to test it. The framing did not soften the position. Strength rose. The apprentice who did not rise was not an apprentice. The apprentice who did not rise was meat the line would discard.

Cognus had read the doctrine. She had read it in three separate sources over the months. She had read it in the voice the texts produced. The voice was the voice of practitioners who had held the line through the centuries, who had themselves risen and themselves been tested in their time.

In the past several days she had remembered the voice of Bane from the duel.

Cognus had heard the voice as the Huntress, positioned at the cover's margin, with the duel in progress across the open ground. The voice had not been speaking to her. The voice spoke to Zannah. The words themselves had passed without her being able to follow them. The register had not. The register was the register of the doctrine she had since read through the texts the Master had given her. Strength rising. The line testing. The Master speaking to the apprentice in the cadence of the inheritance moving forward.

The voice from Ambria sat in her memory with the texts sitting alongside it.

The residence wing came up at her steady pace.

✦

The Master's door was at the corridor's third position past the wing's entry arch.

Cognus paused at the door before opening it.

Cognus had attended three times daily across six days. The small tasks the recovery required was performed at each attendance. What the doctrine permitted her to do in the Master's reduced state, she had not, at any of those attendances, done. The recovery was progressing. The Master's analytical capacity was returning. The Master had spoken to her at the morning attendance for the past two days, briefly, reading the household's state through Cognus's reports.

The Master was approaching the recovery's next stage.

The window the doctrine permitted was closing.

Cognus opened the door.

The room held the morning's standing arrangement. The windows opening onto the interior garden were partly open to admit the warm westerly. The bed at the room's far wall held the principal in the half-reclined position the physician had specified for the morning hours. A small table beside the bed held the water and the morning meal Cognus had brought in at the dawn attendance and that was mostly untouched. The reading area at the room's eastern wall held its two chairs and the low table between them, all empty.

Zannah was awake.

Her eyes opened as the door admitted Cognus. The gold of them held the same gold they had always held. The radius

around them, though — the small operational reach Cognus was present at every prior interaction with the Master — was at a fraction of its baseline. The Veiled Course was not running. The Drawn Breath operated at the shallowest configuration the Master's continued life required.

The Master was open.

The Master was open at every attendance over the six days. Cognus had not previously chosen to register the openness as anything other than the recovery's ambient state.

Cognus crossed to the bedside.

"Master."

"Apprentice."

The voice was at the reduced register the recovery had produced. It was Zannah's voice, not Allia's. The cover had not been maintained in the rooms through the recovery. The Master had not had the capacity to perform it.

"The household is in standing order. Vesh has the surface accounts. Tovek has filed an encrypted communication on the Demici thread, which I will read after this attendance and bring to you when you are able to receive it. The physician will be at the household at the noon hour for the alternate-day assessment."

"Acknowledged."

Zannah's eyes closed. The conversation was the longest she had managed in two days. The reduced state did not permit more.

Cognus performed the morning tasks. She refreshed the water at the bedside. She removed the morning meal that was mostly untouched. She adjusted the window's opening to the configuration the late morning would require as the day warmed.

She did the small functional work in the rhythm her attendance had developed over the six days.

When the tasks were complete she did not withdraw.

Cognus remained at the bedside in the chair the attendance permitted.

The decision arrived through the morning in the slow accumulating way her decisions arrived when the doctrinal frame had been operating beneath her surface state for some time. The arriving was a sequence of small recognitions. The texts. The voice from Ambria. The closing window of the Master's reduced state. Her own service formation pulling against the doctrine and her own understanding that the pulling was itself the test the doctrine was administering.

Beneath all of this, in the space behind the Master's reduced presence at the bed, something else was active.

Cognus had not been able to name it at the prior attendances. She named it now.

The interior of her Master held a second presence. The second presence was not at the surface state of the Master's interior. It was beneath, occupying the deeper layer the Veiled Course concealed across all the time of Cognus's service. The second presence was there across that entire span. Cognus had not been able to register it because the Veiled Course was in operation. The Veiled Course was no longer in operation. The second presence had become readable.

The second presence had also, in the past several seconds, begun to direct its attention toward her.

The attention was not language. The attention was not a face. The attention was a small steady pressure that had not been

there at the prior attendances and that had begun, as Cognus sat at the chair beside the bed, to make itself perceptible.

The presence was inviting her.

Cognus understood what was being invited.

Her eyes closed.

✦

The perceptual register opened — the one she had not previously opened to her Master.

The opening was slow. The years of training in the Quiet Hands and the Drawn Breath had built the apparatus that permitted what she was about to do. The apparatus operated at its surface state through the apprenticeship. The deeper register was now permitted.

The reach moved outward from her position at the bedside.

It crossed the small space between her chair and the bed. It crossed the bed to the position the Master occupied. It found the surface of the Master's interior architecture at the boundary the Veiled Course would have held at full state.

The boundary was not there.

The reach moved past the absent boundary into the interior itself.

What Cognus found first was Zannah.

The Master's mind was where the recovery had left it. The analytical apparatus was operating at slow tempo. The Workings were not running. The interior thoughts that the Veiled Course concealed at all other times were available. The day's small concerns. The recovery's rhythm. The integration of the household's state through Cognus's reports. The patient

working through of the longer questions the Garqi operation had produced.

The longer questions held Aris Demici at the position Tovek's investigation had placed him at. The Master had thought about Aris through the recovery. The thinking was not at the operational register; it was at the deeper register the recovery permitted, the kind of thinking that worked toward shapes rather than toward immediate plans.

The Master had also been thinking about Cognus.

The thinking about Cognus was extensive. It had operated since the apprentice arrived at the household. It had marked every operation Cognus had performed, every Working Cognus was instructed in, every moment of the apprenticeship that had built the apprentice the Master had trained her toward. The thinking was not affection. The thinking was investment. The Master had invested in Cognus the way a Master invested in the apprentice she had selected. The investment was now near its first fruition.

The current thinking about Cognus, present in the architecture at the moment the probe entered it, was the thinking of a Master who had constructed the present situation specifically to test the apprentice. The construction was deliberate. The exposure was deliberate. The doctrinal frame had been laid through the texts deliberately so that the apprentice would come to the recognition Cognus had come to that morning.

The Master waited for the probe.

The Master would have considered the failure to probe a sign that the apprenticeship had not produced what the line required.

Cognus caught this and the register settled.

The reach moved deeper.

✦

Beneath Zannah was Bane.

The recognition was not gradual. The deeper layer of the interior was where Bane occupied. He was there as completely as the Master was. He had been there across the entire span of Cognus's service.

The man at the deeper layer was not a memory of the man at Ambria. He was the man himself, contained in the architecture his apprentice had built to carry him. The structure held him in the form of a presence that occupied without acting. He had reactions. He had attention. He had whatever a man retained of himself when his physical death had passed his consciousness into the apprentice who killed him.

Cognus caught him.

Bane was already catching her.

The recognition between them was instant.

Cognus knew him. She had carried his weapon for a year and three months. She had seen him on Ambria. She had killed three of his Umbaran Shadow Assassins at the duel and she had pulled the Master away from his body when the Master had finished him. The man at the deeper layer was the man she had been in service to without knowing the service was active.

Bane knew her. He had marked her selection by Zannah on the Ambrian freighter. He had observed her training over the year and three months. He had watched her carry his saber and not ignite it across that period. He had watched her ignite it on the day Zannah had instructed her to. He had watched her carry

the Master through the back half of the Garqi operation when the Master's capacity had collapsed.

The attention he turned toward her now was the attention of a Sith Master. He had inherited his apprentice and his apprentice's apprentice in a single architectural arrangement. He had been waiting over the year and three months to see whether the second apprentice would arrive at the recognition the doctrine required.

She had arrived.

Bane approved.

The approval was not language. The approval was the small specific quality the attention took as it landed on her. The quality was the quality a Master applied to an apprentice whose work had produced the result the Master waited on.

Cognus held the attention for the duration the encounter required.

No attempt was made to extend the contact. No attempt was made to draw from him what the contact might have permitted her to draw. The attention was received. The recognition was returned. The exchange was complete in the moments it occupied.

The withdrawal began.

✦

The withdrawal moved back through the layers in the reverse of the entry.

Bane's presence receded. The deeper layer closed behind her. Zannah's mind passed back beneath her reach as she moved outward. The boundary the Veiled Course would have held came

back as the absence it was on entry. The reach returned to her position at the chair beside the bed.

Her eyes opened.

The room was at the same configuration it had been at when she had closed them. The windows partly open. The Master half-reclined on the bed. The water at the bedside. The morning meal removed. The mid-morning light moving across the floor at the slow pace the household's rotation tracked.

The duration of the probe was perhaps four minutes.

The Master had not moved.

Cognus rose from the chair.

Cognus performed the small finishing tasks the attendance required. She drew the window to the configuration the warming day would need. She adjusted the bedclothes the slight movement of the principal had displaced. She set the bedside water at the position the next attendance would require.

Her head inclined at her Master in the small register the attendance permitted.

Cognus withdrew from the room.

✦

In the corridor she walked the standard pace back toward the eastern wing.

The household ran on at the reduced capacity it had been running on for six days. Telar was at his standing position at the rear gate. Vesh was at the surface accounts office at the central block. The household staff moved through the corridors at the morning's standing rotation.

Cognus passed through to the eastern wing and to her own quarters.

The door closed behind her.

Cognus sat on the small chair at the desk where she had been doing the surface review at the seventh hour.

What sshe carried now was the entire shape of the household at its deepest layer. She knew her Master. She knew the man her Master carried. She knew the relationship between them as that relationship now stood. She knew the texts and the doctrines and the operations and the structural arrangement of the line in a register the apprenticeship had not previously given her access to.

None of it went down in writing. None of it announced itself to her in language.

Cognus held it at the place she had been holding the observations of the past months. The place the Quiet Hands had been teaching her to maintain. The place where the things she had become but had not yet been required to be lived.

The morning continued.

Cognus did not return to the surface review. She sat at the desk and held what she had received and did not move for some time.

✦

In the residence wing Zannah opened her eyes some minutes after the apprentice had withdrawn from the room.

The Master had not moved during the probe. She had not been able to move; the reduced state did not permit the kind of voluntary motion the probe would have produced if she had attempted to interfere. She had also not chosen to attempt to

interfere. The probe was what she had constructed the situation to permit.

The probe had had landed with her at the moment it began.

The registration was faint. The Veiled Course was not running; her capacity to read what was occurring at her own interior was reduced; the apprentice's reach had operated cleanly through the absent boundary. But the Master had caught enough to know what had occurred. The apprentice had probed. The apprentice had reached the deeper layer. The apprentice had encountered what occupied the deeper layer.

The Master had also caught, faintly, the attention Bane had turned toward Cognus during the encounter.

The Master did not yet have the capacity to read the content of the encounter at the level she would have read it at full state. The content would surface in the coming days as her capacity returned. For now she carried the knowledge that the probe had occurred and that the encounter at the deeper layer had occurred and that the apprentice had withdrawn cleanly.

The doctrine was served.

The Master closed her eyes again and returned to the rest state the recovery required.

✦

The midday attendance came at the standing hour.

Cognus entered her Master's rooms in the same rhythm the past six days had established. The Master was at the half-reclined position the physician had specified for the midday hour. The room held the late morning's settled light.

"Apprentice."

"Master."

Cognus performed the tasks the attendance required. The midday meal. The water. The window's configuration for the warmer hour.

When the tasks were complete she did not withdraw immediately.

The Master's eyes opened.

Zannah looked at her across the small distance between the chair and the bed.

The look was the look of a Master who had caught what the apprentice had done and who was now acknowledging the registration. The acknowledgment did not use language. The acknowledgment was in the small set of the Master's mouth and the steady direction of her attention and the absence of any sign that the registration produced rebuke. The Master had constructed the situation. The apprentice had passed the situation. The Master's acknowledgment was the doctrinal completion the morning's work required.

"It was correct," Zannah said.

"Yes, Master."

"It was required."

"Yes, Master."

"The recovery will produce additional capacity in the next several days. The standing protocols of the apprenticeship will return at that time. The doctrine permits the probe under the conditions the morning permitted it. The doctrine does not permit the probe at any other configuration. You will not repeat it."

"Yes, Master."

Zannah's eyes closed. The conversation was the longest she had managed through the recovery. The reduced state did not permit more.

Cognus inclined her head at her Master.

Her body rose. She withdrew from the room.

✦

The afternoon and the evening passed at the household's reduced rhythm.

Tovek's encrypted communication arrived through the standing channels at the third hour past noon. Cognus read it at her position at the eastern wing and filed it for the Master's review when the Master was able to receive it.

The day's rotation completed.

In the eastern wing Cognus sat at the small chair at the desk in her quarters as the evening moved toward the deeper hours.

The lamp stayed unlit.

The interior of her had not changed. The doctrine was served. The Master had acknowledged the service. The apprenticeship continued at its standing register, with the addition of what the probe had given her access to that no other apprentice in any standing apprenticeship would have had access to.

What she had received, she carried. She did not move against it. She did not move with it. She held it.

The household ran on toward the deeper hours of the night.

Cognus sat in the dark of her quarters and did not light the lamp.

The relation had shifted to its new register.

In the residence wing at the western reach of the central block the Master rested as her recovery required. In the interior inside her Bane held his position at the deeper layer. The attention he had turned toward the apprentice that morning had returned to the position it had occupied over the year and three months of the apprentice's service. The attention was no longer perceptible to the apprentice in the way it was perceptible during the probe. The apprentice carried the memory of its having been perceptible. The memory would remain.

The night moved toward morning.

The household held.

CHAPTER 22

The holo platform at the consultation room's center came alive at the third hour past the morning meal.

Aris Demici stood at the room's eastern wall, in front of the small reading lectern he kept there for the moments before a holo connection completed. His left hand rested on the lectern's edge. His right hand was at his side. The lamp at the corner of the room had been lit against the morning's gray light. The Hetton estate's library wing had been cool since dawn; the warmth would not arrive until the local sun cleared the eastern hills, which would take another two hours.

The platform's indicator confirmed the connection's status. Encrypted, single-source, scrubbed at both ends. The operative was secure on her end. The room around her would be a holding chamber she had rented in transit, configured to give nothing back about her current location.

The image rendered.

Nivara Tess stood at the chamber's center in the operative's working register. Mid-career human female. Dark coat over working clothes that had been chosen for the kind of low-profile travel her trade required. The image rendered her at a slight angle

that suggested she had positioned herself in front of the holo source without sitting. Standing reports were her preference. She had filed her materials standing for every prior client he had worked with.

She inclined her head at him in the small register the consultation permitted.

"Master Demici."

"Ms. Tess."

The honorific the household used in business correspondence with her. She accepted it without comment. She had asked, two contracts ago, whether he would prefer a different form of address; he had told her the current form was sufficient. She had not raised the question again.

"The report is prepared. I have organized it in the structure you specified at the engagement's commencement. The planetary investigation's findings first, the witness collection second, the physical evidence at the complex third, and the subject's body in detail fourth. The duration will be approximately twenty minutes if you do not interrupt for questions, somewhat longer if you do. I have additional material organized for follow-up questions on any of the four sections."

"Proceed."

She did not begin immediately.

Aris registered the small delay. The delay was new. The seven prior reports she had delivered to him across the past three years had begun with no delay between his instruction and her commencement. Her hands rested at her sides in the standing posture her operative training had built into her professional presentation. The left hand had moved a fraction of an inch toward her hip and then back. The shift had not been deliberate.

She was aware of her own posture in his presence in a way she had not been at the prior reports.

Aris did not name what he had registered. He waited.

"The planetary investigation," she began. "The Garqi authority closed the official inquiry on the third day after the incident. The closing finding was filed as gang-style commercial violence with unidentified perpetrators and unclear motive. The investigation did not pursue the perpetrators across the Hegemony or request assistance from neighboring planetary authorities. The closing was procedurally clean and operationally premature. I assess the closing as the result of either contractor pressure on the Garqi authority or independent decision by the authority's senior investigator that the case offered no productive avenue."

"Continue."

"The witness collection. Three civilians were on the street outside the complex at the time of the team's withdrawal. A human male vendor at his cart approximately fifty meters toward the central exchange. A Twi'lek female pedestrian with a child of approximately six years walking toward the market. An older human male in the doorway of a shop opposite the complex. The vendor and the older male provided cooperative interviews. The Twi'lek female declined initial contact and remained unavailable through my collection window."

"Their reports."

"The vendor reported three operators emerging from the complex's service corridor at the rear, moving at a steady supporting pace through the street, exiting the block within approximately forty-five seconds. He described two of the three as women. The third he described as male and human, carrying

what he identified as a heavy blaster rifle in shoulder-rig carry. The two women he described as carrying what he termed red blades. He described the blade carried by the woman supporting the other as active, producing the characteristic crimson light, with the bearer holding it in her right hand because her left was occupied supporting her companion."

Aris's left hand tightened against the lectern.

The motion was small. The holo on her end would not transmit it. He registered the motion in himself and held the rest of his presentation steady.

"The older male's report."

"The older male confirmed the vendor's description in its essentials. Three operators, two women with red blades, one male with a blaster. He added that one of the two women appeared to be supporting the other physically — her arm across the other's shoulders, her free hand carrying the active blade. He estimated the supporting woman's height at approximately a meter and three quarters, the supported woman somewhat shorter. He could not provide further detail on either woman's features because they had moved past his position at a pace that did not permit close observation."

"The Twi'lek female."

"Unavailable. I assess that she had registered the team's passage in detail and elected to remove herself from the district before secondary inquiry could reach her. I located her current residence on the Twi'lek's family rotation through the harbor district records, but she had departed the city by the time I attempted contact."

"Acknowledged. The physical evidence."

Tess produced a small datapad from her coat and consulted it. The consultation was her own organizational practice; the contents were available to her from memory but she preferred to verify her recall against her written notes when reporting to a client at this tier. The verification practice had earned her her positions across her career. Aris had paid the additional fee her practice required without comment at every prior engagement.

"The physical evidence at the complex was extensive. The middle section of the office complex had been structurally compromised at multiple load-bearing positions. The walls had collapsed inward within hours of the team's departure, as I have included in the attached photographic documentation. The corridor walls showed similar treatment. The bodies recovered from the complex numbered eleven, distributed across the rear corridor, the conference room, and the corridor leading to the front office. Each body showed multiple lightsaber wounds, in patterns consistent with the team having returned to each body during the destruction phase to apply additional cuts beyond those that produced the original death. The cuts were not random. They had been organized in patterns I have been unable to recognize from the operational vocabulary of any criminal organization I have worked against."

"The patterns."

"I have included photographic documentation of all eleven patterns in the materials file. I do not have the analytical training to interpret them. They appear deliberate, repeated across multiple bodies, and consistent in their formal vocabulary."

"Acknowledged. The subject's body."

She consulted the datapad again before continuing.

"The subject's body was in his private office at the front of the complex. The body was intact externally. There were no surface wounds. The cause of death was not immediately apparent to the planetary investigators or to the medical examiner who conducted the initial assessment. The examiner subsequently performed a full cranial examination and discovered the cause. The subject's brain matter had undergone complete structural failure. The skull was intact. The matter inside was the consistency of thick liquid."

"The signatures of the failure."

"Blood from the corners of both eyes, from both nostrils, and from both ear cavities, in patterns consistent with cranial pressure produced from within. Slight distension of the cranial vault detectable on close measurement. The body's position against the wall behind his desk, slumped to the floor, with a small pool of blood at the head's resting position. The examiner's report attached."

Aris's left hand had not released the lectern.

"Was there any external evidence at the body. Anything left at the position, anything placed, anything configured around him."

"No, Master Demici. The body was unmodified beyond the cause-of-death signatures themselves. The desk was intact. The office was undamaged. The operators did not destroy the office or modify the body after the death."

"Acknowledged."

Aris stood at the lectern for several seconds without speaking.

Tess waited at the chamber's center in her standing report posture. She had completed the four-section structure she had organized the report into. She had not yet provided any of the follow-up material she had prepared. She was aware that the

client had not asked the question the prior reports had taught her he would ask first after the structured delivery. The absence of the expected question registered with her as the second indication of the client's state. The first had been the small tightening she had not been certain she had observed at his left hand during her recounting of the vendor's description.

She held her position and waited.

"The departure pattern," Aris said.

"The team departed the city in a small commercial freighter that had landed at a private pad on the eastern outskirts approximately twenty minutes before the operation began. The freighter departed atmosphere at twenty-eight minutes after the first reports of disturbance reached the planetary authority. The freighter produced no traceable registration. I attempted to follow the departure track through commercial traffic records and was unable to reconstruct the vessel's destination. The track terminated at the planet's atmospheric boundary."

"Acknowledged. Your assessment of the operators."

The question she had expected. She delivered the assessment she had prepared.

"Three operators of substantial professional caliber. Two of them deploying lightsabers of the Sith register. Red blades. Single emitter on the supporting woman's weapon. A design I could not confirm on the second woman because her weapon was not active during the withdrawal. The third operator carrying conventional weapons with the professional discipline of an operator of significant experience. The three operating as a coordinated team with apparent role specialization. The supporting woman appeared to be in a reduced operational state at the time of withdrawal, requiring physical support from the

other woman to maintain her pace through the street. The reduced state had not been present at the team's entry to the complex."

"Continue."

"The reduced state suggests one of two possibilities. Either the supporting woman sustained injury during the engagement that the destruction phase did not visibly produce, or the operation itself drew upon resources I do not have the analytical training to assess. In the latter case, the practitioner experienced the drawing as a cost. I am providing the second possibility based on my limited understanding of practitioners of the type I observed in the evidence. I do not represent the assessment as analytically grounded."

"Acknowledged."

Aris did not respond to the assessment. He had registered it. The acknowledgment was sufficient.

"Your conclusion."

"The operation was professionally executed against the subject as a deliberate killing with specific signatures applied to the body and specific patterns applied to the operational structure of the complex. The operators were practitioners whose category I am not trained to identify. The departure was clean. The investigation will not produce additional information beyond what I have collected. I assess the work as complete on my side and await your further instructions."

"Acknowledged."

His left hand released the lectern.

His left hand returned to his side as his presentation required. The motion was deliberate. Tess registered the deliberate quality and recognized that the client had been

holding his hand at the lectern across the last fifteen minutes of the report without releasing.

"Ms. Tess."

"Master Demici."

"The report is complete and operationally satisfactory. The materials file will be reviewed against the report's structure. You will receive payment through the standing channel within three standard days. Your next assignment is being prepared."

"Acknowledged."

"In the interim you will travel to the Lyran III holding location and remain there until contacted. The location has been arranged for thirty standard days. You will not return to your standing residence during this period. You will not engage other clients during this period. You will not communicate with parties outside the standing channel during this period."

"Acknowledged."

"The travel documentation has been filed through the secure channel. Departure within twelve hours."

"Acknowledged."

The instruction to travel to the holding location had been delivered with the same measured cadence as the rest of the instructions. Tess registered the instruction and the cadence and the absence of any expression. Neither reading resolved. Whether the holding location was for her protection or for the convenience of someone who would need to be able to reach her at a known position later, both remained available. She did not ask for clarification. The professional register of the consultation did not permit the question.

"Master Demici."

"Ms. Tess."

The holo closed.

✦

The consultation room held the quiet the closing produced.

Aris stood at the lectern for some minutes without moving. The morning had reached the position where the eastern hills' shadow had begun to recede from the library wing's tall windows. The cool of the room remained. The lamp at the corner held its small steady light.

The report had landed in him in two distinct registers. The first was the operational register he had configured himself to receive across the past two months as he had organized Tess's engagement and waited for the deliverable. That register was satisfied. The operation against the subject had been executed by practitioners of the highest professional caliber, with doctrinal signatures whose recognition he had been preparing for. The operational register confirmed what he had expected.

The second register was where the report had not landed cleanly.

Two women.

Aris stood at the lectern and held the words and did not move.

The signature in the subject's body was Senn-Vec. The Hands Within, deployed at full application, leaving the precise pattern of evidence Senn-Vec's Treatise on the Inheritance of Hands described in section seven of its operational guidance. Anyone reading Senn-Vec at his depth would produce that body. There were perhaps twenty-five copies of the Treatise in surviving existence. He had one of them. He had been operating

under the working hypothesis that one other copy survived in active use. The user of that copy was the practitioner he had been tracking through the Pelu trail across the past fifteen years.

His working assumption had been that the user was Bane.

The witnesses had reported two women.

The two women might both be Bane's. The Banite line was Master and apprentice. Both could be operating against the subject at Garqi under Bane's direction, with Bane present at the operation in some way the witnesses did not register. Or Bane might be absent from the operation, with the apprentice handling the work. Or the second woman might be an apprentice of an apprentice in some extension of the line he had not accounted for. Multiple possibilities remained available.

Bane might also be dead.

The thought arrived with the same measured cadence the report had taken. Bane might have died at some point in the past year, the past two years, the past five. The Banite line might have continued past his death as Master and apprentice, with the woman supporting her companion through the street at Garqi the current Master and the supported woman the current apprentice. The witnesses had not been able to provide enough detail to confirm either possibility. The reduced state of the supported woman could be the cost of the Working applied to the subject, which would mean the supported woman was the principal practitioner who had performed the killing. It could also be injury from the engagement that had escaped his observation. Both remained available.

There was not yet enough information to resolve any of it.

The Banite line might continue in some arrangement he could not identify. The practitioners might not be Banite at all.

The Pelu trail he had been tracking for fifteen years might belong to operators he had not accounted for. The Senn-Vec corpus might be read by more than one party.

The cloud held.

Aris stood at the lectern with the cloud held and did not attempt to disperse it. The dispersal would require information he did not possess. The dispersal would come when he had collected the information that permitted it. The collection would now begin.

After perhaps four minutes he moved.

✦

Aris crossed from the consultation room into the library proper.

The library wing extended thirty meters along the estate's southern face. The eastern half was lined floor to ceiling in shelving that held the texts inherited from Hetton's collection. The western half was lined with the shelving that held his own acquisitions across the years. The two collections had been kept separate. The shelving designs differed in finish and in the shape of their carrying frames; an observer with the right knowledge could read the seam between them at fifty paces. He had not consolidated the two collections into a single arrangement because the seam itself was useful. He read from one or the other depending on what the day's work required. He did not mix them.

The working desk sat at the wing's center, between the two collections.

Aris crossed to it and lowered himself into the chair. The desk held the materials he had organized for the morning's work

before the holo had opened. A single bound codex sat at the right hand of the desk. Leather of an unspecifiable provenance. The binding was worn at the spine in the way ancient codices wore when they had been read by their owners across the centuries before reaching their current possession. A small annotated working notebook at the left hand. The notebook held his own marginalia and analytical work on the codex's content across the past eleven years.

The codex was A Treatise on Spectral Resonance, by Senn-Vec the Late.

The codex was the rarest text in the library. He believed only three copies survived in any condition in the galaxy. He had acquired his copy through a chain of intermediaries that had cost him the equivalent of a Demici subsidiary holding across the years it took to assemble. The acquisition had been completed nine years prior. He had been reading it across the years that followed in the slow patient way the Treatise required.

The codex remained closed.

The working notebook came to the desk's center under his hand. He opened it to the page he had filled the previous evening. He took the small writing implement from the notebook's spine sheath. He composed the next entry.

The entry was a working communication to a contractor he had retained six years prior and had not activated in the intervening period. The contractor operated in Daplona under deep cover as the proprietor of a small commercial property assessment firm. The proprietor's work was legitimate. The proprietor's additional role was the kind of role Aris paid for: observation, slow accumulation of intelligence about specific

commercial entities in the Daplona harbor district, with deliverables produced only when the principal requested them.

The entry assigned the proprietor a new principal target.

The target was the Drekka Freight commercial entity. The entity had been recently acquired by a Daplona aristocrat of the name Allia Omek, sister to the late Sepp Omek, operating from the Omek estate in the harbor district's eastern reach. The proprietor was instructed to develop a working intelligence picture of the Omek estate, its household composition, its commercial activity, the patterns of its principal's daily movement, and any unusual operational signatures the household produced. The proprietor was instructed to develop the picture across the next ninety standard days at a deliberate pace that would not register with the household's own intelligence apparatus. The proprietor was instructed to provide the first deliverable at the ninety-day mark.

Aris composed the entry, encrypted it, and entered it into the working communication channel that connected to the proprietor's standing receiver.

The assignment for Tess came next.

The assignment was the activation of a new operative cell in Daplona, with Tess at its center as the cell's principal observer. The cell would integrate with the proprietor's commercial assessment firm. Tess would operate as a junior associate of the firm while she conducted her own primary observation of the Omek household. Tess would join the firm at the close of her thirty-day holding period at Lyran III. Her cover identity would be prepared through the secure channel during the period.

Aris composed the assignment, encrypted it, filed it through the secure channel that would reach her in the morning.

The two communications were the first concrete actions he had taken in response to the report. They were not the response he had been preparing across the past two months for delivery against the practitioner he had assumed was Bane. That response remained held. The materials he had organized for it were still in the secure cabinet at the wing's far end. They would remain there.

The response would be developed against the practitioners he was now setting out to identify.

✦

The afternoon passed at the library's slow standing pace.

Aris performed the household's minor commercial obligations through the routine correspondence the day required of him as House Demici's reclusive branch head. He acknowledged three intra-House communications from his cousin the senior branch head at Carannia. He filed a routine acceptance of a charitable solicitation from one of the Serenno cultural foundations the House nominally supported. He addressed two minor accounts in the Demici subsidiary holdings he managed in his personal capacity.

None of the correspondence required interior attention.

The interior attention sat with the cloud through the afternoon's rotation. The cloud did not resolve. The cloud also did not produce additional anxiety as the hours passed. He had learned, across his five decades of operational concealment, to hold uncertainty in the place that did not require dispersal until the dispersal arrived.

In the late afternoon the household servants brought the meal he took at his working desk on the days he did not travel into Carannia for evening obligations. He ate at the desk in the standing pattern of solitary meals he had maintained across the years.

The eastern hills' shadow lengthened across the floor.

The lamp at the corner needed adjustment as the evening light began to fail.

✦

Aris opened the codex at the seventh hour past the morning meal.

The leather of the binding was cool against his hands. The cool was the same cool the codex had always carried. He had not been able to determine the source. Whether the cool was a property of the leather, of the inks, of the materials Senn-Vec had bound the work in, or of something else — he had stopped speculating. He registered the cool at each opening and turned to his reading.

The reading he turned to in the evening was the section the day's recalibration had brought to his attention.

Section eleven. On the Carried Presence.

The section concerned the conditions under which one practitioner's spectral resonance could be carried within another practitioner's living architecture. Senn-Vec wrote the section in the archaic Sith of the period three thousand years prior. Marginalia in three later hands ran across the centuries. Aris read both the original and the marginalia, holding the various commentaries as he read the original passages they referenced.

The carried presence is not a matter of summoning. The dead who are summoned are dead who have been called from the outside. The carried presence is a matter of holding. The presence is held within. The carrier holds the carried as a vessel holds water. The difference is that the water is also will, and the vessel is also will. The two wills exist within the same architecture across whatever duration the architecture can sustain.

Aris read the passage twice.

The conditions of the carrying are not common. The carrier must be a practitioner of substantial discipline. The carried must be a practitioner whose death has been recent enough that the spectral resonance has not yet fully dispersed and whose intent toward the carrier permits the holding. The carrier and the carried must have been in direct contact at the carried's death. The transfer must be deliberate on the carrier's side and acceded to by the carried.

The passage settled on a second reading.

The signatures of the carrying are not obvious to the casual observer. The carrier appears externally as a single practitioner of her ordinary configuration. The signatures emerge in the architecture beneath the carrier's external presentation, in small detectable adjustments that a sufficiently sensitive observer could read if the carrier permitted herself to be read. The carrier rarely permits this. The carrier guards the carried as she guards her own interior, because the two are now the same interior.

The third passage required three readings.

The marginalia in the first hand belonged to a Sith of the era two thousand years prior. Aris had identified the hand across the years; he had not been able to confirm the writer's name. The first hand noted: We have not seen such carrying in our age. The

discipline required exceeds what our practitioners produce. The carried presence is a doctrine that may be theoretical only.

The marginalia in the second hand was from the period one thousand years prior, in Aris's assessment. The second hand noted: The Brotherhood of Darkness does not pursue the carrying. The doctrine is preserved against the possibility that some future practitioner will discover the means our age cannot.

The marginalia in the third hand was Aris's own, in his archaic script, dated four years prior: No surviving record of operational carrying. The Working in development draws from spectral residue without requiring carrying. The carrying remains theoretical for the present work.

Aris read his own marginalia and held the codex open at the section.

The evening light through the western window had thinned to the last copper of dusk. The lamp at the corner was now the room's primary illumination. The library wing held the cool it had held since dawn, with the small additional cool the evening had produced as the day's warmth dispersed.

The section stayed open before him. No new marginalia went into the working notebook yet.

The Working he had been developing — the Wasting — drew from spectral residue at the channel he had constructed across the past decade. The channel reached outward to the residue of the dead and drew through itself into the target's interior. The Wasting did not require carrying. The Wasting required only the channel and the residue and the target.

What Senn-Vec described in section eleven was something different entirely. A practitioner held within another practitioner. Will inside will. The architecture sustaining both.

The Treatise had been his reading across nine years. Operational application for section eleven had not surfaced beyond its position as a structural reference for the broader doctrine of spectral resonance the work treated.

Whether the section had operational application now, he did not know.

The question registered with him.

The information to answer it was not yet his.

The cloud held.

The evening moved toward the deeper hours of the night.

Aris sat at the desk with the codex open at section eleven. The working notebook lay closed at his left hand. The lamp's small steady light fell against the codex's leather and the ancient ink of Senn-Vec's original Sith. The Hetton estate ran on at its standing evening rotation. The household servants completed their final rounds. The library wing held the cool the deeper hours required.

Aris Demici read the section once more, slowly, and let the reading settle into the place his interior held the questions he could not yet answer.

The Wasting continued in its development at the place beneath the reading.

The cloud continued at the place above it.

The night moved on.

CHAPTER 23

Zannah was at the desk in the study when the morning's rotation completed.

The lamp at the desk was not lit; the high window's eastern light was sufficient. The folio of Aris materials had been moved from the third fold back to the desk's right hand four days prior, on the morning Zannah had returned to the standing operational rhythm. The Marvash file had been closed and archived in the cabinet at the far wall. Tovek's last communication on the Demici cover documentation sat at the desk's left hand, where Zannah had been working with it across the past two days.

The Veiled Course operated at its full baseline. The Drawn Breath ran beneath. The Quiet Hands held steady where Zannah's discipline had been positioning them since the recovery had returned her capacity. The household's deeper architecture had reassembled to its standing state across the year and three months of the apprenticeship. The small specific differences the past several weeks had produced were now folded into the architecture as continuing texture.

Cognus came in at the standing morning hour.

She crossed from the door to the chair across the desk and took her position without instruction. The apprentice register had reset to its standing form during the morning's rotation, after the recovery period's reduced cadence. Zannah was Master again. Cognus was apprentice again. The standing architecture held.

"The morning," Zannah said.

"The accounts are at standing tempo. Vesh has the harbor coordination in hand. Telar reports nothing unusual at the perimeter. Tovek's last filing has not produced additional material since the previous communication."

"Acknowledged."

Cognus did not move from the chair. She had completed the morning report. She had not withdrawn. The Master had not dismissed her.

Zannah caught the holding and read it for what it was.

"You have something."

"Yes, Master."

"Continue."

Cognus straightened in the chair the way she straightened when she was about to deliver something she had been preparing across some interval. The shift was small; the Master read it cleanly.

"There is something from Garqi I have been holding."

Zannah considered her across the desk.

"Across the recovery period."

"Yes."

"Tell me."

Cognus took a breath. Not hesitation — the small inhalation that had preceded operational delivery in her Huntress days,

when the trade had required her to speak only what mattered. The pattern returned now.

"At the withdrawal. Three civilians on the street. The vendor at his cart. An older man at a shop doorway. A Twi'lek woman with a child. The vendor and the older man were civilians watching three armed strangers cross a street. The Twi'lek was not."

"What was she."

"An observer. The child was her cover. The child watched the team as she did. Children do not watch lightsabers with that quality of attention. The child was performing the role."

"Force-sensitive."

"At minimum. Possibly trained. Her sensitivity did not match the doctrinal shapes I have learned from you. Something else."

"Why did you not surface this on the freighter."

"You were not in a state to receive it. Tovek was carrying the post-operation work. The information had no operational use during your recovery. I would have raised it on your full return. The morning came at the right interval."

Zannah did not respond immediately. She held what the apprentice had brought and worked through what it implied.

"You have been thinking about her."

"I have."

"What have you arrived at."

Cognus took a small beat. "The household has been visible to someone we did not detect. We do not know when she first became aware of us. We do not know what she has done with what she has seen. And if there is one practitioner outside the

Demici and ourselves, there may be others. The picture is larger than we have been working with."

Zannah nodded once. "Recommend."

"We pursue her. At distance. Tovek's conventional channels for physical description — I can give him enough to begin. We do not approach her. We do not produce signatures she could read at her end. The Demici pursuit continues unchanged."

"The Force-side of pursuing her."

"Beyond me. My precognition does not project to unknown targets at distance. I have been waiting on someone in the household who could."

"You have been correct."

Zannah did not move from the desk. The conversation had reached the point she had been working toward across the recovery period. She had not known, until Cognus had brought the matter forward, that this particular morning was the one her preparation had been preparing for.

"There is a discipline," she said, "that I have been developing across the past three months. It is my own. The corpora gave me the framework — Senn-Vec, Pelu's acquisitions, the older Sith texts I have been working through. The assembly is mine."

"Yes, Master."

"It is specific to you. It will not operate through me. I will hold the conditions. The work itself will be your work."

Cognus inclined her head.

"Your precognition operates from your position forward in time. You catch what is about to happen near you. The discipline redirects the capability — the precognition will operate from a target's position instead of yours. You will catch what is about to happen near her, wherever she is."

Cognus took a beat. “The anchor is her Force-signature.”

“Yes. You read the signature at first encounter, hold it cleanly, project through it. The reading is taxing. It will not produce a complete picture on first attempt. It deepens across deployments as the anchor stabilizes.”

“And you hold the conditions.”

“The Veiled Course at extended radius around you. The radius conceals the projection from anything she could read at her end. The Drawn Breath supports your state across the duration. I do not interfere with the precognition itself. The precognition is yours.”

“Yes, Master.”

“We attempt the first deployment now. The Twi’lek’s signature is in your deeper layer. Surface it. Hold it. Project. Read what is about to happen near her at this moment.”

Cognus closed her eyes.

✦

The first reading took perhaps eight minutes.

The Veiled Course extended around her at the radius Zannah had calibrated for the work. The Drawn Breath operated at the support state. The Quiet Hands held the apprentice’s deeper layer steady while the precognitive capability rose from its standing position and reached toward the anchor Cognus had surfaced from the Garqi observation.

The anchor was the Twi’lek female. The signature held in Cognus’s deeper layer was specific enough to function as the projection target. The capability reached.

What Cognus caught was partial.

A vessel. Small, not commercial in any standard sense. The interior darker than the exterior light suggested. A control position at the vessel's forward section. The Twi'lek female at the position, alone, with her hands at her sides rather than at the controls. The vessel was not in atmosphere. The vessel was in space. The space around the vessel was not at any landmark Cognus could identify.

The precognition caught what was about to happen near her in the next several seconds. The Twi'lek female would turn her head slightly to the left. She would not move from her position. She would continue holding her hands at her sides. The vessel would continue at whatever course it was on.

The reading ended.

Cognus opened her eyes.

She had produced what she had produced. The picture was thin. The work had taxed her enough that the deeper layer where the apprenticeship discipline lived was now operating at reduced state for several hours.

"Report."

She delivered the reading cleanly. The vessel. The interior. The Twi'lek's position. The course continuing. The forecast of the small head movement.

Zannah sat with the material a beat before responding.

"The first reading is what it is. It will deepen with deployment. We do not attempt it again today — the capability needs to recover at this stage. We try again at the right interval."

"Yes, Master."

"We have what we need to start. She is on a vessel, currently in space. We do not know where, or the vessel's class, or her

purpose. We know she exists, we know she moves, and we know your discipline can reach her."

Cognus inclined her head.

"The interior. Anything else you can surface before the deeper layer closes?"

Cognus took a moment. The reading's material sat at the edge of what she could still access cleanly. She worked it.

"No standard cockpit pattern I could identify. The control position was unusual. The interior had a sense of being a residence more than a vessel. Her posture there was someone who lived in the seat, not someone who worked it. The vessel is her home."

Zannah nodded.

"The class itself I could not place. The interior elements did not match any class I have been trained to recognize."

"Acknowledged."

Zannah did not press further. The reading had produced what the first reading would produce. The capability would deepen as Cognus's discipline learned the work.

"We activate Tovek's channels with what you can give us," Zannah said. "Physical description, specific markers from the Garqi observation that you can still recover cleanly. Twi'lek female, light blue if you can confirm the shade, lek'ku markings, the eyes, the hands, anything about clothing. Enough for his channels to begin."

"I will have it for him within the hour."

"Good."

Cognus did not rise. The Master had begun the work; the apprentice waited for what further the morning would produce.

Zannah considered her across the desk.

"The Demici pursuit holds at current tempo. Tovek's missing-years work stays primary on that thread. Your discipline deploys against the Twi'lek at intervals I will calibrate. Two parallel threads, neither disrupting the other. The household has been seen and we now know it. We proceed as that requires."

"Yes, Master."

"Withdraw to the eastern wing. Finish the description for Tovek. Rest your deeper layer the rest of the day. We try the discipline again at midday, two days out."

"Yes, Master."

Cognus rose. She inclined her head and withdrew.

✦

The household ran on at its restored tempo across the rest of the morning.

Vesh continued at the harbor accounts. Telar continued at the perimeter. Zannah remained at the study desk and worked through the implications the morning had produced.

The Demici materials at the right hand of the desk. The new threat picture at the desk's center as Zannah developed the framework that would carry it. The Marvash archive at the cabinet, closed. The Pelu correspondence at the desk's left hand, where Tovek's most recent integration had filed it.

The architecture had been simpler at the morning's start. It was no longer simple. The household had two parallel threats now. The threats might be connected. The threats might not be connected. The work would develop the picture across whatever interval the work required.

Zannah worked at the desk through the rest of the morning and did not leave the study until the midday meal.

✦

The vessel held its course through the empty space between Mayagil and Pollillus, deep in the sector that bore the first system's name.

Sariya Karith sat in the cockpit in the posture she always held when reading the flows.

The cockpit was small. It had been built for a single pilot and configured by her, across the years of her ownership, to serve as the only operational space the vessel required. Behind the cockpit was the living compartment. Behind that, the small engine bay. The whole vessel ran approximately eighteen meters from nose to tail. The cockpit itself measured slightly more than two meters across at its widest point.

Her hands rested at her sides. The custom black gloves covered them completely. The two fingers of the right hand had been missing for the eleven years past the lightsaber construction error. They were not visible beneath the glove's shape, which had been cut to suggest a full hand. The lek'ku banding ran taut down her back at the calibration she had been holding for the past several days. The criss-cross of the leather straps produced the discipline that held the lek'ku at the position the reading required. The copper and leather braided tress hugged the skin at her forehead at its standing placement.

The flows around her ran at their ordinary morning texture.

The vessel itself produced its own small ambient signature that she had long ago learned to read past. The crew of a small

commercial freighter four sectors distant produced the small thread of attention she had been tracking for the past two days. The Hutt operation at the spaceport at Saleucami produced the larger sustained pressure she had been monitoring across the past several months. The Force-flows of the broader galactic activity moved at their ordinary rhythms behind all of these.

What she caught now was not at any of those.

It was small. It was at the periphery of her sensing. It had not been there an hour ago. It had not been there yesterday. It had not been there in any of the readings she had performed across the past several weeks since she had departed Garqi.

She extended her attention toward it.

The attention found a shape she could not fully resolve. The shape was not a Force-presence of the kind she usually read. It was something adjacent. It had a quality of being directed toward her rather than ambient in the flows. The directing was small. The directing had a discipline behind it that she had not encountered in her years of reading the flows.

She held her attention on the shape for several seconds.

The shape did not resolve further.

After a longer moment Sariya let her attention return to its standing position. The shape would surface again, or it would not. The flows would continue at their ordinary texture or they would not. She had caught what she had caught and would carry it forward into her continued reading.

She turned her head slightly to the left to consult the navigation board at her right.

The vessel held its course.

The Mayagil sector continued at its deeper rhythms. The shape at the periphery did not return.

Sariya Karith sat in the cockpit and read the flows.

CHAPTER 24

The morning sky over Daplona's harbor district had thinned to the pale gold the late season produced. The light through the eastern windows of the household lay long across the floor of the dressing room where Allia Omek stood at the tall mirror.

She wore the deep teal coat with the brass clasps her late brother had once worn for the same kind of meeting. Linnet had taken in the shoulders these four years until the fit produced the silhouette an Omek principal was expected to present. The under-blouse was cream, plain, the kind of fabric that signaled inherited wealth without insisting on it. The two thin silver bracelets at her left wrist had been her mother's and were the only ornament she wore for business meetings. She had brushed her hair back into the working knot Linnet taught her in the first months after Sepp's death. That had been the time when the household was learning how to hold a woman in the role a man had been preparing to hold.

Vesh stood at the door of the dressing room.

"The water is ready in the receiving chamber," he said. "Linnet poured it at the second hour. The temperature should hold until Master Voss arrives."

"The vessel."

"The deep one with the rim Vaszuun chose. Linnet remembered which."

"Good."

Vesh did not move from the door.

"Telar has the perimeter at standing," he said. "Two of his men at the rear gate, one at the front, the household cell at the corner. The freight runners brought the morning manifests at the regular hour. The harbor is quiet. Voss's vessel arrived at the eastern pad twenty minutes ago. He took the standard transit through the merchant quarter. He will be at the front gate within the hour."

"Acknowledged."

Vesh hesitated.

"He has not been to this house since Vaszuun died."

"No."

"The protocol is the protocol you have prepared for. You know it as well as Vaszuun could have taught it."

Allia did not turn from the mirror. The reflection held the woman the household had built in the four years since her brother's death. The principal of a freight enterprise, sister to a name the harbor district still respected, careful and unremarkable in the ways Daplona aristocracy required. Beneath the reflection, what Vesh could not see, the practitioner held herself in the place she had built for the work that the household's other half required. The two layers ran without interference. They had been running together for long enough that the seam between them was no longer something she had to attend to during ordinary days.

This was not an ordinary day, but the seam still held.

"Send word when he is at the gate," she said.

"Yes, my lady."

Vesh withdrew.

✦

The receiving chamber occupied the eastern wing of the household. It was a long high-ceilinged room with the marble work the Omek family had commissioned three generations earlier. The tall windows opened onto the small enclosed garden Linnet maintained for the few visitors the household received in formal capacity. The chamber had been arranged this morning to the standing form for a Dug visitor of Voss's station. The principal's chair sat at the chamber's northern end with the side table at its right hand. The marsh-water vessel rested on the side table with the carved wooden cup beside it. The visitor's low stand stood at the chamber's southern end, positioned to allow the Dug forelimb-stance the protocol required. On the visitor's stand sat the small ornamental fan that signaled the principal's recognition of the visitor's standing in the broker community.

Linnet had set everything to the configuration Vaszuun had specified in the notes he left for the visit. She had reviewed the notes with Allia across three of the past four mornings. The arrangement was correct.

Allia took her seat at the principal's chair at the third quarter of the hour and waited.

Vesh's tap at the chamber door came eight minutes later.

"Master Ihren Voss to see the principal."

"Show him in."

The Dug who entered the chamber was old. His coat was the deep brown that older Dugs wore for formal business. The small medallion at the throat showed the broker's seal of his guild, which Allia recognized and acknowledged with the half-tilt of the head the protocol required. He moved into the chamber on the forelimb-stance, with the careful weight distribution Vaszuun had described to her. He came to a stop at the visitor's stand at the chamber's southern end and held his position.

"Lady Omek."

"Master Voss."

Her head tilted at the half-angle. He returned the tilt at the matching angle. The opening was correct.

"You honor my house with your visit."

"The house honors me with its welcome."

Her left hand lifted the marsh-water vessel from the side table and poured a small measure into the carved cup. She set the cup on the visitor's stand at the forward position the protocol required. Voss did not touch the cup. He acknowledged the offering with the second tilt of his head, which Allia returned, and the ceremonial portion of the opening was complete.

"Please be at your ease," she said.

"Thank you, Lady Omek."

Voss shifted on the forelimb-stance, finding the angle the long meeting would require. Allia set herself in the principal's chair at the working position, neither forward nor leaning back, and waited for him to begin.

He spoke for some time before reaching the business. He spoke of Vaszuun. He spoke of the seventeen years he had routed his freight through the Drekka scheduling office, which had become the central piece of his own enterprise's reliability in the

harbor district. He spoke of his concern, when Vaszuun had died, that the office would not hold its standing under the transition. He spoke of his observation, in the months since the transition, that the office had in fact held its standing under Vesh's coordination. He spoke of his decision that the protocol his guild required for the formal acknowledgment of the new principal would be performed as the office's standing condition warranted.

Allia listened without interruption. The opening of the meeting's content was Voss's to make. The protocol required that the principal receive what the visitor had come to offer before the principal made any business of her own.

When he had finished she answered him.

"Vaszuun spoke of you," she said, "across many of the months that he was preparing me to take what my brother left. He spoke of the seventeen years you have routed your freight through us. He spoke of the standing of your enterprise in the harbor. He said that the introduction he intended to make between you and me was the introduction that would tell him whether the transition had been correct."

Voss tilted his head at the small angle that indicated received attention.

"He did not live to make the introduction. I know that he intended it for the eleventh day of the first month of the quarter, and that the day passed three months ago without the meeting that was supposed to occur on it. I have carried the absence of the meeting as I have carried other absences across this period. I am grateful that you have brought the meeting to me now."

"Lady Omek."

"Please continue."

Voss continued. The business he had come to discuss was the renewal of the slot allocations his enterprise held through Drekka's scheduling across the previous calendar year. The allocations covered six routes across the Hegemony and three routes into the broader Outer Rim, with the volumes specified at the standing levels his enterprise had been operating at for the past four years. The renewal was the standard renewal his guild made with the Drekka office across many years.

What he was asking, beneath the standard renewal, was whether the new principal would maintain the relationship at the same terms Vaszuun had operated it under. Or whether the transition would produce changes his enterprise would have to absorb or work around.

Allia had reviewed the slot allocations with Vesh and with Linnet over the past two days. She knew the volumes. She knew the rates. She knew the small specific concessions that Vaszuun had made to Voss's enterprise through the years and the reasons for each concession. She also knew what Vaszuun had told her in their last working conversation before his death. The Voss relationship was the relationship that would carry the office through any difficulty that came at it. Maintenance of the relationship at standing terms was the single most important piece of the business Vaszuun had been preparing her to inherit.

"The terms continue at standing," she said. "The six routes through the Hegemony at their current volumes and rates. The three routes into the Outer Rim at their current volumes and rates. The two specific concessions on the harbor transit fees at their current schedule. The Drekka office has been honored to route your freight across the past seventeen years and it will be honored to route it through the coming years."

Voss tilted his head at the angle that indicated acceptance.

"Lady Omek."

"The contracts will be prepared at the office this afternoon and brought to your enterprise tomorrow for the signatures."

"The terms are acceptable. The renewal is acknowledged."

The business of the meeting had been completed. The protocol's closing portion was the longer portion. The broader conversation came next, the one the meeting's commercial substance permitted the visitor to offer. Voss spoke of the harbor district's general conditions, of the broker community's recent activities, and of the small developments his enterprise had been tracking in the wider Hegemony. Allia listened and offered the small responses the protocol expected of her — agreement on the harbor conditions, acknowledgment of the broker community's movements, attention to the developments Voss raised.

The meeting ran for somewhat over the hour.

When Voss was ready to depart he shifted at the visitor's stand into the closing posture and offered the final tilt of his head. Allia returned it.

"Lady Omek."

"Master Voss."

Voss withdrew on the forelimb-stance the way he had entered, careful, deliberate, the medallion at his throat catching the late-morning light through the eastern windows as he crossed back to the chamber door.

Vesh closed the door behind him.

Allia did not rise from the principal's chair immediately. She held the position for the small interval the protocol expected of her, in which the new principal acknowledged the visit's completion to the chamber itself. She let the meeting's shape

settle into the place the household kept for the things Vaszuun had taught her to do.

Then she rose, and the morning's work was finished.

✦

The study at midday held its standing texture.

The Aris materials were at the desk's right hand where they had been for the past four days. The Tovek correspondence was at the left hand. The Marvash file remained closed in the cabinet at the far wall.

Zannah had returned to the study at the fourth hour and had moved through the operational preparation the deployment required. The Veiled Course extended at the radius she had calibrated for the work. The Drawn Breath ran at the support setting. The Quiet Hands held steady.

Cognus came in at the standing midday hour.

Cognus took the chair across the desk; the Master read her as the apprentice settled.

"You are ready."

"Yes, Master."

"The discipline runs from where we left it. The anchor is the Twi'lek's signature. You have been holding it over the two days."

"The anchor stabilized in the evening of the first day. The hold has not required attention since."

"Good. Begin when you are settled."

Cognus closed her eyes.

The Master held the conditions around her. The Veiled Course concealed the projection from anything that could read it

at the far end. The Drawn Breath supported Cognus's state. The discipline reached.

What came back was clearer than the first deployment had produced.

The cockpit again. Small, two meters across at the widest, the layout the first reading had caught now resolving into specific detail. The forward viewport at the cockpit's nose. The pilot's seat angled slightly to the rear of the cockpit's center. Sensor arrays mounted in the cockpit's overhead at positions that did not match standard Republic-pattern installation. A second-tier sensor bank to the pilot's left at her elbow. The hull, glimpsed through the viewport's reflection of the cockpit's interior light, showed the specific curve and the small mounting points of what Cognus's operational training identified as a Sienar Pursuit-Class sensor probe. Aftermarket modification was extensive. Eighteen meters in the standard production length. The class had been produced in Sienar Technologies' middle-period runs in the past forty years. The vessel before her in the projection was at the older end of the production run.

Sariya Karith sat in the pilot's seat in the working posture the discipline required.

Her hands rested at the chair's armrests rather than at the controls. The custom black gloves covered them completely. The leather banding ran taut down her back through the criss-cross arrangement that held the lek'ku at the position the work demanded. The copper and leather braided tress hugged the skin at her forehead, and Cognus's read caught the small heat the copper produced as it conducted whatever passed through it during the reading.

The Twi'lek was reading a flow.

Cognus could see the discipline operating in the Twi'lek's body. The lek'ku held still under the banding. The shoulders carried the stillness the practice required. The breath ran at the slow rhythm a sustained reading needed. The eyes, half-lidded, held a focus that was directed outward at distance through whatever sense the Twi'lek had built across the years.

What Cognus could not see was what Sariya was reading.

The work itself was opaque to the projection. The discipline the Twi'lek operated did not match the doctrinal shapes Cognus's training had taught her to recognize. The Twi'lek's reading produced no signature Cognus could parse. Only the visible shape of the discipline operating was available — the body holding the posture, the copper conducting, the attention extended outward.

The projection caught what the precognition would catch in the next several seconds. The Twi'lek would not move from the pilot's seat. Her breath would continue at the slow rhythm. The reading would continue. The vessel would hold its course.

Cognus came back from the projection.

Cognus opened her eyes. The Master was watching her across the desk.

"Report."

"The vessel is a Sienar Pursuit-Class sensor probe. Aftermarket-modified. Eighteen meters in production length. The interior elements I caught match the class's sensor layout with significant pilot-side modification. The class was produced in Sienar Technologies' middle-period runs. The vessel I caught is at the older end of the run."

"Tovek can search the registry channels with this."

"Yes. The class is specific enough to narrow the search significantly. The modifications will not appear on registries, but the base hull and engine signatures will be searchable."

"What else."

Cognus took a small breath before continuing.

"The Twi'lek was reading a flow. The discipline was visible — the banding, the copper at her forehead, the posture of sustained reading. I could not see what she was reading. The work was opaque to the projection. The discipline she operates does not match the doctrinal shapes I have learned from you. She is doing something the corpora I have read do not describe."

Zannah considered this.

"The visible shape of the discipline."

"The body holding the posture for sustained work. The copper conducting heat as it operated. The eyes half-lidded with focus directed at distance. The breath at the rhythm of a slow reading."

"The conducting heat. You caught that specifically."

"Yes, Master. The copper warmed as the reading ran. The warming was small but it was present. The copper is part of the apparatus the discipline requires."

"She has built the apparatus into her body."

"Yes."

Zannah let the description settle. The Twi'lek's practice had a physical infrastructure — the banding for the lek'ku, the copper for the conducting — that the discipline operated through. The infrastructure was integrated with the body in a way that suggested years of refinement. The capability was real, the doctrine was specific, and the doctrine was not anything the household had been reading.

"She is operating at depth," the Master said. "The discipline is not improvisation. She has been working it for many years."

"Yes."

"Tovek receives the vessel information today. The discipline's nature we hold for our own reading. He does not need the doctrinal dimension."

"Yes, Master."

"Rest until the late afternoon. The deployment was at the second tier — your capability sustained it without the depletion the first deployment produced, but rest holds."

"Yes, Master."

Cognus rose and withdrew from the study.

✦

The afternoon ran long.

Zannah remained at the desk and worked through what the deployment had produced. The vessel class gave Tovek something he could move on. The Twi'lek's discipline gave her own work something to consider. The two pieces sat at different layers of the household's threat picture, neither replacing the other.

The Aris materials at her right hand had waited through the day for the integration that the late afternoon would bring. Tovek's last filed communication had specified that he would arrive at the rear gate at the start of the evening hour with new material on the missing-years investigation. He had not specified what the material was. Tovek did not specify when the material was significant enough to warrant in-person delivery; he simply arrived.

Zannah worked through her own preparation through the afternoon. She had been holding several working hypotheses about Aris's missing years in past months, organized in the working notebook she kept at the desk's center fold. The hypotheses ranged from the conservative to the maximalist. At the conservative end: Aris doing exactly what the Demici cover documentation claimed, commercial education with some unaccounted-for tutelage in the rare-text market. At the maximalist end: Aris spending the missing years training in some institution of the pre-Ruusan Sith landscape that survived the end of the Brotherhood. She had not been able to choose between them on the evidence she possessed.

The afternoon light moved across the floor.

In the third hour past midday Telar's standing word arrived. The perimeter held. The late freight runners had cleared the harbor. Tovek had departed his own office and would arrive at the rear gate within the hour.

In the fourth hour Zannah closed the working notebook, set the Aris materials at the desk's center where Tovek would be able to read alongside them, and waited.

Vesh's tap at the study door came at the fifth hour.

"Master Tovek at the rear gate."

"Bring him through."

Cognus arrived at the study a minute behind Tovek, summoned by the standing protocol that included her in operational deliveries. She took the chair to Zannah's left at the desk. Tovek took the chair across.

Tovek set a small folio on the desk in front of him before he spoke. The folio held what he had brought.

"I have something on the Demici missing years," he said. "The work has been running across the past three months through channels I have been developing since the cover documentation's fabrication date was established. I have produced two independent lines of evidence that converge on the same conclusion. The conclusion is significant enough that I came in person."

"Continue."

Tovek opened the folio.

"The first line. Financial transactions traced through House Demici's subsidiary accounts during the missing years. The transactions were small individually but consistent across the five-year period. They were routed through commercial intermediaries that, in the conventional reading, look like routine procurement for the Demici cadet branch holdings. They are not."

Tovek turned the first page in the folio.

"The intermediaries trace back, through three layers of structure, to a single supply contractor that operated in the Outer Rim during the period. The contractor's declared business was the provisioning of agricultural materials to remote settlements. The contractor's actual business was the provisioning of materials, personnel, and equipment to an institution that did not appear on any commercial registry that survived the post-Ruusan documentation purges. I have identified the contractor by name. The institution it provisioned was the Brotherhood of Darkness Academy at Korriban."

Tovek let this land before continuing.

"The second line. I cross-referenced the Demici family's commercial activity during the missing years against the broader

pattern of families whose sons were at the Academy during the same period. There were eleven such families in my comparison set, all from the Mid Rim aristocratic tier, all with sons whose post-Ruusan biographies show similar five-year gaps with similarly fabricated cover documentation. The transaction pattern matches. The Demici activity during the missing years matches the activity of families whose sons were at Korriban."

The two lines of evidence pointed at the same conclusion. The conclusion was the conclusion.

Tovek closed the folio.

"Aris Demici was at the Brotherhood Academy at Korriban during the missing years. The doctrinal background is Brotherhood orthodox. The training was Sith."

Zannah did not respond immediately. The piece had arrived clean. Tovek had done the work of getting them to the conclusion with the evidence the conclusion required.

"The contractor's name."

"Pellaris Procurement. The contractor was wound down across the year following Ruusan when the demand for its actual product ceased. The principal of the contractor died of natural causes in the third year after Ruusan. The records I have used to trace the work were preserved in the commercial registry of the Hegemony of Ciutric, which has retention policies that proved fortunate for our work."

"The comparison families."

"I will not name them in this conversation. The names are in the folio. The Demici family is the only one of the eleven that has produced a survivor of the missing years. Nine of the families produced sons who died at Ruusan. One produced a son who died at Korriban during the training years."

"Aris is the only survivor."

"Of the cohort I have identified through this comparison. There may be others my channels have not surfaced. The eleven I have identified are the eleven my work has produced."

Cognus had been listening at Zannah's left without interruption. She did not speak now, but her presence at the conversation was operational. She received what Tovek brought as the household received it.

"The implications," Zannah said.

"Aris's actual training was Brotherhood orthodox at the Academy. His capability tier is whatever a prime-acolyte-level Korriban graduate would carry, which is significantly above what the cover documentation has suggested. His doctrinal background is the pre-Bane Sith — the corpora the Brotherhood drew from, the practices the Academy taught, the hierarchies the Brotherhood maintained. His survival is officially impossible because the Brotherhood was declared extinct after Ruusan. His fifty years of operational concealment have been calibrated for an adversary that knows the Brotherhood is supposed to be dead. His motivation against the line we are part of is the Brotherhood's motivation against the Banite line — which my work cannot reach into directly but which we can reasonably infer from his doctrinal background."

"Acknowledged."

"The work continues from this. I will develop the picture of what Aris has been doing across the past decade through the same channels that produced this material. The fabrication of the cover documentation twelve to fifteen years ago suggests that whatever he is doing now is recent enough to require the cover

and significant enough to require the precision the fabrication exhibits. I will surface that picture across the months to come."

"Acknowledged."

Tovek did not rise immediately. He held at the desk for the small interval the household's working pattern required, in case the principal had additional questions or directions to issue. None came. He gathered the folio, set it at Zannah's right hand where she could continue with the materials, and rose.

"My lady."

"Tovek."

Tovek withdrew from the study. The door closed behind him at the standing weight Vesh's training produced in the household staff.

✦

The study held the quiet the closing produced.

Zannah did not move from the desk. Cognus did not move from her chair. The lamp at the desk had been lit when Tovek arrived and now carried the room's primary light. The late afternoon's window light had thinned to the copper the season produced in the evening hours.

The Korriban piece sat in the folio at her right hand.

The piece had brought what it had brought. Aris's training was Brotherhood. His doctrinal lineage was the orthodoxy the Brotherhood had maintained across the centuries before Ruusan. The corpora he had read at the Academy were the corpora Bane had read at the same Academy in the years before Aris arrived. The doctrinal vocabulary Aris would speak in his own interior was the vocabulary Bane had spoken in his interior

before Bane broke with the Brotherhood. Bane had built the Rule of Two on the bodies of every other Sith of his age.

Zannah held the piece and worked through what it implied.

The work moved through several layers of consideration. The first layer was operational: Aris's capability tier, his concealment's precision, his probable resources, his probable plans. The second layer was doctrinal. What Aris would think when he read what the household had been doing. What he would understand from the Hands Within signature at Marvash's body. What conclusions he would have already drawn about the line he was hunting. The third layer was the deeper consideration the doctrinal layer produced as it ran. Aris and Bane had shared the same Academy. The same masters in some cases. The same training texts. The same hierarchical vocabulary. They had not known each other. The Academy had been large and Aris had left it before Bane arrived. But they had been formed by the same institution.

And as Zannah worked through this third layer the carried presence at the deeper architecture of her own interior produced its reaction.

It was small. It was specific. It did not surface as language. It surfaced as a quality of attention. The deeper presence shifted at the word Korriban the way a body shifts at the sound of its own name. The further shift came at the word Brotherhood, carrying the contempt fifty years of memory had refined into something that did not require articulation. Bane had broken with the Brotherhood. Bane had killed them all. The Brotherhood had been heretical to his understanding of what the Sith were for. Bloated with members, riddled with internal politics, dilute in its doctrinal practice, fatally compromised by the very plurality that

had let it think it was the line. The word Korriban carried fondness in his memory. The word Brotherhood carried contempt. The combination at Aris's placement — Brotherhood-trained at Korriban — placed Aris at the doctrine Bane had spent his life dismantling.

The recognition did not need to be translated for Zannah to receive it. It had already become her own through the years of carrying. What the piece had produced in Bane was the same recognition the piece had produced in her, with the additional weight of his direct memory beneath it.

Zannah prepared to speak it to Cognus.

Before she could —

"He is here also," Cognus said.

Zannah turned her head.

Cognus had not moved from the chair. Her hands rested on the chair's arms in the way she had been holding them since Tovek had left. Her eyes were on the lamp at the desk rather than on her Master. The look was the look of someone catching something at the edge of her own attention that she had decided to name now.

"At the periphery," Cognus said. "When Tovek named the Academy. The reaction was small, the way it has been small since the probe. It surfaces when something is in the field that he has direct memory of. I have been catching these moments since Ambria. I have not been certain what they were until today, when the simultaneity of his reaction with what you must have been catching made the source plain."

Cognus held at the chair.

"I should have raised it sooner. I was not certain. I am certain now."

Zannah did not respond immediately. The information had landed in the space the household kept for the things that changed the architecture of the work. The space had been making room for this since Cognus had stood at the deeper layer of the probe and met what was held there. The making of room had been continuing in the months since, without Zannah's active attention, the way certain accommodations happened in a long apprenticeship that the Master did not need to choose to permit.

"The probe seeded more than the moment."

"Yes, Master."

"It has been operating across the months."

"At the periphery only. He does not speak in me. He surfaces in reaction to things that bear on his memory. The Academy was one. There have been perhaps four others I now recognize as having been his reaction rather than my own."

"The four others."

"The first reading of the Twi'lek. The Marvash strike's preparation. The Pelu correspondence the week before Ambria. The carrier-and-carried section I read in the working notebook last month."

Each was an event the carried presence would have had reason to react to. Zannah held the list and let it settle.

"You did not raise it because you were not certain."

"I was not certain. The reactions were small enough that I could not separate them from my own response to the same events. The simultaneity tonight separated them."

"Acknowledged."

Zannah looked at the lamp.

The architecture between the three of them was now on the table. Master, apprentice, and the carried predecessor — all three present in the operational space, with the predecessor active in the apprentice at the periphery and active in the Master at the depth. The Rule of Two had not formally accommodated this. The Rule of Two had not formally accommodated many of the things the household had built over the past year. The Master would consider the doctrinal implications in the working notebook in the coming weeks. For now the implications stood as the situation they described.

"The reaction at the Academy was what you described," Zannah said. "Fondness at Korriban. Contempt at Brotherhood. The doctrine Aris carries was the doctrine Bane spent his life dismantling."

"Yes, Master. That is what I caught."

"Then you have been catching cleanly. The work has been running in you correctly."

"Yes, Master."

The lamp held. The folio sat at the desk's right hand with the Korriban piece inside it. The Aris materials at the desk's center waited for the morning's integration. Cognus did not move from the chair. Zannah did not move from her position at the desk. The carried presence remained at the depth where he had been since Ambria and at the periphery where the probe had seeded him since Ciutric.

The evening moved on.

The three of them at the desk held the space without further words.

CHAPTER 25

Four days had passed since Tovek's delivery of the Korriban piece.

Zannah walked the eastern garden at the second hour past dawn. The morning carried the heavy moisture the Ciutric season brought to the lowlands at this point in the year. The garden's stone path traced the household's perimeter in a long oval. It began at the eastern wing's service door. It ran past the small reflecting pool Linnet maintained, then crossed the lower terrace where the household's ornamental plantings gave way to the grounds Telar's perimeter cell patrolled. The path returned to the service door along its southern arc. Zannah walked the oval at a pace that let her think.

The working notebook was under her left arm. She carried it on the morning walks since the Korriban piece arrived. The notebook was where she worked through what the interior in her was now doing.

The presence had been quiet at the morning's start. Across the past four days she had attended to it the way one attended to a presence one wished to draw forward. Not by addressing it directly, but by holding the conditions in which it could surface.

She had read the Senn-Vec marginalia. She had worked through her own annotations on the Treatise on the Inheritance of Hands. She had opened the carrier-and-carried section of the Treatise on Spectral Resonance and reading it slowly, with attention, as if she were a scholar still studying what she had in fact long since operationalized.

Bane had surfaced in brief precise responses to each of these readings. The responses were brief. They were not language. They were the quality of attention she had named to Cognus at the close of the morning the Korriban piece had arrived. They were enough to confirm that the connection operated when she attended to it and stayed available when she did not.

This morning she would attempt something different.

Zannah completed the oval and returned to the service door. She did not enter the house. She stood at the threshold of the eastern garden with the working notebook held at her chest and looked at the small reflecting pool the path had passed.

The question she would pose to him was specific.

What did the operational style of a prime-acolyte-tier Korriban graduate look like across the years of a fifty-year concealment? She had spent the past days reading what she had on the Brotherhood's training and on the Korriban Academy specifically. The reading produced a general picture. The general picture was not sufficient. What she needed was what only direct memory could provide. The texture of a man trained at the Academy in the years before its destruction. Operating from inside that training across the decades of survival. Calibrated against the doctrinal frame Bane himself had carried away from the same institution.

The working notebook opened to the page she had prepared the previous evening. The page was blank apart from the question written at its top in her careful script.

Zannah did not speak the question aloud. She did not need to. The interior in her had been hosting his presence at a depth that did not require speech. She held the question at the foreground of her attention and waited.

The response came slowly.

It did not arrive as a single discrete pulse. It arrived as a gradual surfacing — the way a held breath might surface in someone who had been holding it carefully across a long interval and now permitted the exhalation. The response had texture rather than content at first. The texture had specific qualities she could catalogue. Patient. Doctrinal. Calibrated against the long view. A practitioner who had taught himself to operate at the tempo the orthodoxy required regardless of what the years produced.

The content came after the texture.

A prime-acolyte-tier Korriban graduate operating under concealment would maintain his doctrinal practice at the standing rhythm the Academy had instilled. The rhythm did not adapt to the years of concealment. The rhythm was the discipline. A practitioner who modified the rhythm to accommodate his cover lost the discipline that was the cover's foundation. The discipline was what the cover protected; the cover was not what the discipline served.

This was specific. Zannah caught it cleanly and wrote it into the notebook in the short form she had developed for these sessions.

The response continued. The fifty years of concealment would have produced specific calluses. The orthodox practices would have been refined past the point at which most practitioners stopped refining. The doctrinal frame would have hardened into the kind of certainty the Brotherhood had produced in its prime-acolyte-tier graduates. A certainty that the orthodoxy was correct, that the practices the Academy taught were the practices the doctrine required, that any deviation from the orthodoxy was either heretical or insufficient.

Zannah caught the contempt that ran beneath the assessment. Bane's contempt for what the Brotherhood had produced was not an emotion that surfaced as feeling. It was a structural quality of the assessment itself. The contempt was the framing through which he read what such a graduate had become.

The assessment went into the notebook in the short form.

A third piece surfaced before the response settled.

The practitioner would have a single weakness the orthodoxy could not have prepared him for. The Brotherhood had not anticipated that the line would continue past Ruusan. The Brotherhood had not anticipated that the line would continue in a form the orthodoxy did not contain. The graduate operating from inside the orthodoxy would be preparing to face what he believed the line to be. What he believed the line to be was the line his own training had taught him to expect. The line he would actually face was something else.

Zannah wrote this and underlined it twice.

The response settled.

Zannah held the notebook against her chest and stood at the threshold of the garden for some minutes without moving. The

morning's moisture was thickening into the small drops the season produced ahead of the longer rains that would arrive within the hour. The path beneath her had darkened with the moisture.

✦

In the smaller workroom at the western wing, where she was completing the daily writing the apprenticeship required of her, Cognus paused at the page.

The pulse had arrived at the periphery without her seeking it. She had not been working at the seeded connection. The connection had operated on its own as something at the depth of her Master's attention had drawn the response forward at the other end of the house.

She caught the response's texture first. Patient. Doctrinal. Calibrated against the long view.

Then the content surfaced enough for her to recognize what the Master was receiving. Bane was speaking to her Master about the Korriban-trained adversary. The speech was not language she could read directly. It was the response of a man whose own training had been Korriban-orthodox and who had broken with that orthodoxy and who was now consulting on what one of its surviving graduates would have become.

The connection settled.

Cognus did not write what she had caught into her own working notebook. The information was the Master's. The Master would communicate what was relevant when relevance was the standing.

Cognus returned to the writing the apprenticeship required of her and let the seeded connection continue at its own state.

✦

The midday word from Telar arrived at the second hour after the morning meal.

He stood at the door of the study where Zannah had brought the working notebook to integrate the morning's session. The position was the position he used when his report required attention rather than acknowledgment.

"There is a pattern," he said.

"Continue."

"Three small commercial visits over the past forty-eight hours. The first at the property two doors east of the estate — the Linnara family residence, currently occupied by the widow and her daughter, no commercial business at the address. The visitor presented as a representative of a Daplona-based property assessment firm conducting a routine evaluation of harbor district residences for a regional commercial registry. The widow received him for approximately twelve minutes. The visit concluded without follow-up."

"The other two."

"The second at the small mercantile office three doors west — the import-export operation Vesh has been working with on the harbor coordination. The same firm. Different representative. Routine evaluation. Approximately eighteen minutes. The third at the residence at the end of the street, which is unoccupied at present pending its sale through a Daplona broker. The same firm again. A different representative

again. The visit was a property inspection for prospective buyers. Approximately twenty-five minutes."

"The firm."

"I have the name in the report I filed with Vesh this morning. The firm is registered in Daplona. The registration appears legitimate at the conventional reading. The pattern is not."

Zannah did not respond immediately. The information settled into the working frame the morning's session had been building. The pattern was the kind of pattern Bane described through her in the eastern garden — patient, doctrinal, calibrated against the long view. The widow east of the estate. The mercantile office west. The unoccupied residence at the end of the street. The pattern formed a small geographic crescent around the household at a distance that did not produce intervention but that placed observation points in proximity.

"Acknowledged."

"I have not yet briefed Vesh on the pattern read. I came directly to you."

"Correct. Continue to monitor at standing intensity. Do not modify your protocols in any visible way. Anything that changed in our response would itself become information the operation could read at its end."

"Yes, my lady."

"Cognus will deploy her discipline against the harbor district commercial entities in the late afternoon. If the pattern extends to the Drekka offices we will know it this evening."

"Yes, my lady."

Telar withdrew.

Zannah remained at the study desk and worked through what the report had produced. The Brotherhood tradecraft Bane

had named in the morning session was visible in Telar's findings. Aris had moved against them in their own city. The cell operated for at least forty-eight hours and probably longer.

Zannah opened the working notebook to a fresh page and began to write.

✦

Cognus deployed the discipline at the third hour past midday.

Zannah held the Veiled Course at the extended radius around her. The Drawn Breath ran at the support setting. The Quiet Hands held steady.

The discipline reached the Twi'lek's anchor first, as the standing protocol now required. The reading produced what the third deployment had produced — modest deepening of the picture, the vessel's class confirmed at higher resolution, Sariya at the cockpit reading her own flows. The reading completed and the projection returned to the household's register.

Zannah did not break the conditions. She held them at the working state and indicated to the apprentice that the deployment would continue against a second target.

Cognus extended her attention to the harbor district. The discipline did not have a Force-anchor for whoever the operation's proprietor was. What Cognus reached for instead was the ambient pressure of the district itself. The proprietor would have been operating in the district for some weeks now. The pressure of his attention would have been small but consistent. The discipline's read could catch the consistency without resolving the source.

The catch came at the eighth minute.

There was a small directed quality at the Drekka offices. Not Force-signature. The proprietor was not a practitioner. The quality was the quality of sustained operational attention being held against the offices across a period that was at the third week at minimum. Someone watched the Drekka business carefully across that interval. The watching had a specific shape — the shape of commercial intelligence rather than direct surveillance.

Cognus held the catch at the foreground long enough to confirm it. The directed quality did not resolve into a person. It was an accumulated weight of attention that the harbor district's ambient pressure carried as a small distortion that had not been there at her earlier readings of the same district.

Cognus came back from the projection.

"The Drekka offices have been under commercial intelligence observation for at least three weeks. The observer is not a practitioner. The shape is consistent with the Daplona-registered firm Telar identified."

"Confirmed," Zannah said.

Zannah did not need to expand. The picture was now coherent. Aris had positioned a commercial assessment operation against the household. The operation operated its intelligence for at least three weeks. The proxy approach to the residences in the household's neighborhood was the operation's expansion phase, not its commencement.

The household was being mapped.

✦

The afternoon ran on at the household's standing tempo.

Vesh did not have the pattern read; he carried the surface accounts at the rhythm the day required of him. Telar did not modify his protocols. Linnet completed her household work. The Drekka office in the harbor district operated at its standing function.

In the study Zannah worked through the integration with the working notebook open at the page where she was writing.

The household was now operating in three configurations simultaneously. The Aris pursuit through Tovek's slow conventional work. The Twi'lek pursuit through Cognus's discipline. The defensive picture against the assessment operation. The three threads required coordination she had not previously needed.

Bane surfaced once during the afternoon's work, briefly. The pulse confirmed what she was writing. The work she was doing was the right work.

In the late afternoon she opened a different page in the working notebook. The page was the one she considered for the past two days but had not committed to.

Her hand wrote a single line at the top of the page.

We do not avoid him.

Zannah closed the notebook on the line and rose from the desk.

✦

The courtyard at the southern wing was the space Bane had used for his work during the years before Ambria.

The courtyard occupied the open quarter of the manse where the household's structures gave way to the encroaching

bamboo jungle that surrounded the Omek estate on three sides. The Omek family had cleared the courtyard to a roughly thirty-meter square at some point in the previous century. The clearing had been maintained against the jungle's slow return. The result was a working space bounded on three sides by the manse's walls and open on the southern side to the wall of bamboo that rose at the courtyard's far edge.

Bane had selected the courtyard as the training space within the first month of Zannah's arrival at the Omek estate. The selection had not required deliberation. The space was correct for the work. The size permitted full-form sparring. The flooring of cut stone took strikes and footwork without giving way. The open side to the jungle produced humidity and heat that no climate control inside the manse would have replicated, which meant the training's physical demands could not be softened by artificial conditions. The training was hard. The training was intended to be hard.

The first rains had arrived in the early afternoon. By the time Zannah crossed from the western wing through the courtyard's eastern entry the rain had reached the steady rhythm the season produced when the front arrived. The flagstones were dark with the water. The bamboo at the southern wall was running with it. The humidity that had thickened through the morning had become full saturation.

Cognus was already there.

Cognus stood at the center of the courtyard in her training clothes. Her saber hung at her right hip. The rain ran down her shoulders and through the short dark hair that the apprenticeship had let her maintain since the Huntress years. She

had her hands at her sides. She did not turn when Zannah crossed the eastern entry.

Cognus had received the message Zannah had filed at the third quarter of the afternoon hour, indicating that the day's work would conclude with combat practice at the southern courtyard at the standing time. She had not asked for clarification. The message was sufficient.

Zannah crossed to her position at the courtyard's northern end. The rain ran across her own shoulders and through her hair. The training cloak she wore was the one Linnet had made for her in the early months of the apprenticeship after Ambria. That had been the time when the Master had returned to the southern courtyard for the first time since Bane had used it. The cloak was now soaked through within the first minute of her standing in the rain.

Zannah drew her saber.

The blade ignited with the sharp hiss the saber produced in moisture. The red light cut against the gray of the rain and the dark of the courtyard's flagstones. The rain that struck the blade flashed instantly into steam and produced the secondary hiss the doubled saber would produce continuously through the work to come.

Cognus drew Bane's saber.

The blade ignited at the same red as her Master's. The hiss doubled. The steam doubled. The two blades held their light against the rain in the courtyard's center.

"The Brotherhood's saber forms," Zannah said. "Their full corpus. We will work through them and we will work against them."

"Yes, Master."

"The work today is preparation. The man we will face has been trained in those forms across the prime-acolyte years at the Academy. The forms he carries are the forms Bane carried away from the same institution. The forms have specific shapes. Each shape has a counter. The counters we will develop over the coming days. We begin today."

"Yes, Master."

"Form One. Shii-Cho. The opening sequence."

Cognus moved into the opening stance the form required. Zannah moved into the matching stance at the apprentice's working distance.

The form began.

Shii-Cho's opening sequence was the basic combat form the Brotherhood had taught its acolytes in the first year of training. The strikes were broad. The angles were obvious. The footwork was deliberate. The form was designed for instruction rather than for combat. The Brotherhood had then deployed it operationally as if instruction and combat were the same thing — which had been one of the Brotherhood's structural failures. Bane had broken with the orthodoxy on this specific point: the forms were tools, not doctrine.

Zannah ran the form against her apprentice at three-quarter speed across the first repetition. Cognus matched at the same speed. The strikes connected, parted, and reset. The footwork held. The rain produced its continuous hiss at both blades.

"The strike at the third position," Zannah said as the form reached the fourth movement. "The Brotherhood-orthodox response is the matching block at the lower guard. The opening that response creates is at the practitioner's upper-left quadrant,

which the form treats as covered by the rising trajectory of the third strike's recovery. It is not covered."

Zannah demonstrated. Her blade fell into the third position. Cognus brought hers into the orthodox lower guard. Zannah let the strike's recovery rise to where the form indicated it should. Then she dropped her left hand from the saber's hilt and turned the angle of the recovery so that the blade entered the upper-left quadrant the orthodoxy had told her the recovery would cover.

The blade reached Cognus's upper-left at the angle that would have ended the engagement.

Cognus held.

"Yes, Master."

"The Brotherhood-trained practitioner will commit to the lower guard because the form says the lower guard is correct. The form is correct against another Brotherhood-trained practitioner. Against us the form is wrong. We open the upper-left."

"Yes, Master."

"Again."

They ran the sequence again. This time Cognus performed the counter — the broken Shii-Cho recovery, the dropped hand, the angle into the upper-left. Zannah matched the orthodox response and accepted the strike at the position the broken recovery produced.

The work continued.

They moved through Shii-Cho's remaining sequences and into Makashi's opening forms. Makashi was the duelist form, refined for single combat, the form most likely to be deployed by a graduate of Aris's tier. The forms' precision required counters that respected the precision rather than overpowering it. Zannah taught the counters slowly, in three-quarter speed, with Cognus

running the orthodoxy and Zannah running the break and then reversing the assignment so that the apprentice ran the break against her Master's orthodoxy.

At the eighteenth minute of the lesson the work changed.

Cognus ran the Makashi opening at the third repetition of the third counter. Her form was clean. Her footwork held against the wet flagstones. The blade moved at the working speed the lesson operated at. When the counter completed Zannah did not call the form's end. She continued the sequence past the standing closure into the next form, and Cognus continued with her without missing the transition.

The transition was the moment the work became real.

Neither of them named it. The acceleration began before either had decided to accelerate. The forms ran into each other. Cognus's blade caught the line of Zannah's recovery at a position the standing lesson would not have permitted, and Zannah responded by escalating the line rather than retreating. The work moved past instructional speed and into the speed of actual combat.

The rain continued. The blades hissed continuously. The steam thickened in the courtyard's air.

In the depth of Zannah's interior, where the carried presence held at the standing register since the morning's session in the garden, something shifted.

It was not language. The shift carried no sentence she could write into the working notebook later. It was the quality of a man's attention turning toward what his apprentice was doing with his apprentice in the courtyard where he had once trained her. The attention was not approving. The attention was correcting. The correction had specific operational content.

What the Brotherhood's forms held should not be yours. Improvise past their orthodoxy. Adapt where adaptation produced advantage. Overpower where the orthodox practitioner committed to the form. Shatter the chains the training had built into the practitioners the Academy had produced.

Zannah caught the correction and pushed against Cognus harder.

Cognus caught the same correction at her periphery. She did not need to translate it. She responded with the matching escalation, and the work between them moved into the place neither of them had yet brought it to in the years of the apprenticeship.

The combat ran for some minutes at that speed.

When it ended it ended on its own. The forms reached a point at which both blades had committed to closing positions that the other could not counter without restarting the engagement. Master and apprentice held the closing positions for some seconds without moving.

Then they disengaged.

The blades shut down at the same moment. The hiss ended. The rain continued at its own rhythm against the dark flagstones.

Cognus's breath was hard. Her shoulders held the residue of the work. Her saber returned to her hip in the motion the apprenticeship had refined her into across the years.

Zannah's breath was less hard than her apprentice's but the residue ran through her also. She returned her saber to her belt and stood at the position she had held at the work's end.

"Tomorrow we deepen this."

"Yes, Master."

"The forms across the full Brotherhood corpus. Every one. We will know every form he carries and every counter we have built against them before we face him."

"Yes, Master."

"We do not avoid him."

"No, Master."

The rain ran on through the courtyard. The bamboo at the southern wall held its slow movement under the water's weight. Master and apprentice held the courtyard's center for some moments without moving.

Then they walked together toward the eastern entry.

The work would continue at the standing intensity through the coming days. The line had committed.

CHAPTER 26

Tovek finished the cross-reference at the eighth hour past dawn.

The workspace at his upper office in the mercantile quarter was quiet at this hour. The lower floors had not yet opened for the day's business. The clerks who staffed his legitimate forgery operations would not arrive for another two hours. The work he had completed over the past seven days was the kind of work that benefited from solitude and the slow accumulation of hours in which no one knocked at the door.

The piece he had assembled was the substantial one. The Korriban piece three weeks earlier was substantial in its conclusion — Aris at the Brotherhood Academy, his doctrinal background established — but limited in what it told the household about Aris's current activity. The new piece corrected that limit.

Tovek closed the folio at his desk and held it under his right hand for some moments without moving.

The pattern he had assembled was the kind of pattern that did not surface easily. The work had required cross-references across nine separate intelligence channels. The development of three new sources he had not previously needed. The slow

correlation of commercial data from four different sectors against the Demici family's known holdings. The pattern that emerged from the correlation was as clean as the Korriban piece was but its implications were not clean at all.

Aris hunted two things in parallel across the past decade.

The first thing was the Banite line. That was the conclusion the household already understood.

The second thing was the operational corpus of Senn-Vec the Late.

Tovek had not anticipated the second thing when he began the work. He had assembled the pattern looking for what Aris was preparing for and had expected the answer to relate to whatever Aris believed the Banite line to be. The second thing had surfaced from the data without his looking for it. Aris acquired Senn-Vec material at scale through the years by purchase, through proxy networks, and through the elimination of competing buyers. The eliminations were the piece that produced the operational shape. Seven rare-text dealers and intermediaries had died over the past decade in the corridors Aris operated within. The deaths was attributed at the time to commercial rivalries among the rare-text underworld. The pattern Tovek had reconstructed showed that each of the seven held Senn-Vec material at the time of death and that the material had subsequently moved through proxies into Demici holdings.

Aris was building his own corpus.

The corpus he was building was the operational corpus — the Workings, the practical applications, the texts that gave doctrine the form of action. He was not collecting the theoretical material. He was building toward sustained operational deployment.

This was the piece that required the household.

Tovek did not understand what the operational deployment was for. The implication was that Aris was preparing to use the corpus against the Banite line. The how of the use was beyond Tovek's capacity to assess. The household carried the doctrinal expertise required for that assessment. Tovek's work had brought the picture to the boundary at which his trade ended.

Tovek rose from the desk and placed the folio in the leather case he carried for in-person deliveries. He would travel to the Omek estate at the close of the morning hour and present the piece. Zannah would read it. Whatever the household did with it would happen at the household's register and not at his.

✦

The household received the message at the second hour past the morning meal.

Zannah was at the study desk working through the morning's saber lesson notes when Vesh's tap arrived at the door.

"Master Tovek will arrive at the rear gate at the standing time. He has filed the message indicating substantive material."

"Acknowledged."

"The protocol is the standard reception?"

"Standard. Cognus to be present at the desk when he arrives."

"Yes, my lady."

Vesh withdrew. Zannah closed the working notebook on the page where she was drafting the lesson plan for the afternoon's training session. The saber work had deepened at the courtyard over the past four days. The lessons had progressed past

Makashi's opening forms into the Soresu defensive corpus, with Zannah developing counters that exploited the defensive form's structural commitment to a particular distance. The work had become operational planning as much as combat practice. The corpus of forms and counters they were building was the corpus they would carry into the eventual confrontation.

Zannah rose from the desk and crossed to the cabinet at the far wall.

The Aris materials were organized in the cabinet over the past two weeks in the arrangement she had committed to after the Korriban piece arrived. Three folders. The first held the original Tovek piece on the missing-years investigation and his subsequent surface work on Aris's recent activity. The second held the materials she she had drafted on the doctrinal counter-work — the saber forms, the predicted Workings, the operational countermeasures the household were developing. The third was empty. The third folder was where the new piece would go.

She returned the second folder to the cabinet and brought the first and the third to the desk.

Cognus arrived at the standing protocol time. She took the chair to Zannah's left at the desk in the placement the household had refined for in-person deliveries from Tovek.

The two of them waited for the rear gate.

✦

Tovek arrived at the fourth hour.

Vesh brought him through. The leather case was at Tovek's right side. He had walked from the estate's eastern entry through the long corridor that connected the household's public

reception spaces to the study at the western wing. The walk gave him the small interval in which he transitioned from the city register of his trade to the operational register the household required.

Tovek took the chair across the desk from Zannah and set the leather case on the desk before he spoke. The opening was the standard opening he used for substantive deliveries.

"I have completed the work on the recent-activity question."

"Continue."

He opened the case. The folio came out and across to the desk's center where both Zannah and Cognus could read alongside it.

The presentation took some thirty minutes.

Tovek walked through the evidence at the pace his trade had refined for in-person deliveries. The cross-references first. The nine intelligence channels and what each had produced. The three new sources he had developed and the conditions under which he had developed them. The commercial data from the four sectors and the correlation work that had produced the pattern.

Then the pattern itself.

Aris hunted two things in parallel across the past decade. The first the household understood. The second was the operational corpus of Senn-Vec the Late.

Tovek presented the evidence for the second thing without comment on what it implied. Seven rare-text dealers and intermediaries dead across the past decade. Each held Senn-Vec material. The material had moved through proxies into Demici holdings after each death. The deaths was attributed at the time

to commercial rivalry. The pattern indicated they had not been commercial rivalry. They were acquisition operations.

He presented the corpus reconstruction. The specific texts Aris was now believed to hold. The categories of material: practical Workings, applied doctrine, operational guidance. The categories Aris was not collecting — theoretical material, philosophical extensions, abstract doctrine.

The picture closed. Aris was building toward sustained operational deployment. The how of the deployment was beyond Tovek's capacity.

"The work has brought the picture to where my trade ends," he said. "The doctrinal assessment is the household's."

"Acknowledged."

Zannah did not ask follow-up questions. The presentation was complete. Tovek had brought what he had assembled and was clear about where his contribution ended.

"Your continued work," she said.

"Continues at the standing intensity. The picture I have reconstructed is the picture of the past decade. The picture of the coming weeks will require new channels. I have begun the development."

"Acknowledged. The folio remains here. You will receive the standard compensation through the routine channel."

"My lady."

Tovek closed the leather case. He held the case at his right side and waited at the chair for the small interval the household's working pattern required. No further questions came. He rose.

Vesh saw him out through the eastern corridor and to the rear gate.

✦

The study held the quiet the closing produced.

Zannah did not move from the desk. Cognus did not move from her chair. The folio sat at the desk's center. The afternoon light through the western window had thinned to the copper the season produced at the late hour.

The two of them sat with what Tovek had brought.

The picture had specific weight. Aris had armed for a decade. The arming was not abstract preparation. It was the operational accumulation of Senn-Vec's practical corpus through deaths and proxy work. The Wasting that Aris had been developing — the household had carried that as inference from the Korriban revelation. A Brotherhood-trained practitioner working at depth would likely be building his own analog of Senn-Vec material. The new piece confirmed it at the operational scale Tovek's evidence had reconstructed.

The implications cascaded. Aris had prepared not for the small operational engagement the household might have anticipated, but for sustained doctrinal work against a peer practitioner. He believed the household to be that peer practitioner. He had armed to face Bane.

Zannah opened the working notebook to a fresh page.

The page was the one she had prepared the previous evening for the integration she had known would be required when Tovek's piece arrived. The page was blank except for the question at the top in her script.

What does the corpus tell us about what he has built?

Zannah held the question at the foreground of her attention and let the connection at the depth surface.

The response came faster than the morning sessions had produced.

The carried presence was available through the days at deepening register. Zannah had spent the past weeks building the conditions in which the connection operated at sustained register rather than at peripheral pulse. The conditions held now. The presence rose into the working space she had cleared at the depth.

Then he spoke.

Senn-Vec's operational corpus is the practical doctrine of a practitioner who refused to let theory rule his work. The corpus catalogues Workings the Brotherhood archived but did not deploy at scale. The Brotherhood preserved Senn-Vec because the orthodoxy could not justify destroying him. The Brotherhood did not teach Senn-Vec at the Academy because the orthodoxy could not assimilate what he had built. A practitioner acquiring the operational corpus across a decade has rejected the Academy's framing of Senn-Vec as theoretical curiosity. He has begun to build from those Workings the kind of operational capacity the Brotherhood denied itself.

The voice was unmistakable. Zannah felt it land in her interior at the depth she she had built toward in the weeks since the Korriban piece arrived. The voice was not memory. The voice was the man, hosted through her at the deepest layer of her own being.

Cognus, at the chair to her left, caught the speech at the periphery. The reception at her end was different from Zannah's reception at the depth. Cognus received the speech as the resonance of a presence she had met directly at the probe, returning now in the form of articulated speech rather than the

wordless recognition Ambria had produced. She did not need to translate what she heard. The speech arrived in her with the meaning intact.

Bane continued.

The acquisition pattern tells you what he is. He has built across ten years what Senn-Vec built across a lifetime. He has done so without the constraint of the Brotherhood's orthodoxy because the Brotherhood is dead. He has done so without the constraint of peer review because he operates alone. He has done so under cover because his survival requires concealment from the order he believes still hunts him. The combination produces a practitioner of considerable depth and considerable isolation. The depth is what his decade of work has built. The isolation is what fifty years of concealment has produced in him.

The picture sharpened. Zannah caught the implications as they unfolded through Bane's assessment. Aris was operationally formidable in specific dimensions. He was operationally constrained in others. Both dimensions came from the same source — fifty years alone with doctrine he refining without external pressure.

Bane addressed the second piece of the assessment.

He has been preparing to face the line. He believes the line to be one practitioner with the discipline the Academy produced in its prime graduates. He has been preparing accordingly. His operational corpus is calibrated for that confrontation. He has built Workings he intends to deploy against a single Sith of equivalent training. He has rehearsed the engagement against the man he believes he will face. He has done this for ten years.

The man he will face is not the man he prepared for.

The shift in the speech was small but Zannah caught it. The voice had moved from doctrinal assessment to operational counsel.

The household must approach the confrontation on the terms the household possesses, not on the terms he expects. He prepared for one practitioner. He will face two. He prepared for the Banite line as the Brotherhood understood the line. He will face the line as the line has become. He prepared for sustained doctrinal engagement at peer tier. He will face the carrier-and-carried architecture and what that architecture permits.

The line he never joined.

He does not know what it became.

The closing came in the same voice but at a register that did not match the operational counsel. The register was something else. Zannah caught it as the doctrinal closing. It was the assessment of what the confrontation's outcome would be, delivered without ornament.

The Brotherhood was the order I destroyed. The line that survived me is the line he survived to face. The arithmetic does not require him to know what he faces. The confrontation will resolve regardless of his understanding. We will resolve it.

The speech settled.

Zannah held the desk position without moving. Cognus, at her left, held her own position without moving. The carried presence remained available at the depth and at the periphery. The conversation had occurred.

The lamp at the desk's corner was lit when Tovek arrived and now carried the room's primary light. The window light had thinned to the deeper copper that the season produced at the end of the day. The folio at the desk's center held what Tovek had

brought. The working notebook at the desk's other side held what Bane had now provided.

Zannah closed the working notebook.

She did not write the speech into the notebook. The speech had landed in both of them. The writing would happen tomorrow when the working notebook was open for the doctrinal integration that the conversation had set up. For the moment the speech was carried in them, the way the doctrine was carried in them, the way the line was carried in them.

She turned her head slightly toward her apprentice.

"You received it."

"Yes, Master."

"At the periphery."

"At the periphery. The reception was clear. The speech arrived in the meaning he intended."

"Acknowledged."

The two of them sat at the desk through the deeper evening. Neither moved. The lamp held against the dark that the season produced at the late hour. The bamboo jungle at the southern edge of the estate held its slow movement against the night wind that had risen with the dusk. The household ran on at its standing rhythm at the periphery of the study where Vesh and Telar and Linnet held the surface life that permitted the work at the center.

The line had spoken through itself.

Zannah let the silence hold for some longer interval before she rose. Cognus rose at the same moment. They held the room together for the last beat of the day's work.

Then the carried presence surfaced one final time.

The speech this time was shorter. It came in the voice Zannah had carried for the past year and three months at the depth and that Cognus had caught at her periphery since Ambria. The voice was steady. The voice was the voice of a man who had broken the order that had produced him and who had built the line that survived to face the order's last son.

Let the Brotherhood's last son come.

We will show him what the line he never joined became.

The lamp held against the dark.

Master and apprentice held the study.

The carried predecessor held the depth and the periphery.

The line, which had once been one and had become two, was now three.