

The Consul walked through the holo of Meina Gladstone, retrieved his glass, and went to pour another Scotch.

“You have been chosen to join the pilgrimage to the Shrike,” said the image of the old CEO whom the press loved to compare to Lincoln or Churchill or Alvarez-Temp or whatever other pre-Hegira legend was in historical vogue at the time. “The Templars are sending their treeship Yggdrasill’ said Gladstone, “and the evacuation task force commander has instructions to let it pass. With a three-week time-debt, you can rendezvous with the Yggdrasill before it goes quantum from the Parvati system. The six other pilgrims chosen by the Shrike Church will be aboard the treeship. Our intelligence reports suggest that at least one of the seven pilgrims is an agent of the Ousters. We do not ... at this time ... have any way of knowing which one it is.”

The Consul had to smile. Among all the other risks Gladstone was taking, the old woman had to consider the possibility that he was the spy and that she was fatlining crucial information to an Ouster agent. Or had she given him any crucial information? The fleet movements were detectable as soon as the ships used their Hawking drives, and if the Consul were the spy, the CEO’s revelation might be a way to scare him off. The Consul’s smile faded and he drank his Scotch.

“Sol Weintraub and Fedmahn Kassad are among the seven pilgrims chosen,” said Gladstone.

The Consul’s frown deepened. He stared at the cloud of digits flickering like dust motes around the old woman’s image. Fifteen seconds of fatline transmission time remained.