

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

### THE WILL OF THE LORD

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Solitary confinement. It was a hard thing for a man as old as Estavan to cope with. On his first night in the dark and cold, locked away from the people he loved by a barred door and a promise that the Lord Abbott would be with him shortly, he was startled from his prayers by the sound of ship wide alarms.

That was terrifying enough: the alarms were only ever used for some sort of ship wide catastrophe. The worst part, however, was the not knowing. When he tried to ask the acolytes on duty what the alarms were about, they apologised and told him they were forbidden to say.

"The Lord Abbott has summoned you, Father," they told him with sympathetic smiles. "You would be best advised to focus your thoughts on that. Pray to God for wisdom. Cleanse your soul. There is little you can do to help beyond that."

They were wise words but they frustrated Estavan all the same. He tried to console himself that the alarms were probably nothing to worry about. It was Ulysses Day, after all, and right now all his months of planning would be finally coming to fruition. The Captain would be meeting with his new bride-to-be at any moment. Everywhere on the ship would be celebration and drinking. People would be raising their glasses to the Captain's good name. The unspoken would be celebrating the fact that one of their own would be marrying the Captain. Peace was sure to follow.

Maybe this was how the ship celebrated now, he pondered. After all, an optimistic part of his mind reminded him, don't you remember the last time the alarms sounded? That turned out to be a false alarm; why imagine this will be any different?

Thus appeased, Estavan went back to his prayers. The fact was he was close to his goal now and he could ill afford such distractions. The fact that he was here now, torn away from the Captain's side at a time when he should have been there most to wait on the Lord Abbott's pleasure, was as clear a sign as any that he'd done enough to finally get noticed. After months of hard work, all his efforts were about to pay off. A return to power. A full pardon in front of the council of priests. That was the only thing this meeting could be about.

After all, had the Captain himself not asked to have Estavan rewarded in such a way? Not even the Lord Abbott would dare refuse a direct order from the Captain.

That first night passed in a haze of worry. The alarms finally stopped around midnight and shortly after the acolytes returned to Estavan bearing fresh water and bedding for the night. They looked no more concerned than they had before and that more than anything else told Estavan that all would be OK.

When the doors of his cell opened midway through the next day, Estavan was unsurprised to find that it was Father Krzysztof who had been sent to bring him to the council chambers.

"It is time, Estavan," the dome-headed priest said from the doorway, figure silhouetted in darkness.

"Time?"

"You have much to answer for."

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Father Estavan followed his replacement at a respectable distance as he lead the way through the spine towards the temple district's inner sanctum.

Father Krzysztof refused to be drawn into conversation as they walked. When Estavan asked him what the sirens had been about the other day, Krzysztof simply told him to keep his mind on the lord. "You are not so important as you seem to think, Estavan. Believe it not but this ship would continue to function just fine with or without your interventions."

Estavan thanked him for his wisdom. They passed the rest of the journey in silence.

The grandeur of the outer temple faded quickly the further inside the temple district one walked. The inner temple was designed for function rather than appearance. Unlike the ostentatious displays of faith that adorned the outer temple, this place was bare and stark. There were no depictions of biblical scenes lining the walls here. No sound of distant choir boys or permanent cloud of incense fogging up the air. The civilians loved such things but there was no need for such pretence among the honoured members of the Priesthood.

Down those hallways Estavan walked, Father Krzysztof a grim shadow beside him. The air hummed with static as they passed through the machine forest of the spine, before turning down past the offices and private chapels of the high priests and down the corridor on the other side where the heart of the temple district lay.

This was as deep inside the temple district as it was possible to go; not even the Captain was permitted so far.

The large chamber at the centre of the temple was perhaps the simplest room of them all. It was a circular space with a raised dais and a large wooden throne spotlighted from above by harsh, glaring lights.

At the front of the dais was a long, semi-circular bench behind which the Heads of each Order sat in perfect arrangement, already awaiting Estavan's arrival.

Estavan knew these men well. How could he not? These were the same faces that had cast him down all those years before, unchanged despite the passage of time.

There was Father Samuel from the Order of Ceremonies - once Estavan's strongest supporter before the Lord Abbott offered him his old job in exchange for selling him out. And there on his right, the fat dismissive Father Thaddeus Grimsby from the Order of Sacred Histories - the very same man who had given Estavan the news of his disgrace. From the Order of Charity was Father Crete McFarlane, a senile old priest the other members of the clergy had tricked in order to get him to vote against Estavan. The old fool hadn't even known what he

was doing at the time. At the end of the bench, Father Daniel Flee from the Order of Divination peered up at Estavan through a mop of dark unruly hair and a corrosive expression that could have rusted iron. It was said Father Daniel was able to foretell the future from the patterns left by the stars dying in the sky. "For who else but God knows the future? And who else but God controls the heavens?"

He was the one who had betrayed Estavan the most. All those years ago, it had been he who had insisted Estavan continue his personal crusade to get Michael installed as Captain. He had told him the portents all read in his favour. Just one kind word from him on that fateful day and Estavan might still have a place on that bench. Now, he wouldn't even meet Estavan's gaze.

So much betrayal everywhere Estavan looked. Father Jubal Manilow from the Order of Atonement; Father Thomas Delaney from the Order of Transience; Father Krzysztof Bajkowska from the Order of Inquisition. Cowards all. Toadies all.

Estavan glared at them from his position below the bench, all the years' worth of bitterness and anger welling up inside him in a single, hate-filled moment. It took everything he had to remain calm but God was with him and he knew his cause was just - as it had been back then.

Now is not the time for rashness, he reminded himself. I'm spacewalking with a cracked suit here. I must step carefully. This was his moment of glory after all. Soon, the Captain willing, he too would be up there on that bench, a new

space for himself grudgingly ceded to him through sheer grit and determination alone.

Father Krzysztof joined the other priests at his rightful place on the bench. He said nothing to the others in greeting and they nothing to him in exchange. Everyone knew the reason they were here today.

"Brother Estavan, if my eyes don't deceive me," Father Delaney called down from the bench, his sonorous voice sounding almost bored as it boomed around the chamber. He had been one of the first priests to throw in his lot with the Lord Abbot, Estavan remembered, and judging by the extra kilos he had gained since that day, he was benefiting well from that decision. A true believer, people called him. Estavan preferred the word 'suck-up'. "I thought you were dead."

"Come now, Delaney," wheezed Father Thaddeus to his right. "You can't kill a man like Estavan. Only inoculate against him, hmmm? Like some sort of disease." He glanced around quickly at the others, as though hoping they would be impressed by his use of the word 'inoculate'. Father Thaddeus had always loved showing off just how much High English he knew.

"A disease, I might add, that ruins one's afternoon. Why, less than an hour ago I was down in my quarters donning my evening vestments ready for a night of servitude and prayer..."

"Ha!" coughed Father Manilow. "You were upending a bottle of wine Thad and you know it."

Thaddeus sputtered with indignation. "I assure you I was doing no such thing!"

"I was," said Father Delaney, which brought forth laughter from the others. He shrugged. "When it's consecrated..."

"The pedant's right, though," said Father Manilow, ignoring Thaddeus's bark of protest ("Pedant?") "Krzysztof, surely we aren't all needed here for a simple dressing down of an unruly priest? Care to enlighten us as to why the Lord Abbott has summoned an entire session just for this... inconvenience?"

"No." Krzysztof's voice was like a slap in the face of every priest there. Their camaraderie was snuffed out like a flame in a vacuum. "The Lord Abbot will explain everything in due course."

"But of course," babbled Father Thaddeus, back-peddling so fast Estavan was surprised his words didn't leave skid marks on the air. "I wouldn't have thought otherwise."

"Quite right, quite right," muttered Manilow.

"It's always a pleasure to serve the Lord Abbot's whims," Father Delaney concurred.

"I knew this would come to pass," Father Daniel said, just a hint of mysticism ringing in his voice. "Surely you have all seen the portents as well as I. You all know of the recent riots among the unspoken which so almost wiped out our entire food reserves. You all know of the attempt on the Captain's life which - God be praised - ended in failure. You

know of the trap that was this unspoken girl the Captain was due to wed and how Brother Estavan here was played for a fool by those scheming idiots in security. No my friends, Estavan's meddling has implicated us all I'm sad to say. It has made the Priesthood look weak at a time when we should be at our strongest. Divided when we should be whole. The people clamber around us now asking, 'what will the Priesthood do about this?' and the truth is, we still don't know." He scoffed. "And you wonder why we've been called here today."

The other priests with the exception of Father Krzysztof and Father McFarlane (who had fallen asleep), all looked away muttering their embarrassment.

Father Estavan just gaped at them all. Riots? An attempt on the Captain's life? This was the first he had heard of such things, though it certainly did a lot to explain the alarms he'd heard. "Played for a fool by security..." Father Daniel's words echoed in his years. "His meddling has implicated us all."

For the first time since he'd been summoned, Father Estavan began to doubt the reason for this meeting. Perhaps it wasn't to welcome him back into the fold after all. Men this powerful seldom met together for matters of little consequence.

Still, Estavan kept his silence. Words alone were not going to serve him now. He had already done all he could for the ship and the Captain he loved. Now it was time to see what the Lord Abbott would do in return.

From the look Father Krzysztof was giving him from up on the bench - his coal-like gaze burning into Estavan like a brand - he could tell that they both shared the same thought in that regard.

One way or another, this matter was getting settled today.

Estavan found himself sweating. I know I overstepped my authority, my Lord, he babbled to himself, unsure if it was a prayer he was making or a rehearsal of what he was going to say to the Lord Abbott. I know I shouldn't have taken matters so far without the proper authorisation. But I never would have got that authorisation if I hadn't struck out on my own. What I did, I did for the Captain and we must remember that he is the ship. His needs must come first. The boy was never going to marry of his own accord. We all remember what happened with Tracey Rutherford. He needed to be pushed and what better direction to push him than in one that would set the whole ship to rights? The Captain agreed - he asked for my services personally. Please don't take all that away from me again out of simple spite...

Round and round that prayer went in Estavan's mind so that by the time the Lord Abbott appeared some 30 minutes later, it was already as well worn as a pair of old socks and so well-rehearsed it was beginning to sound unconvincing even to Estavan.

I have to find a way to make them understand...

As soon as the doors at the back of the room parted, every priest was instantly on their feet, smoothing down their robes with fluttering hands, shaking Father McFarlane awake and helping him to his feet. As one, they put on their most pious faces.

The Lord Abbott slid into his seat without any of the ceremony that might have accompanied a similar visit from the Captain among his crew. One moment the throne was empty, the next the Lord Abbott was there, arranging a pile of cushions behind himself so he could better see the others.

Only after he had deemed himself comfortable did he at last turn to address the priests on the bench and motion for them to sit.

They did so gladly (Father Samuel with some difficulty. The man had suffered from chronic haemorrhoids for as long as Estavan could remember).

The Lord Abbott had changed a lot since Estavan last saw him, but that was hardly surprising. He must have been pushing late-puberty by now. The skin of his face was a reddened rash of acne, his hair a greasy pile of brown curls above a pair of scowling eyes. He was lean and tall for his age, though it was clear from the way he carried himself that he still wasn't used to his height. In truth, he looked every day the 16 years he was said to be, but in his heart was the soul of a man much older.

It had been over 400 years since the Lord Abbott had been born for the first time. Since that day, he had been reborn

seven times, each time into a body born at the exact moment of his predecessor's death, chosen out by the Order of Divination in complete secrecy from the rest of the ship.

The Lord Abbott would never go to heaven upon his death, it was said, because he alone stood as the guiding hand for humanity. Not even the Captain could claim such prestige. Among the Priesthood, he was the next thing to God. In this place, his word was Law.

Estavan despised him.

Lord help me, but I hate that little brat.

At a gesture from the Lord Abbott, Father Estavan stepped to the front of the bench, climbed the steps of the dais and sank to his knees to kiss the Abbott's golden ring in greeting. The ring was said to be made from real Earth gold - mined rather than synthesised and topped with a blue diamond larger than his thumb nail. It was impossible to give such an object a value but many in the Priesthood whispered that it was the most precious manmade object left in the entire universe.

Estavan's lips left a shining eye of spit on the gem's surface as he straightened up and bowed before his Lord. "My Lord Abbott," he murmured to somewhere near his crotch.

"Rise," The Lord Abbot piped in reply. His voice, too, was not yet fully adjusted to adulthood.

"You know why I've called you here."

"I have a pretty good idea, my Lord," Estavan concurred, aware of the many pairs of eyes staring at him. "The others

spoke of riots among the unspoken. Of an attempt on the Captain's life. They mention that I have been tricked.. If I have had any part to play in such matters, I assure you it was unintentional."

"The others talk too much," the Lord Abbott grumbled, scowling at the priests. "But you are correct, that is part of the reason you are here," he confirmed. "Though a wise man might look at the timing of things and realise that this alone cannot be the only reason. You were taken into custody, I believe, before these riots took place."

That was true enough. Estavan reconsidered. He was already in trouble here; he may as well speak plainly. "In that case, I believe you have called me here to talk about my duties in the Priesthood. As you no doubt know from your conversations with Father Krzysztof, the Captain has requested my services personally. He has asked me to be the co-ordinator and overseer of his wedding ceremony, as well as the private tutor to his new bride-to-be. Assuming the wedding is still taking place, I believe you have called me here to reinstate my old titles. Since, by your own commandments, no man may perform such duties without first sitting on this council."

There was an outbreak of shocked murmuring behind him.

"You speak boldly," the Lord Abbott noted.

"Is the wedding still on, my Lord?"

"It is," the boy admitted.

"Then all I have said is true. Three months ago the Captain gave me a direct order to find him a new bride. What could I do but obey?"

"You could have done your duty!" Father Delaney called out. "You could have come to us! Consulted the Order of Divination!"

"Here here!" Father Thaddeus agreed. "The Captain may have asked for your help, Estavan, but any fool can see you jumped on this chance to return to power. Your thoughts weren't on the Captain or the ship. You belittle both by claiming otherwise, hmmm?"

Again, he looked around at the word 'belittle' hoping the others would be impressed. They weren't.

"Instead of coming to us, you went to the uniformed guards in security," added Father Manilow. "We all knew this situation with the unspoken needed dealing with but in interfering you perhaps helped to accelerate a situation which was already bad into the crisis which it has become. The Captain almost died yesterday!"

"Whose idea was it to partner the Captain with one of the unspoken, hmmm?" Father Thaddeus asked. "Commander Rutherford's? Yours? Why to think that we could have allied the Captain to a House of consequence. We could have chosen someone from the Gull-Fossets or one of the other Great Houses who would bolster the strength of the Sullivan line and bring real relevance back to them at last!"

"The Captain would never have accepted anyone from those houses," Estavan countered. "Tracey Rutherford..."

"Was not a Hathaway or a Gull-Fosset," Father Delaney said with a sigh. "Now those two houses are in chaos, the one attempting to overthrow the Captain, the climbing all over this situation to get advantage for themselves. Between them they make the Sullivans seems weaker than ever. A waste."

"Truly," muttered Thaddeus.

There was no point in arguing it. If what the priests were saying was true then Estavan really had been played the fool. And yet what he had said remained true. The Captain had asked for his help and he had done all he could. In return the Captain had rewarded him.

His place was here. On this council.

He turned back to the Lord Abbott who was watching the exchange closely. "My Lord," he tried again. "All I have done has been in the name of the Captain. For the good of the Ulysses..."

"Bah!" spat Father Manilow. "You've been singing the same song for the last five years, Estavan."

"Why won't you just admit the truth?" Father Thaddeus said in that annoying sing-song voice he used whenever he was at his most patronising. "You did it for yourself, hmmm? Power. Prestige. We know you've always wanted it."

Estavan said nothing. His words were useless here, he saw. Only two men in this room had any real say over his

situation now. And both of those men, he noted, were saying precisely nothing.

Only after silence had fallen over the room once again did the Lord Abbott deign to speak. He stood - forcing everyone else in the room to also rise - and glaring down at Estavan uttered two hate-filled words.

"You're old."

Estavan waited for more. When it failed to come, he frowned. "Is that a sin, my Lord?" If so then half the Priesthood were condemned to hell. There were priests on the bench behind him that made Estavan look like a child. Father McFarlane must have been pushing 90 if he was a day.

The Abbott sniffed, his eyes drifting along the bench as though sharing the same thought. "It should be," he decided at length. "Jesus achieved all he did before the age of 33. He died young and we remember him to this day. King David - his most celebrated achievements were all made when he was less than 20. It was only in his old age that Bathsheba and his others failures occurred. Daniel, Joseph: all were young. All relevant."

And Moses began his career at the age of 80 and led the Israelites through the desert for 40 years before dying, Estavan thought. Noah was over 650 years old when he first started work on the Ark. Abraham was older than I am when he fathered Israel and almost sacrificed him at God's commandment... But what use was biblical precedence in the wake of such simple facts? The truth was that Estavan was old and

he was irrelevant and the Lord Abbot was both young and revered.

Just as he was all those years ago when he threw me down in the first place.

"What is the word from the Order of Divination?" the Abbott called out.

Father Daniel lurched to his feet. "We lost six stars in the upper quadrant today, my Lord Abbott."

There was much muttering at that. Estavan understood little of what the Order of Divination did but everyone knew six was the number of the devil. It was a number that stood for both order and chaos all at the same time. It was the number of vast change.

"You see what you have wrought us, Estavan?"

Fanaticism and fear. How could Estavan even hope to compete with such things? Yet he had to try.

"My brothers," he called out. The priests gave way to him only reluctantly but Estavan was blessed with a voice trained by years of preaching to the bunks and it was easy to make it heard even over their babbling protests. "You know me. You know my achievements. You know the years of exile I have suffered preaching to sinners and unspoken alike. Through it all I have tried to do my very best. Perhaps I have been selfish in my desires, yes. Perhaps I have been short-sighted. But if I am to be judged for doing my duty - if I am to be condemned for following orders..." he took a breath, "...then I

demand that such a trial occur before a full council, as is my right as someone who once sat on this council."

In other words, a trial in front of the Captain. Michael's required presence at such an event was the only reason Estavan had managed to avoid a full trial the last time this had happened.

The Lord Abbott scowled at his words. Despite the youth of his current incarnation, he was no idiot. He knew that the marriage was officially announced now. Despite the talk of riots and assassination attempts (and Estavan really needed to find out what that was all about as soon as possible so he could do something about it), the wedding was clearly still due to go ahead or they wouldn't be having this conversation now.

The Lord Abbott would be crazy to pull his support now at a time when the ship needed the Priesthood most. Surely he saw that?

The Lord Abbott turned to the bench, his expression thoughtful. "Brother Krzysztof: you have spent some time with this... child. What is your assessment?"

"Adequate, my Lord," the hook-nosed priest allowed. "She is no noble but it is true she learns quickly. Her presence seems to be having a positive effect on the Captain as well. He was getting quite wilful for a time but it seems he is once more opening up to suggestion."

Estavan was amazed; coming from Father Krzysztof that was as good as a ringing endorsement.

"She would not be my first choice," he continued. "But seeing as how we are stuck with her, I believe we should make the best of this situation. Training should be given. Someone from the Priesthood should coach her in the ways of faith and civility."

Estavan had been expecting this. "The Captain already asked me to do this job."

"Of course he did," the Lord Abbott spat. "He'd ask you to be his personal arse wiper if he thought he could get away with it."

There was a moment of profound shock among the gathered priests. Only the Lord Abbott was permitted to utter such blasphemies and not be expelled for it but it was hardly proper behaviour for a priest all the same. Most of the priests did their best to act as though they hadn't heard. In the case of Father McFarlane (who was fast asleep at his bench) that was true.

"Very well, my Lord," Father Manilow said at length. "Training. Coaching. You are right, a candidate must be found."

"Someone we can trust," Father Delaney concurred.

"Someone the people can trust," Father Samuel amended.

"A vote should be called," said Father Thaddeus.

"A vote will be unnecessary," the Lord Abbott decided. "I have already made my choice. Brother," he called out. "Come in please."

The doors behind Estavan parted suddenly and the next thing he knew there was another man beside him. A man in full regalia and official priesthood robes. A man with tussled hair and a wide, frog-like smile. A man Estavan knew well.

"No," he heard himself say.

"Hello Father," said Israes. Father Israes judging by his new robes that still somehow managed to look creased despite being brand new. "This is nothing personal, I promise."

"This is a joke is what it is."

The Lord Abbott smiled. "How so? You should be pleased. You helped to train Israes and shape him into the man you see before him. If your motives truly are as selfless as you claim, you would be wise to give this one your blessing and step aside."

Rage boiled inside Estavan, but he forced himself stay calm. He ground his protests down beneath years' of submissive practice. He heard himself mutter, "No, my Lord. Brother Israes would be an excellent choice," and with that his fate was sealed.

The Captain could override the Abbott's decision if he wanted, of course, but Estavan doubted he would. What with the wedding preparations now in full swing and the Captain's position on the ship apparently more tenuous than ever, the boy no doubt had bigger things to worry about than Estavan's career.

Once again, Father Estavan was made irrelevant. It was yet another reality check from his all-loving God.

"Good!" the Lord Abbott proclaimed, smiling at Estavan's displeasure. "Brother Israes - this will be a huge undertaking for you. Do you feel up to the challenge?"

"Yes, my Lord!" the young acolyte chirped. And oh, how punchable that frog-like face looked in that moment. How that pudgy neck seemed to call out to be squeezed between Estavan's calloused hands. I trained you, you little shit. I nurtured you! I...

I ignored him. I treated him as little more than a nuisance while still making him privy to my plans. Is it any wonder he's turned his back on me?

Shame filled Estavan like a blush.

"Israes, you will assess this girl and train her as needed. The unspoken can't be trusted at the moment and this child is one of them. Help her to see the light and perhaps she might serve some good for her people after all. God knows we need a stroke of luck around here."

"Yes, my Lord Abbott."

"Our power over the fortunes of this vessel has waned of late. This will not be allowed to continue."

"No, my Lord Abbott."

"Dismissed, everyone. And may God go with you all."

The high priests hauled themselves to their feet with a collected age-filled groan. Their eyes were anywhere but on Estavan as they shuffled from the room.

At length only three men remained: Father Estavan, Father Krzysztof and the Lord Abbott himself.

And now for my punishment. I could run, but what would be the point? This is where it ends.

He stared up at the Lord Abbott and Father Krzysztof as they approached from the dais. He noticed the look of determination in their eyes. There was a knife in the Lord Abbott's hand. It shimmered in the candle light.

"You have been a thorn in my foot for too long, Estavan. I should have disposed of you when I had the chance."

The knife came closer.

If Estavan screamed, would there be anyone left to run to his aid?

"Do it!" Estavan heard himself growl. "Do it and be damned. And when you finally give up this endless cycle of birth and re-birth, I'll be sure to give your greeting card to Lucifer himself, you spotty little brat!"

He pulled himself upright, eyes closed and chin up. If he was to die here, he would do so as a man. At least he had that much of a choice left to him.

"I'm ready," he said, arms spread before them. He waited for the killing blow to come.

It never did.

Shocked, he opened his eyes.

Father Krzysztof was slipping the knife away inside his robes. His dark eyes glimmered with amusement.

"Consider this a warning," the Lord Abbott said. "Of what happens when you get ideas above your station. Because,

Estavan, there is one thing we would have of you. A duty that only a man of your obvious... guile could hope to achieve."

Another job...? Estavan's head was spinning. One moment he'd been sure he was about to meet Saint Peter at the pearly gates, now he was apparently being reassigned. "My Lord?"

"You can spare the formalities now, Estavan. We all know what our opinion of each other is." The Lord Abbott sighed and for a moment he looked almost nervous; as though he really were the adolescent boy he appeared to be and not the 400 year old soul all agreed dwelled inside. "This is a... somewhat delicate situation," he began.

"Go on, my Lord," Father Krzysztof pressed. "It's the only way."

"I know that it's just..." Was that worry in the Abbott's young eyes as he turned to Estavan and looked him up and down? Fear? When the Lord Abbott spoke once more, his voice was little more than a whisper and it seemed he couldn't even meet Estavan's gaze. "W-we have reason to believe that... that... I can't say it."

Father Krzysztof laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "The Metapath has re-awakened," he finished.

Silence followed the words. For a moment Father Estavan wasn't sure he'd heard properly. Then he laughed. "The Metapath?" he said. "And what, is the bogie man going to assassinate the Captain too?"

Was this some kind of test? Were they trying to scare him before slitting his throat with these silly children's stories?

The tales of the Metapath were as many as the ship was old but everyone agreed they were nonsense. A living creature that dwelled in the heart of the ship? Poppycock. Something that was both a man and machine? Ludicrous.

The tales spoke of a satanic being who had at first seemed to help the survivors of the Earth. He lead them away from their dying home and up into the heavens, but as soon as they were out of the solar system, it showed what it really was. Thanks to its interference, it had turned the human race into little more than immoral savages. Ship had turned on ship and the skies had burned in what was now romantically called the War of the Heavens. So many ships perished during that time, their only recourse had been to destroy the thing altogether or risk being damned forever.

The Priesthood had ripped the Metapath out of the Ulysses' heart like the tumour that it was. They filled the space where it had once existed with reverence and prayer. The temple district had been built in the place where it once drew its power to guard against its potential return. The Lord Abbott had started his 400 year cycle of birth and rebirth to ensure it would never return.

Or so the stories said.

Had these riots turned everyone into a babbling idiot? Saying the Metapath was back was just one step away from claiming the Wasting was returning.

"We destroyed the Metapath," he pointed out.

The Abbott nodded. "The last human avatar was executed over four centuries ago during the time of my first incarnation. This is true. But the Metapath itself is a more persistent beast than the human host it dwells within." Again a moment of hesitation. Again a nervous glance at Father Krzysztof who just nodded in reply. "What I am about to tell you can go no further than these walls, Estavan. I need your word on this."

Baffled: "You have it."

"The sad truth is that this ship was designed with the Metapath in mind. It is an immutable fact of the Ulysses' architecture, an essential component without which the spine would simply cease to function and all computer function would end. Rather than shutting the system down forever, then, my previous incarnation chose to instead trick the ship into believing that there was a human Avatar while at the same time ensuring there never would be."

"A feedback circuit was built," Father Krzysztof said.

"It would take the processing power set aside for the Metapath and cycle that power back on itself. Since the ship believed it already had an Avatar it stopped searching for a new one. The Metapath became dormant. Do you understand?"

"I do," said Estavan, though he wasn't sure if he did. "This 'feedback circuit'... It's located inside the temple district, am I right?"

The Abbott nodded. "Deep inside. Where no civilian or crewman should ever be able to go. Very few among the Priesthood even know it's there. We tell no one how special it truly is and, to the naked eye, it looks almost identical to any of the other servers down there. For centuries now, the truth about the continued existence of the Metapath - dormant or not - has been something I have guarded over alone. After all, if it became common knowledge that the Metapath still existed, even in an imprisoned form..."

"There would be those on the ship calling for its return," Father Krzysztof finished. "Cerebral types. Heathens. Those from noble families trying to make a name for themselves."

Estavan nodded. It made sense. "So what's the problem?"

"The problem is that some stupid fool from engineering decided to turn smuggler a few months ago, broke into the spine without our knowledge and stole an irreplaceable node from the data forest," the Lord Abbott hissed. "And in doing so, he apparently disrupted the feedback loop enough that it is no longer dormant. And we can't put it back to sleep."

Krzysztof continued. "We believe someone on this ship has become infected with the Metapath gene somehow, though we're not sure how. There's a lot about the Metapath that's been forgotten over the years - even more that's been exaggerated"

to scare people away. These days it's hard to differentiate the legend from the fact."

"However, we do know that if the circuits are functioning that means the Metapath has already chosen a new Avatar. It will be in a weakened form right now: still growing into its power and unsure of its full potential. It's possible the Avatar isn't even aware of what it is yet. That's for the better. We must stop this thing before it grows any further into its power. We must find this host - whoever he might be - and kill him once and for all."

"Or her," suggested Estavan, who had always been one for equality.

"Him. The Metapath can only ever be male."

How easily they talked about death in this holiest of places.

Estavan was troubled. "This Avatar would still be human, would he not?"

"A possessed human. A demon."

"Death would be a mercy," Krzysztof agreed.

The Lord Abbott considered for a moment. "You think us heartless, Estavan. When we took upon ourselves this life as custodians of the people, we took upon ourselves a heavy burden. This will not be easy for any of us but it must be done... The only difficulty will be doing it quietly. Very few even among the Priesthood know as much as I'm telling you now. I would prefer that it remain that way."

"I cannot leave these chambers, as you know, and Brother Krzysztof has his duties with the Captain to attend to - he would be too noticeable if he started digging around. You, however... people expect to find you digging around in places you're not wanted. Meddling is what you do best. The Captain adores you. The rest of the crew like you well enough, especially your new friends in security who duped you so completely. I hear the unspoken love you more than anyone."

"And I'm expendable," Estavan finished.

The Lord Abbott nodded. "I'll say one thing for you Brother Estavan, you have always been aware of your limitations."

Estavan sighed. Kill a demon and become a saint in the process... where was that written in the New Testament?

"I am no detective," Estavan protested. "Surely someone from security would be..."

"Security is not to know about this. No one is to be told of this mission, Estavan, am I clear? Least of all anyone from the crew. This must remain between us."

Estavan understood the value of secrets all too well. "Fine," he said with a heavy sigh. "You already knew I'd agree to this task or you wouldn't have asked me in the first place. But I tell you now: I won't do anything to harm the Captain."

"And if the Captain turns out to be this Avatar?" asked Krzysztof, curious.

Estavan had nothing to say to that.

The Abbott sniffed. "It boils down to this, Estavan: for the last five years you have been nursing a grievance. I've been watching you, you know. I let you meddle about in your affairs unchecked for so long in part because it was amusing to watch you make such a mess of things. But now I see that was an error on my part. You want to return to your former power: you should know by now that only I hold the key.

"I promise you this - right here and right now - if you are able to find and kill this Avatar, I will give it all back to you. All of it. I will let you return to your old life - even give you a place here at the head of one of the orders. I'm sure no one would complain if I decided to shuffle Brother McFarlane off to one side. Fail, however..."

"I understand," said Estavan. "And so I obey. Such is faith."

"Such is faith," the Lord Abbott agreed. "You have always been such a faithful man, Estavan. Let that faith count for something now. You want to help the Captain - at least do it in a way that matters. Find the Metapath. Destroy it by any means necessary. Do not let me down."

"I won't," Estavan heard himself say. He still wasn't sure if he'd succeeded here today or not but at least he was still breathing and that had to count for something. God be praised.

"By Jesus' holy name, I swear it."

"Then may the blessing of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you Brother Estavan Wicks, now and forevermore. Go in peace to love and serve the lord."

"In the name of Christ. Amen."