

## Octus

Directionless, his mind drifted in the black. His awareness pushed back against the void but found no edge, no boundary. Emptiness, claustrophobic in its totality. He screamed out for something tangible, something to anchor himself to, and the void answered back, blooming in his chest like a rotten fruit splitting open, tendrils of need uncoiling through meat and bone. His fingers lengthened, curling, but too many fingers. Limbs that were not his own thrashed and tore in the dark.

Hunger.

Raw, endless, devouring. A starvation that hollowed him out to the core. A need to consume and fill a void that stretched far beyond him, pulling at his edges until he couldn't tell where he ended and it began. His mind howled in the darkness. His chin was slick with drool that flowed thick and hot from clenched jaws. He bit down and tasted hot, living flesh. Blood flooded his mouth, thick and sweet, and he tore again, and again, and felt a thousand other mouths doing the same, rending, chewing, swallowing in unison. The void inside him only grew.

He forced his eyes open.

The dark looked back. Countless eyes stared from the black, wet and lidless, each one echoing the same hunger.

Octus woke choking on his own bile. Sweat soaked the thin sheet beneath him. The sensation of tiny claws scuttling across his skin. He didn't dare return to sleep, instead whimpering in the corner of his cramped hab, worn blankets wrapped around him, knees drawn to his chest. The ceaseless light of the surrounding hive spilled through his frayed curtains, casting shadows that shifted of their own volition. He sat hunched like that for hours, his only companions the groan of the spire around him and the occasional call to prayer reverberating through the hive.

He dressed in the half-dark. The same grey tunic he wore every shift, washed so many times it had gone soft at the collar and thin at the elbows. He felt through a metal shelf bolted to the hab wall. A dog-eared volume of Imperial statute, a tin of caffeine tabs, a pict-still of a woman he no longer spoke to. Ah, his hands found the sigil of his office, pressed into a disc of cheap metal. He pocketed it quickly and pulled on a coat before heading out the door into the dim hall of the hab building, its lights flickering persistently.

The causeway teemed with scribes and workers, the air sticky with the press of humanity. Each breath left a residue that clung to his teeth, greasy and faintly sweet. The recyc-units churned overhead, doing little more than stirring the warmth from one body into the next. Lamps threw out sickly yellow light that barely pushed back the gloom. He breathed through his mouth and that was worse. He could taste them, the crowd, the sweat-salt and shed skin of a thousand bodies packed into a corridor built for half that number. A transit-hauler rumbled past on the mag-rail above, close enough that the vibration loosened grit from the track, falling in slow swirls that hung in the humid air.

Octus's watch told him it was mid-morning, but it might as well have been night, for all the light that clawed through the cloud-choked skies. Underfoot, the metal grating was worn smooth by generations of boots, and somewhere below it he could hear the dull rush of water or waste moving through the spire's guts.

A gauntleted hand against his chest snapped him out of his reveries. The crowd pressed at his back, warm and damp, threatening to swallow him again.

"Present ID. I won't ask again," said the Arbitrator, his voice pinched and split by vox distortion.

Octus handed over his worn ID chit and turned to the eye scanner embedded in the skull of the servitor beside the Arbitrator. It clicked and whirred as it read his red-rimmed eye. His gaze drifted. The skin around the servitor's cranial implants was swollen and dark, pulled tight where the rivets bit deep and loose where the flesh had begun to give up, sagging in soft folds that glistened under the lamplight. Its mouth opened and closed in a slow mechanical rhythm, as though gasping for air, each gape revealing the wet stub of a tongue that had been cut short. His gaze caught on the soft swell of flesh around the rivets, and something wet gathered under his tongue.

He swallowed. His mouth was slick. He looked away and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

++Name: Octus Aemilius++

++Occupation: Lex Investigator++

++Cleared For Access++

The Arbitrator thrust the ID chit back into his hand and pushed him through the checkpoint. "Next," he yelled, paying no further attention to Octus.

The Lex offices occupied a long, low hall on the 43rd tier, grime-streaked windows looking down on the plaza below, already ringing with the steady hum of the morning shift. He grabbed a cup of recaff, already cold, before heading to his desk.

Octus hung his coat on the hook, sat, and switched on his terminal. The screen crackled as it warmed into focus. While it warmed, he arranged the pile of reports that greeted him, thumbing through a couple as he settled. More missing-person cases, an increase in abhuman activity, demands from the upper spire. He set them aside and pulled the first toward him for transcription, switching on recording. The screen swam into focus, a feed from the lower city, shaky pict-capture of a hab-block swallowed in fire.

The Arbitrator's post-action account droned on. Octus copied it down in neat Gothic, half-listening to the words as his stylus moved. Arbites deployment. Manufactorum lockdowns. Casualties listed in numbers too clean to mean anything.

He paused to dip his auto-quill into more ink, and glanced down.

*Maw.*

The word sat in the middle of the page where a sentence should have been. His handwriting, his ink. His stylus trembling faintly in his hand.

The ink bled. It doubled, spreading outward in a slow crawl across the lines of neat Gothic. *Maw. Maw. Maw.* Eating into the margins, swallowing the careful script, the letters bloating and darkening until they were all one thing, a stain devouring the white of the page from the centre out.

He looked down at his hand. It was still wrapped around the stylus, knuckles white, fingers locked so tight the tendons stood out like cabling. Dropping the pen, he pressed his palms into his eyes, grinding them against the sockets until light burst behind his lids and pain flared sharp and clean through his skull. He held it there, teeth clenched, until the world behind his hands was nothing but white heat.

When he pulled them away, the page was still there. Neat Gothic. Clean margins. The Arbitrator's account, exactly as dictated.

A halting breath escaped his lips. He finished the report and thrust it into the tray of a collection servitor as it rumbled past, forcing his eyes back to the screen as the paper left his hand. Three aisles over, Supervisor Ohar stopped the servitor with an outstretched hand. She drew the top sheet from the tray and read it in silence. Her gaze lingered.

She looked up.