

For Every End, a Beginning

By Andy Clark

Illuminor Szeras squats at the heart of a pulse-lit chamber full of ancient, complex machinery. He casts his gaze over the information swirling between two emerald orb-sensors before him. It constitutes biomechanical analyses of Szeras' latest specimens, derived from molecular dissection and transpectral analysis. One segment of his android cerebellum absorbs the information with what he knows is lightning speed compared to the cogitational abilities of the creatures he is studying. To Szeras such swiftness is normal. He has thought this way for millennia, after all.

Not quite true, he chides himself.

Yes, the Illuminor has long possessed a towering intellect. His augmented consciousness has the capacity to turn over fractally complex scientific problems and weigh philosophical conundrums that have obsessed entire planetary cultures. It can do all this while leaving more than enough processing power for Szeras to function, converse, experiment and even take to the battlefield without breaking mental stride.

Barely a step from divinity, after all.

Yet thanks to the generous gifts of his new patron, melded of course with Szeras' own scientific brilliance, his thoughts move faster than ever before. The Illuminor flexes his freshly augmented android limbs and stretches himself up to his full, newly towering height. Without the unique materials that his patron has provided, Szeras would have struggled to progress with his self-improvements so swiftly. The risk of compromising his physical shell might have been acceptable, but the danger to integrated elements of his personality engram would have been unconscionable. Szeras knows himself to be the most brilliant mind of his entire species. To needlessly endanger the most precious intellectual asset of the Necron race would, of course, be inexcusable.

Yet now I am more, greater, he thinks as information streaks through his newly refurbished mental architecture. With such augmentations he will be more able than ever before to pursue his studies. Surely, at last, comprehension of the very deepest secrets of life itself lies within Szeras' grasp!

That work must wait, however. The Illuminor has forged a pact with his new patron and must uphold his end of the bargain. In truth, the patron's goals are not so dissimilar to Szeras' own. Furthering his ally's work must inevitably advance his, also.

Patron.

Ally.

Szeras knows there are other terms of address for the being with whom he has struck his deal, terms that he should perhaps use. Yet the Illuminor's arrogance is rooted deep within the labyrinthine architecture of his personality engram. He cannot bring himself to do so. Humility is as alien a notion to Szeras as are biological imperatives such as sleeping or eating – concepts for which he has neither use nor capacity. Yet Szeras also knows that he does not wish to delay his patron's plans, let alone risk failing him.

I have a reputation to consider, the Illuminor tells himself, as though that is the only reason to honour his pact.

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Relegating his latest biomechanical calculations to tertiary cerebral partitions, the Illuminor sets his limbs in motion. Powerful, insectile body carries brilliant mind up a gravitational latticeway to a higher platform. Here a dome-like alcove is recessed into the chamber's wall. The space's physical constraints are cramped, but dimensional regulators adjust its spatial reality to accommodate the sprawling computational arrays and multidimensional lenses of Szeras' planar observatory.

The Illuminor shoos away several diligent Canoptek constructs with a mental imperative. He settles himself before the primary dimensional focusing aperture and attunes himself to its information flow.

The data layers itself onto Szeras' perceptions bit-by-bit. It expands his consciousness by degrees, furnishing him with an exploded spatial viewpoint. The process would burn out the mind of even the most advanced biological specimen. Even the most talented Crypteks of his own race would be forced to wrestle with the sheer scope and scale of what Szeras sees.

He is no simple Cryptek.

The very notion!

The thought crackles through some small, affronted segment of the Illuminor's consciousness. Yet even Szeras has little computational power to spare for such

personality-driven feedback, not while examining the dimensional aperture.

Laid across the architecture of Szeras' incalculably powerful mind is a sizeable swathe of the galaxy. He perceives not only the material plane upon which his people exist, but also the Energistic Infinity that lies beyond it and to which all sentient biological beings are tethered. Szeras even observes the silken skeins of the Old Ones' webway, stretched and tattered as they are. He does not see detail; the Illuminor is not yet a true deity, after all! Still, he receives impressions, hues, subtle spectra and data-aurora that reveal precious information. The Illuminor suspects that any other sentient race in the galaxy would burn worlds for such wisdom.

Szeras sees the empyric cascade as it rages across the heart of the galactic sprawl. Advanced empyro-predictive modelling suggests constantly fluctuating probability patterns, positing likelihoods of which warp storms may wax and which may wane. Szeras reads fluctuations hinting at new channels preparing to open, at existing routes that may suddenly and violently close.

All of this is frustratingly theoretical, of course. The very inconstancy of the Energistic Infinity is anathema to the coldly logical analyses of the Necron engines. For every probability there is a counter-conclusion, a contra-model overlaying the more likely predictions with fractal modulations. The information is far from useless, but it is deeply unstable and thus, to Szeras' mind, untrustworthy.

The only constants are the slowly expanding zones of empyric outflow and immaterean radiation spreading ever further outward to permeate the matter of realspace. An infinitesimally complex overlay of shimmering lights reveals to Szeras that psychic mutation runs ever more rampant through the malleable biological forms of many lesser races, Humanity foremost amongst them.

Still they reach out from aeons lost to dust, thinks Szeras. Still their refusal to accept defeat imperils us all. Just as Orikan foresaw.

The Illuminor is above such base emotional responses as jealousy or bitterness. Still, the mere thought of the Diviner is enough to disrupt his synaptic equilibrium. The information vista in his mind fractures. It unravels and is lost.

Szeras steps back, perturbed, though whether at himself, at the thought of Orikan or indeed at the wider galactic situation he cannot say. Nor does it matter; he has learned what he needed to from this latest glimpse through the planar observatory. There is no alternative to his patron's schemes that Szeras can see, nor any unforeseen factors that lie outside of the Illuminor's own tolerance models.

It is time that he attended to the contra-empyric matrix.

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Down his body carries him, through chambers and shimmering particle-translocators. He clatters through vivisectorae where specimens scream and writhe within the grip of molecular disassemblers. They emit piteous moans as their hides are flayed away, their limbs and nervous systems splayed carefully and meticulously sampled by Canoptek chirurgea. Here, a head lives on, sustained for a time without its body. There a skeletal structure twitches as the nerves still threaded across it contract with impossible levels of agony. Szeras' partitioned mind makes notes as he passes particularly promising dissection subjects.

Ork-form... promising musculature adaptation... old, so old and long familiar...

Human-form... again, inexplicable cerebral resistance to counter-mutative measures... intriguing...

Hrud-form... vexing temporal entropy detrimental to disassembler armatures... troublesome...

At last Szeras steps through a dimensional ingress and emerges into the stellar repository. He pauses, permitting himself a moment to bask in the magnificence of what he has wrought. The repository is spherical, so vast a tomb ship could comfortably dock within. Its inner surface seethes with complex machineries – many of Szeras' own design – that shimmer with energy and ripple with emerald glyphs. Figures move amongst them. Hunched Crypteks and drifting Canoptek constructs tread what are to Szeras' perspective the walls, ceiling and floor of the immense space thanks to its centripetal gravitic compellers. Between them all, hanging at the chamber's heart and maintaining a constant planar alignment no matter where one stands around the repository's edge, is a magnificent map of the contra-empyric matrix.

At its centre hangs the blazing orb of the confluence sphere, its brilliance filtered by the living metal cage that has grown to encompass it. Radiating out from the sphere like the arms of some primitive oceanic predator are skeins of energy that interlace through multiple dimensions. Each enfolds smaller, yet still brightly blazing orbs of fire and the spheres that orbit about them. The energy skeins ripple and flow. They are growing like a living thing, forming an interlocking web that connects via non-Euclidean linkages and entraps dozens of lesser nodes.

This is a map formed from mirroring-particulates entangled on a quantum level with their equivalent megastructures in realspace. Put simply, it is a massively miniaturised version of his patron's contra-empyric matrix that changes and reacts in real time to reflect what is occurring across this entire region of space.

As the matrix expands through its nodal pylons, so the map expands to show this.

As worlds and systems fall under the shrouding influence of the matrix, so the captured data flows in glyph-form across the repository's sensor-displays and into its retention matrices.

Szeras tears himself away from his admiration of the repository's grandeur. A deputation of figures is approaching along an observation spar. He notes several senior Crypteks: the drifting form of Amnothek the Dissolutor, draped in diaphanous skeins of plasmic energy; Kothotar of the Endless Eyes, borne upon a chattering carpet of Canoptek Scarabs; Hasmathep the Veiled, whose quicksilver tendrils roil about her in constant motion; at their head, souring the Illuminator's mood by his mere presence, Athmandyus the Infinite Doorway. The ancient Technomandrite's staff clunks against the ground with every stride. His obdurate metal visage radiates blunt power and purpose while his triad of eye-lenses burn with amethyst fire.

'The Illuminator graces us with a rare visitation,' says Athmandyus, the flatwave amplitude of his vocalisation communicating thinly veiled distaste.

Szeras, who towers over these lesser techno-thaumaturges, has no interest in being bated. That Athmandyus engages in all-too-organic exchanges of insults and posturing is but one of the many reasons Szeras dislikes the ancient Necron. Discarding the Technomandrite's comment as superfluous, he instead addresses the other three Crypteks of the conclave.

'Illuminate the purpose of your approach.'

Hasmathep the Veiled offers a non-vocalised flurry of synchro-pulse information.

Visual confirmation of your presence – query regards wishes of the patron – supplementary informational report – gesture of proper respect.

Szeras doubts greatly that Athmandyus the Infinite Doorway intends any respect by troubling him in person like this. His suspicions are confirmed by the Cryptek's next vocalisation.

'You force progress at an excessive pace, Illuminator. The empyric dissonance triggered by the manifestation of the cascade chain through the Energistic Infinity is reducing. The rapid expansion of our contra-empyric matrix leads to ever greater degrees of disruption amongst the lesser races along its borders. This effort should have been so gradual as to be imperceptible to the short-lived vermin. Instead, you choose haste, and in so doing surely alert them to our efforts.'

Ever cautious, ever conservative, thinks Szeras, peering down at the blunt-skulled Technomandrite and wondering whether his mind would yield anything useful under vivisection. The Illuminator feels it is doubtful. Again, he ignores Athmandyus' words.

'Display secondary informational strata,' Szeras commands. He could bring the information up at a whim, and they know it. Still, Kothotar hastens to access a nearby terminal node and inputs the sequence of glyphs that will provide Szeras with the information he requests.

Before them the map shimmers as multi-faceted skeins of additional detail manifest. The Illuminator sees designators for the lesser races of this region, differentiated by species and sub-category. Those beyond the intersectospheric boundary of the matrix pulse with vitality. Others, recently subsumed and still barely within its fringes, stutter and glow more weakly. The glyphs designating sentient species towards the matrix's heart are cold and grey, appearing as stone carvings hanging inert within the weave of the map.

Other glyphs, vast numbers of them, teem across the map. They swarm in the void and gather around major worlds. These glyphs bear the heraldic designs and colouration of numerous Necron dynasties; some are minor, some very powerful, but all, Szeras knows, have accepted the mastery of his patron.

All do that being's will.

Coiling around the map's edges from infolooms and crystalline analytic actualisers come secondary glyph-streams of esoteric data.

Empyric activity dropping within predicted parameters, Szeras thinks, studying the information with a sense of satisfaction. Energy drain is vast, yet our capabilities remain infinitely higher. The fashioning of new dolmen gates proceeds apace, also...

Out loud he says 'I am pleased. Our patron will be pleased. I will go now and make my report to—'

Szeras' words cut off mid-flow as amber glyphs swirl in spirals around one edge of the map display. In the same instant an alert imperative rolls through his cerebrum like a tolling bell.

The Illuminor does not assert his authority this time; with swift efficiency he manipulates the map that he has fashioned, partitioning segments aside and drawing forward the quadrant from which the alert glyphs are pulsing.

There, he thinks. Something new.

Sure enough, a fresh collection of glyphs can be observed amongst the confusion of life-signifiers and prospective nodal worlds beyond the boundary. Szeras' single eye-lens flicks back and forth rapidly. He tracks blossoming empyric signatures that herald further glyphs that join the gathering swarm.

'Human-form, prodigious militaristic disposition,' he says aloud.

Athmandyus' staff cracks hard against the floor of the observation spar.

'Thus am I rendered prophetic, one whose gaze pierces the veil of causality itself,' he says, quoting one of Orikan the Diviner's more famous boasts. He must know this will irritate Szeras. 'Would that my words were not so immediately and fortuitously proven correct. How then shall our Patron react to this unfortunate development, do you think?'

At last Szeras deigns to turn his gaze upon the old Technomandrite and entangle in dataspheric communion. Athmandyus' posture stiffens and his shoulders hunch. The fire in his eyes gutters, becomes wary. In this moment Szeras permits Athmandyus to experience his own reactions; the Illuminor shares his excitement, his anticipation and his sense of mounting triumph, and the sensations cow the Technomandrite for they are not what he expects.

'Proceed upon the projected course,' Szeras vocalises. 'Know that this is precisely as both myself and the patron intend. The next phase of testing for the contra-empyric matrix will now commence.'

With that, Szeras turns his back upon his inferiors and makes for a nearby translocation gate. He has a great deal to attend to before the Imperial interlopers cross the intersectospheric boundary. He wishes to be in position to observe the effects of his matrix uninterrupted when they do so.

This is only the beginning, he thinks.

