



The Alembic Plot, by Ann Wilson

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THE ALEMBIC PLOT

A Terran Empire Novel

by Ann Wilson

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1. Injury

St. Thomas, Monday, 17 June 2571 CE

Captain Mike Odeon cursed in angry frustration as he climbed out of his command van into a late fall New Pennsylvania evening and signalled his Special Operations team forward. They were too late.

Well, too late to catch them in the act, he amended silently. This looked like one of the hit-and-run attacks the so-called Brothers of Freedom specialized in; with local Enforcement men already on-scene, the Brothers would be long gone. But they would catch the bastards who'd attacked this Royal Enforcement Service convalescent hospital, sooner or later. Motioning his second-in-command to him, Odeon gave the routine orders. "Check for anything the attackers might have left. Odds are you'll only find bodies, but do your best while I talk to the locals. Call me on Channel One if you do find anything."

"Yes, sir." Odeon's sergeant led the other three team members into the building; Odeon himself looked around, and was pleased to find he knew one of the locals.

He waved. "Rascal! Over here!"

The local returned his wave, jogged over, and saluted. "Mike! I mean, 'Captain Odeon, sir.'"

"Mike's fine," Odeon said. "You haven't touched anything?"

"Huh-uh. Saw the marks the Brothers'd burned into a couple of the walls inside, and backed off right away to call in the Royals." Rascal spat. "Damn Brothers! Didn't expect Special Ops, though."

"You'll get SO any time the Brothers are involved, from now on," Odeon said. "That came straight from His Majesty not five minutes after we got word they'd hit a hospital. It doesn't look too bad from here, though."

"From here, no. But, Mike . . . I hope your men have stronger stomachs than mine turned out to be."

Odeon scowled. "It's that bad?" Rascal Anderson had been in Enforcement for almost fifteen years, nearly as long as Odeon himself; it would take more than the aftermath of ordinary violence to make him sick.

"Worse," Anderson said. "Mike, it looked like . . . like a cross between a battlefield and a mass third-stage interrogation."

"Dear God." Odeon bowed his head in a brief silent prayer for the victims, then looked up. "We'll find the bastards who did this, and make sure--"

His beltcom interrupted him. "Sir, we've found a survivor. ID says Captain Joan Cortin, Royal Enforcement. Boris is working on her, but he says she'll need a lot more help than he can give."

"She'll get it," Odeon snapped. Anderson was already signalling urgently for the medics, who'd been waiting to bring out what everyone was certain would be only dead bodies. "I'm on my way. Set for homer."

"On homer, sir." The sergeant's voice was replaced by a series of tones, increasing in pitch and speed as Odeon more than half-ran into the hospital and through the corridors.

The scenes he passed were as bad as Rascal had suggested, and Odeon's stomach needed stern control to prevent rebellion. Doctors, nurses, patients, the service staff--all had been bound, then brutally murdered. The stench of gutted bodies was enough, even without the blood and corpses, to stagger anyone.

It wasn't long until he reached his men. Two of them were checking for other survivors while Boris and Sergeant Vincent knelt over the inert form that had to be Joan Cortin. Vincent was giving her Last Rites while Boris tended to her physical needs, his posture evidence of his intense concentration, and Odeon thanked God again that the St. Dmitri exchange troop he'd drawn for his team was so damn competent. He'd love to take his whole team to that world for a bit, he thought irrelevantly. He'd worked with a Dmitrian team once, here on St. Thomas, and thought everyone in SO should have that experience.

"How is she?" he asked, joining the medic. If the ID said "Joan Cortin," he'd have to accept that evidence; he certainly couldn't identify the woman he knew so well in this bloody, mangled body.

"Not good, Captain." Boris' English had a heavy Dmitrian accent, but Odeon had no trouble understanding him. "Badly beaten, raped--more than once, I believe--and she appears to have a spinal injury. The Brothers of course burned their mark into her hands, but that is minor." He looked up with a frown. "I regret having to tell you, Captain. She was your protego, was she not?"

"Yes, and she's still my friend." Odeon stood, making way for the other medics who promptly began working on the unconscious woman. So the Brothers had burned their circled-triangle mark into Joanie's hands, had they? That didn't happen often, but he was no more surprised than Boris had been that they'd given her that distinction. Not even all Special Ops officers rated that mark of the Brothers' special hatred, and why Joanie did was something he couldn't guess--she'd never been on an anti-Brotherhood operation, that he knew of--but they'd taken a special dislike to her for some reason none had divulged even under third-stage interrogation, calling her "the damned Enforcement bitch" in a tone Odeon himself reserved for those who had begun the Final War. Maybe they hated her just because she was the only active-duty female Enforcement officer. At any rate, they had marked her--and she was the first he knew about to survive the torture that accompanied the mark's infliction.

He watched the medics work, his thoughts going back. It'd started . . . what, twelve years ago? Yes, that sounded about right. A small town here in New Pennsylvania--and not too far away, if he remembered clearly. He'd been on light duty, wounded in his first fight with the Brotherhood and counting himself lucky to be alive. It had left him with a scar across his right cheek, cutting into his mouth and chin, but it had left five others dead, three disabled.

The scar had upset the young men he was interviewing; most had stared for a few seconds, then looked away. Well, they hadn't been very promising anyway. Recruiting trips to out-of-the-way small towns like that Boalsburg were mostly for show rather than out of any real expectation of finding good Enforcement candidates.

The last applicant's folder had brought a smile. Joan Cortin . . . Not many women applied for Enforcement, and even fewer qualified. He remembered thinking it probably hadn't been a serious application; more than likely, she just wanted to meet the "romantic" Enforcement officer. Odeon hadn't minded; he'd been rather flattered, if anything. He'd opened the folder and scanned it, intending to make it look good before he turned her down.

There'd been only one catch. Grades, psychoprofile, and physical stats said she did qualify--and at well above officer-cadet minimums. He'd wondered if she knew.

She hadn't. Her application had been the ruse he'd guessed; she admitted that immediately, without either staring at or avoiding his scar. She thought it added to his appeal, which hadn't hurt his feelings at all. It'd been rather enjoyable convincing her that she really was Enforcement-officer material, and he'd taken real pleasure in waiting until she was leaving--and her former schoolmates could hear--to tell her when she'd be picked up by an Enforcement trooper who'd drive her to the Royal Academy.

He'd been there for her graduation, too, proud that one of his recruits had been at the top of the class, commissioned First Lieutenant for that achievement. He'd given her her first salute, then staggered as sixty kilos of enthusiastic female officer jumped him for a congratulatory kiss.

Remembering that kiss--and the night that followed, the others later--Mike Odeon rubbed the scar crossing his lips. It hurt to see medics working over her, hear them sounding pessimistic. Her injuries seemed to be even more severe than Boris had said at first, and she'd been weak to begin with, just recuperating from one of the unnamed plagues that had devastated the Kingdom Systems during the Final War. The plagues were no longer common, hadn't been for over a century; Joanie had simply had the bad luck to pursue a gang of horse thieves into a still-contaminated area.

The medics were putting her onto a litter, careful to support her back. As they picked up the litter, her eyes flickered open and she looked in Odeon's direction. "Mike?"

A gesture stopped the medics. "What is it, Joanie?"

"Don't let 'em kick me out . . . while I can't fight back. I've gotta . . . get the bastards who did this . . . Mike, promise . . ."

"I promise, Joanie. I'll do everything I can, you know that." He waved the medics on, looking after them, then turned to his second. "Find anything useful, Sergeant?"

"Afraid not, sir. They're too damn good at covering up. We won't have a thing, unless Captain Cortin's able to give us some descriptions."

"All right. Call in a specialist squad from New Denver; they may be able to find some kind of evidence. Fingerprints, footprints, identifiable bullets--damn, but I wish we had what the prewars had!"

"Able to identify a culprit from a speck of blood or a hair?" Sergeant Vincent laughed bitterly. "Hell, if we could do that, we'd have the Brothers under control in six months."

"Yeah." Odeon tried to hide his frustration. "No use playing what-if, though; we could do that forever. Let's get back to HQ."

Silently, respecting their leader's mood, the Special Operations team returned to their command van for the copter-lift back to their Middletown headquarters. It wasn't until they were landing that anyone spoke. "Captain?"

"What is it, Boris?"

"I spoke with the physician, sir. Captain Cortin will be stabilized at the local clinic, then sent to New Denver for surgery. You are due for leave, are you not?"

"Yeah, and I intend to take advantage of it. Two years' worth of accumulated leave ought to give me time to help her stay in."

* * * * *

Leave arrangements weren't difficult to make. Special Operations teams tended to stay together, but casualties were high; anyone could be replaced quickly. By mid-morning the next day Odeon had finished briefing his temporary replacement, and by noon he'd used his Special Ops identification to get aboard a plane to New Denver.

He'd only flown twice before, with the exception of command-van copter-lifts, so he slept lightly when he did sleep, then took advantage of a rest stop to work the kinks of too much sitting out before the second leg. Back aboard, he listened to the engines and tried to doze off again. The throbbing roar they made was monotonous enough to be dulling, but too loud to be soothing . . .

Rather to his surprise, the second landing woke him up. He hadn't realized he'd managed to sleep again, and he grinned at himself as he exited the aircraft.

The air here smelled as fresh and clean as the newly-fallen snow, so good it'd be a shame to waste it. Odeon waved away the SO car that pulled up, walking to the terminal instead. By the time he'd made arrangements for a room in Visiting Officers' Quarters, his luggage, the single small bag that, with what a command van held, was enough for an SO man for half a month, was waiting. He claimed it, made his way through shift-change traffic to the VOQ, and checked in.

He went to his assigned room, intending to shower and get a few hours' rest. Boris had said Joanie would be brought here once she was stabilized; that could be today, if the doctors decided to fly her in, or up to a week if they decided she could tolerate surface travel.

He'd just gotten the shower temperature right, though, when he heard the four sharp knocks on his door that meant official business. With a muttered "Damn," he turned the water off, wrapped a towel around his waist, and went to the door. Couldn't a man even get a shower without being interrupted? "What is it?" he asked the young man in Medical Corps green when he opened the door.

The medtech looked at the clipboard he held. "Captain Michael Patrick Odeon of Royal Enforcement Service Special Operations?"

"Serial 263819. Yes." Odeon swore to himself. Formal identification meant the leave he'd planned to use helping Joanie was over, in favor of some special duty.

The tech extended the clipboard. "Captain Cortin has asked that you be the one to represent her interests while she is under treatment, sir. Would you sign here, please?"

Chuckling, Odeon took the clipboard and scanned the form it held. He should have expected this; trust Joanie to think of his leave time, have him assigned to what he would be doing anyway. Then he frowned at the length-of-assignment block: Indefinite. That was bad, tended to indicate Boris' field diagnosis of spinal injury was right. He found the signature block, wrote his name in the small precise script he was continually kidded about. "Is there any word on her condition or when she'll be here?"

"She will be on a special medevac flight from Middletown, sir, due in at 1815. I was told nothing of her condition. By your leave, sir?"

"Dismissed, Tech." Odeon closed the door and went to finish his interrupted shower. She wasn't due in for another ten hours; he had time to clean up, nap, and eat before he went in to speak to her doctors. By then, they'd know exactly what was wrong with her, and have some idea of what could be done for her.

* * * * *

Two hours before the medevac plane was due to land, Odeon was in one of New Denver Municipal Hospital's briefing rooms. There were half a dozen nurses, twice that many technicians, and several doctors in addition to the one behind the lectern.

By the time the briefing was over an hour later, the only things Odeon was sure of were that he hadn't understood more than one word in three, and that the doctor in charge of Joanie's case was as competent as she was attractive. Bernette Egan, she'd introduced herself--a neurosurgeon.

He went up to her as the others began leaving. "One moment please, Dr. Egan, if I may."

She tilted her head to one side, crisp gray curls contrasting with skin the color of rich chocolate as she looked up at him with a smile. "You would like a summary in plain English, Captain. Correct?"

Odeon found himself returning her smile. "Yes, ma'am, if you wouldn't mind. You'd tell Joanie--Captain Cortin--and she's made me her advocate."

"Indefinitely, yes. I saw the form. Come to the coffee shop, where we can be comfortable, and I'll be happy to tell you everything I can."

"As you wish, Doctor. I'm buying."

"As you wish, Captain." Egan smiled again, gestured him out of the briefing room. "The coffee shop isn't far."

The short walk didn't give them time to talk, but Odeon had understood one key item: Joanie had gotten treatment quickly enough that none of her injuries now threatened her life. Some were serious, yes--maybe damn serious, especially the spinal injury--but she would live!

Mike Odeon didn't understand why he felt so strongly about Joan Cortin and her welfare; all he knew was that he did. He'd recruited her, sure, but he'd recruited others; he'd slept with her, but he'd slept with others; he'd led the team that rescued her, but he'd done that before, too. Maybe it was because the other incidents had all involved different people, maybe it was because none had reacted as positively to him on first meeting . . . he didn't try to analyze it. He was in Special Operations; analysis was for Intelligence. He simply accepted facts as he found them.

Odeon let Egan choose pastries while he drew coffee and paid the cashier. Once they found an empty table and settled themselves, he said, "Okay, Doctor. Tell me."

"To begin with, most of her injuries are what I understand you Enforcement people call minor. Fractured skull, three broken ribs, assorted cuts, burns, and bruises." Egan frowned. "However, her spinal injury is serious even by your standards, and . . . Captain, did she plan to have children?"

'Did,' not 'does,' Odeon thought grimly. "Yes, Doctor." Until he'd met Joanie, Odeon hadn't minded that the red crossed daggers of the SO patch on his sleeve meant he was sterile; his parents had both had

plague-derivatives that made it inevitable, and it was a fate he shared with almost a third of the Kingdom Systems' population. That patch also meant he was one of those trusted to protect his Kingdom and the Systems from their most dangerous enemies. No one able to have children was allowed into SO since the average life expectancy was less than a year . . . "As soon as she found a suitable--and fertile--man. What was it, the rape?"

"Multiple rapes, and not all with . . . natural equipment." Egan looked at the grim, scar-faced man across from her, uncomfortably aware that he was both upset and a trained killer. That she knew he was a devout man as well was little help; Church and state both 'overlooked' acts from Enforcement people that they would condemn in anyone else. It seemed reasonable to assume Odeon and Cortin had been lovers, that if he'd been fertile he would have been the father of her children. "Captain, it pains me to have to tell you this, but she was so badly injured by them that the doctors in Middletown were forced to do an emergency hysterectomy, simply to save her life."

"Does she know?" Odeon kept his voice level, but with effort.

"Not yet. She should be stronger before she is given any more shocks."

Odeon nodded; that made good sense. "What about her spine?"

Egan breathed a silent sigh of relief at the change of subject. "You know it has what are called discs?" At his nod, she went on. "Good. According to the medevac doctor, a sharp blow to her back has caused one of those discs to swell and 'float,' or pop out of position from time to time. The swelling may subside, but if it does not--which is most likely--Captain Cortin will be in constant pain. Either way, when the disc pops, she will be in agony to match anything a third-stage Inquisitor can do."

"I gathered from the briefing that you plan to try surgery. What're her odds?"

"Not good," Egan admitted. "I can't be sure until I examine her myself, but we have had little success in correcting a floating disc. There is an alternative procedure, spinal fusion--essentially welding part of the spine together so the disc can't pop. She will still hurt, and it will limit her mobility somewhat; the only advantage is that she'll be spared the agony of the disc moving out of place."

"That sounds like grounds for a disability discharge." Odeon sipped his coffee and made a face, trying to lighten his mood a bit. He wasn't that fond of coffee to begin with, and this certainly wasn't the best he'd had. "Do hospital coffee shops have to boil this stuff?"

"You get used to it," Egan said. "Yes, that is grounds for discharge, and at full pay. I will have to examine her myself, as I said, but if Dr. Franklin says it's a floating disc, that's exactly what it is. I'll send her discharge recommendation in to Enforcement HQ first thing tomorrow."

"No, Doctor, you'll give it to me for endorsement." Odeon saw her beginning objection, and raised a hand to forestall it. "She doesn't want a discharge; my endorsement will request a waiver. And she won't want her mobility limited, since it would hamper her in her work. So no spinal fusion, we'll just have to hope that other operation you mentioned works."

Egan frowned, concern for her patient overcoming her apprehension. "You're a harsh man, Captain Odeon, even harsher than I expected from one of your profession. Do you know what you're condemning her to?"

"I know what you just told me, yes. But I also know the last thing she asked me was to help her stay in. I am her advocate, Doctor; until you release her, my word goes."

"Unfortunately, it does," Egan said with a sigh. "But then she can countermand your orders."

Odeon half-bowed in his seat. "That's right, Doctor, and I hope to God she does. I don't want to see her hurting, but she asked me not to let her get kicked out while she couldn't defend herself. I'm doing for her what she would do for me if our positions were reversed."

Egan looked at him for several moments, silent, then she nodded. She was beginning to understand, she thought. His grim harshness was real, but it concealed equally real concern for the woman he represented. "As you say, Captain. Be sure Captain Cortin will have the best care I can give her."

This time Odeon stood to bow and answer, formally. "My thanks, Doctor Egan. When may I see her?"

"Tomorrow afternoon," Egan replied. "I have her scheduled for surgery--whichever procedure you decided on--at 0800. I assure you she will be given only those drugs which are absolutely necessary."

"My thanks again, Doctor." Odeon gave her a sketchy salute. "If you'll excuse me, I have to pick up some forms." At her nod he left, grateful for her last assurance. It was almost a hundred years since the Final War--not the nuclear holocaust the prewars had dreaded; there had been only a few atomics used, and most of those were relatively clean neutron bombs. The primary weapons had been biological; it was their devastation that had wiped out over fifty percent of the Kingdoms' population, and the passage of time hadn't removed the remainder's sudden overwhelming aversion to "unnatural substances" imposed on the body. Drugs were used, sparingly, by doctors--and not so sparingly by Enforcement Service Inquisitors.

* * * * *

The next morning Odeon woke at dawn as he usually did, but instead of rising at once, he rolled onto his back and laced hands behind his head.

Joanie. She hadn't been beautiful when he first met her, so she never had been. That suited him well enough; he didn't like the prewar standard of beauty that still prevailed in many places. Beauties were too fragile, didn't have the strength of a real woman the way Joanie did. Tall skinniness was fine in a paid-woman, but Joanie's compactness was better. Stronger and more suitable for an Enforcement officer or a mother, anyway--He pushed that thought aside. Joanie might be able to stay in Enforcement, but she'd never be a mother.

He tried to remember her as she had been, 165 centimeters and maybe 59 kilos, mostly muscle, of vigorous womanhood. But it'd hurt to see her lying broken and bloody on the hospital floor, her short dark hair stiff with drying blood; he couldn't get that image out of his mind, so he made himself study it instead, trying to bring out anything he hadn't consciously noted then.

There wasn't much. The hospital hadn't been all that different from other Brothers of Freedom raid points, except in being a hospital, its occupants even more helpless than most. The only oddity was that they hadn't made sure of the woman they'd marked. Possibly Rascal and his locals had arrived before they were able to.

Odeon grinned wolfishly at that thought. Joanie was alive, and she wanted revenge. That kind of personal motivation wasn't really necessary, but in going after terrorists like the Brothers it didn't hurt; some of the things necessary in anti-terrorist sweeps were hard to stomach. And the Brothers were the worst of the terrorists, as well as the most wide-spread; they had units in every one of the Systems, while most groups were restricted to one or two.

He was getting off the subject, though, he told himself sternly. He was here to protect Joanie's interests, not worry about the Brothers. And if he was going to do that, it might be a good idea to get up.

He glanced at the clock, then almost tangled himself in the sheets in his hurry to get out of bed. It was almost six-thirty! If he didn't get a move on, he'd be late for seven o'clock Mass!

He made it, though with barely a minute to spare, and he found peace as usual in the familiar liturgy. There were still times he wished his call had been to the priesthood--he'd been raised in a monastery, by the White Fathers, after his parents died--but for the most part, he no longer missed the life too badly. The Fathers had comforted him when it became clear that his vocation was military rather than religious; enforcing civil order, they'd reminded him, was as important to human welfare as ministering to spiritual needs. And when he'd been commissioned, directly into Special Operations, several of them had been at the Academy to congratulate him.

As he went forward to take Communion, Odeon found his thoughts going to Joanie. He shouldn't be thinking about her, not now . . . but he couldn't concentrate on the Sacrament properly, even as he accepted and swallowed the Host. Well, the Fathers had taught him that if he couldn't, despite his best efforts, maybe he wasn't supposed to--and it wouldn't be the first time something had resolved itself this way. Returning to his place in the small chapel, he said a brief prayer to the Blessed Virgin as the Compassionate Mother for guidance. Surely, she would help the only officer of her sex in this dangerous vocation!

* * * * *

He was feeling better when he entered Egan's office half an hour after Mass was over. He hadn't found a solution, but he had become sure that one would make itself known; he'd just have to find it.

Egan wasn't there; she was already in surgery. But she'd left word that he could use her office while he waited, and he appreciated her thoughtfulness. An Enforcement officer in a civilian hospital waiting room tended to make patients and visitors nervous; a Special Ops officer tended to make the staff nervous as well, which bothered him. And a desk was far more convenient for doing paperwork than a lap. Odeon sighed as he picked up the form she'd left for him. It was her recommendation for Joanie's discharge, as promised, and it made no bones about the seriousness of her injuries, or about the resulting sterility and constant pain.

Frowning, Odeon read it again--and realized that here was at least part of his solution. Joanie was sterile, which meant she was eligible for Special Ops!

Granted that he didn't like either the fact or what had caused it, she was eligible, and he was positive that--given the cause--she would want to apply, which could very well give her a bit of an edge staying in. And he was equally positive that she'd be as outstanding in Special Ops as she had been in regular Enforcement work. He endorsed the discharge recommendation with a combined request, for waiver and transfer to Special Ops, then decided to tackle some paperwork he'd gotten behind on.

It was several hours before Egan returned to her office, obviously fatigued, and collapsed into an armchair. Despite his anxiety, Odeon took time to get her a cup of coffee and let her drink some before he asked tensely, "How did it go?"

"Better than I expected," Egan said, taking her desk back. "The operation was as successful as any I've performed." She raised a hand cautioningly. "That doesn't mean it's good; it isn't. It's just as good as it can be. She'll be in the pain I told you about, and the disc is still subject to popping, but it could've been far worse." Egan rubbed her eyes before going on. "Otherwise, I would say she will have a complete recovery, with no more than the usual scars. Except that she refused skin grafts for the brands on her hands."

"Mmm." Odeon frowned, thought for a moment, then smiled slowly. "I hadn't expected that, but it fits."

"Fits how?" Egan asked in near-exasperation. "I cannot for the life of me imagine why she would want to live

with such reminders, as well as the pain."

"Not live with them," Odeon corrected. "You're thinking like a doctor, of course, but she's not one--she's an Enforcement officer who wants revenge. I'd say she intends to kill Brothers with them. And I'm trying to get her in a position to do just that."

Egan stared at him, appalled by the pleased anticipation in his soft voice and pale eyes. She'd known all her life that Enforcement people--especially those in Special Operations--were killers, but this was the first time that knowledge had actually frightened her. "Yes . . . is there anything else?"

"Only one." Odeon retrieved his briefcase, preparing to leave. He hadn't intended to disturb the doctor, but if she had any acquaintance with Enforcement at all, and was that easily upset, she should have known better than to ask such a question. "When can I see her?"

"Tomorrow morning, if you want to speak to her instead of just see her. You know the kind of equipment that will be hooked up to her?"

Odeon chuckled. "It's been hooked up to me more than once, Doctor. It doesn't bother me." It was enough for now to know his Joanie was doing as well as humanly possible. "Thank you for your efforts."

To meet Lawrence Shannon: 1a. Raid Master

2. Hospital

St. Thomas, Thursday, 20 June 2571

Odeon was still perplexed by the previous afternoon's odd meeting when he got to Joanie's room the morning after her surgery. The door was open, but he tapped on it and called her name anyway.

"Mike!" Cortin hoped he could hear the welcome she tried to put in her voice. "Come in, please!" She watched him approach, holding back tears. Mike had been her ideal since the day she'd met him, and she'd done her best to live up to his example of cool, impartial professionalism. He was an outstanding officer, an exemplary son of the Church; he certainly wouldn't come apart, so she had to conceal her anguish. She couldn't forfeit his respect for her by collapsing, even though the Brothers had maimed and perhaps crippled her.

He entered, smiling as he saw her. Her head and hands were bandaged, along with most of one arm; her face had half a dozen cuts and bruises not worth bandaging; and her ribs had undoubtedly been strapped tight under her hospital gown, but-- "You're looking a lot better than you were the last time I saw you. How do you feel?"

"Right now, I mostly don't. They've got me so heavily doped up it's a miracle I'm awake and coherent. At least I hope I am. Coherent, that is; I know I'm awake."

"You sound fine to me," Odeon assured her. He leaned over, kissed her forehead. "Ready for my report?"

"Not until you do better than that," she said. "I know you can, and as far as I can tell, my mouth is all right."

"As good as ever, but I don't hug people with broken ribs." He kissed her as thoroughly as he thought possible without hurting her, then pulled up a chair to sit beside the bed.

Her first question gave him an unpleasant shock. "Have you put me in for Special Ops?"

"What?" he said, trying to stall. Dammit, she wasn't supposed to know she was eligible yet!

Cortin sighed. "I don't need a doctor to know I've been spayed, Mike. The incision in my belly, after what the Brothers did to me, makes it obvious I'll never have a family. It was unlikely before; now it's simply impossible. You can thank God I'm on sedatives right now, or I'd probably be a raving maniac. So answer the question."

"I have, yes. I found out day before yesterday that you'd be eligible, took the paperwork to Headquarters yesterday as soon as Doctor Egan told me you'd made it through the surgery with a reasonably good prognosis, and started to walk it through." He paused, frowning.

"And?"

"I don't know," Odeon said slowly. "Personnel didn't seem too interested in doing anything about the waiver request at first, until I raised my voice a bit." He chuckled briefly. "It seems office workers are more than a little apprehensive about an upset Special Ops man. At any rate, once I convinced them to do more than glance at the forms, I was very politely escorted to a private office--which is where it gets odd. Joanie, there was a colonel of His Majesty's Own there!"

"His Majesty's Own!" Cortin said, impressed. "So what happened?"

"Not much--which is what bothers me." Odeon frowned. "He took the forms, read them, nodded once, and told me not to tell anyone including you about the meeting. I asked what was going on, told him I had to tell you something--but the only thing he'd say was that it was a classified project, that you'd be given serious consideration, and that he'd be in touch as soon as the decision was made. Typical bureaucrat talk--but the oddest thing is that I believe him."

"Did he give you any idea of when?"

Odeon shook his head. "No--but I'd guess not more than a few days. Full colonels don't work for long in bare-bones offices without even carpeting."

"True, especially when they belong to His Majesty's Own. And I've got a couple of months before I'm well enough I have to make a final decision--I presume I am eligible for a disability discharge?"

"Yes, of course, at full pay. But I don't like what I think you're getting at. Joanie, don't do anything you'll regret."

"I don't intend to," Cortin said quietly. "I know what I have to do, though. If I can stay in and do it, that's best, of course. If I have to get out, though, I'll do that instead. One way or another, Brother Lawrence Shannon and the rest of them on that raiding party are gone--and so are any Brothers who get in my way to them." She looked at her bandaged hands for a long moment, then back up at him. "Which I'm sure you guessed when Egan passed along the information that I was keeping their marks."

Odeon nodded. "Partly--that you'd go after them. Not that you'd consider going rogue to do it." Enforcement took superlative care of its members and their families, if they had any . . . but when a trooper went bad, all its resources went into hunting and then killing him. Or her. Odeon had participated in three of those hunts, hating the necessity but as grimly determined as any to rid the world of them. Dammit, Enforcement troopers were sworn to protect the Kingdoms and their citizens--when one went rogue, he had to be stopped! And yet . . . the idea of taking part in such a hunt with Joanie as the target upset him more than it should. Not that the alternative was any better! "Joanie, please--don't do it."

"As I said, I don't intend to." Cortin took a deep breath. "You know me too well to believe I'd do something like going rogue if I had any choice in the matter. And I need time and resources a rogue wouldn't get, to do what I have to--but I can't do it if I'm stuck behind a desk, either." She frowned, still unable to make sense of the feeling of absolute certainty that had come over her during the Brothers' torture. "Mike, we both know I'm as practical and non-mystical as anyone could be--but while the Brothers were working me over, I . . . realized, or discovered, or something, that eliminating them is my job. It helps that I have a personal reason for wanting to, but that's a bonus. Whatever happens to me, whatever I have to do to accomplish it, I don't have any choice about the fact. I have to get rid of the Brothers--and I plan to enjoy it." She stared at her hands again. "Then I may be able to get rid of these Hell-marks. Can you understand that?"

"I think so--and God help me, I couldn't blame you if you did go after them on your own. But I'd still have to help hunt you down." Odeon was less positive of that than he made himself sound, though. He wasn't at all certain he'd be able to, even if not doing it meant he'd share her outlawry--if the thought of hunting her was upsetting, the idea of actually harming her was revolting. Worse than revolting, really--impossible was more like it.

The sudden awareness of that stunned him. He hadn't realized he felt so strongly about her! He shouldn't; no one in Special Ops should have any more than professional respect for another person. There most emphatically should not be anything like that strong a feeling! It was almost like--no. He was too professional to love anyone, especially a fellow officer, however many times he might have shared a bed with him or her.

On the other hand, what else could it be? He'd have no objection to hunting down Wolf Corbett, say, if it were necessary--and Wolf had been on his team the longest of any, almost a year now, and was the closest friend other than Joanie that he had.

He sent up a quick prayer for guidance, and felt an immediate sense of reassurance. He did love Joanie, and it was all right . . . but she didn't love him yet, so there was no reason to burden her with the knowledge of his feelings.

"Is something wrong, Mike?" Cortin's voice brought him back to the present. "You look like you ate something that's disagreeing with you."

"No, I'm fine. It's your problems we should be worrying about now, anyway." Odeon made himself smile. "Let's assume you make it into this classified project, and that it's something that'll let you at the Brothers."

"We might as well," Cortin said, shifting position slightly. "The first thing is to get off these drugs. The sooner I learn to cope with what's happened, the sooner I can get to work. I need to get my strength back, hone up my hand-to-hand combat, and do some serious study of interrogation techniques. I'm okay at first-stage, but Brothers don't break that easily; I'm going to have to be more than just good, at all three stages. Especially third. Will you help me?"

"Of course." That was his Joanie, all right, Odeon thought proudly. No crying or self-pity for her; instead, a plan that would let her accomplish what she intended. He took the clipboard from the foot of her bed and studied it for a moment. "Dear God! They do have you in deep, don't they? Do you want to make a cold break, or would you rather taper off?"

"Cold break," Cortin said firmly. Even though it was probably a decision she would regret, it was what she was certain he would have done.

"Right." Odeon made the necessary notations, initialed each one, then replaced the clipboard. "You can't do much about exercise or combat training until you're out of bed, but you can read . . . mmm. I think you should go for an Inquisitor's Warrant, even though you won't be able to do the practical work right away. If you want

to go that route, I know an instructor at the Academy who'll give you classroom credit for reading the course materials and passing a test, then let you do the practical when you're back on your feet."

Cortin nodded. "I would--thanks." The Warrant wouldn't do her any legal good if she did go rogue, but she'd have the skill, and letting her subjects know she'd had a Warrant should make it easier to break them. "How soon can I get the texts?"

"I should be able to have them for you by visiting hours tomorrow. Anything else?"

"Newspapers, please--and a pair of gloves, for when the bandages come off."

"No problem; Sergeant Vincent promised to send your gear along. I figure it should be here tomorrow or the next day."

"Thanks--I should have thought to ask."

"You did have other things on your mind at the time," Odeon pointed out. He hesitated, went on reluctantly. "Speaking of which, as soon as you feel up to it, you should be debriefed."

Cortin would have preferred to keep the information for her own use, but by the time she was able to do anything with it, it would be obsolete, useless. Best to pass it on to the debriefers, then hope her fellow Enforcement troops would keep the trail warm without taking the quarry that was rightfully hers. "I'll be glad to talk to them any time they want. And if the team includes an artist, I think I can describe the ones I saw well enough for him to draw."

"That would help--I'll make sure it has one. And I'll try to get them here before the painkillers wear off; I don't think you'd want them to see you in pain."

"I don't, and I wouldn't be able to cooperate as well, either. As soon as you can, then."

"I'll do that." Odeon turned to leave, then hesitated and turned back. Joanie went to church Sundays and holy days when she wasn't on duty, though she wasn't what he'd call really devout. Still, it wouldn't hurt to ask. "Would you like to see a priest?"

Not really, was her first reaction, but on the other hand, why not? As usual, she didn't have anything to confess--part of her, with wry humor, said it was because she hadn't the imagination to think of any interesting sins, as well as not having any opportunities. Might be a good idea to take advantage of this chance, though; if she were accepted for Special Ops, she'd be given Exceptional Holy Orders--empowered to carry out time-critical priestly functions, mostly Last Rites--and she really ought to be sure of being ready for ordination. "Maybe I should." She hesitated, then asked, "Mike--did you give me Last Rites?"

Odeon shook his head. "By the time I got to you, Sergeant Vincent had already taken care of it."

"If you get a chance, will you thank him for me?"

"My pleasure." Odeon bent to kiss her goodbye, then paused when bandaged hands took and held his.

Cortin looked up at him, her throat tight. Maybe he wouldn't fault her for one bit of weakness . . . "Mike, I know I'm not a real woman any more, but . . . maybe I can still function like one. Will you help me find out? Please?"

"As soon as the plumbing's out and you feel up to it," Odeon promised, stricken by her uncharacteristic

vulnerability. Blessed Mother of God, he prayed silently, don't let them have robbed her of that, too! She's lost the ability to have children; don't let her be condemned to the constant danger we face without even this consolation! "Just let me know when, Joanie. I'll be here for you." He kissed her again, and left. Cortin watched him go, relieved. He'd been reassuring, not scornful, and that was a big help in itself.

* * * * *

She was kept busy the rest of the day, first by the priest, then by medical personnel, and then--over Dr. Egan's objections--by the debriefing team, which included the artist she'd asked for. It also included a lieutenant wearing the silver question-mark badge of one who held an Inquisitor's Warrant, and who was treated with a degree of respect that was highly unusual for a junior officer. Cortin made note of that, then disregarded it; if she was under consideration for something classified, she had to expect some non-standard attention. And he was a good Inquisitor, whatever else he was, eliciting details she didn't remember noticing, gaining her confidence even though she was familiar with the techniques he was using, reading her face and body language well enough that at times he seemed to be reading her mind instead. No, she thought when the team left, he was more than a simple lieutenant!

The drugs had worn off by early the next morning. When an orderly brought her breakfast, Cortin was in physical pain and emotional shock, but she forced herself to be as polite as possible to the orderly, and then to eat in spite of her lack of appetite. Afterward, she endured the medical attentions that brought more pain, telling herself she had to go through that and the accompanying humiliation to reach her goal. She was glad when it was over and she was left alone; the only person she had any real desire to see was Mike.

He arrived moments after visiting hours began. She started to greet him, but fell silent in shock when she saw his face. Mike had been crying, and there were still tears in his eyes! Hesitantly, she held a hand out to him. "Mike--?"

He took it, tears again starting to fall. "Joanie--oh, Joanie, I'm so sorry!"

Her stomach churned with miserable certainty of his answer, but she made herself ask, "What is it, Mike?"

"Dr. Egan said nurses had heard you talking in your sleep, that the bad news would be easier coming from me, but not to tell you yet, not till you were stronger . . ." He took a deep breath to steady his voice, though the tears were running unchecked down his face. Dammit, there was no kind way to tell her this! "She's a civilian, she doesn't understand that we can't afford false hopes. Or how important this is--she told me that except for your back, you'd have a complete recovery!" He took another deep breath, trying with a little more success to calm himself. "Joanie--I'll never share your bed again, and neither will anyone else, unless all you want is company."

"I'm totally non-functional, then," Cortin said flatly.

Odeon nodded miserably. "I'm afraid so. The Brothers . . . damaged you too badly. Egan's team was able to salvage the urinary tract and make a usable opening for it in the skin graft--but I'm afraid the other is gone, permanently."

Cortin clung to his hands, her mind numb. She wanted to scream, cry, do something to protest this additional, gratuitous despoilment--dear sweet Jeshua, they had been killing her, why do something so pointless?--but she didn't seem to have the will.

Odeon took her in his arms, stroking her and speaking quietly, reassuringly. She was taking it hard, of course--so was he, dammit!--and it was no wonder. Most civilians didn't understand, so they resented the civil and canonical laws that exempted Enforcement personnel from the sexual restrictions everyone else was

morally and legally bound to observe--but, thanks to Saint Eleanor of the Compassionate Mother, Church and civil authorities did understand that people in almost constant danger of sudden, violent death needed more of a distraction than books or cards or dances could provide. Not even sex always helped--but most of the time it could take your mind off the danger enough to relax for a few minutes, or an hour, or if the Compassionate Mother was kind, an entire night. Joanie wouldn't have that escape any more, which was grossly unfair.

Still, there was a purpose behind everything God did, Odeon reminded himself, whether a human could perceive it or not. He couldn't imagine what purpose would condemn Joanie to constant pain, as well as all of an Enforcement officer's normal stresses, with no chance of relief--but he believed there was one, and if he were allowed to, he'd help her achieve it.

After several minutes, Cortin pulled back, still dry-eyed. "If that's the way it is, I guess I'll have to learn to live with it. Thanks for giving it to me straight, Mike--you were right, I'd rather know the truth than get my hopes up and then have them dashed."

"I'm glad. I thought you'd feel that way--but I was praying I wouldn't just make things worse for you." He squeezed her hands, debating whether or not he should kiss her, then decided against it until later. If he was any judge, she was in no mood for affection at the moment, especially the fraternal kind that would emphasize it was the only kind she'd get from now on. "I have the books," he said, instead. "Dalmaine's Practical Interrogation Techniques, Gray's Anatomy, and Wu's An Inquisitor's Manual of Pharmacology. Major Illyanov sends his regards, and asked me to tell you that his evenings are free if you think some tutoring would help."

"I'll take him up on that, gladly." Anything to help keep her mind off her pain and loss . . . "Though I'm surprised to find him so willing to help."

"I think he's pleased that you're interested in his specialty," Odeon said. There were no prohibitions against a woman becoming an Inquisitor, any more than there were against them entering whatever other field they chose--but the fact remained that very few women chose Enforcement, and to the best of his knowledge there had never been a female Inquisitor. "Want me to ask him to come over tonight?"

"Yes, please."

* * * * *

Cortin had started reading as soon as Mike left, not long after lunch, and halfway through the first chapter of Dalmaine's book, she was totally absorbed. He gave a brief overview of the basic first-stage techniques taught at the Academy, then continued with the psychology of willing witnesses and how to help them remember pertinent facts. Cortin recognized several of the so-called lieutenant's techniques, nodding as increasing knowledge let her appreciate his skill more fully. The next chapter started to deal with reluctant cases, and within ten pages Cortin had the other two books open and was referring back and forth. Supper came; she ate it mechanically, with no idea when she was finished of what she'd eaten, as she kept studying.

She jumped when a hand covered her page. "What--!"

"I apologize for interrupting such intense study, Captain Cortin, but I have been trying to attract your attention for several minutes." The tall, attractive man in Enforcement gray, with St. Dmitri collar insignia and major's leaf, bowed. "Major Ivan Petrovich Illyanov. Your instructor--and delighted to have such an attentive student. How far have you gotten?"

When Cortin told him, he smiled. "Excellent progress. Now we see how well you have absorbed what you have read." He began questioning her--without any of the memory-enhancing techniques, Cortin

noted--nodding or frowning occasionally at her responses. He made her work, and she did so enthusiastically, disappointed when he finally called a halt.

"You cannot learn a year's course material in one night," he said drily. "Though at this rate you may well do so in a month. The classroom material, at any rate." He touched a bandaged hand. "May I see?"

"Of course. Uh . . ."

"Uh' what?" Illyanov asked, gently unwrapping the bandage.

"Mike--Captain Odeon--told you why I want to learn this?"

"He did indeed." Illyanov paused, smiled at her. "I doubt there is an officer in any Enforcement service on this world of ours, perhaps anywhere in the entire Systems, who does not know of Captain Joan Cortin and her ordeal. It should please you to learn that anti-Brotherhood operations are currently overwhelmed with volunteers sworn to avenge you. Although that has driven the Brotherhood to ground, so I fear I must tell you we are having no more real success than before."

"I am pleased--and flattered," Cortin said. "It never occurred to me that there'd be that much of a reaction."

"But you are also pleased there will be some left to hunt when you recover." Illyanov finished undoing the bandage, nodded approvingly at the burn. "A good move, keeping these. You did it on instinct?"

"Yes. They're obscene, disgusting--a worse violation than the rape, by far--but it didn't seem right getting rid of them. Though I probably will, eventually."

"You will not show them at all times, then?"

"No--I plan to wear gloves except when I'm on a hunt."

"Remove them also during an interrogation, I would suggest." Illyanov smiled, replacing the bandage. "You have not yet reached that point in your studies, so you cannot be expected to know the psychological impact, but such touches can appreciably increase your odds of success. Terror is often more persuasive than pain."

"I will, then. Thank you." But she'd still use the pain . . .

"The pleasure is mine." He stood, bowed again. "Until tomorrow, then?"

To see more of Shannon: 2a. Musing

3. Center

Late July 2571

As Cortin recovered and the pain in her body eased to what Egan assured her was the best she could expect without further surgery, the burns on her hands took top priority, as she'd expected, on her list of personal grievances against the Brothers. Any trooper they--or most terrorist groups, for that matter--captured, was certain to be brutally beaten, and usually raped. Coming out alive was the best one could hope for, and she'd managed that. The experience would leave psychological as well as physical scars, she was certain, but like all officers and any enlisted personnel who wanted it, she'd gone through extensive training and conditioning of both types in case she were subjected to terrorist captivity and mistreatment, and she was confident the experience wouldn't have any lasting effect on her. Except, probably, the desire for revenge; that, she had no

doubt, would last until she'd personally done justice on her attackers. Especially Brother Lawrence Shannon.

She knew, from helping other victims, that rape normally demolished a woman's desire for sex, sometimes permanently. In her case it hadn't; she wanted Mike as much as ever, and would have been glad to enjoy Major Illyanov, given the chance. It was a bitter irony that her training had left her with the desire, while the attack had robbed her of all capability. And it still seemed so pointless, when they'd been in the process of killing her!

Still, terrorists weren't known for reasonable behavior, or they wouldn't be terrorists. She'd simply have to live with the fact, she told herself grimly, of having the desire and not being able to do anything about it.

Bad as that was, though, it wasn't the worst. Nothing had prepared her for the Brothers burning their Hell-marks into her flesh; that was a totally unexpected violation! She wasn't being reasonable in keeping them, and she knew it; the reasonable thing would have been--was!--to have them covered with grafts. Much as they revolted her, though, the idea of having them removed still felt wrong. And Major Illyanov did think they'd be useful--so she'd settle for gloves.

As soon as she was free of the medical plumbing, she started exercising. The first day, she confined herself to her room, when no one else was there, to spare herself the embarrassment of being seen unfit in public--but the room was too small for decent exercise, and she was in a hurry to get back to duty and the practical side of her training.

The next morning, too impatient to wait for visiting hours and Mike's help, she found a hospital robe in the closet. It was too big, but it didn't drag the ground and sleeves could be rolled up, so she put it on. That gave her her first honest laugh since the attack when she looked at herself in the mirror, but the robe did cover the hospital gown's open back, so she felt decently enough dressed to go out into the corridor.

When she opened the door, she was astonished to find a pair of troopers, obviously on guard. One of them, a sergeant she remembered meeting briefly several years ago, looked startled to see her. "Captain Cortin! Is anything wrong, ma'am?"

"Nothing but a strong desire to recover enough to get out of here," she said, smiling at his grimace of agreement. "A mere captain doesn't rate an honor guard, and I haven't done anything to be arrested for, so how come you two're standing post?"

The sergeant--his name was Kennard, she remembered--chuckled. "Scuttlebutt says you're still on the Brothers' wipe list. Colonel Nguyen has people like Corporal Redden here assigned officially, and some of us figure they could use a little unofficial help."

"Um." Cortin gestured acquiescence, bemused. "I don't really think I need protection, but I have to admit it's reassuring having you around. Is there anything in your orders that says I can't go for a walk in the corridor?"

"Not a thing, ma'am," Redden replied immediately. "The detail I'm on is just to stay with you and keep you safe. Though Dr. Egan seems to think you'll be safe enough since it'll be a week or so before you're up to anything even a little strenuous--like going for a walk."

"Dr. Egan's a civilian," Cortin said, appreciating the men's sympathetic expressions. "You may have to catch me if I overdo, though."

"No problem," Kennard said.

"Good. Shall we go, then?"

* * * * *

The day Cortin could get to the far end of the hospital building and back without having to stop for rest, she got Mike to have her discharged--over Egan's protests--and help her move into the VOQ.

That evening after supper, Odeon went to her room. He'd been increasingly worried about her lack of apparent emotion; he'd seen others like that go into an abrupt withdrawal and become extremely depressed, sometimes even suicidal. Her interest in interrogation and desire for revenge would both help, but he was determined to give her a better reason to live.

When they were both settled comfortably with cups of her favorite herb tea, he grinned at her. "I meant to mention this earlier--you look a lot better in uniform than you did in a hospital gown!"

"I feel a lot better, too. Hospitals are all right, I suppose, but I'm a lot more comfortable in quarters. Not to mention wearing a gun."

"Of course you are," Odeon said, chuckling. In hospital was the only time an Enforcement trooper, officer or enlisted, was completely unarmed; even in bed, they always had a weapon within easy reach. "Going to Mass tomorrow?"

"Why, is it Sunday?"

"No." Odeon chuckled again; it was easy to lose track of time in a hospital! "That was yesterday; I just thought you might want to join me. I talked to the Academy chaplain, and he's going to offer a special Mass of Thanksgiving for your recovery."

Cortin stared at her tea, turning the cup in her gloved hands. "That's a little premature," she said at last. "And I'm not at all sure it's something I'm thankful for. It might've been better if you'd been just a few minutes later."

She meant it--and that was exactly what he'd been afraid of. "You shouldn't feel that way, Joanie. God had a reason for keeping you alive; you've got to believe that."

"Why?" Cortin asked tiredly. She'd spent quite a few hours thinking about that, when she should've been sleeping but the pain wouldn't let sleep come and nothing seemed to matter except an end to her torment. "I'm no saint, but I've never done anything really terrible, either. Certainly nothing bad enough to deserve this living Hell."

That was true, Odeon thought. Still--"We can't hope to understand His reasons for what He does," he said. "We can only accept. Offer the pain to Him, Joanie. Come to Mass with me tomorrow, dedicate yourself to Him, and ask Him what He wants of your life."

He looked so hopeful she couldn't refuse him. "All right, Mike. I'll go with you, and I'll try to do what you say. Just don't expect too much."

"I'll settle for anything that'll help you." Odeon smiled at her, raising his cup. "To your recovery."

"Thanks--are you going out tonight?"

He'd been planning on it, but he quickly changed his plans. "No, why?"

"I'd like some company, then, if you don't mind." She grimaced. "Though if you'd prefer a woman who can do

something for you instead of a counterfeit, I'd certainly understand."

"Even disabled, you're more of a real woman than any I've paid to be with," Odeon said. "I've always enjoyed your company, even when one of us was too tired or too hurt for fun and games--you know that."

"I know--I felt the same way." Cortin managed a smile. "But I will miss the fun and games, and you'll have to be careful about waking up shooting because you hear something out of place--I haven't learned to stay in the right position while I'm sleeping yet, so it's at night my back acts up worst, and I have a bad tendency to scream when it does."

At least her sense of humor hadn't completely deserted her, even though the humor now was on the dark side. "I'll be careful," he promised. "I certainly wouldn't want to shoot my favorite recruit."

* * * * *

She found it comforting to lie beside Mike, even though part of her also found it a near-painful reminder of what they'd shared earlier. She lay awake for awhile listening to his quiet breathing before it lulled her into a doze, then into deeper sleep and dreams of a better time. It was her Graduation Day; the Duke of Columbia had almost finished pinning on her classmates' gold Second Lieutenants' bars. Her own, the silver of a First Lieutenant since she was first in her class, already gleamed on her immaculate gray uniform. She was impatient for the ceremony to end. She'd seen her recruiter in the crowd, and she wanted to carry out the plans she'd made for him, plans that bore no resemblance to the sometimes-sadistic ones her classmates claimed to have for their recruiters. She'd discovered the surprisingly pleasurable reality of the Enforcement Service's sexual freedom not long after her arrival at the Academy, quickly losing her inhibitions. Being the only woman in the class, she had enjoyed her instructors' attentions--but the corollary was far less enjoyable. In prewar days, being a teacher's favorite had supposedly meant having an easier time than other students; at the Royal Academy, it meant additional work, more intensive instruction, and more severe testing. The harder they were on her, she was repeatedly told, the better her odds of survival would be when she got out in the field--and she had thrived on the increased challenge, as she'd proven by graduating at the top of her class. But much as she had enjoyed her instructors'--and a few of her classmates'--beds and bodies, it hadn't taken her long to realize that Mike Odeon was the one she wanted most, and she was determined to take full advantage of this chance at him.

The ceremony ended at last; she accepted congratulations--and her first salute, from Lieutenant Odeon. She returned it with the proper dignity, then launched herself at him for a completely undignified, and equally thorough, kiss. He cooperated after a second's startlement, then grinned down at her. "That isn't the kind of attack I carried out on my recruiter!"

"Oh, that's just the first sortie," Cortin assured him, pleased to find that although he was sterile, he certainly wasn't impotent, as quite a few sterile men were; she'd felt that quite clearly during the kiss.

"I think I'm going to like this attack," he said, still grinning.

"I hope so." She tightened her arms around him. "You're staying at the VOQ?"

"Uh-huh." Odeon raised an eyebrow. "You're thinking of a tactical strike?"

"Not exactly--more like a siege, if you don't mind my using your toothbrush in the morning. I couldn't think of a reasonable excuse to bring my kit to Graduation in case you did show up."

"My toothbrush is yours," Odeon said with a chuckle. "It sounds like you're anxious to get this siege started."

"I've been taught that unnecessary delay is bad strategy," Cortin said. "Shall we go, Lieutenant, or should I begin my siege here?"

"We go, Lieutenant," Odeon said, and they did.

When they got to his room, they didn't hurry, but they didn't waste time, either; once their uniforms were hung in the closet, Joan's siege began in earnest, and with her target's full cooperation. Lying beside him, kissing him, caressing his body with the battle scars few Enforcement and no SO men escaped, feeling his answering caresses on her still-smooth skin, was even better than she'd dreamed.

Exploration grew into passion, caresses becoming more direct and intimate, yet there was still no hurry. Cortin savored the touch of his hand skillfully stroking her, the silk-over-steel delight of him as ready for her as she was for him. It was she who moved first, eager to take him in, and she gasped with pleasure as they joined and began moving in the eternal rhythm.

Then pain stabbed through her, bringing her awake with a choked sob. As it slowly subsided, she became aware of arms around her, a voice in her ear, and she tried to tear herself away.

Odeon wouldn't let her. "It's me, Joanie, Mike--not some Brother. You're safe. You know I won't hurt you--and I'll do my best not to let anyone else hurt you, either. Relax, try to go back to sleep. Want your gun?"

"I've got it under my pillow." Cortin managed a half-smile. "The sovereign remedy for boogey-men, my father used to say. A 10-mm Ruger with every fifth round a tracer load."

"Smart man, your father," Odeon said. "Not much human-size a 10-mm load won't stop, and tracers'll discourage the rest. Think you can sleep now?"

"Yes, I think so." Cortin sighed, relaxing slowly. "Thanks, Mike. For being here, and for . . . you know. Make sure I wake up in time for Mass, will you?"

"No problem," Odeon said. "Sleep in peace, Joanie."

* * * * *

Tuesday, 23 July 2571

The Mass had more of an effect on Cortin than she had expected it to--more than it ever had, even when she was in a mood for religion. For some reason it seemed more meaningful, more immediate, than it had before. Maybe it was the pain that made her empathize with the tortured image on the cross, maybe it was something else, she didn't know. All she was sure of was that for the first time, it felt like the "collective sacrifice" it was supposed to be, and when she went forward for Communion reciting the "Domine, non sum dignus," she found herself hoping the Host would actually heal the hurt in her soul.

It didn't, but when she returned to her pew she did feel less despondent, and when the service was over, she found to her surprise that she intended to return the next morning. As they walked to the Officers' Club for breakfast, she turned to Odeon with an unforced smile. "Thanks for getting me there, Mike. Mind if I go with you again tomorrow?"

"Be glad to have you. It helped, then?"

"Yes. I don't know how, but it did."

"Good!" Odeon grinned down at her. "I thought it had, from your expression. Just remember, He doesn't allow any of us to be tried beyond our endurance--even though He may come right to the brink of it."

"I will." She started to ask him a question, but they were almost at the Club; she waited until they had gotten their food and started to eat, then she said, "You told me once you wanted to become a priest. Why didn't you?"

"Because my primary calling was to law enforcement instead." He shrugged. There were priests in Enforcement, true--even a few bishops--but not in the operational sections, which was where his calling lay. "I've never understood why the two couldn't still be combined--the prewars sometimes had fighting priests and bishops--but since I had to make the choice, I decided I'd rather be a good law officer than a mediocre priest."

Cortin nodded. "That makes sense, though I'd bet a month's pay you'd be an outstanding priest, not a mediocre one. As well as a great law officer--have you ever thought of applying for an exception?"

"Quite a few times," Odeon admitted. "I think the reason I never did was that I was afraid I'd get my hopes up, then be turned down."

"I can understand that," Cortin said, remembering. "I think you should, though. Maybe if you point out that Enforcement troops, especially Special Ops, go places regular priests don't get to in years, it would help. His Holiness does seem to be willing to accept that sort of innovation."

"Maybe I should, at that," Odeon agreed. There were always articles in the various parish papers bemoaning the lack of vocations, especially to serve remote areas . . . "In fact, maybe I should ask for a general exception. I'm not the only one who'd like to do something more positive than just administer Last Rites."

"It's worth a try," Cortin said. She speared a piece of ham-and-cheese omelet, ate it, then said, "I can understand how you feel. It may sound odd for an Enforcement officer, but I'd love holding a baby for baptism--they're fun to cuddle."

"Cuddle a baby?" a voice said from behind her. "I hope that does not mean you want to discontinue your training; I should deeply regret the loss of such a promising student."

"Not at all, Major!" Cortin turned, gesturing to another chair at their table. "You must've missed some of the conversation. Would you care to join us?"

"With pleasure," Illyanov said, putting his tray down and seating himself. "I am personally glad to hear you intend to continue; it takes no more than fertility to bear children, and anyone with moderate interest can become a fairly competent Inquisitor--but it takes both talent and motivation to do truly well in our field." He smiled at her. "Which I am convinced you will. It is good to see you out of the hospital."

"It's good to be out!" Cortin said emphatically. "I'm still technically in hospital status, and Doctor Egan has made it clear she'd put me back in bed if I do anything too strenuous--but it's great being out of there and back in uniform!"

"I am fully familiar with the feeling," Illyanov agreed. "There are few things worse than enforced idleness, especially in such surroundings." He raised a hand, smiling at her. "Not that I call your studying idleness, not at all--I am, in fact, impressed by your industry--but from your Academy and other records, I am sure you are impatient to begin practical application of your theoretical work."

"I certainly am." She wasn't all that eager to practice the first two stages, though, especially in the beginning

when they were on Academy cadets, with the additional purpose of training them to resist interrogation. Her interest was in third-stage, with Brothers of Freedom as her subjects--but she supposed it was all necessary, to achieve her real end. "How soon can we start?"

"Such eagerness!" Illyanov laughed. "Nor are you the only one; I have been relieved of my classes and given orders to expedite your training, once you were out of the hospital. We are, if you choose, to concentrate on Stage Three--and the one who gave me those orders said it was highly likely you would so choose."

"He was right." Cortin thought back to the debriefing and that mysterious Lieutenant, certain he was somehow involved--but that the classified assignment probably was too, so it would be wiser not to ask about either his identity or his involvement. She'd thank him for it later, if she could do so without breaking security. For now, she smiled at Illyanov. "So, when do we start?"

"I do love an enthusiastic student . . . shortly after we finish here, if you are that impatient. Any Brothers of Freedom captured in this area--except, for now, those probably having critical or time-sensitive information--will either be sent here or held where they were captured until you decide whether to question them yourself or turn them over to another Inquisitor." He gave her a raised-eyebrow smile. "I confess to being astonished at that, Captain. I have heard of prisoners being reserved for a particularly skilled Inquisitor, yes, but never for a student. Even one as promising as yourself."

Odeon whistled. "Neither have I, and I'd thought I'd heard just about everything." He'd known for a long time that Joan Cortin was something special, but Illyanov was right--this was unprecedented. "Joanie, any ideas?"

"Not exactly, though I can't help connecting this with the Inquisitor on the team that debriefed me. I'm positive he's more than a simple Lieutenant, and--" she chuckled ruefully, "from what I've learned since, I'm sure he picked up more from me than I told him verbally. Or wanted to tell him, for that matter."

"And what did this more-than-Lieutenant look like?" Illyanov asked, suddenly attentive.

"A bit over 180 centis, slender build, medium-brown hair receding slightly above the temples, green eyes, classical features that looked like he laughs a lot--" She broke off, seeing recognition in the others' faces. "You've both met him, then."

They nodded. "The . . . officer I spoke to at Personnel," Odeon said.

"Colonel David Bradford," Illyanov said with a slow smile, "of His Majesty's Own. Yes, that explains many of the rumors currently circulating."

After a few moments, Odeon asked, "Are you going to share that explanation?"

"Indeed, but not here. Captain Cortin and I must go to the Detention Center so she may choose her first subject. I will share my deduction on the way, if you care to join us."

"Try to keep me away!"

* * * * *

As soon as they were on the way to Detention, Cortin turned to her instructor. "All right--now why would someone like Colonel Bradford be taking such an interest in me?"

"Bear in mind that this is speculation based on rumor," Illyanov cautioned. "However, I have considerable experience putting together small pieces of information to form an accurate whole; I am confident of my

evaluations."

"They've got to be better than the nothing I have now," Cortin said. "Go on, please."

"Very well. This first item I rate as virtual certainty." He paused. "The Monarchs' Council in New Rome this past December did remarkably little of significance, to outward seeming. Not true?"

"Very true," Cortin said. "I'd expected a lot more, after the Kunming raid."

"Most people did--and from observations I have made since, the expectations were accurate; the reality has simply not been revealed yet. I am convinced that Their Majesties, either at His Holiness' urging or with his full consent, are in the process of forming an inter-System--or perhaps all-System, the effect is the same--anti-Brotherhood elite."

"It's about time!" Odeon exclaimed.

"I agree. Especially since it appears the members of that force will be people who have little reason to be overly fond of the Brotherhood. All but one of the people I believe to be selectees or potential selectees are Special Operations personnel, and all have suffered some personal harm from the Brothers." He glanced at Joan, smiling. "From his interest in you, Captain, I think it highly likely that you are not in full uniform. You certainly have most of the other qualifications I have deduced: a personal grievance that would motivate you to accept extremely hazardous anti-Brotherhood missions, a clean service record, excellent to outstanding combat skills, regular attendance at church when possible--all except a specialty, which you are getting now. I would say that as soon as you receive your Warrant, you will be approached about joining that unit."

"It fits," Odeon said softly. "So well that's got to be it. But why did you say it might be at His Holiness' urging?"

"You do not remember the Kunming raid Captain Cortin referred to?"

"When it happened," Odeon said drily, "I was snowbound in the Northwest Territory, alone in a shelter halfway between Holy Cross and Laredo Junction. By the time I got out almost a month later, there wasn't much talk about it any longer--I don't remember hearing any details."

"It was quite similar to the raid in which Captain Cortin was attacked. The church was full of schoolchildren and their teachers; there were no survivors."

Odeon crossed himself, feeling sick. Schoolchildren in church, staff and patients in a convalescent hospital--
"What next?"

"Only the Brothers know," Illyanov said grimly. "But I would be extremely surprised if they plan to attack anyone who can defend themselves. Nor do they seem amenable to persuasion, which leaves no alternative: they must be eliminated."

"Now that I could enjoy," Cortin said consideringly. "I could enjoy it a lot."

"I am sure you will have the opportunity," Illyanov said. "Perhaps Captain Odeon will as well, if he is a specialist and has adequate personal grievance."

"I do. I'm a specialist, yes, a Tracker. The grievance I'd rather not talk about, except to say it gives me a good reason to go after Brothers. Any idea when this group will go public? Because I plan to apply for it as soon as I can."

Illyanov shrugged. It wasn't hard for an experienced Inquisitor to read Odeon's expression, and from that deduce his grievance; the question was whether Colonel Bradford would consider it sufficient. "The timing I can only guess at, Captain. I have heard no rumors on that subject."

"Living in the capital, though, you'd have a feel for it; what's your best guess?"

"Until recently, I would have said the next time the Brothers made a particularly abhorrent raid, but that would have been the hospital one. I still believe it will be tied to such a raid, though it now appears there is at least one additional criterion. The most likely is that the unit does not yet have sufficient personnel, but it could be any number of other possibilities; I simply do not know."

Odeon nodded. "Makes sense--but that could be months, at their current rate. If I see him before that, I'll try to apply then."

"There is one other item of interest," Illyanov said as they drove into the Detention Center compound and toward the gray, windowless main building. "That is that many of the new unit's members supposedly either have been or will be given full Holy Orders. I find this plausible, since such a force will of necessity spend much time in remote areas where priests are extremely rare." He paused, then said thoughtfully, "I think that a wise decision, if only for reasons of morale. A civilian priest would find it difficult if not impossible to survive under such conditions, yet people in mortal danger should not be deprived of the sacraments for prolonged periods; I know that I, for one, would not care to be placed in such a situation."

"Neither would I," Cortin said, then she turned to smile at Odeon. "It looks like you won't have to apply for a special exemption after all, Mike--just get into this new unit, and let them know you're interested in the priesthood."

"I plan to do exactly that," Odeon said. "In fact, unless you need me to help in the interrogation, I don't think I'll wait until I happen into him; I'll see if I can get hold of the good Colonel and put my bid in. Initiative never hurts, and he can't very well say much if I tell him I'm applying based on extrapolations from rumor."

Cortin glanced at Illyanov, who shook his head. "No, it doesn't look like we'll need you. Go for it, Mike--and put in my application while you're at it; I don't want to take any chances on getting overlooked. I should have enough practical experience to qualify as a specialist by the time the group is activated, especially if the Brothers maintain a several-month interval between horror raids."

"I'll do that." Odeon turned to Illyanov. "Is there a phone in there I could use for an hour or so?"

"Yes, in the Inquisitors' lounge. I will have you admitted there as my guest."

"Thanks."

When they got inside the building, Illyanov showed Odeon the lounge and introduced him to the three Inquisitors it held, then he and Cortin went to the Records Section. The clerk there was a young private, who looked to Cortin as though he might possibly be a full week out of boot camp; he was certainly still new enough to the job that he showed apprehension at the sight of an Inquisitor's badge. "Yes, Major?" he asked.

"I wish to see the records of all prisoners being held for third-stage interrogation."

"I'm sorry, sir," the young private said, obviously nervous. "As of the first of the week, all those not currently undergoing questioning are being saved for Inquisitor-Captain Cortin's evaluation."

Inquisitor-Captain, Illyanov noted, not Inquisitor-Trainee. Yes, things were being accelerated for her, indeed.

But if Colonel Bradford thought it best that she be treated as fully qualified by Detention Center staffs, there had to be a reason; he would go along. "Captain Cortin and I are currently acting as partners," he said. "However, you must keep your records in order, must you not?" He turned to Cortin. "If you would identify yourself for this young man, Captain, we can proceed."

"Of course, Major." Cortin dug out her ID, the first time she'd used it since before going into the convalescent hospital, and had to hide her surprise as she showed it to the clerk. Besides the standard Enforcement Service card, the little folder held an Inquisitor's badge! Keeping her voice level, she said, "Now, may we see those records?"

"Yes, Captain--it'll only take me a moment." While he went to the files for them, Cortin gave Illyanov a curious look, got only a slight shrug in return, and took a closer look at her ID. It was the one she'd had since making captain, yes--there was where the pen had spluttered while she was signing it--but it had been altered. Very skillfully altered, by someone who knew precisely what he was doing, and according to it, Illyanov was right; she wasn't in full uniform. Or . . . was she? Surely she would have noticed an SO patch on her sleeve! She snuck a quick glance, and was relieved to see nothing there. At least it didn't look like she was going either blind or insane!

"Here you are, Captain," the clerk said, handing her a small stack of folders. "If you want to go through them here, you can use that desk by the west door."

"Thank you." Cortin took them, going to the desk and seating herself, then opening the first one--but her mind was on the additions to her ID. She took out the folder again, staring at the badge and the Special Operations stamp. "What's going on?" she asked Illyanov in a low voice. "Why do I get a badge while I'm still in training, and why sneak it all in on me like this?"

Illyanov thought for several moments, frowning. At last, keeping his voice as low as hers had been, he said, "Unless you wish to attribute it to Colonel Bradford's well-known and decidedly peculiar sense of humor, which I consider likely, I do not know. The speed can perhaps be explained if he has information not generally available about an upcoming raid, though I would have expected that as your instructor I would have been informed when you were granted a Warrant--out of courtesy, if nothing else--but I can think of no logical reason for him not to inform you."

"Neither can I, so I guess you're right about it being his sense of humor." Cortin put the ID away and began studying the prisoner records. They seemed to be arranged in reverse order of capture, which made sense; the ones deemed to have critical information had already been removed, so the ones on top would be the ones who had been here longest, already softened up by the first stages of interrogation.

When she opened the last folder, she bit back a curse, then, at Illyanov's startled glance, said, "I think I just found out why the badge." She turned the folder so he could read it easily. The subject was a deserter, who had compounded his crime by joining the Brotherhood, but was so new to it that he was believed to have no significant information. "Bradford's making sure I don't do what this plager did. I told you he was reading more than I wanted to tell him--he had to know I'd never join the Brotherhood, but he also had to know I'd go after them, either legally or as a rogue. And that I'd much rather do it legally."

Illyanov nodded. "I read the same things, of course. I did not, however, realize that his desire to keep you in Enforcement was great enough he would have all practical training waived--even for one who had made perfect scores in all the theoretical material."

"You didn't tell me that!"

"I did not wish to make you over-confident. That, however, is no longer a consideration; if you are to function

independently, with little or no notice and limited practical experience, you should be as certain as possible of your ability to do so." He smiled. "As I did tell you, you were most promising. Motivation and hard work have let you live up to that promise so far; I see no reason to doubt that you will continue to do so. But now, Inquisitor-Captain Cortin, you have an interrogation to conduct." He gestured at the folders. "Logic will tell you to choose one who has been through preliminary questioning, and your emotions will tell you to choose the rogue-turned-Brother. However, you have been an Enforcement officer long enough to have learned to trust certain feelings; do any of them indicate which of these will give you the most useful information?"

Cortin moved her hands across the folders as if she could get her information that way, wishing she really could. She had learned to trust her hunches--they had kept her alive more than once--but she was less certain of them in these circumstances. Finally, she picked two she thought ought to have more information than their records suggested: a thief suspected of exercising his skills for the Brotherhood and, though she admitted to herself it might be as much because of his betrayal of the Service as for any information, the rogue trooper. The thief had been through the preliminary stages; the rogue hadn't, formally, but the Special Ops men who had captured him had--justifiably, she thought--taken out some of their anger on him, so he'd been through a crude form of second stage as well.

"These two, I think," she said, handing Illyanov the folders. "The thief first; procedures on the renegade weren't exactly by the book, so I'd like to have a little experience before I start on him."

Illyanov nodded, gathering up the remaining folders. Cortin followed him back to the counter, glad that since he was the ranking officer, he'd be the one to give the orders; she didn't yet know what orders to give!

"Yes, sir?" the clerk asked.

"Have prisoner 829-A taken to Interrogation Suite Delta's third-stage room. Standard restraints, no special requirements."

"Yes, sir." The clerk relayed Illyanov's orders through an intercom, got an acknowledgement. "He will be waiting when you get there, sir. Ma'am."

"Thank you. Shall we go, Captain?"

On the way to the interrogation suite, Cortin removed her gloves and tucked them in the back of her belt, then rubbed the scars on the backs of her hands. In a few minutes she'd start getting the first installment of her revenge for those, and the other hurts they stood for--and it felt good. Illyanov read her gestures and smiled. Most trainees were nervous about their first practical work, especially their first third-stage work. It was understandable enough--he could remember his own apprehension--but it was those who went into it with anticipation, as Cortin was doing, who generally became the outstanding practitioners, those whose very names could be enough to persuade criminals to avoid their attentions by a full confession. It was a shame that if his speculations were accurate, she would be in the field much of the time, where she was likely to be killed, rather than at a Detention Center where she would be safe and her skills could be put to their best use. However, he chided himself, it would be better having her working within the law, anywhere, than it would be to have her outside it, not only useless but being hunted!

When they got to the suite and exchanged tunics for the coveralls that would protect their undershirts and trousers, Illyanov gave her a final caution. "Do not let your enthusiasm make you careless, Captain. Even a field interrogation requires both caution and precision."

"I'll be careful," Cortin assured him. "You've told me often enough that the line between persuasive pain and unconsciousness is a very fine one, and I don't intend to let him cross it."

"Very good." Illyanov smiled at her. "I will intervene only if you ask, or if you appear about to do something unfortunate. Shall we go?"

4. Ordination

St. Thomas, Tuesday, 23 July 2571

About mid-afternoon, Shannon was leaning back in his desk chair, planning the March raid that would supposedly mark the beginning of the Brotherhood's real push against the Kingdoms, when he sensed a use of power that had to be Cortin. It was weak, barely detectable, but undeniably there, and he swore viciously. Even the slightest deliberate use she made of her power might lead to more . . . did he dare check to see if it was deliberate?

That should be safe enough, he decided at last. It was far more difficult to detect a passive use such as observing than an active one such as coercion or physical alteration, and Cortin's use was weak enough it might well be unconscious.

Despite his decision that the risk was low, he was cautious in extending his sensitivity toward her. When he made contact, though, he felt a sense of relief. Her use was unconscious, which meant there was no immediate danger.

He could have retreated then, but he was too intrigued; she was getting her first practical experience as an Inquisitor, and he couldn't resist the temptation to watch.

The subject was one of the Brotherhood's suppliers. Too cowardly to actually join the Brotherhood, but a skillful thief who could generally get what the Brothers wanted, and sold it to them at about half what he'd charge anyone else. It was a shame to lose him, but worth it to watch Cortin work on her first victim, whether she turned out to be the incomparable expert he expected if she had the nerve, or the total incompetent he expected if she didn't.

"Are you a Brother of Freedom?" she asked the prisoner.

"No."

Cortin nodded. "Then have you worked for them?"

"Not that, either."

"In that case, we can proceed. I don't suppose you'd care to answer my questions without unpleasantness?"

"I don't have anything to tell you."

"The choice is yours." Cortin picked up a scalpel, pausing at the expression on Illyanov's face. "Is something wrong, Major?"

"That is not the standard way of beginning an interrogation."

"It will be, for me," Cortin said. "I'll do whatever is needed to stop criminals, but I have no intention of hurting innocents."

"He denied everything."

"But he only told the truth the first time. He's worked for the Brothers, even though he isn't one himself, and he has some significant information."

"You never told me you had truthsense," Illyanov said quietly. "That is a most useful talent."

"The subject never came up--but I can't be lied to, never could even as a child. If a question has a yes-or-no answer, it doesn't matter if he tells the truth or not. I'll know."

"As I said, a most useful talent. Not every Inquisitor can tell truth from lies intended only to stop the pain, and most of us who do have that ability have developed it through long experience." He smiled at her in a way Shannon sensed was intended to express only approval, but hid a degree of affection the Raidmaster found both disgusting and amusing. "Go on, then."

Shannon watched critically as she began work. This would be a short interrogation--despite his bravado, the thief was a coward, and already terrified of the two Inquisitors--but it would tell him whether or not Cortin would make the grade.

The first few minutes left him with no doubt that she would. Oh, she had some problems--the determination not to hurt innocents, as if there were any such thing, was one. Another was giving her prisoner the chance to answer without persuasion, then not wanting to use any more than she had to, though neither surprised him particularly; she had always been overly scrupulous. Which was probably why her primary motive was to extract information rather than to enjoy herself.

It was ironic that she was enjoying herself, and thoroughly, even though it wasn't the same kind of pleasure he experienced in giving pain. For her, the only real passion involved here was for justice; criminals caused pain, so it was just to inflict it on them, either as punishment or in the interest of preventing further crime. It was simply more immediate this way than it had been in the past--and it gave her victims the unfortunate opportunity to repent. Even though right now Cortin was concerned with punishment rather than repentance.

* * * * *

Cortin removed the blood-spattered coverall, then went into the suite's small bathroom to wash her hands, feeling dissatisfied. She couldn't quite identify why, though; she had eventually persuaded the thief that she could tell when he was lying to her, and he had finally told them of his contacts within the Brotherhood, giving enough details that those two would be taken into custody next time they appeared in public. Neither theft nor contact with the Brotherhood were capital crimes, so once she'd made sure he knew nothing of Shannon or the horror raids, she'd called the guards and had him taken away for sentencing.

Major Illyanov had said she'd done well, she reminded herself as she put her tunic back on. So why should she feel otherwise? The answer, of course, was that she shouldn't--but the fact remained that she did. Well, she'd be trying again after lunch, on that trooper who'd gone rogue; maybe she'd do better with him.

Shortly afterward, she and Illyanov entered the Inquisitors' lounge. The only one there was Mike Odeon, slouched in an armchair with his feet up on a hassock and what she could only call a positively smug look on his face. It took no effort at all to realize that his phoning had been successful; she grinned, her mood lightening. "Is it still Captain," she asked, "or do I call you 'Father' now?"

"Depends on the circumstances," Odeon said, returning her grin lazily. "Until after the next horror raid, anyway." He stood, turning to Illyanov with a more sober expression. "Which you're not to talk about even as a rumor, sir. Colonel Bradford asked me whose deductions I was going by--I suppose he knows my records well enough to be sure they weren't mine--and I'm to tell you the whole thing is rated an all-Systems secret, until King Mark says otherwise."

"Understood--and I will of course comply." Illyanov bowed slightly. "But since I did deduce this much, will you be able to tell me how correct I was?"

"Now that I can do, along with a bit more," Odeon said, grinning again. "And our lunch is courtesy of Inquisitor-Colonel Bradford--it should be here any time. If you don't mind, I'd just as soon wait till then to go any further."

"As you wish."

Odeon's prediction was correct; their lunch arrived less than half a minute later, and not long afterward, they were eating a meal that might have come from the Royal Palace itself.

All three spent some time in silent enjoyment, then Cortin couldn't hold her curiosity any more. "How did you do it, Mike?"

"No problem, Joanie--none at all." Odeon smiled at her. "I have the feeling he expected my call, though I don't know how he could've. At any rate, I asked about both of us applying, and made what I think was a rather eloquent argument on our behalves. He listened to me, even though I have a sneaky feeling he knew everything I was going to say--then he said we were in, and called me to the Palace for ordination. Our new Commanding Officer is also Bishop of the St. Thomas Strike Force, it seems." He grinned. "If you still want to go to Mass tomorrow, I'd like you to come to my first one. Even if it will have to be private."

"I'd be honored," Cortin said. "What about my application?"

Odeon laughed. "Looked at your ID lately, Inquisitor-Captain?" Then he sobered, quickly. "No, I'm sorry--you're in, Joanie. Probably as a team leader, if you get anything useful out of your first subjects--as team-second, at worst. And we'll be on the same team, whoever's CO." He frowned. "But--Joanie, His Holiness has decreed that all Strike Force Inquisitors be priests, since it's conceivable even a Brother might repent at the last minute and need the sacraments. But you never said anything about having that call."

"Because you just told me about it," Cortin said. "It's pretty obvious my primary call is to being a Strike Force Inquisitor; if part of that is taking Holy Orders, I'll do it. And I'll do my best to be a good priest." With a lot of prayers that she never be called on to administer to a Brother that way . . . "Do I need to be ordained right away, or can I take care of this afternoon's subject first?"

"I get the impression he wants us to be ready to go any time, so I'd say you should get in touch with him sometime today. How long do you think this subject'll take you?"

Cortin shrugged. "No real idea, though I don't think he'll be easy."

"I believe you should count on a minimum of several hours," Illyanov said. "Probably no less than a day, perhaps a bit more. He was an Enforcement trooper, after all, and was trained to resist interrogation."

"You've got one of those?" Odeon smiled, wolfishly. "My urge is to tell you to take care of him before you do anything else, but Strike Force business has to come before even that. So I'd recommend you see Colonel Bradford first."

"That's not necessary."

Cortin recognized the "Lieutenant's" voice and started to rise, but was stopped by his next words. "As you were, gentles--and thank you, Major, for not giving me away." He pulled up a chair and joined them.

"Pleased to be of help, sir." Illyanov managed a seated bow. "I presume you are not here by chance?"

"Not at all, Major." Bradford smiled, the expression making him look years younger. "My interest in Captain Cortin led me to be sure I was informed of her choice of subject, and I wanted to review the films when she was done." He turned to Cortin, still smiling. "I hadn't expected you to choose two, especially not the first time, and especially not ones with so little promise. I've got to compliment you on how well you did with the first one."

Cortin shook her head. "With all respect, sir, I don't think I did that well. I just hope I can do better with the rogue."

"Maybe you can, at that," Bradford said. "As Major Illyanov said, not every Inquisitor can tell truth from lies intended only to stop the pain, and not many of those learn it the first time with a subject; if you can do that already, there's no telling what you'll be able to do with a little experience."

"As I told him, it's something I've had since childhood. I can't claim any special credit."

Bradford chuckled. "You don't have to, as long as it works," he said drily. "It's still a good sign, as is the fact that you enjoy our work from the start. There are those who never do, and they're naturally free to find something else--but I'd imagine you're anxious to get to work again."

"Yes, sir, I am."

"Good." Bradford stood. "In that case, shall we go to the chapel for your Ordination? I'm afraid the secrecy we're under for the time being means it can't be as elaborate as a civilian ordination, but you can be assured it will be effective."

"I don't doubt it, sir." It didn't seem quite proper to have Ordination without public acknowledgement, but Mike's must have been that way too, and since it obviously didn't bother him, she couldn't let it upset her. "I'm at your disposal."

The brief ceremony over, Bradford returned to the Palace while Cortin, Odeon and Illyanov made their way to the suite where her prisoner waited. It might have been a brief, basic ceremony, Cortin thought, but it was one she would remember for the rest of her life, from the unprecedented sight of an armed Bishop in Enforcement uniform and stole to the anointing of her hands. She rubbed the oil that was still on them. It was hard to believe she was really a priest now, far harder than it had been to believe she was an Inquisitor when she saw the badge in her ID folder--but of course she'd had some preparation for that, where half an hour ago it had never occurred to her that she'd be a priest. As she'd told Mike, though, if she had to be a priest to be a Strike Force team's Inquisitor, so be it. What surprised her was Bradford's acceptance of her necessity; the only explanation she could think of was that the Strike Force needed Priest-Inquisitors badly enough they'd ordain anyone who claimed both vocations. That was unsettling in its own way, but since it served her purpose, she wasn't inclined to argue.

The three entered the suite and went through the routine of getting into coveralls. Odeon wasn't sure why he was there, except that Joanie hadn't asked him to leave and he'd never seen a third-stage interrogation--though he'd both seen and helped in several second-stage ones. He said as much, then continued, "So if you need me to do anything, you'll have to tell me."

"I will," Cortin promised. "I didn't send you away because it didn't occur to me, but I'm certain to need help in the field from time to time, and there's no one I'd rather have backing me. So if you're willing, you should get used to both third-stage and my methods."

"I'm willing--especially," he opened the door to the third-stage room where the prisoner was shackled, waiting, "when the subject's someone like this plauger. Renegades and Brothers deserve anything an Inquisitor does to them."

"Keep thinkin' that, cull," the prisoner sneered. "You ain't worth the effort it'd take to spit on you. You or that other bastard, or the Bitch."

Cortin looked him over, coolly. He was naked, spreadeagled between chains in the ceiling and eyebolts in the floor, and must know he was completely at the Inquisitor's mercy--but he probably didn't know she was the Inquisitor. With all three of them in coveralls, he had no way of knowing who was who, just that he was faced with two men and a woman.

The Special Ops men who had beaten him had done a fairly professional job, she decided. Not enough to eliminate his defiance, but enough to give her quite a number of tender areas to exploit in addition to the natural ones. She smiled, approaching him and showing him the backs of her hands. "I'm the one you call the Enforcement bitch, rogue. I survived the Brothers' torture, unfortunately for you and the rest of them. Because I intend to return the favor without the mistake, and you will tell me how to find the specific ones who damaged me."

"I'm not tellin' you a damn thing, Bitch!"

"Wrong, and you know it," Cortin said calmly, beginning the examination that would tell her where his flesh was most sensitive and thus most vulnerable to her persuasion. "You will perhaps tell me less than I wish, but you will tell me as much as you can."

He jerked away as she probed a dark bruise over his ribs. "Like hell I will!"

"We shall see." Cortin hid a smile, a bit surprised at herself. She'd noticed a little of it last time, but it seemed to be getting stronger: when she conducted an interrogation, she adopted Illyanov's speech patterns--perhaps as a reaction to the prisoner's crudity, perhaps as a tribute to her teacher, she didn't know, and it didn't really seem to matter. "I think that before too long you will be most curious as to the information I want, and you will be increasingly eager to give it to me. When you do, I will release you."

She was pleased to see the prisoner starting to look apprehensive. He still had his defiance, though. "You damn servants of corruption never let anyone go! So why should I believe you'll start with me?"

"I did not mean that kind of release, as you should know, having been a trooper yourself. I meant only that I will release you from your pain." She explored further, identifying areas of promise from his sounds and flinching. It was a temptation to relieve him of his genitals, she thought as she reached them, but that would be short-sighted; from her own torture, as well as her studies, she knew them to be capable of some of the body's most exquisite pain. No, she would leave them where they could be of the most use--right where they were.

For Shannon's reaction: Reaction

Odeon watched in revolted fascination as his Joanie stripped skin, with precise delicacy, from the screaming renegade's hands. He'd expected her to go after the plauger's manhood in retaliation for what had been done to her, but--except for a couple of times he'd been lying so obviously it was an insult--she had left that alone.

When she finished her subject's hands, Cortin stepped back to study him. She had discovered quickly that his personal horrors included being skinned alive, so that had become her primary tactic against him. It was slow--enjoyably so, for her--and it was working very nicely indeed. "Have you decided to cooperate yet?"

"Damn you, Bitch!" The renegade tried to spit at her, without success. "Do your damndest--you won't get nothin' from me!"

Cortin smiled. He was still defiant, true, but Illyanov agreed with her assessment that he was the type who would remain defiant until he broke abruptly, and the same sense that told her when he was lying now told her he was close to that abrupt break. Give him the proper physical and psychological stimuli, and he should go from defiance to surrender in seconds.

She had already planned what to do, a continuation of her primary tactic--but a little bit of insurance wouldn't hurt. She turned to the other two. "Would either of you gentlemen care to avail yourselves of our guest while he still has enough spirit to be interesting? I fear I am being greedy, keeping him to myself."

Illyanov smiled, bowing to her. She hadn't been avoiding an extremely useful technique, as he had been half afraid she was, because it had been done to her; she had merely postponed it until the optimum time. "It is generous of you to share, Inquisitor. It has been some time since I have had the opportunity to indulge myself in another's subject. I will not interrupt your work?"

Both ignored the renegade's protests and insults as Cortin returned the bow. "Not at all--your enjoyment of him should make the removal of his genital skin even more effective." And enjoyable . . . "Particularly if you can make him move enough that it is he who pulls himself free of it."

"That should pose no particular difficulty."

If it hadn't been his Joanie doing the work, his Joanie who might need his help, Odeon would have taken advantage of his non-Inquisitor status to leave. He'd taken part in some second-stage interrogations, on occasion enjoyed them if the recipient had done something particularly revolting--but even the most methodical of those beatings seemed more human, cleaner, than the cool, meticulous infliction of pain both Inquisitors so obviously enjoyed. At first he'd thought Joanie's enjoyment a pretense intended to make her subject's torment harder to endure, but he couldn't convince himself of that any longer. Joanie was enjoying her subject's anguish, taking a delight in his screams and writhings that Odeon found sickening. But it was Joanie; after what had been done to her, surely she had a right to whatever pleasures she could find . . .

Cortin was beginning to think she'd miscalculated her subject's resistance when screams of defiance turned abruptly, as anticipated, into hopeless whimpering sobs mixed with pleas for mercy. She looked past him to Illyanov, who nodded; while he finished, she went to the instrument table and picked up a slender, razor-sharp dagger.

"Here is the end to your pain," she said softly, laying it against the raw flesh of the rogue's throat. "As soon as you answer my questions, I will give you your release. You have learned that you cannot lie to me; try it again, and you will find what has happened so far only the beginning. Do you understand?"

"Yes . . . Oh, God, no more!"

"That is up to you, not Him; you gave up any claim on His Mercy when you pledged allegiance to His enemies." Though, an inner voice said, he could still repent . . . "Tell me about Lawrence Shannon. Who he is, where he is, what his plans are."

"I don't know all that . . . please, I don't!"

He was telling the truth, unfortunately. "Very well. Tell me what you do know, then."

"I'm . . . not sure. No! Honest--he's the Raidmaster, everyone knows that--plans all the new-style raids--but

nobody knows him. A Lawrence Shannon even leads all those raids, but not the same one, maybe not the one who plans 'em. An' that's all I know about 'im, honest!"

"I believe you," Cortin said. It was too bad he knew so little, and that so inconclusive, but she had no doubt that he was telling her all he did know, as she'd asked. "Have you heard anything else? It need not be certain--a rumor of his plans, perhaps."

"No . . . no, wait . . . maybe. I overheard something . . . a hospice . . . or could be a retirement home, or some sort of hospital. Old folks, or sick ones, anyway. That's all."

"All on that subject, or all on any?"

"All on any . . . please?"

"You have earned it." Cortin drove the knife up under his ear; he gasped, shuddered once, and died.

Cortin looked at him for a moment, then smiled. "Compared to your present master, my friend, I was easy on you. May you suffer under him for eternity."

Odeon tasted bile, knew suddenly he was going to be sick. "Joanie--"

She turned, saw his pale face, and hurried to him. "Can you make it to the washroom?"

"I don't think--"

"No, he cannot," Illyanov interrupted, coming over and holding a wastebasket.

Odeon had time for a grateful look before his stomach completed its rebellion. He felt Joanie's hand stroking his head, heard both Inquisitors telling him it was all right as they helped him into the suite's outer room and got him seated. When he was finished, Joanie handed him a towel; he wiped his mouth and looked up at them. "I'm sorry."

"That is a normal reaction," Illyanov said calmly. "There is no need to apologize; you did better than could have been expected."

"You should've left if it bothered you," Cortin said. "I'd like to have you backing me, yes, but not if my work's going to upset you like this."

"I'll get used to it," Odeon said stubbornly. "I can't promise I'll ever get to like it, but I will learn to handle it well enough to give you any backup you need."

"You set yourself a difficult task," Illyanov said. "I feel safe in predicting you will not come to like it; observing you, I would say you lack the quirk of mind required to take pleasure in another's pain. With adequate motivation, time, and exposure, however, you may develop enough tolerance to be able to assist."

"I'll settle for that." Odeon's stomach churned again at the thought of doing what Illyanov had, unsure whether he was pleased or not at the Major's prognosis. In a way, it'd be good to share Joanie's pleasure even in that . . . "What do I do, sit in on all her interrogations?"

"I would normally recommend that you begin with a less talented Inquisitor," Illyanov said, "as that would be less unpleasant for you. However, Captain Cortin is the one you will be teamed with, so perhaps it would indeed be as well if you work with her from the beginning."

"Less talented?" Odeon asked, puzzled. "That doesn't make sense."

"If you think for a moment," Illyanov said gently, "you will find it makes very good sense. One with less talent cannot judge tolerances as well, is not as sensitive to an individual subject's particular dreads, is more likely to believe lies told to please him and stop the interrogation, and--although this is also true of Captain Cortin, until she acquires experience to match her theoretical knowledge and raw talent--apt to let the subject die before extracting all possible information."

"Put that way, it does make sense," Odeon admitted. "I've never thought about Inquisitors very much--or the talents you have to have."

"Few people do," Illyanov said drily. "Few people care to think much about us, fewer still about how we obtain our results--even though they have no objections to using those results. We get few thanks and less praise for what we do, so it is well that God grants us the mercy of deriving our satisfaction from the work itself."

Odeon nodded. That was something else he'd never thought about . . . and again, it made sense. "I understand, I think. So I'll work with her whenever she's doing an interrogation, then?"

"Yes. When you feel able to assist, you will of course be covered by her Warrant." He looked at his watch, then grinned ruefully at Cortin. "I thought we had been busy for some time, but I had not realized I had lost track of time to this degree. It is almost midnight--I think we had best call it a day immediately, and pray Doctor Egan does not find out how late I kept you. I am not feeling suicidal enough to face her if she feels I have been overworking you again."

"Neither am I! Once was more than enough." The chewing out Egan had given them when she'd caught them in a tutoring session after visiting hours was one Cortin would remember with respect for some time. "See you at breakfast?"

"It would be my pleasure."

* * * * *

Cortin slept soundly, and when she woke early it was in anticipation of assisting at Mike's First Mass and then celebrating her own. She found herself looking forward to both of them more than she could remember having done since her First Communion, after the way the previous day's had made her feel.

Her anticipation suffered a setback, though, when she found a note from Mike in her message box; he'd been asked to say his First Mass for some newly-arrived Strike Force selectees, and he said she would have as well if she hadn't still been on hospital status. She didn't see how saying Mass could be more strenuous than conducting interrogations--though maybe Egan didn't know she'd done any--but she couldn't object.

For Odeon's First Mass: Odeon's First Mass

She opened the field Mass kit she'd been issued and laid it out on the bureau, kissed the stole and put it around her neck, then blessed herself and began her First Mass. She was surprised at how easily she was able to speak the Latin; even though she'd heard it almost every Sunday since she was old enough to remember, she'd never seriously tried to use it. She'd heard the Terrans had experimented with using whatever the local language happened to be, but that seemed almost sacrilegious; she couldn't imagine Mass without the solemnity and beauty of Latin.

As she continued, offering her prayers and her pain to the figure on the crucifix, the ceremony seemed to take on a life of its own, filling her with a sense of rightness and peace. At some point Illyanov's voice joined hers, taking over the responses; she accepted it without surprise. Nor was she surprised, when the time came, to find several men in Enforcement gray kneeling for Communion.

It wasn't until she finished the service that she realized they were all Inquisitors, or wondered how they came to be in a room she was positive she'd locked the night before. When she asked, Illyanov chuckled and held up a key. "I did not think it fitting that you have to celebrate your First Mass alone, so I spoke with Colonel Bradford and received his permission to act as your server, as well as--since I convinced him it would be impossible to keep secret the fact of Special Operations priests, especially from Inquisitors when one of those priests is also one of us, for more than a few days--to invite several of our colleagues." He introduced them, then said, "It is our pleasure to invite you to breakfast at the Eagle's Nest. That is one of the few commercial establishments where Inquisitors in uniform are welcome--probably because the proprietor was one of us before his retirement--and has much better food than the dining hall. Will you join us?"

Odeon had loaned her a Special Operations patch until she could get to the Uniform Sales store to buy some, and she was wearing her new Inquisitor's badge, so she was in full uniform; she had no hesitation in accepting. Tucking her stole into a tunic pocket, she said, "I'd be honored--just let me put my kit away."

* * * * *

The Eagle's Nest proprietor, unlike the young private she'd met the previous day, obviously followed Service news; he recognized her, welcoming her with almost embarrassing effusiveness, asking how she felt, congratulating her on becoming an Inquisitor and her success with her first subjects, expressing delight and asking the Reverend Mother's blessing when Illyanov told him she was a priest.

When they were seated, Cortin turned to Illyanov. "Is he always like that?"

"Only since he retired," Illyanov assured her. "He misses our professional discussions and fellowship, although I doubt he would wish to give up this profession, either." He grinned. "It is, after all, far more profitable than the Service."

Cortin chuckled. "It would be, yes. But he seems to keep in pretty close touch--normal news channels wouldn't have anything on how I'd handled my subjects."

"He prides himself on it, true--and since we find it useful from time to time, we help him."

"Useful how?"

"You're a good example," a young First Lieutenant said. "We all know you're interested in that plagues Shannon--those plagues, I should say--so we'll see to it you get anything about 'em we come across. Can't do it through official channels, though--personal revenge isn't frowned on, exactly, if it can be done in line of duty, but it isn't exactly sanctioned, either. So we'll give it to Francis, and he'll get it to you. You'll be expected to return the favor if you come across anything that'll be of special interest to one of us, of course."

"Of course. Just let me know your interests; I'll be glad to ask about them."

"No problem; we'll leave notes in your message box."

Cortin chuckled. "I hadn't expected this sort of mutual support when I started my studies--but I'm glad to find it. Would it be proper to ask Mr. Robbins to join us?"

"Francis," Illyanov corrected her. "Off duty and among ourselves, we are less formal than others might think desirable. To answer your question, however: yes, it would be perfectly proper to ask him to join us. Christopher, would you mind?"

"Sure thing." The young Lieutenant rose, grinning at Cortin. "Everyone but Ivan calls me Chris, though, okay?"

"Okay, Chris." As he left in search of the proprietor, Cortin turned to Illyanov. "Ivan--" it seemed strange calling him that--"thanks." She looked around. "Thank all of you, for joining me. It means a lot."

"It means much to us, as well." Illyanov touched her hand. "You are new to our field, Joan, but already you must begin to feel our isolation. An Inquisitor who is also a priest is most literally a gift from God."

"I'm not the only one," she said, uncomfortable with his intensity. "Colonel Bradford, uh . . ." She hesitated, realizing that the Bishop was the only other Priest-Inquisitor she knew of.

"His Excellency's other commitments do not normally permit him to exercise his priestly functions on an individual basis, not true?"

"True." Most Bishops did have to be more concerned with administration than with a chaplain's duties . . .
"Okay, I guess you're right. What can I do for you?"

"Hear our confessions, for one thing," a graying Captain said. "I messed up, oh--three or four months ago, but the chaplain we were assigned doesn't understand Inquisitors--he couldn't figure out why it bothers me." He paused, looking miserable. "Reverend Mother--please?"

Cortin looked around for a private place--she couldn't refuse such a plea--but it was Robbins who said, "If you'd like to use my office, Mother, I'd be honored."

"Thank you--where is it?"

"Through the curtains over there, second door on the right."

Cortin rose, feeling inadequate, but led the older officer--Captain Gregory Watkins, if she remembered correctly from the group introduction--through the curtains and into an office decorated with Enforcement Service pictures, awards, and certificates. She sat in the desk chair, putting on her stole; when Watkins knelt beside her and began his Confession, she understood why he would want a confessor who could understand the feelings of guilt that, deservedly or not, went with failure to get necessary information from a subject, then damaging him so badly, in an effort to correct the first problem, that no one else could get the information either. She hadn't done that badly yet--her clumsiness with her first subject had been due to inexperience, not lack of judgement--but she was certain she'd do it some day. When she did, she too would want a confessor who understood what she'd done, why it was wrong, and how to help her avoid it in the future.

She gave him absolution, with a penance of memorizing the third chapter of St. Jean Grillet's *The Inquisitor's Call*. It seemed harsh to her, but his expression said otherwise, and when he rose, he thanked her.

Breakfast was on the table when they got back, and she was hungry; as soon as grace was said, she started on a stack of hotcakes and honey. Illyanov was absolutely right, she decided immediately; the food was far better than she'd gotten in any Service dining hall. She grinned at Robbins, giving him the "first-class" hand signal, then continued eating and listening to the conversation.

That had settled rather quickly into shop talk, as it usually did when groups of specialists got together. She

could understand how it might upset a nearby diner, but she'd been studying during meals for weeks now; she listened carefully, making mental notes of several useful-sounding--or just interesting--tips, though she didn't join in until her plate was empty and she was enjoying a glass of pear nectar. There was less resentment than she'd expected at Bradford's order that she get first choice of all non-critical prisoners, though she did take some teasing about being sure she left some for them, what with the Brothers still laying low. She promised, with a bit of return teasing that if things were all that slow this might be a good time to take some leave, then she had to make another promise that she'd hold Confession and Mass for them, in the base chapel if she could get permission, in their lounge at the Detention Center if she couldn't.

As she was getting ready to leave, a waiter approached and handed her a note; she read it, grinned, and handed it to Illyanov. She was summoned to the Base Theater for a meeting of prospective Team Leaders and team-seconds. The note didn't say what kind of teams they were to be Leaders and seconds of, naturally, but it didn't have to; she and Illyanov knew. "I'll see about arranging for the chapel," she told the group as she rose. "I'll post the results on the bulletin board, whichever way it works out, but I've got to go now. Thanks again."

5. Azrael

St. Thomas, Wednesday, 24 July 2571

Less than half an hour later, she was in the theater along with what she estimated at fifty others, all with Special Ops patches and specialty badges--even Odeon, when she spotted him, was wearing his Tracker's badge, something he didn't normally do. She would be willing to bet, now that the operational arms needed them, that a Priest's badge was being made and they'd both be wearing those as well, not long after the Strike Force was activated--and she'd also be willing to bet Mike would love wearing his. She made her way to him, exchanging introductions with several others on the way and realizing quickly that those in the group had more than insignia in common. There was an air to them, a feel of anticipation as of a wolfpack scenting its prey, and she shared it. "How did it go?" she asked Odeon.

"Not bad for someone who'd never done it before," he said with a smile. "How about yours?"

"Better than I would've believed," she said. "I ended up with a server and small congregation, thanks to Colonel Bradford--and I've already heard my first Confession. It's strange being on the receiving end, believe me!"

Odeon chuckled. "I do--not wasting any time, are you?"

"I couldn't just let him suffer, could I?" she protested. "But yes, things are coming at me pretty fast. It's almost like someone's pushing me to get qualified at everything right now. Not that I mind; I hope I am able to handle everything by the time the Brothers decide to break loose again." She rubbed the backs of her hands absently. "I want--"

"Ten-shun!" an amplified voice called.

Cortin turned, coming to precise attention when she faced the stage. It was Colonel Bradford at the microphone; as soon as he had the group's full attention, he said, "Please be seated, gentles." When that was done, he went on. "We have all met, but some of you know me only as an anonymous Lieutenant. In fact, I am Colonel David Bradford of His Majesty's Own. I am also, in this case as His Majesty's Personal Deputy, Commander of the St. Thomas Strike Force. You all know the basics of that, and are all under oaths of secrecy concerning it for the time being. Although some of you have made your wishes known privately, I must now ask you all, formally: Do you wish to be part of the Strike Force?"

Cortin's shout of assent was lost in the general clamor of enthusiasm that died only gradually as Bradford stood with both hands raised. When he could be heard again, he lowered his hands with a smile. "I was certain you'd all respond that way. You're the ones qualified as Leaders and seconds of Strike Force Teams--is there anyone here who doesn't want one of those positions?"

When the second clamor died, Bradford smiled again. "I thought not. In this case, I am to extend His Majesty's appreciation, and his regret that the secrecy of getting the Strike Force started prevents him from being here himself. We have kept together those of you who have proven you work well together; that gave us four Leader-second combinations. The rest have been paired on the basis of records and interviews. In either case, you will have the next week to confirm or rearrange these match-ups and choose your team names, though you can do either immediately if you prefer. If you'll look in the package you were given when you came in, you'll see our team-ups, and a few team names we hope will give you ideas. Take half an hour, get together with your suggested Leader or second, and tell me if you're ready to confirm now. Refreshments are available in the lobby."

"I finished a big breakfast less than an hour ago," Cortin said as most of the others rose. "We know we're paired, and I don't care which of us is Leader, so if you don't mind, I'll stay here and see what I can come up with for a team name."

"Suits," Odeon agreed. "I could stand some juice, but I'll be back shortly."

"Right." Cortin opened the briefing packet as he left, finding that they were paired, as promised, with her as Leader. Scanning the bios, she found that their teaming wasn't unusual except in them knowing each other so long; the pre-selected leadership teams had the one with the most personal grudge against the Brothers, rather than the senior in rank, named as Leader--though in some cases, like theirs, the two coincided; she'd gotten her captain's bars two days before Mike got his, so technically she did outrank him, if not by much.

Team names, now. She studied the short list of suggestions, seeing names of angels, predatory animals, military qualities. Quite a variety, she thought--and the list did give her an idea. She grinned, then decided not to take any chances on having someone else beat her to even such an unlikely name; she went into the lobby to find Mike and then Colonel Bradford.

She almost ran into Odeon when she opened the door; he greeted her with a grin and a salute. "I gather you've come up with a name, Team-Leader? So've I--I was just coming to see what you thought about it." He sobered. "Better make sure you like the one we settle on; I overheard Colonel Bradford say the team's name will be the Leader's code name until we go public, then it'll be the team's radio call sign."

She thought about that for a moment, then smiled. "I like the one I came up with well enough for that, definitely. What's yours?"

He murmured a word in her ear, and she chuckled. "Great minds, Mike--that's the same one I thought of. But if the two of us did, others may too; let's get to Colonel Bradford and have him confirm it."

"Right. Last time I saw him, he was over by the juice machine."

The two made their way in that direction. It was clear that several Leader-and-second pairs had already confirmed; those were the ones discussing either team names or possible personnel. Those who hadn't were getting acquainted; Cortin saw a couple she thought would confirm shortly, another couple she thought probably wouldn't at all. They found the Colonel still at the juice machine, approaching him with Cortin in the lead and Odeon a step behind and to her left. "By the Colonel's leave?" Cortin asked.

Bradford smiled. "I thought so--you'll make a good pair." He took out a notebook, made a checkmark. "Have

you picked out a name?"

"Yes, sir. We are agreed on Azrael."

Bradford raised an eyebrow, still smiling. "That shouldn't surprise me--but I admit I'd expected you to choose something less openly descriptive."

"If you'd seen her in action, sir," Odeon said, "you'd know it fits."

"I have, Captain; I've been following her activities with considerable interest since I debriefed her, which has included watching films of her interrogations rather than just reading summaries; I certainly don't argue the appropriateness of her choice. My surprise is only that she's being so open about her intentions for the Brothers."

"It's deliberate, sir," Cortin said. "Major Illyanov told me early on that terror can be useful; naming my team after the Angel of Death is on the same order as taking my gloves off for the conclusion of a hunt or during an interrogation."

"I understand that--but it could also work against you, if they suicide rather than face interrogation."

Cortin smiled. "I think I can count on the 'can't-happen-to-me' syndrome, sir, at least in the great majority of cases. At worst, a few of them die quickly and with relative ease."

"True." Bradford made a note, put the pad back in his pocket. "Azrael it is, then."

When the break was over and everyone was back in the theater proper, Bradford went on with the briefing. "We have nine confirmed Leader-second pairs, five of which have chosen names: Wolf, Guardian, Flame, Falcon, and Azrael. The rest of you, as I said earlier, have a week to let me know your decisions."

"During that week, in addition to those decisions, you will start selecting your team members. Eligible volunteers have been brought in on TDY orders, the way most of you were, and are being quartered at the Academy. You'll meet them tomorrow morning, and can begin interviews then; their records will be made available to you as soon as we finish here."

"In two weeks, you will have your teams together and ready, because you deploy during the following week." He paused. "True, there may be no need for such hurry--but we don't know, so we want you prepared and in place as soon as humanly possible. Now--some details."

"To start with, you--and through you, your team members--will hold Writs of Immunity good in every system in the Kingdoms. The scope on these Writs is even broader than an Inquisitor's Warrant; as long as you avoid regicide or treason, and what you do is aimed at suppressing terrorist groups--primarily the Brothers of Freedom--your actions will carry the license of both the Church and the various Kingdoms. You'll be expected to follow normal procedures, as a rule; however, your primary purpose is to eliminate terrorists, and if normal procedures interfere, you are to disregard them. Questions?"

There was a murmur of astonishment both Cortin and Odeon joined. This freedom of action was as unprecedented as the Brothers' horror attacks, but Bradford's orders were clear; there was nothing to question.

"Excellent. You'll be sent to bases or stations as close as possible to where the Brothers you're particularly interested in appear to be located. You'll use that as your headquarters, but you are subject to no-notice assignment anywhere in this Kingdom and four-hour-notice assignment to any other one, so keep your kits up to date and readily available. You will also cooperate, as fully as possible without neglecting your own

missions, with other kingdoms' Strike Forces; they'll do the same if you need to go to their systems. Any questions on this part?"

Again, there were none; he went on. "You Team Leaders and seconds, I'm afraid, will have to live on base or at the station, in separate buildings where possible. Your teams should too, but if that would cause too much hardship to either them or the personnel normally stationed there, you can permit them to live up to five miles away." He raised a hand, forestalling objections. "It's not as bad as it sounds, gentles. You will all be issued personal radios, as well as personal vehicles; those of you who can't drive or do basic vehicle maintenance will be taught how. And you'll use those vehicles any time you're in areas where they can be supplied and maintained. You'll use horses only where there are no facilities for vehicles. Any questions?"

"I have one, sir." A tall Major with a missing ear stood. "Vehicle fuel and service aren't cheap; they're certainly beyond my pay grade. How do we pay for them? And more importantly, how do our people pay for them?"

"Until we go public," Bradford said, "you'll be given an allowance for such things, and you'll pass it along to your people. After that, you'll use your Strike Force ID, and the Kingdoms will reimburse the dealers. The same thing goes for all non-personal expenses." He grinned. "As for personal expenses, you'll be interested to know that Strike Force personnel get a 50% hazardous-duty bonus. Which, believe me, you'll earn!"

There was a mixture of laughter and good-natured complaining, in which Cortin and Odeon joined. Yes, they all knew they'd earn any hazard bonuses; you didn't go into something called Special Operations, much less into a Strike Force, for the safety of it. On the other hand, Cortin thought, they got the chance to go after Brothers with almost no limitations; that seemed fair enough to her, and it sounded like the rest agreed.

"That's about it for now, then, though of course you'll get daily updates on anything we find out about the Brothers," Bradford said. "This is my primary duty, so I'll be in the area most of the time; if you have questions, or just want to talk, I'll be available."

* * * * *

Cortin was uncertain what to do after the briefing. Part of her said to read the records and start picking her troops; the other part said to find herself another Brother to question. After some internal debate, she went with the first alternative; her fellow Inquisitors had told her they'd get any information she might be interested in to her, as soon as possible after they'd gotten it, so she could start picking her team without worrying that she'd miss something she should know.

With that decided, she and Mike went to the Academy area that had been set up for such record study and interviews. She groaned when she saw the masses of personnel folders she'd be expected to go through--paperwork had never been her strong point--but she grabbed a handful, sighing. "You, too, Mike," she said. "We may not be able to tell who we do want from these, but we ought to be able to pick the ones we don't."

"Right." Odeon didn't like paperwork any better than she did, but he did know as well as she how inevitable it was. "Anything in particular, or just someone we could both work with?"

"I think it'll be good enough if we get someone we can work with," Cortin said. "Manage that, and we can go from there. Just look for good strong motivations, because where we're likely to be going after Brothers, we'll sure be earning our bonuses."

By the end of the afternoon, the two of them had gone through about a third of the records, finding a medic and a communications specialist they definitely wanted, as well as several that looked promising if an

interview showed they had no objection to working for an Inquisitor. Quite a number of people objected to even working near an Inquisitor, for which Cortin supposed she couldn't blame them--she'd been apprehensive about Inquisitors herself, not all that long ago--but since all the teams would have Inquisitors, it seemed reasonable to assume that those who couldn't work with them at all would have been removed from consideration.

Her first interview was the following day with the medic, a nun transferred from St. Ignatius to St. Thomas by her Order, at her request. Cortin rose as the young woman in sky-blue slacks and shirt--the Blue Sisters' field habit--entered. Sister Mary Piety was as attractive as her photo indicated, but there was an air of stress that hadn't shown there. From her records, Cortin thought it was probably the residue of her mistreatment by the Brothers--well, she'd find out. She introduced herself and gestured the nun to a chair, then took her own seat. "I know what's in your records, of course, Sister; I just want to get to know you as a person, and let you know me well enough to decide whether or not you can work for me. So relax; I only hurt criminals."

"I understand, Captain." Chang studied the woman in Enforcement gray, puzzled. There was something about Captain Cortin that reminded her of the Raidmaster--but in Cortin, it wasn't frightening. It wasn't even mildly disturbing, the way she usually felt around an Inquisitor; if anything, it was reassuring, even comforting. "What do you wish to know?"

"Well . . . it puzzles me that when you reported the attack on the clinic, you always called Shannon 'the Raidmaster', never by name. I admit he's frightening, but that much?"

"I was not aware then that he used that name," Chang said, hiding her irritation. "Nor is it fear that keeps me silent. I tried to tell the troopers, but I was unable to say his name--or to describe how I discovered his identity."

"No offense intended," Cortin said mildly. "Your report said he'd forbidden you to tell, yes--obviously with more than words."

"That is true, Captain," Chang said, mollified. "Though I have found that almost as difficult to describe." She smiled tentatively. "It may be as well I have such difficulty--were I able to identify him as I know him, I would not be believed."

"If you ever feel able, I'll believe you. He qualified me for Special Ops and the Strike Force, too." Cortin chuckled, though with little real humor. "I don't even think I'd be too surprised if you identified him as Shayan incarnate. Mind you, I don't think I'd believe it--" She broke off at the nun's sudden expression of shock. "Did I say something wrong?"

Chang sighed with the relief of Shannon's coercion dissolving. "That is he. You have said what I could not, Captain Cortin. I am in your debt."

Cortin didn't believe the identification, but her truthsense left no doubt Chang did. And she had to admit it was a natural identification to make, given the plagues' actions. "Was there anything special to identify him?"

"His power and evils are enough, but I believe he wished me to be certain. Did he seem a normal man when he attacked you?"

"As normal as a terrorist ever is," Cortin said.

"That was not so in my case. His general body temperature was quite high, well beyond a human's survival limits. His genitals, however, were extremely cold--the classic description, as you know."

"Yes." That had to be hypnotism or drugs, Cortin thought, but beliefs were hard for mere facts to alter; she wouldn't argue pointlessly with someone who promised to be extremely good for the team. "Even with that, you're willing to help hunt him?"

"We are all called to fight evil," Chang said calmly. "My call was simply more unmistakable than many. Yes, I am willing."

She couldn't ask for more than that, Cortin decided. Excellent medical qualifications, an "Expert" small-arms rating, plenty of courage--and she sounded almost as devout as Mike. Cortin thought it odd that she'd be concerned about devotion when she wasn't particularly devout herself, but the fact remained: talking to Piety had made it clear that it should be one of her considerations. "One stipulation, and you're in," she said. "I don't want any auxiliaries on Team Azrael; you'll have to trade that habit for a uniform. There's no proof you're technically qualified for Special Ops, but since you've gotten a waiver, that's no problem."

"As this branch of Enforcement now has priests, there is no reason it should not also have a nun. I will make the trade."

"Good! Let me get my second and another witness, and I'll swear you in."

Cortin was a little surprised that no one questioned her power to administer a commissioning oath without prior authorization, but she'd apparently been right in her guess that it was one of her rights as a Strike Team leader; after all, it was neither treason nor regicide, and it was in the interest of eliminating the terrorists. As a side effect, one she hoped might reduce press attention to herself, it made her no longer the only female Enforcement officer.

When the ceremony was over and Chang had accepted Odeon's offer to help her get her ID and uniforms later, that afternoon--"Anything to get away from stacks of personnel records," he admitted cheerfully--he and the other witness left the two women alone. Cortin studied the nun for a moment before speaking again.

"You're aware, of course, that your Enforcement oath takes precedence over your vows--and that being Strike Force means you owe obedience only to your Strike Force superiors, the High King, and His Holiness."

"I am aware of all that." Which was true, Chang thought. She was no longer restricted by her vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience--or protected by them, illusory as that protection had proven when she had most needed it.

"And you're a field medic, so you know what tends to go on in a team's spare time. Will that bother you, now?"

"No, Captain. I have been on missions since; shelter parties and the like do not disturb me." Chang smiled momentarily. "In fact, my last . . . experience . . . with His Infernal Majesty seems to have had a side effect he did not anticipate and may not like. Forcing me to feel sexual pleasure, even with him, has let me appreciate what willing partners give each other. Since then, I have found it highly enjoyable watching them, where earlier I had no particular reaction."

"As long as you don't have to participate, naturally." Which she most certainly wouldn't; any attempt to compel sex, at least in Enforcement, was dealt with harshly--and usually right then. "If you'd like, I'll tell the men not to even ask you."

"I would appreciate that. Even though I am unable to accept their offers, I would prefer not to hurt their feelings by refusing."

"I'll take care of it, then. Have you tried therapy, to get over what happened?"

"And prayer," Chang agreed. "I shall increase my efforts at both now, of course; it would be unfair to the rest of the team to do less."

That was true, Cortin thought. No one could be faulted for not taking part, but that shouldn't be because of a correctable disability; it should be either voluntary, or because of permanent disability like her own. It seemed a cruel irony that Chang had the ability without the desire, while she had the desire without the ability. At least she could try to take comfort in the fact that one of them had a chance to be fully functional again . . . "If there's any way I can help, just let me know. And let the men know if you beat your problem."

"I will be certain to."

* * * * *

Shannon felt a brief surge of power, traced it--and hastily retreated, swearing. That God-loving Cortin had dissolved the compulsion of silence he'd put on Piety, without even knowing she was doing it! That was a minor use of power, of course, but it was more than he'd thought her capable of, even--or especially--unconsciously. If she could do that, he'd have to stop even observing her--not just when she was idle, but when she should have her full attention on her work. No more watching her while he played with Victor, then, unfortunately--no more watching her, period.

He could do without the entertainment she provided, but it would be inconvenient doing without the information she let him eavesdrop on. What really bothered him was the timing. It might simply be coincidence that Cortin's first real use of her power took place the first time she met Piety--but he didn't trust coincidence, especially not when it involved someone with Cortin's latent power.

He should've killed the nun when he had her, amusing though it had been to torment her further by letting her live. Well, that was one mistake he could remedy! Sister-Lieutenant Eleanor Mary Piety Chang had just made it to the top of the Brotherhood's wipe list.

There was more than a little risk to that, of course, especially if an attempt was made on her when Cortin was in the area--it might trigger the Bitch into using her powers instead of keeping her from them--but he thought it a risk worth taking.

Wait a minute! Lieutenant? He'd barely brushed her mind before jerking back, but the brief contact had been enough to tell him she thought of herself differently. A Lieutenant of Enforcement, and a member of the whatever-it-was--Strike Force?--the various Kingdoms had gathered groups of their best to form.

Shannon scowled. A Strike Force or equivalent, able to attract people like Piety, was extremely bad news--especially at a time when he was forced to restrict his own powers.

* * * * *

Cortin's next interview, with the communications specialist, was rather different. She'd known his size and race, from his records--but facing a man over two meters tall and built like a weightlifter, with skin so dark it was almost blue, was an experience she'd never had before. So was his reaction, when he entered the interview office; his eyes lit up, and he gave her a brilliant smile before saluting. "Lieutenant Joseph Pritchett reporting to Team Leader Azrael as ordered, ma'am. And thank you for considering me."

"Be seated, Lieutenant," Cortin said. As he obeyed, she went on. "Your enthusiasm is flattering; may I ask why?"

It was impossible for his complexion to get any darker, but she had the impression he was flushing. "I've heard about Captain Cortin ever since my freshman year at the Academy," he said. "I've always wanted to work with you, but I was never in the right place at the right time, and when I heard what the Brothers had done to you, I thought sure you'd retire. I'm glad you didn't, and I'll finally get to work with you--if you want me after this, of course. I hadn't heard you were an Inquisitor, though."

"That's quite recent," Cortin said. "Would it bother you, working for one?" She was flattered that he'd wanted to work with her that much, and hoped it wouldn't.

"Not working for one, no, ma'am--but I've got to tell you right from the start that I'd really rather not help with third-stage."

"I don't see any reason you should have to," Cortin assured him. "I'm training my second, Captain Odeon, as my assistant, and I hope to find someone with Inquisitor as a second specialty for the team. Any other problems?"

"No, ma'am."

"Good. Welcome to Team Azrael, then. Two more items, before I turn you over to Captain Odeon for a complete briefing and equipment issue. Firstly, off duty and within the team, first names are proper; mine is Joan. Do you prefer Joseph or Joe?"

"Either is fine, ma'am. I'm generally called Tiny, though."

Cortin chuckled. "Tiny it is, then. The other thing: I will expect your sexual conduct to remain within so-called 'normal' bounds while we're within populated areas. I'll make sure you have adequate access to decent, reputable courtesans, or you can find yourself an informal wife; that's up to you. Otherwise--as long as you don't involve anyone who isn't willing, of course--what you do is up to you."

"Couldn't ask for more than that," Pritchett said. "Ah--does that freedom include yourself, ma'am? I've heard how much fun you are, especially at a shelter party; I'd appreciate being allowed in, either alone or with the rest of the team."

"And I'd enjoy having you, either way." She'd liked the pairing that, even with Enforcement's dispensation, it was wisest to confine oneself to in civilization--but she'd also liked, and taken full advantage of, the opportunities offered by an entire team in one of the shelters the Service put up for its people traveling in remote areas. She cut off those memories sternly, before they could become too painful. "Unfortunately, the attack left me incapable of that pleasure."

"Dear God!" Pritchett said, looking sick. "There must be something that can be done!"

"Cosmetically, yes, my doctor says. Nothing . . . erotically useful." Cortin grinned sourly. "Which I don't think upset her unduly. She's a good doctor, but a typical civilian. I'm learning to live with that, as well as the pain. I appreciate your concern, but if you'll excuse me the Terran slang, what can't be cured must be endured; don't worry about it." She stood, extending a hand. "Welcome again, Tiny."

* * * * *

It took two dozen more interviews over the next couple of days to find the other two members she wanted for Team Azrael. Odeon had conducted the interviews with both; she promised herself she'd have a private talk with each of them later, when they were less pushed for time. One was Lt. David Bain, demolitions expert and the backup Inquisitor she'd hoped to find, a tall blue-eyed brunet with an easy grin; the other was Lt. Anthony

Degas, a quiet, self-contained small-arms expert who could have been the model for Michelangelo's David. She could have had more--some teams had over a dozen--but she and Odeon wanted to keep Team Azrael small and mobile enough to respond quickly.

With the team complete, Cortin had them begin training together every morning. She herself started the day with Mass for the Detention Center Inquisitors and their guests, as she'd promised, losing herself in the ceremony and coming back to mundane reality only when it was over and she removed the stole. After breakfast was the team training, then lunch, followed by individual work or study. For her, that meant interrogations--and she decided quickly to allow Bain to do the preliminary stages, concentrating her own attention on the stubborn subjects. With a limited, if uncertain, time before they had to be ready, she had to get Odeon past his squeamishness as quickly as possible so she could start training him as her assistant.

It was Saturday before he managed to get through a session without throwing up, and she didn't think it proper to conduct interrogations on Sunday except in an emergency, so it was Monday when she started teaching him. The subject was a young Brother that Bain evaluated as having no useful information, but as being strong enough to survive up to a week of teaching sessions. Cortin preferred to go after something specific, make it a contest between her and her subject, even though it was a contest she was almost certain to win. But teaching was as valid a function as extracting information, and it would insure that the Brother served at least one useful function in his life while paying for his crimes against the Kingdoms.

Their subject was waiting when they entered the interrogation suite's third-stage room, prepared as usual: naked, with some bruising, spreadeagled between ceiling chains and floor eyebolts. Cortin gestured at him, speaking to Odeon. "You've already noticed I keep our methods simple, Captain; the reason is that almost all our work will be done in the field, so I think it best to practice with equipment we can either take or adapt there. This method of securing a subject is an example; you can almost always find trees and ropes, while you'll seldom if ever find a surgical table. The same principle goes for drugs; we use ones like algetin or eroticine that are effective, simple to administer, and can easily be replaced at a shelter or detention center. Any questions so far?"

"No, ma'am." Odeon had been more concerned with keeping his stomach under control than with evaluating her methods and techniques, but thinking back, he realized she had kept them to the basics.

"Good." Cortin went to the prisoner. "The preliminary examination seems simple, but it will give you both physical and psychological information invaluable to the interrogation process itself." She ran fingers over the subject's face and throat. "For instance, Lieutenant Bain has convinced this one that arguing back is not a good idea, although there is little damage visible; that tells me he is easily intimidated, and would not normally require third-stage interrogation."

"Why, then?" the subject burst out. "I told--"

Cortin backhanded him across the throat. "Because I need a training aid, and you were available. Now be silent." She paused, but saw no sign of disobedience. "That's better."

She continued her examination and commentary to Odeon. "No particular sensitivity around the ears . . . about average for the eyes . . . rest of the face and throat the same . . . minor sensitivity at the nipples, promising . . . ribs tender in spots . . . same over the kidneys, have to be careful there if we want him to last; internal injuries should be avoided in an extended interrogation." She paused, turning to Odeon. "We are getting to a particularly interesting area now. There are a few rare subjects who do not seem to mind being naked to an Inquisitor, or having their buttocks and genitals handled--but in most cases, a subject's sexuality is his most vulnerable area, in theory especially so to a female Inquisitor. Physically, these areas are extremely rich in nerves; psychologically, they are ego-centers. Both make them easy targets, which is why I seldom exploit them early; if the subject cooperates without that particular pressure, nothing is lost since you can still use it

as punishment if you feel it desirable. If the subject does not cooperate, you can be almost positive he will when you add that pressure to the rest. A perfect example is the first interrogation you saw me conduct."

Where Illyanov had raped the subject while Joanie finished her skinning of him with his genitals. "Yes, ma'am, I remember--though I'm afraid I don't understand how the Major could have been . . . able . . . to do his part."

Cortin grinned without humor. "You'll see, perhaps with this subject, probably within another two or three. It's a reaction I'm no longer capable of, but it's perfectly normal for pain--usually another's, but sometimes your own--to provoke arousal. I'm told it's similar to the pre-danger form we're all familiar with."

Odeon nodded slowly. Put that way, he thought he could understand, at least a little.

"With this one, if you feel the urge, go ahead; in a serious interrogation, I may need for you to wait till it's most useful."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good." Cortin turned back to her subject, probing between his buttocks, pleased when he whimpered. "Brothers, in particular, express a strong revulsion for what they choose to call 'unnatural' sex--but you would be surprised how many of the older ones show evidence of having participated in it repeatedly. I know I was." She probed deeper, hearing truth in her subject's cries of horrified denial. "This one, however, seems not to be party to such, ah, rarefied pleasures. Yet." She moved to his front, stroking the underside of his penis and smiling at his uncertain response. "Or to more usual ones, it seems. Is it possible you are a virgin, Brother? I do find that hard to believe."

"Yes . . ." the subject gasped.

"Intriguing . . . I will have to inform my colleagues. But you will cooperate in anything Captain Odeon wants of you?"

"No, please!"

"Don't bother begging; I am not inclined to show a Brother any more mercy than they showed me. The primary difference is that I finish the job."

The youth stared at her, then shook his head. "No, you can't be--the Bitch is dead!"

Cortin started to hit him for his insolence, then paused. "Perhaps she is," she said thoughtfully. "But if they killed the Bitch, they gave birth to Azrael." She turned to Odeon. "I gather the Brothers don't believe the news stories of my survival. That is unfortunate; for the maximum psychological impact, they should." She turned back to the subject, frowning as she studied him, her fists on her hips. "Is that it, Brother?"

The young man shook his head, then nodded. "Sort of . . . the Raidmaster says you're alive, and a few may believe him, but the others in the raiding party say you can't be--an' since no one wants you to be, well . . ."

"I see." Cortin's frown deepened as she thought. "I had not intended to permit any Brother who came to me to live--but I begin to think I should make an exception, use you as a messenger and advertisement."

"You can't just let him go!" Odeon exclaimed.

"No, of course not--that would give the wrong impression." Cortin scowled as her subject licked dry lips. "He

is a Brother, by definition deserving of a painful death and eternal damnation. Conventional punishment, however--especially mine--would leave him in no shape for anything except intensive care or a disabled ward. If you have any suggestions, I would appreciate them."

"Um." Odeon thought for several minutes, then said slowly, "I don't know if it's possible, but what you said about sexual vulnerability gives me an idea. He's a virgin, and he had a strong negative reaction when you mentioned homosex, both of which his superiors must know about him. He's also beautiful--so how about turning him into a catamite for them?"

Cortin turned to him in surprise. She hadn't expected anything that creative; it certainly wouldn't have occurred to her. "It should be possible, given the appropriate drugs and experiences--I like it."

"What's a catamite?" the subject asked apprehensively.

"A young male prostitute, especially one for older men."

The subject looked sick. "No, please--it's not right!"

"It isn't as if homosexuality were still banned," Cortin said reprovingly. Thanks to St. Eleanor and the Compassionate Mother, sexual orientation had been recognized as something one was born with, like blue eyes or black skin, and no more blameworthy; the Church even recognized stable pairings as equivalent to common-law marriage, though it still didn't grant them the sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

"Even if I were that, I'm no whore! I won't--you can't make me!"

"Wrong on both counts," Cortin said pleasantly. "We can, and on the physical level, you will find it most enjoyable. How you feel about it emotionally may be less pleasant, and I hope it is. It goes against my grain to release a Brother, and you may assure the rest that you will be the only one--but if I must let you live, even for my own purposes, simple justice demands that you suffer." She turned to Odeon. "I can handle the drugs and overall direction, but I obviously cannot participate in the operation itself. We'll need more than you to partner him, too, if we want him properly promiscuous; if you'll check with the rest of the team, I'll check with my fellow Inquisitors." She grinned. "I'm sure several of them will find this project interesting enough to want to participate as their own projects permit." She looked around, then chuckled. "These aren't appropriate surroundings, though; I'll have to arrange for some redecoration." She turned to the subject. "Under the circumstances, anonymity isn't appropriate either; what's your name?"

"Charles Powell," he said sullenly.

"Very well, Charles." She went to the instrument table and loaded a hypodermic, then returned to him. "This is eroticine, a potent aphrodisiac. Under its influence, you will have no interest in anything except sex, of whatever type your partner wants. And I assure you, you will find it most pleasant."

Powell shivered as she made the injection, but said nothing.

"It will take effect in about five minutes." Cortin turned to Odeon. "I'm going to make arrangements for the redecoration, and ask whoever's around if they'd be interested in helping with his tutoring. You can wait if you want, or release him and begin his lessons when you see the eroticine taking effect. It'll definitely be noticeable--and as I told him, he won't be interested in minor distractions like fighting."

Odeon nodded. "I'll do whatever looks best when he shows a reaction."

"Good enough." Cortin left, thinking it would be useful if she could help in the redirection. Mike, plus any of

the other men on the team and any Inquisitors who were interested, could handle the positive aspects of Powell's reorientation, but it would be even better if a woman could provide negative reorientation. She was incapable in one way, Piety in another, and you couldn't ask a civilian--even a paid-woman--to take part in something like this. There might be a few female enlisted personnel willing to take part, but by the time one could be found and brought here, it would be well after the Strike Force teams had left. Too late, in other words; she'd just have to hope the reorientation worked without that. She scowled, angry at herself. If she'd realized, rather than just read, that even a simulation of sexual function could be this important, she'd have insisted on what little Dr. Egan had admitted to being able to do. Too late for that as well, now, though; she'd talk to Sis later, see what she could do when they had some time available. A synthetic vaginal passage shouldn't be more than minor surgery, well within a medic's abilities--and Sis would be able to understand why she wanted it, even knowing its limitations.

* * * * *

The Powell project proved even more popular with her team and the Inquisitors than Cortin had expected. And, after a night of considerable thought, she'd reluctantly decided that she couldn't direct it properly if she couldn't take part, so she'd turned direction of the project over to Illyanov, who'd promised to handle it as well as he could, as far as the subject was concerned acting under her instructions. She made it a point to spend some time in the observation center every morning, though, following Powell's progress.

The redecoration she'd ordered was in place the first morning; the third-stage room of Interrogation Suite Delta now looked more like a courtesan's room at the New Eden. Most of the equipment was still in place, she knew, but the surgical table had been replaced by a wide bed, the floor now had thick rugs covering tile, and draperies hid drug and instrument cabinets, with others turning the harsh brilliance of overhead fluorescent lighting into soft pastels. Powell was still apprehensive despite the eroticine, looking as if he wanted to pull away when the Inquisitor with him began to caress him, but unable to resist the drug. Cortin disliked seeing a Brother display even the little enjoyment Powell did, despite the fact his pleasure was drug-enforced, but she was pleased that his tutor was obviously enjoying himself.

The next day, Powell's apprehension had disappeared; when she entered the observation room, he was absorbed in his tutor's instruction. Cortin found it amusing that he took to his lessons so readily, and that his instructors were so gentle and patient. It wouldn't surprise her too much, she thought, if they decided they wanted to keep him; she might even agree, for their sakes, if his testimony to his Brother superiors weren't so important to her plans.

The day after that, Chang and an Inquisitor were coaching him on relaxation techniques. By now, he seemed eager to learn, even more eager to try what he was being taught, and Cortin found her hostility to him diminishing. He seemed more like an innocent boy now than like a Brother of Freedom, and she found herself hoping, when the Inquisitor had him roll over for a practical demonstration, that he wouldn't find it too distressing.

He didn't; when his instructor began penetration, his sounds and movements were ones of unmistakable pleasure, increasing rapidly as the Inquisitor rode and manipulated him. To Cortin's surprise, she was pleased when Powell's enjoyment peaked at his climax. When she left the observation room after telling one of the techs to have Chang report to her when the session was over, she found herself thinking Powell would be wasted on the Brothers--but told herself sternly that he would do well, for both her plan and herself.

An hour later, Chang joined her in the Inquisitors' Lounge. "Good day, Captain," she said. "A most interesting experiment, though perhaps a bit too reminiscent of what was done to me for complete comfort."

"If you want out, all you have to do is say so," Cortin told her. "The last thing I want to do is make things worse for you."

"I do not," the nun said with a brief smile. "While it is reminiscent, the purpose is entirely different, and for a good cause. By God's grace, that relieves the discomfort. And as I said, I enjoy watching others enjoy themselves. So: is there anything more I can do to help?"

"Not with him, no. With others in the future, maybe." Cortin went on to explain what she would have liked to do, and what she would like from Chang whenever it was possible. "Can you do that?"

"Easily; as you say, it is minor surgery. However, it may--and I stress may--not be necessary to settle for function without sensation."

"Nerves don't regenerate," Cortin said flatly. "Dr. Egan was quite emphatic about that. And the necessary tissue is gone."

"The latter I can do nothing about," Chang conceded. "The first, however, I am less sure of. With all respect to the good Dr. Egan, I doubt she follows the doings of Inquisitors on St. Ignatius, while I have heard rumors that one has had some success in regrowing removed organs, with restoration of full function." She raised a cautioning hand. "I believe that to be an exaggeration--such regrowth would, I believe, require a saint rather than an Inquisitor or medic--but there is a grain of fact behind any rumor. I would be most happy to investigate, and, if his actual results warrant, apply his findings to your problem."

Cortin took a deep breath, held it, and exhaled slowly. Getting her hopes up, on the basis of some fact that might lie behind a rumor, was stupid. She knew that, she'd resigned herself to her loss--but apparently not as well as she'd thought, because she found she was hoping. Regrowth and restoration of full function would mean the chance, again, of children--though honesty compelled her to admit that her failure to become pregnant in years of more than adequate opportunity meant the chance was vanishingly small. Even the chance of restored sensation would be worth a lot, though! "Please do, Lieutenant. Let me know the results as soon as you have something definite, then we'll base what we do on that."

Chang inclined her head respectfully. "I shall begin at once, Captain." She left, and Cortin went on to her next subject.

Powell was released the Saturday before the Strike Force's Monday reassignments, in an area known to be infested with terrorist sympathizers. He was provided with fresh clothing, a month's supply of eroticine, an authorization to get more from any medical supply center he happened to be near--which she didn't expect him to need or use--and a brief message that "The Bitch" was most definitely alive, and was deeply interested in the Brothers' welfare.

6. Tony

St. Thomas, August 2571-February 2572

During the first week after Team Azrael reported to Middletown, Cortin got her men assigned quarters and the personal vehicles they were authorized, then made arrangements for them to have unlimited access to the Elysian Gardens, the city's most exclusive--and equally expensive--joy-house. The proprietor was reluctant--her ladies were accustomed to New Pennsylvania's nobles and gentry, not common troopers--until Cortin, with considerable hidden amusement, paid generously in advance, and promised bonuses if her men were pleased.

She also offered the Base Commander her services as priest and Inquisitor. He preferred to retain the base's civilian chaplain, but did accept her other offer, promising her all the work she could want. With that done, Cortin discovered that time went by very slowly when you were part of a group that had to conceal its mission, yet remain independent and assert special privileges.

Her work helped ease the boredom for her, and she took advantage of some of her spare time to ease more by practicing her driving. She'd never been in a car before her trip to the Academy, hadn't driven one until Strike Force training. It had been frightening at first, but she'd come to like it, and Odeon encouraged her. Since she no longer had the consolations of sex, he said, she really ought to make full use of what she could enjoy--and after all, a tank of gasoline wasn't much more expensive than an evening at the Elysian Gardens.

She was pleased when, midway through the second week, Degas asked to join her on one of her after-work drives. She'd known from their first meeting that something was bothering him; it was about time he got whatever it was out of his system. He was silent as she drove them through town and past the Ducal Palace, but when they got to open country, he asked her to pull over. She did so as soon as she found a shady spot, and turned to him. "What is it, Tony?"

Silently, slowly, he drew his pistol and held it to her, butt-first. "You may want to use this."

Cortin accepted it, stunned. "In God's Most Holy Name, Tony! Why?"

"Something I've kept from everyone except the priest I confessed to." Haunted eyes looked at her from that beautiful face. "I--Captain, for almost a year I was a Brother of Freedom."

Cortin's finger tightened reflexively on the trigger, but somehow she managed not to fire. "Why, Lieutenant?" she asked coldly. "And why tell me, now?"

"My confessor said that when I found the person I really wanted to follow, I'd have to tell, and accept her judgement."

"Go on."

"I was a kid, idealistic--I believed in what they said they stood for. I still do, but what they say doesn't come anywhere close to what they really stand for."

Cortin nodded, relaxing slightly. "I've never faulted the ideals they claim, or their courage--just their methods and their real morals."

"I was slow--it took me a while to realize the two didn't match. Once I did, and let people know I was sorry I'd joined, my superiors arranged for me to meet Shannon, and that told me I had to get out." Degas paused, looking sick. "He's an attractive man, handsome and--from the effect he had on the people I was with--damn near irresistible. I don't know how I was able to resist, but I've thanked God every day since that I was." He shuddered. "Shannon's evil, Captain! There's no other word to describe him. He may not be Shayan himself, like Sis thinks--though I tend to agree with her--but if he's not, he's not far off. A demon, or possessed by one. Most of the Brothers, I think, are just deluded--but Shannon's evil, and as long as they're under his spell, they'll act that way too."

"Did you commit any crimes while you were a Brother?"

Degas shook his head. "Not for lack of trying, I'm afraid. As I said, I was a kid; I wanted to do everything I could. But my superiors wouldn't let me, until I was older and knew more. So the only thing I was guilty of was joining, which I've been forgiven for--and I think I've paid any criminal debt I owed. I became a trooper because I was a Brother."

A trooper with a good Academy record, fifteen of his twenty-one active duty years in Special Ops--critically wounded several times, but living that long at all in Special Ops qualified as a real miracle--with numerous operations to his credit that he'd refused well-deserved awards for, as he'd refused promotion beyond the one

to First Lieutenant he'd had to accept to remain in service. She'd wondered about those refusals, but Odeon had said he'd claimed personal reasons. Now that she knew, she respected him for it; that was his way of atoning. "You've decided to follow me, so your confessor said you have to accept my judgement--and he knew you'd decide to follow a woman. That sounds peculiar--did he give you any reason?"

"Not exactly, ma'am. He just told me he knew, with absolute certainty, that if I lived long enough I'd find the one I needed."

"Um." That statement made Cortin uncomfortable; she didn't like the idea of something being predetermined, the way Tony made this sound. Still, it had been his choice to join Team Azrael. "Why did you choose me?"

Degas frowned. "I'm . . . not positive. Your record, of course, and you've got the same sort of odd attraction Shannon does--except that with him it's lethal, evil, and with you it's . . . I don't have the words. 'Good' sounds soft, and that it certainly isn't . . . maybe 'creative'? And definitely not evil; after Shannon, I can feel evil." He looked at her, his gaze steady. "Following you feels right, if you'll still let me."

Membership in a terrorist organization normally carried sentences of excommunication and death, but there were, on rare occasions, mitigating circumstances. Degas had been young, that sin had been forgiven, and he'd done more than enough to help the Kingdom to repay any harm he might have done. Cortin reversed his gun, handing it back to him. "You're still in, Tony. And I'd advise keeping this conversation between the two of us."

"Gladly!" Degas' expression was one of pure relief.

"We won't mention it again, then." She started the car and pulled back onto the dirt road. "I've got to stop at the Harrison ranch for a few minutes, then we can finish our drive."

Cortin hadn't intended to let any of her team see the softer side of her--it didn't seem fitting for an Enforcement officer, much less an Inquisitor--but she'd thought Tony's willingness to talk too important to miss. And she wasn't about to let anything stop her from visiting the retired priest, his brother's family--and her family, the cat she'd found in labor on the back seat of her car three days ago. She'd always remember the expression on the good Father's face, when he opened the door to find a desperate-looking Inquisitor with an armful of very pregnant cat, trying to explain she'd gone into the woods for a minute to answer a call of nature, and come back to find this, and was there please any place Mama-Cat could have her kittens?

He'd been kind enough to let her in and find a large basket he lined with towels. Mama-Cat had promptly settled in, making it clear Cortin wasn't to leave while she gave birth. Not at all reluctant, Cortin had stayed, getting acquainted with the Harrison family--who'd been understandably alarmed to find an Enforcement Service car parked in their front yard--while Mama had eight kittens Cortin assured her were absolutely beautiful. Of course, as she'd told the Harrisons, she'd always had a soft spot for animals, especially baby ones--but they were delightful!

Father Harrison was waiting, as usual, when she pulled into the drive and parked. If he was surprised to see another officer with her, he hid it well, smiling as Cortin introduced Degas. "Welcome, Lieutenant--and come in, both of you. Andrew's fixing supper; you'll stay, of course?"

"We'd love to," Cortin said, "but--"

"And Margaret's baking pies, with last year's dried fruits. She'd like to send your men some, but they won't be done for another hour . . ."

Cortin raised her hands, grinning. "You win, Father, you win! We'll stay. Has Starfire foaled yet?"

"This morning, a healthy palomino colt. We've named him Lifestar, in your honor--I hope you don't mind."

"On the contrary, I'm flattered--though I don't get the connection."

"In that case, just call it an old man's whimsy. I thought it might be a little early."

Cortin was puzzled by that comment, but she didn't have long to wonder at it; as soon as she and Degas followed the priest inside, she was mobbed--at least that was what it felt like--by the Harrison children and pets. Three children, four dogs, and a cat, she thought, were far more formidable than it sounded like they should be--and she loved being their target. When their greetings settled down a bit, she picked up Mama-Cat and carried her back to her kittens, smiling wistfully as the tiny beings mewed, hunting blindly for nipples, then settling down as they found them and began nursing. She'd always wanted a family of her own; if Mike hadn't been Special Ops, she'd have married him as soon as her Service obligation was complete, and done her best to have a dozen or so children. Now that that was impossible, the wish for it seemed to be getting stronger.

She put that out of her mind, stroking Mama-Cat and, very gently, each of the kittens before she rose to see a bemused expression on Degas' face. "Doesn't quite fit my image, does it?"

"No, ma'am. But it makes me even more certain you're the one my confessor meant."

Father Harrison looked from him to Cortin and back, then smiled slowly. "I thought your voice was familiar, Lieutenant," he said. Then, to Cortin's astonishment, the old priest blessed himself and murmured, "Thank You, Lord."

Degas stared at him, nodded once, and duplicated the slow smile. "Same here, Father. I'm glad we both lived to see it."

This time it was Cortin who looked from one to the other. "I do not believe in coincidence," she said firmly, shaking her head.

"What coincidence?" Father Harrison asked, beaming at her. "This happy meeting is simply the power of prayer in action. Needless to say, I'm delighted to see the troubled boy I counseled has matured into a fine officer and found the one I predicted would complete his healing."

Cortin couldn't argue the power of prayer--and the children weren't about to let adult seriousness delay their fun any longer. They almost pulled Cortin outside and to the corral behind the barn, to show her Starfire and the newborn Lifestar. The colt was a palomino, all right, in the classic--and rare--coin-gold, his mane and tail gleaming white as he frolicked around his mother. If she were any judge, Cortin thought, he'd be a prize-winner before too long. And he positively glowed with vitality--if Father Harrison had seen that kind of connection between her and the colt, she could only feel flattered.

She wasn't allowed much time to think about that, though. The children wanted to show off their Young Farmer projects, so she spent the rest of the time till Margaret called them in to supper happily admiring them and giving any help the children asked for.

Once they were seated at the table and the children's father had said grace, Degas turned to the priest. "If I'm out of line, Father, forget I asked--but is there any reason you're all wearing cartridges on neck-chains?"

Father Harrison glanced at Cortin with a smile. "We wanted souvenirs of Captain Cortin's visit, once we got over the shock of her sudden arrival, and cartridges were all she had extras of. She was kind enough to bless them for us, asking special protection from terrorists. I put them on neck-chains, and we've been wearing them

ever since."

"Fortunately," Cortin said, "terrorists seldom show any interest in farms or landfolk, so we'll probably never know how effective they are."

"On the other hand," Degas said, "we might--I'd like one, and I'll even provide my own cartridge. I wouldn't be surprised if the rest of the team felt the same way, too."

"Okay, as long as you don't expect miracles from them."

Father Harrison smiled. "But don't be surprised if you get them, either." He turned to Cortin. "A number of the neighbors would like them, too. I took the liberty of buying a box of cartridges and making several up, hoping you wouldn't mind."

Cortin wasn't really sure whether she approved of that or not, but she couldn't think of any real reason to object, and it would only take a few minutes of her time. "All right, as soon as we finish supper."

* * * * *

Degas' prediction proved correct; the rest of the team did want cartridges she'd blessed, and wore them on neck-chains--but attached so they could be quickly removed if necessary and used as they'd originally been intended, a precaution Cortin approved of. From the team, the popularity of her blessed cartridges spread to the rest of the base and beyond, gaining in reputation as field teams credited them with the fact that casualties seemed to be fewer and less serious among troopers who wore them.

As the team's stay in Middletown lengthened, all of them became impatient with the sheer frustration of waiting for the Brothers to make the first move. It was a frustration law enforcement personnel learned to live with, since they almost always had to react to lawbreakers, but that didn't make it any easier as winter became spring, then early and mid-summer.

At least, Cortin thought, the Base Commander kept his promise. There were fewer Brothers or other terrorists among her subjects than she would have liked, but she was kept busy with other criminals. They were less personally involving than the Brothers, though she discovered as she worked with them that they provided just as much professional satisfaction. Unlike terrorists, most of them survived her attentions; her interest in murderers, thieves, and the like was restricted to getting the necessary information from them, then turning them over to judges for sentencing. As her skill grew to match her talent, that became both easier and more satisfying, though it had a side effect she hadn't really expected and didn't like as well. Her reputation also grew, to the point where--as Illyanov had predicted--the threat of being handed over to Inquisitor-Captain Cortin was enough, in many cases, to elicit a full confession. Even that had its satisfactions, though, after the first few times; the point, after all, was to get the necessary information, and if she could do it by proxy, that only made her more effective.

And, one late February evening, Chang and Odeon reported to their commanding officer's quarters with the news that Chang's research had at long last borne fruit. When Cortin invited them in, Chang bowed. "I can report limited success, Captain--and our superior has taken an interest." She handed her commanding officer an envelope. "He wished me to maintain silence until a suitable donor was found, to prevent undue anxiety on your part. Lieutenant Bain and I did so this afternoon; if you agree to the procedure, Team Azrael will depart tomorrow morning for a suitable surgical and recuperation area with its prisoner."

Cortin waved them to seats and took one herself, then opened the envelope. It held a single sheet of paper, directing her to place herself under Medic-Lieutenant Chang's orders if she chose the procedure, with a handwritten note at the bottom: "It sounds indecent, but promising. If you decide to have it done, keep me in

mind next time you're in New Denver or I'm out East."

Cortin scowled at her subordinates, but couldn't maintain the expression; it was too hard to keep from grinning, and she finally did. "For people who've been going behind their CO's back, you two look remarkably unrepentant--not to mention smug. So tell me about this 'indecent but promising,' 'limited success' procedure . . . not that I think I'll need much convincing."

"The team will be ready to go at 0500," Odeon said, doing his best to look innocent.

Cortin gave him a dirty look, then shook her head in resignation. "I must be getting too predictable. Go on, Sis, spill it."

"As the Captain says." Chang's face remained impassive, but her eyes twinkled. "As I thought, the original rumor was exaggerated. The Inquisitor was not regrowing tissue; he was merely reattaching items that had been removed. And it was only external items; internal organs are either too complicated or simply beyond his skill. However, full function and sensation were restored in all cases, even when the reattachment was to another subject, provided the blood type was the same and the work was carefully done. And the recipient subject was maintained on an adequate dosage of algetin."

Cortin winced. Algetin was a potent pain-enhancer, which made it extremely useful for interrogations, but this was the first she'd heard of it having any medical use. Still . . . "I gather this talk of reattachments and algetin is not just theoretical, and is connected with my problem?"

Chang nodded. "Inquisitors on St. Ignatius do tend to take more time with their subjects than do those in other Kingdoms. This one discovered that algetin, used in adequate quantity and for an adequate period, promotes both healing and nerve growth. While, as I said, reattachment was successful in all cases, that of genital tissue was spectacularly so." She allowed herself a brief smile. "The Service's favorite virus, I suspect, is involved there. So, while any skin could, in theory, be used for the reconstruction you require, I have chosen somewhat more specialized material. You are, of course, aware of penile nerve density and sensitivity."

Cortin chuckled. Sis knew perfectly well she did, but she said, "Of course," willing to play along. What the medic called a virus wasn't, exactly; it was called that only because it wasn't exactly anything else, either, except itself, the cause of the Satyr Plague. That was the only "disease" she knew of that people hadn't tried very hard to avoid, because of its effect: it enhanced sexuality, especially in men, and gave them capability to match their increased drive--capability that had been purest fantasy before the virus' appearance thirty years ago. "Go on."

"The donor we have found is a Brother with your blood type; I believe the appropriate skin and nerve layers, inverted and properly placed, should serve your purpose nicely." She smiled again. "We are, of course, assuming you wish to resume female function. If not, there is nothing I can do. However, from our discussion some months ago and what Captain Odeon has told me, I believe that assumption is warranted. Am I correct?"

"You are," Cortin managed to say, staring at her medic. But it did make sense--was even just, in an odd way. If it worked, a Brother would be providing what several of them had ruined. "You are absolutely correct. It sounds like fantasy, but if you think there's any chance at all, I'm willing to try." She glared at Odeon, who was trying unsuccessfully to keep a straight face. "What's the matter with you? Don't you think it'll work?"

"If Sis's this optimistic, it'll work." Odeon grinned. "And I know you, remember? You've had a long dry spell--I can hardly wait to help you make up for that."

Cortin's eyebrows rose. "Longer than I ever have before, true--and I'm as eager for the drought's end as you are. Maybe more so--and from what you two are saying, that won't be long."

"Not long at all," Odeon said. "We'll be heading for Dragon's Lair first thing tomorrow--no need to look so surprised! Bradford pointed out that it'd have to be kept between him and us; what better place than a well-secured Royal retreat? He may've told His Majesty, to get us permission to use it, but can you imagine the reaction if the public found out someone--even a Brother--had been maimed for the purpose of allowing an Enforcement officer to have sex again?"

"I can imagine it would cause a bit of an uproar," Cortin said drily. "Even if it's part of the punishment he deserves for his crimes."

"And I imagine that's putting it damn mildly," Odeon said. "It's pretty obvious how you feel, but to make it official?"

"I want it--even if it means being under algetin for however long." That would be days at least, maybe a couple of weeks, of pure agony . . . but it would be worth it. She hoped. "I'm at your orders, Lieutenant Chang."

"The only one I have at the moment is that you are to eat no solid food until after the operation," the medic said. "Let me reassure you about the algetin, however. It will cause you no distress; those of my profession have drugs to ease or eliminate even such extreme pain. I can render you unconscious while the algetin is necessary."

"Good." Cortin had no desire to use drugs for normal pain, but algetin enhancement was an entirely different situation. She turned to Odeon. "You said we leave at 0500, which means getting up at 0300 if we're going to say Mass and still have time for the rest of you to eat breakfast. So I think you'd better have supper, and all of us should get to bed early."

7. Dave

St. Thomas, Thursday, 20 Feb 2572

The Royal Family, the King's Household and staff, and favored nobles flew to Dragon's Lair; everyone else rode. So when Team Azrael and its prisoner left Middletown for the deliberately-isolated Royal retreat, they were on horseback. Cortin, like most people, had learned to ride almost as soon as she'd learned to walk, and was expert at it, but she quickly found that riding was another thing she could no longer enjoy. She was wearing the back brace Egan had given her for unavoidable strenuous exercise and riding the smoothest-gaited horse in the Base stables--a black Arab named Rainbow--complete with a lambswool saddle pad, but within fifteen minutes she was thinking that maybe disability retirement might not be such a bad idea after all. Without it she'd be spending a lot of time in the saddle, hurting worse than usual. On the other hand, if she got out she'd be spending even more time in the saddle, unless she abandoned her crusade--and she had no intention of doing that. So she just had to learn to endure this, too. At least, she thought, if they had to ride they had a nice day for it. The temperature was still comfortable in the morning sun, and by the time it got too warm in the open, cultivated areas, they'd be in forest shade. And the quiet was pleasant, only an occasional word or two and the soft sounds of leather or hooves on dirt breaking the silence. She could see landfolk out working their farms and ranches, but they were far enough away she couldn't hear them--and they weren't likely to approach a group of Enforcement troopers, especially one escorting a prisoner.

Cortin smiled grimly at that thought. Prewar, even Terran, police, from her reading, had gotten the same reaction: civilians tended to stay away, unless they needed something. And civs were even less interested in having anything to do with police carrying out the enforcement part of their duties. Let one get close enough to see an Inquisitor's badge, and lack of interest usually turned into active avoidance of contact; the Harrisons' pleasure at her visits was unusual. At one time, she'd disliked provoking that reaction; now she was accustomed to it, and at times found it useful.

She heard a horse speed up slightly, until Lieutenant Bain was riding beside her. "Is anything wrong, Captain?" he asked. "I've been noticing you don't look exactly comfortable."

"Nothing that can be helped, thanks. It seems my back doesn't approve of horses any longer, is all."

"How bad?"

"Late second stage, maybe early third. Nothing I can't handle for a few hours if I have to--though I'll admit I'm already looking forward to stopping for the night." She gestured to the rear, where Degas was leading the unconscious prisoner's horse. "How far did you get on him before Sis tapped him for surgery?"

"I didn't even start," Bain said, surprising her. "She and I were looking for a blood type match, plus a couple of other factors she thought might help; when we finally found one she thought would be right, we put him straight under." He grinned. "Don't worry, though. He'll have to stay out while Sis takes what you need--we don't want to take any chances on damaging it--but once he wakes up, I'll make sure I get anything interesting. Unless you'd rather I save him for you?"

Cortin returned the grin. "I shouldn't be greedy, and I do have something else to look forward to from him; you go ahead."

"Thanks." Bain glanced at her, then obviously decided not to go on.

Cortin hid a sigh. Having civilians apprehensive about her was one thing, but her men should feel free to ask or tell her anything. "What's the problem, Dave?"

"It's not exactly a problem, ma'am . . . uh, Joan."

"What, then?"

Bain looked uncomfortable. "Uh . . . you're the first lady trooper I've been around, and . . ."

"Oh." Yes, that explained his hesitation. "I've been the only woman on a team most of my career. I'm neither a virgin nor a prude, though I sometimes find it useful to pretend the latter around civilians. So spill it."

Bain grinned in relief. "Right, Joan. Okay, then--Mike says that before the Brothers messed you up, you enjoyed using our dispensation whenever the opportunity offered. Nothing fancy, but not skimping anyone, either."

"True," Cortin said, smiling. "I'm a firm believer in the basics, and God was generous enough to let me enjoy them in abundance. If He's merciful enough to let this work out, I'll do it again."

"Just let us know what you want, and how much; we'll do our best to oblige." Bain grinned again. "Always a good idea to keep the CO happy, you know."

Cortin couldn't help laughing, in spite of the pain. She knew that a commanding officer taking part in a team's sexual activity tended to have an extreme effect, one way or the other; it could tear the team apart, or it could weld it into near-unity. From watching hers work together, she was certain it would react positively, so she said, "And from my experience with other teams, I doubt you'll find at least that aspect overly disagreeable."

"Or at all difficult," Bain agreed. "I'm looking forward to it, in fact." He gestured in a way that told her he was still unsure. "I've been with a lot of civ women, paid or curious about an Inquisitor, but they didn't--oh, hell!"

"You're not the first one to tell me that," Cortin said drily. "I was lucky, always had enough willing troopers around I never had to go to a civ man--but I always got more out of Special Ops men. The emotional feel was better, even when physical things were the same."

"You do understand, then." Bain's look was full of relief and something else she couldn't quite identify.

"Yes--and if this works, I want all of you to feel free to come to me. Other duties permitting, I'll be more than happy to help keep up morale." She grinned. "Rank doth have its responsibilities, a few of them pleasant; a CO is expected to be available for counseling whenever it's needed."

Bain chuckled. "'Counseling'--I like that. You may have the best-counseled team in the entire Service, here shortly."

"Most counseled, anyway," Cortin said. "And while you're here, I've been meaning to ask--if you don't mind talking about it, I'd like to hear how you ended up in the Strike Force. Records are all very well, but there's no feel to them."

"I'd rather not," Bain said slowly. "Fair's fair, though; Mike told us all about how you got into this." He paused, clearly trying to organize what he wanted to say.

Cortin had suspected Mike might have given them the details of her background, probably because he'd thought it would somehow help her. He'd be right, too, if it helped her get insight into her people. She waited for Bain to speak.

"I come from a big family," he said at last. "Four sisters and a baby brother, with me the only sterile in the bunch. I enlisted in Enforcement, became a demolitions expert, got a recommendation to the Academy and graduated about the middle of my class, put in for SO and got it, made First about three years later. By that time, my baby brother was in the Service too, a top-notch medic." He paused, and Cortin saw tears in his eyes. "We weren't stationed together, but we were close enough we got to see each other regularly. He loved his work, would go out of his way to help anyone who needed it, wouldn't hurt a fly--wouldn't carry a gun, even on a remote patrol. He had a great family, wife and two kids with a third on the way, he and Betty both hoping for eight or ten . . . He couldn't understand why I wanted to be an Inquisitor, even though he knew someone had to do it--hell, he couldn't understand why I went into demolition!--but I was his big brother, so if I wanted it, he wanted it for me."

Bain paused. "I'm rambling--sorry. Anyway, about a week after I got my Warrant, my team got called out to help search for survivors of a terrorist ambush on a patrol. I heard the patrol that got hit was from Lancaster, but I didn't get scared until I heard the Team-Leader's name. It was Jeffrey's team . . . and on the ride out I heard other searchers had found seven bodies from the ten-man team. The medic wasn't one of them, and that scared me worse. Jeffy didn't have what it takes to escape an ambush, and you know what's likely to happen to an Enforcement trooper captured by terrorists."

"Nothing good," Cortin agreed.

"We were the first combat team to get to the ambush site, so after a quick briefing, the on-scene commander sent us after the ambush party--fifteen of them, his Tracker said. With that few, our Team-Leader decided we didn't need any backup, so we got on their trail. When we caught up a few hours later, they'd made camp and were working on Jeffy. I couldn't see them yet, but I knew his voice well enough to recognize it, even screaming and with the overtones algetin adds."

Cortin nodded. Screams, to a civilian and even to most Enforcement personnel, didn't tell much except that the screamer was feeling intense pleasure or pain. An Inquisitor learned not only to tell which, but also several

other things; she wasn't at all surprised that Bain had been able to tell his brother had been dosed with the pain-enhancer.

"We took out the sentries, which eliminated five of the terrorists and gave us the advantage of numbers as well as skill, then we moved in on the camp." Bain paused. "Have you ever been in on a mass interrogation?"

"No, but I know the theory; pick the least likely to be useful and make a dramatic example of him, to save time with the rest."

"That's what they were doing with Jeffy. All three of our people were hanging spreadeagle, but Jeffy was the one their version of an Inquisitor was working on." Bain's voice caught, and it was a moment before he could continue. "I'd . . . rather not go into the details; just call it a standard demonstration. The plager was in the middle of gutting him when we attacked. I knee-shot him, then went to Jeffy." He stared at his saddle horn. "He . . . didn't recognize me at first, and . . . when he did, he begged for help." Bain looked at his commanding officer, his expression haunted. "Joan, he couldn't have lived if there'd been a hospital trauma center five feet away, and he knew it. I couldn't refuse him, make him live in that kind of agony until shock and blood loss killed him in spite of the drugs. So I gave him Last Rites--then I killed him, as quickly and painlessly as I could." He looked down again. "Dammit, I became an Inquisitor to help find the Kingdoms' enemies, not to kill people I love!"

"I understand." His Warrant made his action blameless under both civil and Church law, but that wouldn't have helped his feelings any. "It was the only help you could give, and both of us know it can be welcome. At worst, he's in Purgatory; I'll include him in my Mass intentions from now on."

"Thanks--I've been doing it since I was ordained, of course, but extra Masses never hurt, and it'll make his family feel better."

"How did they take it?"

"Betty understood; the kids are too young to know anything except that Daddy's gone and won't be back. She gets a pension, of course, and I'm 'acting Daddy' for the kids when I'm around. You'll have to come out for a visit sometime, since we're stationed in the area--I'm sure they'd love to meet you."

"I'll do that." She ought to find out if she could still relate to normal civilians, she supposed; except for visiting the Harrisons, she'd been in a strictly-military environment since the attack. And not even a normal military environment, between the hospital, her Inquisitor's training, and starting a Strike Force team. She knew she'd changed, for what would generally be considered the worse; what she didn't know was how much.

"Great! If you don't mind, I'll drop back now and pass your invitation along."

"Fine."

She rode alone the rest of the morning, glad when they got into the forest and out of the rapidly-warming sun. She was pleased to find she could still appreciate the sounds and smells of the forest, the squirrels and birds, the green-tinged light. Lunch was good, though she was restricted to broth and more grateful for the brief relief from jarring pain than for the unsatisfying pre-surgery meal.

8. Ambush

Back on the road, about an hour later, Cortin spotted a rider coming in their direction. He was apparently daydreaming, because it was a few seconds before he saw the group--and when he did, he reined around and galloped back the way he'd come.

Cortin stopped, frowning, and motioned Odeon to join her. Most people didn't like getting too close to prisoner escorts, no, but leaving at a gallop was a rather extreme reaction. Not necessarily a guilty reaction, and not one she would normally be justified in having him pursued or shot for . . . but it bothered her. When Odeon reined in beside her, she said, "I don't like the looks of that. It could mean nothing, but it could also mean trouble. Patrol formation, I think, with you at point; as Tracker, you've got the best chance of spotting trouble before it spots you."

"Right. And I'd recommend Tony as rear guard; he's the closest we have to a second Tracker."

"Agreed." As he rode ahead, Cortin dropped back to the main group, briefed them, and sent Degas to the rear. This wasn't good ambush country--the woods were open, with the road avoiding rough terrain wherever possible--and they'd be in secure territory when they got within an hour's ride of the retreat; even when the Royal Family was elsewhere, there were security and housekeeping staffs in residence.

When they moved out again, she stayed with the group, all of them alert for unusual movements or sounds. Cortin found herself half-hoping for action, though she also wanted to make it through without having any of her people hurt or killed.

Odeon moved forward cautiously. He agreed with Joanie: even though someone fleeing a prisoner escort didn't necessarily mean trouble, it was a good idea to take a few simple precautions. He studied the other's tracks when he got to them, but they told him nothing he didn't already know. The man had been riding at a walk, and had suddenly turned, galloping away. If it was because of normal apprehension, fine, and no real problem even if he was a wanted criminal; he'd cause them no trouble, and he'd be caught eventually if he kept reacting that way. The problem would arise if he were point man for a group of Brothers or other terrorists--not likely this close to a royal residence, but certainly a possibility.

He wasn't kept in suspense long; within five minutes, he heard a group of riders ahead. They were making no effort to be silent, which didn't prove anything one way or the other; either they were innocent, or they were pretending to be innocent to get close to the Enforcement group. The woods were open enough there was no point in leaving the road to try to eavesdrop on them; if he were close enough to understand words, he'd be close enough to see. So, keeping his hand close to his pistol, he rode forward.

His appearance clearly startled them, enough to get an honest reaction; half of the fifteen or so went for their weapons. He drew and fired at the same time he was turning his horse and urging it to a gallop. Leaning low over the horse's withers, he continued to fire, and was both surprised and gratified to hear a cry of pain mixed with the return fire; it was damn near impossible to hit anything from the back of a running horse even if you tried to aim.

Cortin heard the shots, then rapidly-approaching hoofbeats. So did the rest, and there was no need to give orders; all had been in similar situations often enough to know precisely what to do. By the time Odeon came in sight, Chang and the prisoner were far enough off to the side to be out of the firefight, and the rest were behind good-sized trees. This wasn't exactly what Cortin had had in mind, wanting action--it was more like the kneeling-behind-a-barrier segment of a firing range exercise--but it would do.

When Odeon passed their positions, the team opened fire. Cortin hit two, someone else hit two more, and the terrorists turned into a milling, cursing mob whose return fire was sporadic and poorly aimed. Cortin smiled, continuing to aim and fire as coolly as if she were on the target range. She had no more hits, but others did; three more terrorists fell, and the rest fled, demoralized.

She stood, brushing off her trousers, then reloaded and holstered her pistol. "Anyone hurt?" she called.

"Nope."

"Fine here."

"Nicked by a chunk of flying bark, nothing serious."

"We are unhurt."

Hoofbeats from the rear brought them alert again, but it was Degas galloping up, his gun drawn. He holstered it as he pulled his horse to a stop, looking disappointed. "I missed all the fun, huh?"

"I'm afraid so," Cortin said, smiling. "Bad guys zero, good guys seven."

"Eight," Odeon said. "I hit one when they started chasing me. I don't know if he's dead or just wounded, though."

Chang had come up and started checking the casualties; now she reported. "Six dead, Captain, the other critically wounded."

"Can he be questioned?"

Chang frowned. "Perhaps, if you hurry. He is conscious, but will probably not survive more than a few minutes."

"I'll hurry--which one?"

"Over here." Chang led the way, kneeling beside the terrorist and doing what she could to keep him alive for Cortin's questions.

Cortin knelt on the man's other side, pulling her gloves off. "My medic says you only have a few minutes to live. If you've got any desire to make your peace with God, now's the time to do it." That didn't seem a very promising tactic, but it was obvious he wouldn't live long enough for her usual methods.

"You're . . . Cortin?" The man coughed, blood speckling his lips.

"Yes." Maybe her reputation would be a help--except that he didn't seem as much afraid as hopeful.

"Now I know . . . why th' Raidmaster's . . . afraid of you." The man seized her bare hand. "Protect me from him . . . you're a priest . . . I'll tell you all I can."

"You'll be as safe from him as you are from me, in a few minutes."

"No!" The man struggled to sit up, gasping in pain. "That's no help--I need . . . th' Sacraments."

Much as she wanted to, Cortin couldn't refuse; this was why Strike Force Inquisitors were required to be priests. She got her stole out of her pocket, calling for Odeon to bring her saddlebags, then kissed the stole and put it on. "I'm ready."

The man's Confession was hurried, missing details he must know he didn't have time for, but to Cortin's surprise it was an honest effort; he actually did regret what he'd done. Imminent-death repentance wasn't as good as trying to live a decent, useful life, but if God found it acceptable she had to. She gave him Absolution and Communion, less disturbed by that than she'd expected--though it still wasn't an experience she cared to repeat.

When he'd swallowed the Host, the Brother sank back. "Thanks . . . didn't know how much I'd missed it . . . once you've taken the oath . . . he doesn't let you know." His eyes closed, and Cortin didn't need Chang's murmur to tell her he was almost gone. When he spoke again, his voice was little more than a whisper. "He's right to be . . . afraid of you. So afraid . . . you're to be . . . left alone. It's the nun . . . Piety's top of the . . . wipe list . . . more ways than one . . ." He tried to laugh, choked instead. "You'll need 'em both . . . t' beat him." That was all he could manage; with a sigh, he died.

Cortin gave him a final blessing, then resumed her gloves, put away her stole, and wrote a note that this one required burial in holy ground. She pinned it to his shirt, then rose and looked around.

The Service horses were still there, obedient to their dropped reins, but only two of the others' had stayed--not enough to transport seven or eight bodies. "Check them for ID, then get them off the road and cover them. We can inform the residence's security people, and they can send someone out. We'll take the horses along, though; they're royal property now, and they need looked after."

"Right." Odeon took charge, helping pull bodies off the road and search them, while Cortin collected the horses and mounted. None of them expected terrorists to be carrying identification, so there was no disappointment when they didn't find any. Half an hour after the attack, they were ready to go again, but as Cortin was taking a final look at the blanket-covered bodies, she got an idea, reached back into her saddlebag for one of her spare gloves, then tossed it on one of the bodies. "Whoever finds these plagues won't know what that means until later," she said, "but Team Azrael has claimed its first victory, and it won't be our last. They'll learn."

* * * * *

The repentant Brother hadn't told her much, Cortin thought as they rode, but the little he had said was disturbing. Shannon, so afraid of her--why?--that he'd put her off limits. That didn't make sense; logically, he should be doing his utmost to kill her. Instead, it was Piety--and what did that 'in more ways than one' mean?--at the top of their wipe list. Which also made no sense.

"Unless Shannon knows something we don't," Odeon said, riding up beside her.

"You reading minds now?"

"Hardly--but what else would you be thinking about, after what he said?"

"True." Cortin gave him a sidelong glance. "So what possible knowledge would have that effect? Put an Inquisitor off limits, and target a medic? The only thing she and I have in common is that we were both his victims."

"Surviving female victims," Odeon said. "Both associated with Enforcement, and now both, not just one, religious." He frowned. "If Shannon's who--or what--Sis thinks, and Tony won't dispute, God won't let him operate unopposed for long. Though it may seem like forever to us, depending on when he started. If it's recently, there won't be a whole lot we can accomplish, though of course we'll have to try to fight him--but if it's near the end of his allotted free time, it means the Protector's about to appear. With him afraid of you and targeting Sis, I'd say the latter's more likely, and with you two playing important parts. Maybe his heralds, maybe part of the staff the prophecies say he may have if Shayan's strong enough to make him need one, there's not enough information to say--but whichever, if I'm right, you and she are the two most important people in the Systems right now."

Cortin tried to laugh at that conceit, but she couldn't. Mike had an uncomfortable habit of being right, especially in this sort of thing. On the other hand--"That's one possibility, I suppose. You have to admit,

though, it doesn't sound too plausible: that two women Shannon's already defeated should be much of a danger to him."

Odeon frowned. "I agree. Still, it's the least unreasonable thing I can think of, assuming he is Shayan."

"Which I doubt, in spite of Sis' conviction. But we do have to assume a worst-case scenario, which means we turn around right now and spread the alarm." Cortin started to rein her horse around.

"No!" Odeon exclaimed, shocking them both with the intensity of his refusal.

"Why not?" Cortin should have been angry at his insubordination; instead, she was curious. "You have a hunch about it?"

"Stronger than a hunch," Odeon said, frowning. "It feels like something vital now, not just a nice idea." He shook his head. "I don't have any hard evidence, Joanie, but I think Team Azrael's been chosen--maybe even designed--to take on Shannon. We've got things to do before we're ready, though. Things we've got to do alone, or with very few and very carefully chosen people to help. And this is one of those things."

"You make it sound like we're puppets."

"No!" Again, Odeon's intensity startled both of them. "Compulsion is Shannon's way, not God's. He'll guide and help us as long as we're willing to accept His backing, but He won't go beyond that unless we specifically ask Him to." He managed a grin. "Which I did, back at the White Fathers' monastery. And I think He just took me up on it, because I'd never argue a lawful order on my own."

"I know--I think that's what shocked me most," Cortin said. "But . . . Mike, you're scaring me. Sure, Azrael's good--we picked the best. And he was telling the truth when he said Shannon was afraid of me, though I can't imagine why, if he is Shayan. Dear God, Mike, we're only human!"

"Humans have been known to work wonders, with God's help," Odeon pointed out. "Though I have to admit I'm not too thrilled about going up against His Infernal Majesty myself."

"But we both will if we have to. We all will." Cortin shuddered. "And we'd better be in a state of grace when we do, because we're not going to have much of a chance of coming out alive." She took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. "But that's a good idea any time, and I'd rather think Shannon's just a particularly nasty human. Under Shayan's influence, of course, but not supernatural himself."

"So would I. God willing, that's how it'll work out."

* * * * *

It was still a couple of hours before dark when they got to the retreat's main guard post. Cortin was surprised when a lieutenant emerged to check their identification and authorization, until he told her that Crown Prince Edward and Princess Ursula were in residence, and went on, "Colonel Bradford and Inquisitor-Major Illyanov are in Their Highness' party, and asked whoever met you to extend their regards. They would like to see you when you get a chance; they're billeted in the Manor, but we were told you and your team need privacy, so you're assigned a field-type shelter we use when there're too many security people here for normal quarters. I hope that'll be satisfactory."

"A shelter is fine, thanks," Cortin said. Better, in fact, than the Manor--for her, at least. Being loaned a corner of a royal retreat was an honor, but she was certain she'd be horribly uncomfortable in the actual presence of royalty. Seeing Illyanov and Bradford again would be nice, though--especially Ivan, and especially if the

surgery worked, though she was reluctant to admit an Inquisitor had that kind of attraction for her. "I do need a couple of things, if they're possible?"

"My pleasure, Team-Leader. What can we do for you?"

"Take care of these spare horses, and see about picking up and identifying some bodies." Cortin gave him a brief explanation, and a description of the location.

"I know where you mean," the Lieutenant said. "I'll be happy to see to both. Is there anything else?"

"No, except where this shelter is." She paused, realizing she was forgetting something. "Lieutenant Bain plans to conduct an interrogation of our prisoner, probably within the next couple of days. We certainly don't want to disturb Their Highnesses, though; is there someplace remote we can use?"

"The shelter is about a kilometer from the Manor, Captain; standard procedures will be fine." The Lieutenant turned back to the guardhouse and called inside; seconds later, a sergeant emerged. "Sergeant Halvorsen will guide you, then take the spare horses to the main stable. If you don't mind him using one of them?"

"Of course not. Glad to meet you, Sergeant."

"My pleasure, ma'am." Halvorsen saluted; when she returned it, he mounted one of the spare horses and led them another half-dozen kilometers, past immaculate lawns and formal gardens, to a shelter that looked odd because it was covered in multi-colored climbing roses. "Here you are, Captain," he said with a smile. "Enjoy your stay."

"Thank you, Sergeant." Cortin dismounted as he left, leading her horse into the shelter's stable. She needed help unsaddling--her back wouldn't let her do it by herself any longer--but once that was done, she was able to care for and feed Rainbow alone. She wouldn't mind having the gelding as a permanent mount as long as she was stationed at Middletown; he did have a smooth gait, even though she couldn't appreciate it properly any longer, and he was beautifully responsive to reins, knees, or voice. Once the Strike Force was activated, maybe she would lay claim to him.

When they got into the shelter proper, Degas began fixing supper. That, like clean-up, was normally done by turns, but he'd volunteered for the job--he claimed in self-defense--any time they were in the field. No one argued, after Pritchett had challenged him to show why; he could do wonders with shelter rations, and was the only human Cortin knew who could actually make trail rations into something you didn't mind eating.

A knock on the door brought them all alert, though none were anticipating trouble here; as Cortin had half expected, what they got was company for supper, in the persons of Bradford and Illyanov. She was glad to see them, and even more pleased that they settled into the team's non-regulation informality as if it were a group of Inquisitors like the one at the Eagle's Nest.

She saw Bradford's look of pleased surprise at her men's gloves, and his slow smile of approval. "I see Team Azrael has decided on a trademark. Did you by any chance leave a glove with the remains of your attackers?"

Not at all surprised that they'd heard the story so quickly, Cortin nodded. "Yes--it seemed like a good idea. Shouldn't we have?"

"That's your option, as Team-Leader. Leaving a token that way will gain your team a reputation, which can be helpful at times--but it'll also make you targets. So I'm leaving the choice, as I said, to the Team-Leaders."

"We'll talk about it, then," Cortin said, a bit disturbed. "Personal notoriety for Inquisitor Azrael will be

useful--but I've discovered I'm no longer one of the Brothers' targets, though Lieutenant Chang is at the top of their list. I will not turn the rest of my team into special targets without their consent."

Bradford looked incredulous. "You're not a target? I find that hard to believe."

"One of the Brother casualties lived long enough to talk." She explained, including Chang's conviction about Shannon's identity--leaving out only Degas' youthful indiscretion--watching the Colonel's face.

After a brief silence, Bradford nodded. "I've heard similar opinions, though I'm not sure I believe them either. In that case, your team may choose."

"Anyone else with an Inquisitor's badge is automatically at the top of the Brothers' target list," Bain pointed out. "Me, I'll take any advantage I can get to balance that. Though if we keep on at this rate, we may all go broke buying gloves."

"Requisition them as team equipment," Bradford said. "Team Flame has already put one in for candles."

"I like the idea," Odeon said thoughtfully. "Anyone on a Strike Team, not just the Inquisitors, is going to be a prime target as soon as we go public. So I agree with Dave--we might as well take the advantages with the dangers."

"I didn't join Special Ops or the Strike Force for safety and security," Degas agreed. "I'm for it."

"Same here," "And I also," came simultaneously from Pritchett and Chang.

"I'd say that settles that," Cortin said, gratified. "Shall we eat, gentles?"

That suggestion got hearty approval, and the men served themselves while Cortin gave her mug of broth a disgruntled look.

"Looking forward to some solid food?" Bradford asked, grinning. "Oh, I've cleared Ivan for this experiment, since I could see how close you two got while he was training you."

"Um." Cortin looked from him to Illyanov, whose attempt at an innocent look might possibly have fooled a two-year-old, then back. So Ivan wanted in too, did he? Well, she certainly didn't have any objection! "Yes, I am," she said. "Right now, I'm not sure whether I'm looking forward more to that, or to being able to have sex again. I suppose I'll find out when I'm able to have both."

That got chuckles, and Chang smiled. "I will make sure you are nourished well enough that you can make your choice without concern for your strength."

Cortin bowed in her direction. "Thanks, Sis. That should make it fair enough . . . as long as I'm not asked to choose between a chocolate éclair and one of you ready for action. In that case, I'd probably try for both at once."

"No chocolate éclairs, then," Odeon said promptly. "The other I won't promise."

Cortin almost choked on her broth, but managed to bring herself under control. "I wouldn't put it past any of you gentlemen, and I can't think of anything nicer to wake up to--but any sedative strong enough to knock me out under algetin won't leave me able to do any of us much good for . . . how long, Sis? About a day?"

"Considerably less than that, I should say," Chang replied. "I will discontinue the algetin only when I am

convinced you are completely healed, and the sedative I will use will fade into a natural sleep. When you wake from that, you should be fully recovered and capable of any exertions you care to make."

"Better than I thought, then. When do you plan to operate?"

"Tomorrow morning," Bradford answered for the medic. "I've had what would be the armory in a real shelter set up for the operation. You should be on your feet again within a week."

9. Surgery

Shannon fumed in helpless anger. The first direct attack on Cortin's new team--one he admitted to himself shouldn't have been made, but that he'd found irresistible--had been a total disaster. The troopers had been outnumbered more than two to one, yet they had still routed his men, as far as he knew taking no casualties while claiming eight kills. Worse, he'd had to let one of his own go before death. It was always unpleasant to lose someone useful, and when that one was sworn to him, it was humiliating as well.

Worse, though, was his near-certainty of why Cortin and her people would be taking another of his to a remote security area, when that one was a near-perfect medical match. Restoring Cortin's sexual function, and the use she would make of it, would cause severe and possibly critical damage to the use he had been making--and intended to continue making, if she didn't reclaim it--of human sexuality. Especially the new virus-enhanced version, which offered such delicious possibilities if properly redirected and emotionally loaded.

Was there anything he could do to prevent it? Degas, a former Brother--though unfortunately too young then to be properly sworn to him--was on Cortin's team. It was possible he could be blackmailed into cooperating . . . though that would mean using his power, since security at a Royal retreat was so tight. Cortin would have to be sedated for the surgery, maybe for part of her recovery time as well, and it should be safe enough to use them while she was drugged. If he only knew when she'd be under!

But without that knowledge, he decided regretfully, it would be wiser to refrain. The Adversary had pointed out that timing was crucial; he simply dared not take the risk of rousing Cortin's power too early.

* * * * *

Friday, 28 Feb 2572

Odeon was sitting beside the heavily sedated Cortin, stroking the hand without tubes, when Bradford entered the shelter. He started to rise, but settled back at Bradford's gesture. "Yes, Colonel?"

"Brad, please." Bradford looked at the woman for some time, then he turned his attention back to the scar-faced man who was her second in command. "You've known and loved her for years, Mike. So will you please tell me why in God's name the most talented Inquisitor I've ever seen won't take a nice, safe, productive assignment at the New Denver Detention Center where the most difficult cases can be referred to her?"

"I thought you wanted her in the field!" Odeon exclaimed.

"Dear God, no! If I had my way, she'd be at the Center with all the medical and professional support I could provide, not out in the field getting shot at, torturing herself by making her back trouble worse, and wasting her talents on criminals a second-semester student could handle. If I try to keep her there, though, I'm afraid I'll lose her--she's never said it in so many words, but if I read her right, she'd go rogue rather than give up her hunt for the Shannons."

"I think so too," Odeon said. "She wants revenge, and I can't blame her. So I'll help her, and protect her as well as I can . . . and so will the rest of Team Azrael."

"And any other Enforcement man who's been around her for long," Bradford said drily. "Interrogation isn't her only talent, I've discovered. She doesn't know about it, I found when I debriefed her--I can't help wondering if you've noticed."

"Noticed what?" Odeon asked, puzzled.

"How people, men especially, react to her."

Odeon chuckled. "That? That's easy! She's an Enforcement officer, so civs are apprehensive about her--more than they are of us, but until Sis came aboard she was the only woman officer. And our people like her, probably for the same reason."

"Your observations are accurate, of course--I'd expect that, from a Tracker. But not completely so, since I have yet to find an Enforcement trooper, officer or enlisted, who's been around her for more than a short time and only likes her. To the best of my research, any trooper who's spent as little as ten or fifteen minutes with her has fallen in love. I used to believe it was because of sex--you know how generous she was with herself--but since her maiming, I found that theory was wrong." He grimaced. "The effect isn't even conscious, much less deliberate. When I went in to debrief her, I thought it would be routine, and that I was braced against anything she might try. But she didn't, and I wasn't--by the time I left, I was in love with her, and so was every man on my team. I can't claim I don't feel any sexual attraction for her, because I most definitely do, even though I'm a happily married man with a child. But my primary feeling for her is protectiveness, and I understand that's how the rest feel. Including," he grimaced again, "Major Illyanov, the entire Inquisitorial staff of the Detention Center, one clerk-private, and the proprietor of the Eagle's Nest. Probably others as well."

"Mmm . . . that fits." Odeon hadn't thought about it that way, but now that Bradford had pointed it out, it did fit. The team's degree of protectiveness toward their commanding officer and their concern with how she came through the operation were both unusually strong; it was good to have an explanation. Especially one that also explained Bradford's presence--and Illyanov's, since he wouldn't normally be a member of a Royal party. "I hadn't realized, but you're right. So what do we do about it?"

"Damned if I know," Bradford said. "There's probably nothing that can be done, since she's not doing it either deliberately or knowingly. I mentioned it to you primarily because you're her second and need to be aware of that effect. It could be useful--at least if a young civ falls in love with her, you'll know to send him to a recruiter!"

Odeon chuckled. "True--too bad all recruiters don't have a method that effective. It would've saved me a lot of time, when I had that duty."

"It would save the Service a lot of time, too, getting rid of ones who don't work out," Bradford agreed. "If she weren't such an incredibly talented Inquisitor, I'd want her on that duty--though she'd have to have a partner who could tell when it happened, because as I said, she doesn't know she's doing it."

Odeon frowned. "Do we want her to know? I don't like keeping things from her, but offhand I'd say she's better off thinking it's normal comradeship, with her back trouble as an explanation for any help or protection out of the ordinary."

"Which is what I was working around to asking you," Bradford said. "If you think that's best, we'll keep it between the two of us."

"Us and the team," Odeon corrected, "so they don't mention it by mistake. No one else is likely to say they love an Inquisitor, even if it's true. I know I'd never dare."

"Did you tell her before she got her Warrant?"

"No--she never seemed to want that kind of tie, so I didn't burden her with it." Odeon frowned briefly, then smiled. "Fortunately for me--and the rest of us, I guess--she doesn't need that to make love to us."

"I've heard," Bradford said appreciatively. "As well for you--us, if she's willing to go outside her team--that she doesn't put a daily limit on herself."

"She's never restricted herself to a given team, either," Odeon said. "Only to Enforcement men. I'm sure she'd be willing to accommodate you and Major--I mean, Ivan."

"Good!" Bradford smiled. "Both our wives understand and accept the dispensation, of course, and so does Ivan's mistress, if that matters to her."

"I don't know if it does or not," Odeon admitted, surprised at himself. "She's never mentioned it to me, or to anyone else I know of. If I thought about it at all, I guess I assumed she assumed any wives or girlfriends did accept it."

"Okay. Sis expects her to wake up tomorrow?"

"Late afternoon or early evening, yes."

10. Dream

Saturday, 29 February 2572

Odeon was too edgy to sleep, too nervous about Joanie's prospects for recovery even to rest well, and more than a little apprehensive about the Brothers, so not long after midnight he gave up his useless attempt to sleep. He dressed quietly in the dim night-lighting, careful not to disturb the others--especially Piety, napping at the table. With a patient to care for and herself the only medical person who knew about Cortin's surgery, Chang slept grudgingly, not letting herself get comfortable for fear of not waking if Cortin should need her. Odeon didn't think it really necessary, but he wouldn't order anyone to be less conscientious in their specialty than they thought wise.

He slipped outside, chuckling ruefully at himself. Sis wasn't the only one taking unnecessary precautions; here he was putting himself on guard duty in a Royal residential compound with the Crown Prince and Princess present! If that wasn't redundant, he didn't know what would be; he'd have the proverbial snowball's chance against anything that could get past the kind of security this place had. Still, he felt better when he'd made a tour around the shelter and settled himself in a lawn chair beside the door.

It was a mild night, a bit cooler than usual for this time of year--good sleeping weather, and the smell of the roses was relaxing. Maybe out here he could catch a nap after all, so he wouldn't be a total loss in the morning--wouldn't want to be a zombie when Joanie woke up! And he was a Tracker, trained to wake instantly if he heard anything unusual. He settled deeper into the chair, closing his eyes.

* * * * *

The man approaching him was impossible. For one thing, he was inhumanly attractive, almost beautiful--but the clincher was his uniform. Enforcement did have some good-looking older officers; it had never had a

white uniform, or a star for rank insignia, or a Kingdom emblem that looked like a spiral galaxy. This had to be a dream, then, so Odeon settled in to play along and enjoy it.

It seemed reasonable to assume that a star outranked even an eagle, so he stood, coming to attention as the man neared.

"At ease," the stranger said, smiling. "You need have no fear for your Joanie, Michael; she'll be fully recovered when she wakes."

"Thank you, sir." Odeon had no doubt the man knew precisely what he was talking about, and it was definitely reassuring.

"But you'd like to know how I know." The man smiled again. "I'm an aspect of the Triune you worship, Michael, in a form I hope you'll find--" He broke off, chuckling. "Not comforting, certainly, or even reassuring, but at least not threatening. I'm here to give you a heads-up, and maybe more if you want it. You've thought for a long time that Joanie's something special, haven't you?"

Odeon nodded, glad that this was a dream. If it'd been real, he would've been too stunned to function--because the man looked like an older Jeshua, and that was entirely too much for him to accept as reality with any degree of calm. As it was, he managed a nod. "Yes, I have."

"And you're quite right, she is." The man paused. "The White Fathers taught you well, but human interpretations do tend to modify even the most accurate prophecies. Can you accept both that fact, and the accompanying one that I cannot, for your own sake, give you all the details just yet?"

Odeon hesitated in turn, then nodded, slowly. "From anyone else, I'd say no--but from you, I can manage."

The man smiled. "You please me, my son. The White Fathers called this the Time of Chaos, though Time of Change would be more accurate, particularly where the lives of those on your team are concerned. Joan is the herald of the Promised One, and will act as that one's surrogate for a time, though she will not be asked to bear that burden permanently, and would be far happier if she isn't forced to acknowledge her temporary Protectorship."

Odeon frowned. "The Protector's Herald and acting Protector herself?" That didn't seem particularly plausible, though he had to agree Joanie wouldn't enjoy being put in either position.

"You are a wise man, Michael. And properly skeptical, as a police officer must be." The man raised his hand. "But it's your devotion that has to take precedence now, and it has to be focused on her."

"With all respect, sir, I don't understand."

"Remain her friend and guide, as you've begun. Completing her destined tasks will be both difficult and dangerous, particularly since she must remain largely unaware of that destiny, and her powers must remain mostly latent, until the true Protector manifests." He gestured, and they were inside, standing beside the cot that served Cortin as a recovery room, with Chang on the other side.

The man kept his attention centered on Odeon, though he was clearly addressing Chang as well. "When she wakes, the final phase begins. You will be severely tried, Michael in particular, by pain and loss great enough that you will be sorely tempted to reject me." He raised a hand to forestall Odeon's instinctive denial. "I said you would be tempted; I did not say you would succumb, though even Cardinals are not immune."

Odeon frowned again. In the light of last month's murder of Pope Anthony and Cardinal McHenry's

near-unanimous election--he was now Pope Lucius--that had an ominous sound. "There was something fishy about the Papal election?"

"Let us just say that were his true identity known, most people would prefer a fish in that position. The former Cardinal McHenry introduced himself to Sister-Lieutenant Chang as the Raidmaster."

Odeon stared at Chang, then at him. "The Raidmaster--are you saying that Shayan is the Pope?"

"The Cardinals' free will includes the freedom to accept temptation," the man said drily. "Yes, he's managed that. But for now balance must be maintained, which means giving Joan a core group he can't touch, and nudging temporal authorities to give her mundane power to match his. All of which will have to be done without her knowledge, or she loses her temporary immunity before she's strong enough to fight him. If that's how she chooses to handle it."

Gently, he pulled the coverlet down to Cortin's waist, then touched her breasts. "If you choose, you two will be her chief support--and for that, you'll need support yourselves. You've both offered your lives to me and been accepted. That hasn't protected you from sin, because that's part of the Protector's covenant. And it's too early for it to protect more than her core group--but if you're willing to surrender that fragment of your free will so you can serve her fully, I can give you the help and protection you need to do it."

"You've got it," Odeon said without hesitation, and Chang nodded.

"I expected no less of you," Jeshua said, obviously pleased. "Then drink from her, for hers is the protecting and healing Milk of Life."

Chang obeyed immediately, but Odeon hesitated, looking at the drop of white that had appeared on her nipple. "Even for that," he said softly, "I can't take advantage of her. That's not the way to help her."

"I admire your integrity," Jeshua said, "but that need not concern you. I foresaw this possibility; she'll feel and enjoy your drinking. Though she won't understand it until the time comes to make this available to everyone."

Reassured, Odeon bent to his Joanie's breast and drank. Her milk was warm and sweet, so full of the promised life it was almost intoxicating--and he could feel her pleasure in it, could feel Sis' emotional pain and scars fading to nonexistence, could feel God's Presence surrounding and enfolding them.

He was reluctant to release her even when he could drink no more. The unity he'd felt with her, and through her with Sis, was too right for him to want to leave it.

"There will be other times," Jeshua said. "Only one drink is necessary--but once all can partake, she will feed you again and often, both as part of your loving and as a remembrance and renewal of the unity you've just felt." He smiled. "That doesn't mean she won't continue to lactate; she and those who accept her will have special gifts, you and her other staff and priests in particular. It only means that until then, her milk will be no more miraculous than any other woman's. You and Piety are the ones who'll choose those to serve her and give them milk or seed."

That part made sense; Odeon was used to both priestly functions and delegation of authority. It was what Jeshua said about Joanie's milk being part of their loving--with Joanie the Protector, even just temporarily, he couldn't possibly--

Jeshua chuckled. "Of course you can, and will. You don't love her any less because of what you've learned; why deprive either yourself or her of the most powerful physical expression of that love? It's also something both of you want, and I certainly have no objection." He smiled.

Odeon returned the smile, unable to resist the other's charisma. What he said did make sense; he'd wept when Joanie'd lost that pleasure and consolation, and now that she had it back, it'd be unfair for him to deprive her. Not that he wanted to deprive either of them; it just seemed incongruous that he make love to an Aspect of God. Knowing that she was, anyway; it'd seemed normal enough before. Still . . . "You know I'll do anything she needs--or just wants--me to do."

"I know," Jeshua said. "To your credit, my son, though you don't really need it." He turned to Chang, touching her head gently. "Any more than you do, daughter. You've had the special help you needed; now your suffering is over, and you may conceive whenever and with whomever you wish. I assure you, your child will have a distinguished family."

Chang bowed to him, her expression at once radiant and serene. "I will leave those choices to the One Who healed me, with gratitude."

"So be it." Jeshua smiled, covered Cortin again, and was gone.

* * * * *

Moonlight in his face brought Odeon awake, frowning. That dream had been decidedly peculiar, not at all his usual type--much too realistic, for one thing, so much so that it seemed he could still taste Joanie's milk. What had gotten into him?

More disturbed by the dream than he cared to admit even to himself, he got up and stretched, then made another tour around the shelter before going in. The activity helped--until he saw Chang's tear-stained face and haunted expression. He joined her at the table, glancing at Cortin--no, nothing obviously wrong--before touching the medic's hand. "What's wrong, Sis?" he asked quietly.

"A dream, no more," she said. "I should not have let it disturb me--though it seemed so real I find it hard to dismiss as I should."

Two overly-real dreams not only on the same night, but apparently at the same time . . . "I just had one of those myself," he said. "If yours matches, I think we can count on interesting times ahead--tell me about it."

When she finished, he rubbed his scar. "Word for word, and as close to action for action as possible with you in here and me outside. Not a dream, then, was it?"

"No." Chang managed a shaky smile. "To live in interesting times is an ancient curse of my people, did you know that?"

"I'd heard," Odeon said. "This was a blessing, though." He fell silent. "If we can believe the visions, anyway. On the other hand, Shayan is the Father of Lies, and his only absolute limitation is that he can't create life. He could be trying to trick us."

Chang shook her head. "I have felt Shayan's touch, Michael; I would know it anywhere, and that was not he. More, what benefit would he get from such trickery?"

"None that I can think of," Odeon admitted. "And I don't really believe the idea myself--comes from a career of questioning everything, especially when there's no physical proof one way or the other."

"There is a form of proof possible," Chang said. "If either of us can do something we know to be sinful, the vision was false. If not, which I am certain is the case, it seems safe enough to assume its truth; even in my most cynical moments, I cannot believe that Shayan would render a human incapable of sin, even if such lies

within his power."

"I can, under one condition, but since I don't believe he's capable of love--especially where Enforcement people are concerned--I agree with your conclusion."

Odeon thought for a minute, then made the attempt, with a total lack of success. Giving the nun a half-smile, he shrugged. "Can't violate the First Commandment, at any rate. I can consider it intellectually with no problem, but when think comes to do, no way." His attempt at a humorous grin turned into an elated smile. "Sis, it's great! I've been praying for this since I was a boy and learned what the Protector would do--I not only can't sin now, I can't even want to!"

Chang gestured him to quiet down before his enthusiasm woke the rest; it was still well before normal time to get up, and waking someone unnecessarily was rude at best. His pleasure was infectious, though, and she couldn't help returning his smile. "I feel as you do, Michael--though I still find it difficult to fully accept that I am actually living in the Protector's time. I am somewhat surprised that I am able to accept it at all."

"Me too--so I imagine that's part of the help we were promised. We couldn't accomplish a whole lot if we were too stunned to function, and from what he said, we're going to have to start functioning almost immediately."

"True--though we will be able to say nothing about this."

"Not right away, no," Odeon agreed, "but we'll have to tell the rest soon. And anyone else we think should be part of her core group. I've got some pretty good ideas about who I'd like to see in it, too. Brad and Ivan definitely, Their Highnesses--odd as it may seem--very possibly."

"I believe it would be difficult to find better, if they are willing."

"We'll ask when we get the chance. In the meantime--" Odeon hesitated. "I don't know about you, Sis, but I never expected to be living at the end of one age and the beginning of another, even though the monks who raised me said it was possible and I always wanted to see the Protector."

"My feelings also," Chang said. "I had hoped for such, but not really anticipated it either." She smiled. "I always wished to be both a nun and a mother, and that seemed to be the only way it would be possible. So while I, like you, am frightened, I am also looking forward to the experience."

"From what he was saying, you're going to be more a priest than a nun--but I know what you mean." Odeon studied her carefully. "I gather that being healed means you'll be able to join the action now--and want to?"

"Indeed, as eagerly as you. Were it not that I have responsibilities to my patient, I would wish to enjoy you immediately." She looked toward the sleepers, then back to him. "I find that strange, considering the circumstances of my previous sexual experience. But it is also undeniably true. I desire you, and I will undoubtedly desire the others when opportunity presents itself."

"They'll be as glad to hear that as I am, though they might find it a little hard to believe at first. Whatever we tell them later, we'll have to give some sort of explanation for that almost immediately."

"I see no problem there; the truth, in part, should do nicely. All know I have been praying for this; I need only say my prayers have been answered. I need not say how directly just yet, though I agree that we will have to do so eventually."

Odeon chuckled, pleased to find his equanimity returning. "True. It looks like you may not be with us too

long, though, if He sends you a child right away."

"It is in His hands--but He said Joan will need us both, so either I will not conceive soon, or He will find a way for me to remain with her."

"Any preference as to the father?"

"Not of the fertile men I know. Were he one, and the choice still mine, I would choose Tiny."

The gentlest of the team, except for Piety herself. A natural choice, Odeon thought, smiling. "He'd make a good father, I think. And it's not completely out of the question, with the same kind of help you've already had."

"True." Chang smiled briefly. "We shall see, when the time comes."

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"How do you feel, Captain?"

"Mmm?" Cortin opened her eyes, to see Odeon and Chang standing over her. "Not bad--it's done?"

"It is done. The procedure went quite well. You feel no pain?"

"Only the usual in my back. No sensation where you were working."

Chang gave them a thumbs-up, smiling. "Precisely as it should be; you are fully healed, and the algetin has worn off. You are again capable of intercourse, and I believe enjoyably so. Though it may take you a few times to become accustomed to the different sensations."

Cortin licked her lips apprehensively, sitting up but keeping herself covered with the sheet. Mike had said it'd be an order of magnitude better, Sis said it should be enjoyable, and she trusted them implicitly--so why in God's name was she suddenly so apprehensive at the prospect of something she'd enjoyed so much before? Her last experience had been horrible, granted, so maybe the apprehension was normal . . . She forced herself to calm. None of her people would hurt her, she knew that; at worst, she'd have no feeling. No physical feeling, she corrected herself. Making love with Enforcement men had always been fun, and usually gave her a comfortable, cherished feeling whether she climaxed or not. She'd still have that, which was something to cling to. A big something.

"There are some things you should know before beginning," Chang said. "While you are again capable of arousal, you must understand it will not be the same; you will have to make allowances."

Cortin nodded. "I understand. Can you be more specific?"

"I found it necessary to provide muscular support for the replacement," Chang said. "I attempted to tie the necessary relaxation into the arousal mechanism, but I am a medic, not a surgeon; I do not know if I was successful. Should arousal not relax those muscles sufficiently to permit penetration, you will have to do so consciously."

"I think I can manage that, if I have to. What about climax?"

Chang shrugged, smiling regretfully. "You will have to tell me," she said. "You are not physiologically equipped for such, yet my studies tell me it is as much a mental as a physical phenomenon, so I cannot say

you will not experience it."

"That's all I can ask," Cortin said. "I owe you, Sis; what can I do for you?"

Chang smiled. "You owe me nothing, Captain; restoring your ability to function is reward enough. And I have news of my own. You are not the only one to be restored; my prayers have been answered."

Cortin laughed, her apprehension dissolved in the nun's evident pleasure. "Wonderful! When? Who'd you celebrate it with?"

"Last night. No one as yet, not with a patient under my care and myself the only available medic."

"In which case it's a good thing I don't need medical care any longer," Cortin said with a grin. Then she turned to Odeon. "Where are the rest, Mike?"

"Tiny's outside playing gardener; the rest are up at the Manor visiting Prince Edward's security troops. We thought it would be a good idea to let you check yourself out without a crowd."

"I appreciate the consideration, but my team's not a crowd." Cortin cocked an eye at him. "Since I know you wouldn't pull rank for a personal matter, were you the one to stay because we were lovers before?"

"That did make him the reasonable choice," Chang said equably.

"And Sis has more than a passing interest in Tiny," Odeon said.

"Then I'd suggest she invite him in," Cortin said. "While she does--any news?"

She meant professional, not personal, Odeon knew; he shook his head. "Nothing worth mentioning. The Brothers are still laying low, and aside from confirming what you found out about the Shannons, Ivan says the Detention Center Inquisitors have been drawing blanks."

"What about the one we brought with us?"

"Dave and Ivan teamed up on him, but unless you count some entertainment, they didn't get anything useful."

"Blast! Not wishing anyone anything bad, but I'll be glad when this stalemate breaks."

"You aren't the only one," Odeon agreed emphatically. "Morale's as good as you could expect, maybe a little better, but everyone's itching for some action." He made a wry face. "Group therapy can only do so much, even when you've got a bunch of compatible enthusiasts. Which we definitely do, even with you out of action."

"Good." Most Enforcement men were heterosexual whenever possible, to Cortin's gratification, but had no hesitation in enjoying each other rather than doing without; if they weren't compatible, morale suffered. "Nobody's getting shorted or exploited?"

"No. Everything's as smooth as we could hope for, and everyone's looking forward to having you join in."

"I plan to," Cortin said, then turned to Chang, who had come back in with Pritchett. "Unless you'd recommend otherwise?"

"As I said, you are fully healed," the medic said. "I see no reason to hesitate, even with our misnamed Tiny."

"Well endowed?" Cortin asked Odeon, grinning. She'd never seen her communications specialist naked, to her disappointment; in Middletown he'd used the Elysian Gardens, and here, she'd been unconscious.

"Nicely in proportion, at any rate," Odeon replied with an answering grin. "And his stamina's nothing to sneeze at, either--he gave me a ride yesterday evening you wouldn't believe."

The big man grinned. "You flatter me--and I love it."

"No flattery intended," Odeon said, straight-faced. "Just doing my duty, keeping the CO informed. Of course, I imagine she'll see for herself here shortly."

"If not," Chang said, "I will be most disappointed. When I was praying for a normal trooper's sexual attitude and abilities, I did not realize the strength of the drive I was praying for. I confess I am finding it difficult to keep my hands to myself."

"Why try, then?" Cortin asked. "Neither of you is on duty, there aren't any civs around, and Tiny looks willing enough."

"More than willing," Pritchett said, extending his hand to the medic. "I need a shower first; care to join me?"

"That sounds most enjoyable."

"Attractive couple, aren't they?" Odeon asked appreciatively as the pair disappeared into the bathroom.

"Very," Cortin agreed. "Sis deserved a miracle if anyone did, and Tiny'll be good for her." She let the sheet drop--and found out why Odeon was wearing a robe at this time of day; he was naked. And, she thought with satisfaction, as beautifully and excitingly male as she remembered.

Odeon looked at her, afraid that what he'd learned of her early that morning would block his normal reaction to her. To his considerable relief, he discovered it didn't; if anything, it made her more desirable. The remembered taste of her milk sent a surge of thrilling warmth through him, focusing in his loins.

Cortin grinned at her second's fast arousal, holding out her arms as she felt half-familiar, half-strange sensations in her belly. "It's nice to have a dependable second--especially one who's properly respectful."

Odeon glanced down, smiling at her familiar banter. "Yes, ma'am. The Academy did stress respect for one's superior officers, and the importance of a proper stance of attention."

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They lay for awhile when it ended, catching their breath, then Odeon withdrew, caressing her affectionately. "You seemed to enjoy that--and it's the best I've ever had."

"Enjoy?" Cortin looked at him, trying to sort out her feelings. "That's . . . I don't know. Too weak a word." She smiled at him, a bit tentatively. "Mike . . . it was like climaxing, the whole time--and when you did, it was . . ." She hesitated, searching for words, then gave it up as hopeless. Even a poet would have trouble describing what she'd felt! "I can't describe it, except that it was like being filled with liquid fire--and I'm still tingling from it."

"So what's the verdict for tonight? Rest or recreation?"

"Recreation, definitely. After supper, though."

"Bradford and Illyanov have been making it pretty clear they'd like in, if you're willing."

'Willing' seemed like a pretty weak word too, Cortin thought. It didn't seem her drive was any stronger than it had been, so maybe it was the length of time she'd had to abstain, but the idea of as wide a variety as she could get--and as much--was overwhelmingly attractive. "I assume you told them I would be?"

"Not exactly, though I did say you'd enjoyed men from outside your team in the past. Sweet Mother, I couldn't even be sure you'd want me, after what the Brothers did to you!" Until he'd been told this morning that she would, and he'd only become positive when she'd claimed him . . .

"There's a major difference between an enemy assault and a friendly tussle," Cortin said drily. "I was a little nervous at first, I can't deny that, but it didn't last long. I didn't notice you having me held down, or using broken bottles, or gun barrels along with threats to blow my head off from the inside."

"You never told me that!" Odeon exclaimed, horrified.

"I . . . had a hard time talking about it until now. Even during debrief, with all of Colonel Bradford's skill. I still do, a little."

Odeon embraced her, swearing to himself. What he had known was bad enough--but he hadn't imagined rape with a gun barrel, and he didn't want to imagine any parts she'd still have trouble talking about. Brad was right--they had to get Joanie out of the field, somewhere she'd be safe, before the Brothers had a chance to get hold of her again, off limits or not, and maybe do something even worse. Between himself, Brad, and Ivan, they should be able to find some way to get her into a safe job willingly! "It's okay, Joanie," he said softly. "We'll take care of you."

Cortin started to pull away, protesting that she could take care of herself, then she settled back into his arms. Mike meant well, she was sure, and it was nice having him hold her. "We'll all take care of each other," she agreed. "And yes, do invite Ivan and Brad along--we'll make a real party of it."

"That sounds like fun." Odeon gave a theatrical sigh. "Which I suppose means I should get up and call them."

"No need," Chang said, startling them both; they hadn't realized she and Tiny were back until she spoke. "We will do so, though that will give you only a few more minutes."

"Every little bit helps," Odeon said. "Thanks, Sis--Tiny."

11. Dinner

Supper was a festive affair. The meal was sent from the Manor, with Prince Edward's compliments, and Princess Ursula sent Cortin a silk-lined brocade evening robe with a note expressing the royal couple's pleasure at the Captain's recovery. The robe was nothing like the utilitarian one Cortin usually wore, but it was attractive, and proved more comfortable than she'd thought it could be. It had seemed too showy when she first saw it, but when the men appeared in full dress uniforms, it seemed entirely appropriate. Only the two from the capital appeared completely comfortable in their finery at first, since they were the only ones who wore dress uniforms regularly, but by the time the group sat down to eat, her team looked more relaxed.

When Bradford finished saying grace, Cortin looked at him, letting her curiosity show. "A catered dinner from the Crown Prince, a robe from Her Highness, and everyone in dress blacks--what's going on?"

"Attempted bribery," Bradford said cheerfully. "For which I can't be prosecuted, since I'm operating under His Majesty's orders."

Cortin stared at him, her mind momentarily blank. "What?"

"You may not realize it, but since until recently you were St. Thomas's only female Enforcement officer, His Majesty follows your career with considerable interest. Try your soup; it's much better hot."

Cortin obeyed. "It's delicious . . . I know I was, and I suppose that's reason enough for curiosity--God knows I've run into more of it than I like!--but why bribery? I took the same commissioning oath you did, to obey His Majesty's lawful orders." If she didn't like them, well, she could go rogue after all . . . "And why so suddenly? Before the operation, everything was strictly routine."

Bradford shrugged. "That's what I thought, until this morning. One thing you'll learn, if you take the bribe, is that His Majesty asks for information and advice, but he keeps his own counsel and makes his own decisions. He won't make this an order because I told him what you were likely to do if you were kept from your revenge."

She'd been certain he knew; she nodded. "And?"

"He's always been impressed by the loyalty you inspire in those who work with you, and he was also most impressed when he saw the films of your training interrogations." Bradford smiled. "Not as impressed by the films as Ivan and I were, but His Majesty isn't an Inquisitor; he couldn't see the subtleties that can make such a difference. Still, what he could see, combined with your truthsense, not to mention the reputation you've earned from your work at Middletown, have convinced him that you're the one he wants for a new position. It's a major part of the increased anti-terrorist campaign, and it won't require you to leave the Strike Force or give up your team. There'll be less field work, though--probably a lot less--and you'll be headquartered in a new building near the Palace compound. This is a small sample of the life you can lead there, one both His Majesty and I hope you'll find tempting."

"I do," Cortin admitted. It would be hard not to be tempted by the thought of living close to the Palace compound, eating this sort of food, and keeping her Strike Force status and team as well. "What's the position? And, with all due respect to you and His Majesty, what's the catch?"

"The position is High King's Inquisitor, which carries membership in the Royal Household as well as the rank of Colonel, to match your counterparts in other Kingdoms." Bradford grinned at her expression of disbelief. "I don't joke about His Majesty, Joan. Or about a prospective member of the Royal Household, who'll outrank mere members of the King's Own if she accepts the job, and might take offense."

Cortin swallowed, hard. How could she refuse such an offer, whether she believed it justified or not? She looked at Odeon, almost desperately, but saw no help there; he looked both smug and as pleased as she thought she ought to be, so she turned her attention back to Bradford. Worse, this fit in with what she'd experienced--and preferred not to think about--while she'd been under Sis' drugs. "The catch?"

"We're hoping you don't think there is one--or at least not one bad enough to stop you from accepting the position. As I said, there'll be less field work, but to balance that, you'll be able to flag any topic you want information on, and you'll be able to requisition any prisoner you want to question yourself. You'll also be asked to carry out the most difficult interrogations as well, and executions of the worst criminals. What do you say?"

"That it all sounds much too good to be true," Cortin replied. Jumping from Captain to Colonel, the highest Enforcement rank, plus joining the Royal Household, access to any information or prisoners she wanted . . . it was hard to believe she could be offered all that, even with the reputation she now took pride in. And the vision, or hallucination, or whatever it had been that said this was going to happen. She sipped at her drink, a freshly-pressed cider. She did have to admit it was hard to refuse, though. "What else?"

"The clincher, I hope," Bradford said. "A commander who can resist personal threats or promises is often vulnerable to the same pressures on his--or her, of course--people. So a reminder: your team will remain with you. If you're part of the Household, that means they'll be attached to it--members of the King's Own, reporting to you. Not as prestigious as being Household members, and it doesn't carry automatic promotion, but they'll also live near the Palace compound--in your Lodge, if they don't mind living in a building that also houses the High King's Inquisitor and a state-of-the-art interrogation suite."

Not as overwhelming an offer as the one to herself, but Cortin nodded. "You're right, Brad, that is the clincher. Even though you might not have needed it, if you'd given me time to think; I would've realized what the offer meant for them."

"You accept, then."

"Yes."

"Good." Bradford smiled. "On His Majesty's behalf, then, as well as from me: Congratulations, Colonel Cortin." He stood, raising his glass. "Gentles, I give you Her Excellency Colonel Joan Cortin, the High King's Inquisitor."

The others followed suit. Illyanov and Odeon exchanged glances, Odeon obviously trying to look solemn but spoiling the effect with a smile he couldn't hide. Illyanov raised an eyebrow, then nodded, and Odeon said, "To Your Excellency's continued health and happiness." The diners drank the formal toast, then sat back down, and Odeon dropped his attempt to look solemn. "High King's Inquisitor--Joanie, you couldn't've asked for a better place to hunt those plagues from!"

"No, I don't think I could," Cortin agreed. "It's still hard to believe I'd get tapped for it, though--talent or not, I don't have that much experience." She paused long enough to eat some stuffed shrimp and take a drink of cider, then she went on. "If there'd been a position like this earlier, I'd've expected it to go to someone like Brad or Ivan, with experience."

"I do not know about Brad," Illyanov said with a smile, "but I am not qualified. I am immediately subject to Czar Nicholas, not to High King Mark. Since you express interest, however--I have been informed that I am under consideration for that position on St. Dmitri. I should like to teach you the advanced techniques we did not have time for earlier, but I should also like to return to my wife and children in New Moscow. Despite the climate."

"New Colorado's bad enough in the winter," Cortin agreed. "I'd like to go to your home world some day, on assignment or leave--but I hope it's in summer!"

"It is far more pleasant then," Illyanov said, chuckling. "Should I get the position and require your assistance, I shall try to assure it is in summer. Should you go there at any time, however, I would like you to meet my family. You will like them, I think, especially Elena and the girls, but I must warn you: the boys, especially Pyotr, will beg you for war stories, and they can be most persistent."

"I think I can handle that," Cortin said, amused. "You'll all be welcome at the Lodge, of course." She turned to Bain. "That goes for your brother's family, too, you know."

"Thanks . . ." Bain said, hesitantly. "But I'm not sure they'd be comfortable in the capital."

"I'm not sure I'll be comfortable there," Cortin said, then turned to Bradford. "Brad, all any of us know about life in New Denver comes from the news and--if we read them, which I sometimes do for laughs--the society columns. What's it really like?"

"I don't want to disappoint you," Bradford said, "but most of the time it's actually quite ordinary. You'll wear dress uniform more often, you'll be expected to attend important Palace functions, and your team will act as bodyguards any time you leave the Compound; otherwise, except for taking orders only from His Majesty--no one else can do more than request--you should find things fairly normal." He grinned. "You'll find out, starting tomorrow . . . if Your Excellency cares to join Their Highnesses on the return flight."

Cortin swallowed. That shouldn't have surprised her, but it did--a flight to New Denver with the Crown Prince and Princess wouldn't be unusual for a member of the Royal Household, and she would get used to it, she supposed. Right now, though, it was a shock. She brought herself under control and said, "I'd be honored. Arrangements will have to be made, of course, to return our horses and pick up our personal gear. Oh, and we'll need proper insignia."

"All taken care of," Bradford said. "We had plenty of time while you were under treatment."

Cortin absorbed that, starting on her dessert. It sounded at first like Bradford or His Majesty had assumed, even before asking, that she would accept--and maybe they had, she couldn't know--but a little thought told her that wasn't necessarily the case. Bradford could carry all the insignia in a pocket, all of their personal gear wouldn't strain a single packhorse, and if she refused, they could all be returned to Middletown with only a slight loss of time. "Thanks--that was kind of you."

"Call it enlightened self-interest," Bradford said. "And I do have something to ask, when and if your primary duties permit."

"Of course, if I'm able."

"You are; you've done it. Act as auxiliary confessor and spiritual advisor to the Detention Center Inquisitors--I heard how much good you did."

"Gladly--but don't forget Dave; he's a Priest-Inquisitor too."

"I've already said I'd do it," Bain said. "And I'll probably have more time for that sort of thing than you will. I have a very strong feeling your primary job isn't going to leave you much time for anything else."

"Probably true," Cortin agreed. "I enjoyed helping, but if I'm going to do a good job as King's Inquisitor I may not have time to do that very well. And I'd rather not do it if I can't do it right."

"You'll be keeping busy, all right," Bradford told her, "with a whole Kingdom to draw from. The whole Systems, if your skills are necessary."

Cortin smiled. "Good!"

"And it might interest you to know that His Majesty doesn't interfere in his Household's private lives," Bradford said. "I don't know your preferences that well, but as long as you don't flaunt them, what you do is between you and your partner or partners. With the security provided at the Palace Compound and Harmony Lodge, you won't have to worry about outsiders who might be offended."

"No flaunting," Cortin promised. "I have very basic tastes; the only thing most people would frown on is the amount and variety of partners I like."

Bradford smiled. "Such as this group?"

Cortin returned the smile. "Exactly."

"And is Her Excellency interested now?"

"Her Excellency most certainly is."

* * * * *

When Cortin woke, shortly before dawn, she was still awed by her new position. That sort of promotion and transfer simply weren't supposed to happen--but all the Kingdoms would have Sovereign's Inquisitors, according to Brad; soon she'd be one of a dozen, different only in that she worked directly for the High King. That made it a little less daunting--and they were supposed to leave for New Denver today. She got up, bathed, and dressed, unable to suppress a thrill when she fastened the Colonel's eagle and the Household badge to her tunic.

12. Flight

Sunday, 01 Mar 2572

The flight started out as interesting, if uneventful. Cortin exchanged courtesies with the Royal couple, then joined her team, taking a window seat. It was her first flight--well, she thought, the first one she'd been awake for, anyway--and she wanted to see everything she could. She'd had a passing interest in archaeology once, so she was aware of pre-war population statistics, and knew the unnaturally straight lines of vegetation in the areas they flew over marked roads or buildings that no longer existed. For the first time, the two came together and became real for her. There had been so many of them! Dear God, it must have been unbearable, especially in the cities, crowded so closely together! But it was fascinating, seeing what they'd left . . . and they'd been thriving, not declining . . . She forced that thought aside, not for the first time. It was for Kings and Popes to concern themselves with the fact that humanity in the Systems was dying out, not for Enforcement officers.

As the plane droned westward, though, she discovered she couldn't dismiss it any longer. Whatever she'd experienced during her drugged recovery wouldn't let her. Like it or not, if she believed the vision or hallucination or whatever--and it didn't seem to be leaving her much choice in the matter--she'd been saddled with responsibility for reversing the decline.

It wasn't fair, she protested to herself. She was an Enforcement officer, not a secular or Church noble; she didn't have the kind of power or backing it would take to make the tremendous changes she'd been shown were necessary. Though, she admitted grudgingly, she'd also been promised help getting the power and people she'd need to do the job--and a Strike Team Leader/Inquisitor just promoted to High King's Inquisitor wasn't exactly powerless. Not popular, which she'd have to be to gain widespread support for the changes she'd be trying to make, but certainly not powerless.

Odeon's voice broke into her thoughts. "You look disturbed, Colonel. Is it anything we can help with?"

Cortin wanted to say no, but nodded instead. She couldn't accomplish either of her objectives alone, and who better for her closest helpers than the team she and Mike had hand-picked? "I'm afraid so. See if we can use the conference cabin, please, so I can brief all of you at once."

"Right away." Odeon stood, then hesitated. "What about Colonel Bradford and Major Illyanov?"

"Fine. And civilian input wouldn't hurt, either, so see if Their Highnesses would care to join us."

* * * * *

Even on an aircraft of the Royal Fleet, space was limited; the conference cabin was full when Cortin began the briefing. "Your Highnesses, gentles--thank you for coming. This is difficult for me to talk about, and it will be difficult for you to hear--but it not only has to be said, it has to be acted on."

She paused, scanning the group's faces. Yes, she had their full attention, though both Odeon and Chang looked apprehensive as well as attentive. That was all right; everyone here would feel the same before she got through. "While I was recovering from Lieutenant Chang's surgery, I had a series of what I can only call visions. You can decide the source for yourselves when you've heard what I have to say; my own opinion is that the medication I was under either allowed or forced me to put together a number of facts and arrive at some uncomfortable conclusions.

"Although we've eliminated war and most illness, leading in turn to the elimination of poverty in any sense the Terrans or prewars would understand, the human race faces two great--and immediate--threats. One is the terrorists, particularly the Brothers of Freedom and their chief Raidmaster, Lawrence Shannon. Eliminating them is a job we've all--except Your Highnesses, of course--sworn to do, and the Strike Force has personal reasons to do it thoroughly and quickly."

She took a deep breath. "As bad as that threat is, the other is both worse and harder to deal with. Everyone knows, although no one wants to talk or think about, the facts of human infertility and a declining population. The only thing that has been done about that, and it was against considerable opposition, was the granting of Enforcement's sexual dispensation. Although some families are blessed with numerous children, the average birthrate is less than two per family--and there are many people who choose not to have families at all. On the other hand--Major Illyanov, how many children have you fathered?"

The Dmitrian smiled. "Three by my wife, six more I am aware of by other women--the children live with us, their mothers nearby--and my mistress is currently with child."

"Seven children that wouldn't exist without the dispensation," Cortin said, "since Major Illyanov honors God in both word and deed. As does Bishop-Colonel Bradford. Colonel?"

"One by my wife, who's expecting our second," Bradford replied, frowning. "Three others I know about."

"Less prolific, but still well beyond replacement. No one else in this room has had any."

Princess Ursula echoed Bradford's frown. "Are you suggesting that we do away with families, or make all married women attempt to have children by Enforcement men?" she asked quietly.

"Not at all, Your Highness," Cortin said. "A strong family structure is necessary to a healthy society, and no woman should be compelled to have children, by any man. I'm not advocating anything of the sort. What I am saying is that family structure has to change in response to changed conditions. Monogamy means that if either spouse is sterile, that couple will have no children--which is the case with almost half of our families. And that is as tragic for the individuals concerned as it is suicidal for the race." She paused. "Some infertile couples adopt, of course, and some seek Enforcement help, but neither is statistically significant. Fortunately, a few of those we've helped have been nobles otherwise unable to fulfill their duty to provide heirs."

Prince Edward winced, then nodded, looking grim. A trooper's partner naturally shared his dispensation for that act, and if a child came of it, the trooper was almost always named the baby's godfather--though the legal father was the husband. "A service the Kingdom cannot acknowledge," the Prince said, "but one it's nevertheless extremely grateful for. Unfortunately, it's one that has been of no benefit to Ursula and myself. If you have something that might work, we'll be glad to consider it."

"Polygamy," Cortin said promptly. "More than two spouses improve the odds dramatically. Four to eight per

family, ideally half men and half women, would do wonders for the birthrate."

"Be better for the children, too," Bain put in. "Like my brother's family--when he was killed, they lost the only adult male, and were left with one adult to care for three young children, no steady role model for the boys. Jo--the Colonel's way, that'd be a whole lot less likely. One parent's death would still be tragic, of course, but it wouldn't cause complete disruption."

"Which," Cortin said, "--and I admit to considerable personal interest here--would mean Special Ops personnel could have families. That includes my team, though according to what I saw it doesn't include me."

It wouldn't, Odeon thought regretfully, at least not until the real Protector manifested. Her family, until then, had to be all the humans in the Systems; she couldn't be restricted to a few individuals. If he were permitted a family, though, Joanie'd be as much a part of it as he could manage--and he had a pretty good idea how.

The Royal couple whispered to each other for a few moments, then Prince Edward looked back at Cortin. "We agree, Excellency. Show us how it can be done legally and without sin, and Ursula and I will bring others into our family." He raised an eyebrow at them. "Although we have come to love each other, it's common knowledge that isn't necessary to a Royal marriage, the primary purpose of which is to beget heirs. If a polygamous marriage can permit us to fulfill that purpose it is--as you pointed out--our duty."

Cortin swallowed, uncomfortable. "I intended no offense, Your Highness."

"None taken, Your Excellency. Although it's not by intent, we have failed." He turned to Bradford. "How do you think Enforcement personnel and their families would react to the idea, Colonel?"

"Favorably," Bradford said. "Many of us already have such arrangements informally, as I'm sure Your Highness knows, and quite a few--myself included--would like to formalize them."

"And most of the nobility," the Prince said, "would be more intrigued than offended, if it could be shown not to be sinful. The Church would resist that, though, I'm afraid, and the landfolk would probably have strong objections."

"I know," Cortin admitted. "I don't have any choice but to try, though. I saw two possibilities in the vision, or whatever it was, and I've got to work for the second. In the first, humanity kept on the way it's going now, a slow decline with the terrorists getting stronger until they reach a critical number and Shayan takes them over openly, uses them to wipe out the rest of us in a final bloody massacre, then amuses himself by torturing them to death one by one--which he and his demons continue, of course, once they're in Sheol.

"The other wasn't quite as clear, maybe because there's more than one way for it to go--I can't be certain. In it, we recognize the Satyr Plague for what it is--"

"Shayan's attempt to corrupt us," Princess Ursula declared.

"With all respect, Your Highness," Cortin said firmly, "that's not possible. I can't deny that Shayan has tremendous power, but there's one power God has reserved to Himself, and that is the creation of life. The satyr virus isn't very high on the scale, I agree, but it is life, with no detectable connection to any other form in the Kingdoms. So the Satyr Plague is from God, and it must be His Will that we use it, within the limits of morality He's given us, to reverse the decline."

"The Satyr Plague used within the bounds of morality?" Princess Ursula sounded highly dubious.

"It can be done," Cortin said. "Troopers don't use their dispensation to spend all their time having sex, do

they?"

"No," the Princess admitted, "not even all their spare time. But troopers are far better disciplined than the average civilian--give landfolk the freedom to indulge their drives the way troopers do, and I dread to think of the consequences."

"I think you're underestimating them, Your Highness," Cortin said, allowing herself a smile. "I was raised in a farming family, and I can assure you they're every bit as disciplined as troopers, although in a different way." She grimaced. "I'll take drill, and transfers, and orders, and getting shot at, any day, over milking and plowing and feeding and getting up before dawn every day! Even with the virus' help, farm life doesn't leave enough energy for overindulgence. I'm sure most would be happy to keep their sexual activity within the family."

"Happier than now, I'd bet," Bain said. "That way, they'd get the variety the virus makes you want, without having to go outside the family--which would be a major reduction in adultery all by itself."

"That sounds reasonable," the Princess said. "Your argument about the virus being a new life form is one I can't refute either, so go on. We recognize the Satyr Plague as God's gift; then what?"

"The first thing, as Your Highness has already agreed, is to get polygamy approved," Cortin said. "And, as His Highness has pointed out, convincing the Church to sanction it is going to be difficult. Assuming we can manage that, even on a small scale to demonstrate its effects on the birthrate, the next step is to eliminate the terrorists. I don't know for sure, but I think that's going to mean a showdown between me and Shannon--the real one--and that, gentles, terrifies me." She took a deep breath, exhaled slowly in an attempt to calm herself. "Assuming the new family structure and Shannon's defeat, what I saw was God's Kingdom, here in the Systems. That tells me the Final Coming must have taken place sometime between now and then, with the protection from sin Jeshua said the Protector would bring to those who sought it. I didn't see that part, though."

The Princess crossed herself. "The Spirit Who will come to correct and comfort," she said softly.

"'Who will come in a form none can predict,'" Bradford quoted, "'bringing God's Wrath to those who persist in sin, and His Eternal Joy to those who forswear it.' Are you claiming to be His Herald, Colonel Cortin?"

"I'm not claiming anything, My Lord Bishop. All I'm doing is telling you about some things I saw in what may have been nothing more than a drug-induced hallucination. But it's one convincing enough I have to believe and act on it, even though I'm certain it's going to kill me." She shrugged. "Not that I expected to live long when I went into Special Ops. All I can ask is to go out doing my best."

"That's all any of us can ask," Bradford agreed. He'd have to talk to Odeon about this soon, in private; the scar-faced man's expression, though he was trying to remain impassive, told the Bishop-Inquisitor he knew something he wasn't saying. "I wouldn't tell anyone else about this until we get some hard evidence one way or another, and I'd suggest the rest of you keep it within this group as well."

"As the Colonel commands," Illyanov said. "I, however, intend to act as if Colonel Cortin's vision was precisely that." He gave Cortin a deep, seated bow. "I am yours to command, Excellency."

"So's the team, of course," Odeon said.

"And I'm willing to give serious consideration to anything that will give us an Heir," the Prince said. "I'll speak to my father about this, and I'll expect you to keep us informed. For now, we should be getting ready for landing." He paused. "Before we return to the main cabin, though, Your Excellency, I have a favor to ask."

"If I can, Your Highness."

The Prince took four cartridges out of his pocket. "For us and my parents, then, if you would be so kind."

Cortin sighed, but only to herself. "Of course. I'll need holy water; is there any aboard?"

"At your service." The Prince handed her a small vial.

Cortin took it, blessed the cartridges, and returned them. "With my personal hope you're never in a position to need the special blessing," she added.

"Which would be a form of protection, wouldn't it?" The Prince smiled. "Thank you, Colonel."

13. Chuck

Nobody had thought to brief them on the welcoming ceremonies at the airport, but Bradford had mentioned her team acting as bodyguards, so when it was their turn to leave the plane, Odeon took point and the other four formed a square around Cortin. That might or might not have been the right thing to do, but it was effective; as a member of the King's Household, she got some press attention--as the High King's Inquisitor, surrounded by Special Operations officers, that attention was both brief and extremely respectful.

Once they got through that, Cortin and her team boarded a passenger van with "Harmony Lodge" emblazoned on the side for the brief trip to their new home. The Lodge was more impressive than Cortin had expected, though she'd gathered from Bradford that it was adequate for a larger team than hers. It was close to the Palace Compound, not a kilometer from the Palace itself, but the way it had been landscaped, it could have been far from anything: thick hedges and a formal garden made it a private place. The building itself was huge, and looked more like a medieval castle than the simple, probably rustic building she'd expected from something called a lodge. She wondered with some amusement if it had a dungeon; that was, after all, the classical place for interrogations in a castle.

The van dropped them off at the main door, then headed toward the rear of the building. As they approached, the door swung open to reveal an elderly man in black-and-scarlet livery, who bowed to them. "Welcome home, Colonel--gentles. I am Michael Brady, Your Excellency's butler and head of Harmony Lodge's staff." He gestured them inside. "May I show you around, or would you prefer to rest until supper?"

"Thank you, Mr. Brady," Cortin said. "I'd like to see the place, especially my work areas. My men may make their own choices."

Odeon and Chang chose to join her, the others decided to rest. Brady called servants to show them to their rooms, then said, "Your Excellency has not had servants before?"

"No . . . it shows?"

"It does. Servants are addressed and referred to by first name, not by an honorific and last name."

Cortin didn't like that; if she used first names with a person, she expected to be referred to that way herself. Still, she didn't like to defy custom in public, and while the servants might work for her, they weren't part of her team. She inclined her head in agreement. "As you say, then, Matthew. My apologies if I offended."

"No offense, Excellency. You wished to see your work area first?"

"Please--and brief me on the rest of the place as we go, if you would."

"Of course," Brady said. "If you will follow me?" He led them through a doorway to the left of the broad, sweeping entrance stairs. "The entertainment areas and public offices are here, on the main floor; living quarters are on the upper floors--private bedrooms and baths, common eating and recreational facilities, including an excellent library; and the work area is below ground. Servants' quarters are in a building behind this one."

"Sounds nice," Cortin said appreciatively. "I do have an honest-to-God dungeon, then?"

"Yes, Your Excellency."

"I'm new to Royal circles, Matthew--is it usual for members of His Majesty's Household to have households of their own?"

"No, Excellency." Brady paused, looking uncomfortable. "With all due respect to the Inquisitor-Colonel, she is the only one whose position makes it desirable. The rest live in the Palace itself."

Cortin had gotten used to an Inquisitor's normal isolation, but she hadn't expected it to be this extreme. It was fine with her, though; she'd rather have her own place. "I gather I won't be expected to do much entertaining or go to many parties, then."

"No, Excellency, though you will of course receive all the usual invitations. The only functions you will actually be expected to appear at will be ones hosted by His Majesty, and you are free to miss those if you are in the midst of an interrogation. He has instructed me to inform you that your work is to take priority over anything else, and that you are to contact him personally at any time if you believe you have obtained valuable information."

"I'm not to report to him, then?" Cortin was both relieved and a little disappointed at that.

"Not immediately, Excellency; as I said, your work is to take priority, and there are four prisoners in the holding cells awaiting the attentions of the High King's Inquisitor."

Cortin smiled, changing her plans for the evening's entertainment. "In that case, I'll pass on the rest of the tour for now. Captain Odeon, would you do me a favor?"

Odeon nodded, grinning. "Call Major Illyanov and tell him no guests tonight, right?"

"Right, then join me downstairs." She thought for a moment, then asked Brady, "What shape are they in?"

"Untouched, to the best of my knowledge, Excellency."

Four, and none softened up. Cortin nodded to herself, pleased, then asked, "What's the setup like down there? Colonel Bradford said one state-of-the-art suite, other conventional ones."

"Yes, Excellency. There are five complete interrogation suites, though only Suite Alpha--yours, of course--has the highly sophisticated equipment."

"Thank you." Cortin turned to Chang. "Lieutenant, would you ask Lieutenant Bain to join me after supper?" When she agreed, Cortin turned back to Brady. "Let's go."

Someone with a sense of humor she appreciated had posted signs in the prisoners' passage showing the way to the dungeon, and one over its door quoting the ancient poet Dante: "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." They stopped there, and Bradford gave her a set of keys. "My responsibilities end at this door, Your

Excellency. Enforcement Service personnel from the Detention Center are responsible for caring for the prisoners and cleaning up after you; the first is done at midday, and they are on call for the other. Now that you have assumed your duties, no one else will enter except by your order or with your permission."

"What about record films of the interrogations?"

"That is handled by the Palace security monitors, Excellency."

"Fine. What about spare keys?"

"There is a set for the Enforcement personnel I mentioned."

"We'll need three more, then. One each for Captain Odeon and Lieutenant Bain, and one for anyone else in the team."

"I will see to it. By Your Excellency's leave?"

"Granted."

The keys were marked; Cortin had no trouble finding the one for the main entrance, or for the cellblock. She'd wait for Mike before taking any of them to the suite, but she could make a preliminary evaluation and pick her first subject.

The block held twenty cells, four of them, as Brady had said, flagged as having occupants. She didn't get beyond the second one, though. Its occupant startled her at first--she hadn't thought of him since leaving New Denver months ago--then she chuckled and turned on the cell's speaker. "Powell--I would've thought you, of all people, would've avoided Enforcement troopers."

Startled, the young man stared at the one-way glass in the door. "Uh . . . Captain Cortin?"

"Colonel, now--but it's me, yes. What're you doing in custody again, much less at Harmony Lodge?"

Powell managed a tentative smile. "Congratulations, Colonel." Then it faded, and his shoulders slumped. "You won't believe me--they didn't, at the Center, so they sent me here for the High King's Inquisitor." To Cortin's astonishment, she saw the beginnings of hope in his face, and his eyes brightened. "That's not--You're not--?"

"It is, and I am."

"Oh, thank God! They said the King's Inquisitor would have truthsense--please, let me talk to you!"

Cortin hesitated. He certainly sounded sincere enough, but he'd been conditioned once; possibly he had been re-conditioned, this time to kill whoever turned out to be King's Inquisitor. On the other hand, that Brother had said Shannon had put her off limits, and Powell had submitted to her will once; he'd do so again easily. So she was unlocking the cell door when Odeon arrived.

"Find a promising one?" he asked.

"I'd say so--one who wants to talk to me, at least." Cortin opened the cell's door, beckoned its occupant out. "You remember our young friend?"

"Of course! What's he doing here?"

"That's what he wants to talk about. Shall we go to my suite?"

"Just a second, please?" The young man was looking at her with adoration so open it was almost embarrassing, and Cortin wondered where that had come from. "I haven't seen Captain Odeon in ages . . ."

"I don't mind if he doesn't." Cortin watched them embrace, one hand close to her pistol, but it seemed that all Powell wanted was a kiss. At least that much of his conditioning held, she thought. When they broke, she repeated, "Shall we go to my suite?"

This time they made it. Suite Alpha's office was simple, but comfortably appointed, designed to give the subject a feeling of relaxation and trust. Cortin took her place in a grouping of furniture intended to help the subject feel more at ease than the normal desk-centered version of first stage, and gestured the other two to adjoining seats. "Now, Charles, what is it you don't think I'll believe?"

"That--" The young man gulped, tried again. "That I . . . had to come back. The Brothers . . . some of the older ones had me, the ways Captain Odeon and the others helped me find out I liked, but it . . . with them, it wasn't right, and I finally figured out that was because Captain Odeon and the others also helped me realize the Brotherhood itself was wrong. Especially to hate you, when you're the one who let them help me." He gestured, helplessly. "So I had to go back to the Center, and find you, and . . . offer to help you any way I could, in return for the help you gave me."

Her truthsense told her he was being absolutely honest. "Did you tell the Brothers how you felt?"

"No, ma'am--that didn't seem like a very good idea. I let troopers see me, but they didn't do anything--maybe because you'd had me released. Anyway, I didn't manage to get arrested until I hit one of them--and then no one'd believe I'd done it to get arrested! And that's how I ended up here."

So Mike and the Inquisitors had modified the conditioning she'd set up, had they? Powell was supposed to be terrified of her, if not of them--justifiably so, she admitted to herself--but he was grateful instead, enough so that he'd risked his life to get back. He could easily have been shot for attacking a trooper, not simply gotten arrested. As it turned out, their modification should prove more useful than her simple revenge, so she couldn't get too upset with them--but she would definitely have to find out how it had been done! "That's good, then. What help do you think you can give me?"

"To start with, I overheard them planning a raid. I don't think it's the big one--nobody down at my level is supposed know anything about that, except that it's going to happen--but maybe it'll help? Even though I didn't hear much?"

Cortin leaned forward, not trying to hide her interest. "It will, Charles. Tell me about it."

Powell frowned. "It's supposed to be on the main convent of the Blue Sisters--you know the one, just south of Carthage Mountain?"

"I don't, but I can find someone who does. Go on."

"It's supposed to be on their main feast day--that'd be the Annunciation, the 25th. But they're afraid the Service'll find out somehow, so if you post troops--even watchers--they won't show."

Cortin scowled. The Blue Sisters--formally, the Order of Succor of the Compassionate Mother, Piety's order--were dedicated to caring for the seriously ill or wounded, especially Service troopers. So perhaps they were a natural target--and they definitely needed protection. "The most important part is keeping the Sisters and their patients safe, even if it means the Brothers escaping. I personally hope that can be done without

alerting them, but--" she shrugged, "once I pass the information along, I'm out of it unless they pick up some prisoners. Do you know if one of the Shannons will be involved?"

"I'm afraid not--that I don't know, I mean. But I'd think one would; it's the kind the Raidmaster would want to lead, either in person or by proxy."

"Good enough; I'll report it as a possible, then." She smiled at the young man. "I'm afraid I'm not as good at this type of questioning as I should be, Charles; I'd like to call in a friend for it. Will you talk to him as well as you have been to me?"

"Of course, if that's what you want."

"Good." Cortin went to her desk and picked up the black phone, asked Brady to come escort a guest, then turned her attention back to Powell. "You've been a lot of help already, Charles, and I'm sure you'll be a lot more--but have you given any thought to what you'll do when you've given us all the information you have?"

The young man shrugged. "A little, but it depended on someone believing me. Like I said, I'd like to go to work for you, if I could."

Cortin nodded; she'd definitely be questioning Mike next! "Think about it some more, talk to my men--then if you're sure that's really what you want, I'll see what I can do. For now, go with Matthew; he should be at the main door shortly."

When Powell left, Cortin turned to Odeon. "All right, Mike, give! Last time I saw him, I revolted and terrified him--now he's like a puppy eager for my approval, and I swear he has a crush on you. Why and how?"

To her astonishment, Odeon looked abashed. "Uh . . . Ivan had an experimental drug he wanted to try, just to see how thorough a conditioning was possible and how much trouble it'd be. Well, you'd already set up a program for our young friend, so Ivan figured he might as well work on him. He outranks us--outranked you, then--so we went along."

Cortin nodded; they'd had no choice, and Ivan had been polite enough not to tell her he'd modified her intentions. "It looks like the conditioning was complete, all right--but how permanent?"

"Till he dies, Ivan says, or till he's put through the same type of conditioning again, which Ivan doesn't think is possible anywhere outside a Detention Center. So if you take him on, it'll be for good."

"I don't see that you left me any choice," Cortin said with resigned amusement. "Kicking him out with conditioning like that would be like . . . kicking a puppy, I suppose. Though I have no idea what I'll be able to do with him!" She paused, frowning. Joining the Brotherhood of Freedom, or any other terrorist group, meant automatic excommunication, and she didn't care to make her people associate with an excommunicate. "I don't suppose you also saw to his spiritual welfare, by any chance?"

"Of course we did, and not by chance," Odeon said. "Better than that, though we blocked the memory in case you turned him down. Uh--"

"Don't tell me," Cortin said, half-grinning. "You enlisted him and put him on the team."

"Close," Odeon said. "Commissioned him, since you wanted all officers. He doesn't meet the normal Strike Force criteria, but Colonel Bradford waived them in his case. He's a good rider and a damn good marksman, but otherwise his main qualification is absolute dedication to his Team-Leader. I wouldn't call him a puppy, young as he is; I'd call him a guard dog. The cue to make him 'remember' he's been an agent of yours is you

welcoming him to Team Azrael."

"I'll do that next time I see him." Cortin sighed. "Pritchett saying last night that he's in love with me, Powell conditioned into devotion--what next? No, don't answer that; I don't think I want to know." She paused, then changed the subject. "So Ivan's experiment was successful--but how useful will it be?"

"Practically, very little or none. It worked, yes, but the drug's expensive and scarce, and the procedures take too many people too long, to be worth using in normal circumstances. It may be done again, but it'll have to be a pretty special case."

"Too bad; I can see where it could've been useful." Cortin dismissed the subject with that, hesitated, then picked up the red phone that almost had to link her interrogation suite directly with the Palace. According to Brady, His Majesty wanted any significant results she got, as soon as she got them. The phone rang once, then a half-familiar voice said, "Yes, Colonel?"

It was a direct link, then. "His Majesty wanted immediate reports," Cortin said. "Are you authorized to take them?"

"Anyone who answers this phone is so authorized, Colonel. Go ahead; your report is being recorded."

"Good." Cortin gave a concise but complete report of what she'd gotten from Powell, pleased at the quick response. Too bad not everything in the Kingdom went this smoothly!

"Excellent," the voice said when she was done. "I had, of course, hoped for quick and substantial results from you, but this exceeds my expectations. Good work, Colonel."

Cortin swallowed hard, finally placing the half-familiar voice. Of course he was authorized to answer his own phone! "Th . . . thank you, Your Majesty. This was an easy one."

"Easy or not, it was effective. Keep up the good work, Colonel; we have to crush these terrorists, especially the Brothers of Freedom."

"Of course, Your Majesty--I'll do my best."

"I would expect no less, Colonel." The line went dead.

Cortin stared at the handpiece for several seconds before replacing it carefully in the cradle. It was hard to believe she'd just spoken to High King Mark--but she knew his voice, she had to believe. "I'll get you more, Sire," she said unnecessarily, then she stood. "Okay, Mike--I suppose we ought to get supper, then I'm going to start another subject." She grinned. "I really shouldn't say this, but even though he gave me some good information, Charles wasn't much fun, and I promised myself some entertainment tonight. If you and one of the others will help me set the next one up, I'll play with him awhile, then if he's being stubborn, we'll get serious in the morning."

14. Bradford

Cortin climbed the stairs to the second floor, Bain following her, satisfied with the results of her evening's work. Her fear that Sis' work would leave her vulnerable to sexual stimulus from anyone, including a Brother of Freedom, had proven unfounded; even when she'd used eroticine to force an erection on the prisoner she'd chosen for her evening's work, her only response had been anticipation of a challenge, no arousal at all. She could relax, then, concentrate on doing her new job to the best of her ability. And she'd found Dave next door; when he'd settled his prisoner for the night, she'd been eager to share her discovery with him.

When she entered the common-room, she had to hold back a gasp of astonishment. She'd expected a certain amount of showiness on the public floor, and it was in the Kingdoms' interest to have the interrogation areas as well-equipped as possible--but she hadn't expected to find much more than average living conditions, comfortable and with the promised privacy. This was luxury, the kind she hadn't believed real even in stories about royalty. Carpets so thick she seemed to be wading in them, rather than walking on them--it felt almost criminal wearing boots on them--paintings even she could see must be worth at least a small fortune, couches and chairs she wasn't sure she'd dare to sit in, some covered in fur . . . Then her admiration was interrupted; Illyanov embraced her, kissing her thoroughly.

"I know you sent a message about no visitors," he murmured, "but after last night, I thought you might wish the opportunity. If not, there is no harm done."

"True, and you're right," Cortin replied with equal quietness. "The prisoner didn't affect me, but Dave sure did." She raised her voice to a normal level. "Want to introduce the colleagues I haven't met yet?"

"My pleasure, Excellency." As he was doing so, Illyanov saw Odeon gesturing him to where her team had gathered. When he joined them, Odeon said, "You've been in on this as much as any of us, Ivan; Dave's got some information that may put a different light on Joanie's sexuality. Go ahead, Dave."

Bain did so, telling them about Cortin's lack of reaction to her prisoner. "It seems odd," he finished, "that she wouldn't react, especially with him dripping on eroticine, if it's as involuntary as she--and we--thought."

"That agrees with what happened this morning," Illyanov said. "We slept linked last night, and were still so when I woke." He smiled. "You are all aware of her new ability to intensify climax?" When they nodded, also smiling, he went on. "That ability can also be most stimulating if you happen to be within her and relaxed. My point, however, is that she did not let it continue; she removed herself before either of us became too aroused. I agree with David: she has some control, though it may not always be conscious control."

Odeon traded glances with Chang. That sounded as reasonable as the truth about Cortin, and considerably more believable; they'd go along. "Then maybe it wasn't a fluke, or fear, when she came down after the first time," he said. "What about it, Sis?"

"Unconscious control?" Chang said thoughtfully. "I should like to believe so, and from what you all say, it does sound reasonable. As a hypothesis, then: she indulges herself based on--if you will excuse the term--available, acceptable resources and time. I should like more evidence to either confirm or refute that, however; I have obviously been wrong on that subject before."

Odeon grinned at her. That was a more reasonable hypothesis for the others--and for Joanie herself, until it was time for her to go public--than he could've come up with. "We'll get it for you, though I don't know if we'll be able to tonight." He waved at the group around Cortin; they had her almost undressed, with her full cooperation, and were getting out of their own uniforms as all of them moved toward her bedroom. "But if one of us can arrange to be her last for the night, he can do what Ivan did last night. If he's the only one with her, and doesn't let her move away, the results should be conclusive."

"A good indication, at least," Chang agreed. "And I will put a sedative doser in the bedside table in the event the conclusion is not what we currently believe."

Cortin didn't have time to wonder why none of her team were in the group surrounding her; Illyanov's embrace and kiss had been quite enough to start the ache in her belly, and the Inquisitors' caresses had turned it into a burning need--one they seemed to sense and perhaps share, because almost as soon as they got her to the huge bed, one of them was sliding into her, his urgent thrustings sending her into a spiral of sheer pleasure.

* * * * *

When she fell asleep, it was with Pritchett holding her, relaxed inside her, murmuring that Ivan had said she liked sleeping that way. And he was still there when she woke, a comfortable strong presence in spite of the fact, since the two of them were alone, that she must have overslept. He was smiling at her, and when she started to pull herself reluctantly away, he held her gently but firmly where she was. She started to object--her body was already reacting to him--but he silenced her with a kiss. "It's okay, little fox," he said affectionately. "Just relax, trust me. You'll be fine."

"But--"

"Just relax, I said." Pritchett kissed her again, rolling so she was beneath him as she preferred. "Sis says your drive may very well be self-regulating, and I'm the lucky one who gets to find out with you. If not, she left a sedative." He paused, smiling. "It is something you--and we--need to know." He began moving gently.

He was right, Cortin thought. They should all know her reactions--and he felt far too good, growing and stiffening inside her, for her to want him to leave. "Mmm," she agreed, yielding. Last night had been a feast, she'd loved it and intended to repeat it whenever she had the time and interested partners--but it would be nice if she could snack, too, not have to gorge all the time.

"That's my little fox," Pritchett said indulgently. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." He was at his full size now, solid and delightful, his gentle movements arousing her more slowly than she'd have believed possible after her recent experiences. "And you feel so good . . ."

"Slow and easy this time, hmm? I think so, too." Pritchett smiled, kissing her, caressing her breasts. His little fox--their Joanie--was something special, all right. Even if other women had shared her new endowments, he didn't know of any who'd have been either willing or able to delight a group of men the way she had two nights running. It was too bad she didn't love her Enforcement partners the way they did her--she must think they came to her only for the sex, which was laughable. That you could get anywhere, with the right money. But she was still willing--hell, eager!--to have them.

Their lovemaking was unhurried and thorough, different from any she'd had since her surgery, but Cortin enjoyed it just as much. When they were done, they bathed and dressed--to Cortin's amusement, Pritchett had a complete set of clothing in her room; she'd have to make sure the rest did, too--then they went to the common-room with Pritchett happily carrying the still-full sedative injector.

The only one there was Powell, who smiled when he saw the injector. "It went all right, then--great! The rest of us have all been to Mass and had breakfast, and they're getting settled in. What do you want me to do?"

Cortin didn't know enough about his conditioning to give a good answer, so she said, "You tell me. You need debriefed by an expert, of course, but since you joined us have you had any gear issued, or been paid, or taken care of personal matters?" She saw a puzzled expression, remembered, and added, "Oh, by the way--welcome to Team Azrael."

He looked dazed for a moment, then his expression cleared. "I was working for you the whole time, then--thank you! About the other, though--no, none of it."

"Um." She thought for a moment, then went to a phone and dialed Bradford's number.

"Colonel Bradford's office, Corporal Callahan speaking, sir."

"This is Colonel Cortin. I'd like to speak with Colonel Bradford, please, if he's available."

"Yes, ma'am--one moment, please."

Seconds later, Bradford was on the line. "What can I do for you, Colonel?"

"I'm not sure. Does being the High King's Inquisitor let me borrow you to debrief someone?"

"It lets you borrow anyone you need to do your job. Who do you need debriefed, and how soon?"

"My new team member, Lieutenant Powell. As soon as you can, please."

"Half an hour soon enough?"

"That'd be fine, thanks. I've already gotten some useful information from him, but I'm not good enough at the memory-enhancing techniques to do a really thorough job."

"He's the one who told you about the raid on the Blue Sisters' convent?"

"Yes."

"I'll be over as soon as I can. I'm in charge of the task force protecting them; I'll need all the good information I can get."

"I'll probably be saying Mass when you get here, then. You can talk to him in our quarters if you want, or you're welcome to use my public office on the main floor. Any idea how long it'll take?"

"That's hard to say exactly, but two hours is about average. And since you haven't said Mass yet, I'd appreciate it if you wait till I get there; I like to attend all my priests' services at least once."

"Of course." She couldn't refuse her Bishop, and since no one had commented on her bearing during Mass, her absorption was either normal or not noticeable, so it shouldn't be a problem. "Then this afternoon I can have someone help Powell get the Service formalities straightened out--payroll, uniforms, ID, all that sort of thing." She shook her head, even though he couldn't see the gesture. "Things are going too fast and working out too well, Brad. I'm living in luxury, doing valuable work I enjoy, having an incredible sex life--I ought to be overjoyed, but I'm not. It scares me."

Looked at from her point of view, Bradford could understand that. But since he'd helped with much of the maneuvering that had gotten her into the first two situations--that the third had worked out so well had been by God's mercy, not human skill--he didn't share her apprehension. But he also couldn't reveal any more of that maneuvering than she already knew about, so he tried to reassure her instead. "I don't see anything to worry about, Joan. Think back--everything that's happened to you since the attack has been perfectly reasonable, given your talent as an Inquisitor and Their Majesties' determination to put down the terrorists. If you weren't High King's Inquisitor, someone else would be--someone less talented. As for the speed, well," he let his smile show in his voice, "from what I hear, you were the one in a hurry to qualify as an Inquisitor and get to work--and I know you didn't waste any time getting your team together."

"I can't argue that," Cortin said. She had pushed hard to learn, and learned faster than she'd expected even with that amount of work. "Motivation does work wonders--but it still bothers me."

"We'll talk about it more this afternoon, then, if you're not at a point in an interrogation where you can't take a break for an hour or so."

"I should be able to manage; the one I'm working on seemed to be coming along nicely when I left him last night, and I doubt it'll take me more than a couple of hours to finish him."

Bradford was both astonished and pleased. Except for Powell, he'd chosen these subjects himself, as being particularly resistant. Either he'd been wrong about one, or she had an even more accurate sense for individual weaknesses than he'd realized. "I'd have expected at least two days of concentrated effort for any one of them--what did you do?"

"Thought aloud for his benefit, then left him alone under a twelve-hour dose of eroticine. Not very original, but effective."

"That's what counts." Bradford shook his head, glad she couldn't see the chagrin on his face. "Sometimes simple methods are the most effective." And the hardest to spot special vulnerability to, he reminded himself. "I'll be at the chapel in about fifteen minutes--talk to you more this afternoon."

"Right." Cortin hung up, turned to the two waiting. "He mentioned a chapel--where is it?"

"On the main floor," Pritchett told her. "Dedicated to St. Eleanor, of course."

The patron saint of Enforcement, yes, since there were no Inquisitor saints. "Good--I'd hoped for a chapel, but I hadn't really expected one."

"I'll show you where it is." Pritchett grinned. "I go to Mass every day, when I can--glad I didn't miss it today."

"Can I go too?" Powell asked hesitantly. "I've been once, so I can't take Communion, but . . ."

"Certainly!" Cortin exclaimed. "Whenever you want, as long as it doesn't interfere with your duties. Shall we go, gentlemen?"

Not at all to her surprise, after seeing other parts of the Lodge, Cortin found the chapel to be exquisitely--and expensively!--equipped and decorated. She went into the vestry for some private meditation, then put on her stole and went out to say Mass.

Bradford was struck by the change in her when she went to the altar and began the preliminary prayers. She was still attractive, rather than beautiful, but there was an aura about her now that made her seem as beautiful as the ceremony itself. She was completely wrapped up in it, obviously unaware of those in the chapel with her except for the little time it took her to administer Communion. He couldn't be sure if she even needed her Missal, or if her references to it were simply as part of the ceremony; somehow, he believed it was the latter. He'd only seen this sort of absorption twice before, he thought in awe. He'd have to report it to his superior--and he'd definitely have to talk to her later. After talking to Odeon!

* * * * *

As soon as Mass was over, Bradford took advantage of Cortin's offer to borrow her main-floor office. He should have summoned Powell for questioning, but what he'd just seen wouldn't let him; it was Odeon he called for. And, as he'd half expected, Cortin's second in command was trying to conceal something, his cold pale eyes revealing to the Inquisitor what his impassive expression hid: he was afraid. Not for himself, though; for Cortin?

Bradford gestured Odeon to join him in the informal seating area. When he did, Bradford leaned forward. "Mike, I have no intention of doing anything to hurt Joanie. But it's pretty clear you and Sis are hiding something you've found out about her--something her Commanding Officer and Bishop ought to know

about."

Odeon was silent. Bradford had a point, but was it a strong enough one to justify risking Joanie's life? No, he corrected himself, not her life--her mission. Their lives. It was true that Bradford could be helpful, as Bishop of the Strike Forces--but again, helpful enough to justify the risk? Well, he'd been promised support, so there should be a way to find out.

Bradford watched, initial puzzlement quickly turning to awe as Odeon's eyes lost focus and he seemed to glow, despite the bright office lighting. Yes, there was definitely something highly unusual happening in and around Team Azrael!

When Odeon became aware of his surroundings again, he grinned. "You're in, Colonel. What's going on is hard to believe, but you'll get help." He sobered. "And you'll get help keeping it from all except the very few with a need to know--plus one who has a need not to know."

"Something else we have to keep from her for her own good?"

"Hers and the entire Systems'," Odeon said. "It's why she attracts people in spite of being an Inquisitor. Brad, she's the Herald and acting Protector--and she doesn't know it, can't afford to know it until we've gotten people ready to accept her changes. As long as she doesn't know her identity and powers, Shayan can't use his against her--in fact, he's afraid to use them at all, for fear of waking hers."

Bradford had gone pale. Hard as it was to believe, he couldn't disbelieve. "But she'd win!"

"There's no guarantee of that," Odeon said grimly. "I think she would--but the only limit I'm sure of on Shayan's power is his inability to create life. Joan's limited herself to restrain him and give us a chance." He grimaced. "That's how I understand it, anyway; I could be misinterpreting what I was shown. But I'm positive we can't afford to tell her who she really is. We've got to act normal as long as she does--with a few exceptions."

"Normal." Bradford shuddered. "Around the one who's supposed to judge us for eternity? Or, from what you said about being acting Protector, maybe not make the final judgement?"

"I can't be sure myself," Odeon said. "I have the feeling that anything she does in that capacity will be permanent, or there'd be no reason for an acting one, but it is just a feeling." He paused. "And acting normal around her's possible. Not easy, but possible, because Sis and I are doing it--and essential." He quirked an eyebrow, smiled. "Fun, too, at times. One thing she's doing is reclaiming the jurisdiction over sex that Shayan claimed in the Garden. If you've got any doubts on that score, just remember the shelter party."

Bradford did, his mind going back to her enthusiasm and the incredible pleasure she'd given her men and her guests. "That is going to be one of the hardest things to convince most people of," he said eventually. "Is that going to be the Seal of Life God said the Protector would bring?"

"No--though that's not a bad guess." Odeon told him about the early-hours visit by the man in the white Enforcement uniform, including himself and Sis drinking from the still-unconscious Cortin. "From that and everything else I've seen," he concluded, "the New Kingdom--for lack of my ability to imagine a better name--is going to be a lot more enjoyable, as well as a lot more challenging."

"A lot more sensual, at any rate," Bradford said drily. "Do you think that means all Her priests will be women?"

"I doubt it," Odeon said after a moment's thought "Even though Jeshua's were all men until not long before the

War, which would only be fair. But we have a life fluid of our own, and knowing our Joanie, she'll want it used both ways." He paused, then grinned. "And it wouldn't surprise me if the normal arrangement was to celebrate this Sealing with a priest of the opposite sex."

"Normal--but not necessary?"

"No, or Sis wouldn't have been able to take it from Joanie." Odeon hesitated, then went on. "I wouldn't have been able to tell you all this unless it was highly probable you'd want to be on her team if you knew. If that's right and you do, either Sis or I can Seal you to her; if not, you'll have to wait till she goes public."

"I do," Bradford said without hesitation. "From you, since I agree that there's no time to waste."

"Good." Odeon rose as Bradford knelt in front of him. "Drink, then, the Seed of Life."

Bradford was hesitant at first, taking only what welled out--and that was enough for the union to form. Odeon felt the hesitancy dissolve, felt Bradford's awed pleasure as God's Presence filled and cleansed him, shared his fear that it would end--and then his joyous realization that it wouldn't, that he'd been accepted and was wholly God's now.

When it was over, Bradford shook his head, looking dazed. "I had no idea . . . and Mike, I don't feel like conducting even a Stage One after that. I need to come down, if you don't mind."

"Me too," Odeon said. "The repetitions, or whatever they end up being called, won't be that prolonged or intense, of course, but I'm beginning to think the Sealing itself always will be. And that we'll have to allow for a wind-down period--most likely sexual, the way I felt and felt you feel. Though Sis and I didn't, until after Joanie was on her feet."

"Of course not," Bradford said. "I'd like sex--but what I need is talk. To help Joanie effectively, I've got to know exactly what she and we are trying to accomplish, and--if possible--why." He found a chair without looking, settled into it. When Odeon had followed suit, he went on. "Since you and Sis were chosen directly by Jeshua, you two are the obvious leaders of our group. If she's around, maybe she should join us."

"If she's awake, you mean," Odeon corrected, grinning. "When I saw her last night, she and Ivan were heading for her room, looking like they intended to make a night of it."

Bradford looked at him quizzically, then echoed the grin. "And a disciple of him, I'd be willing to bet."

"A bet you would win, Colonel." Chang stood just inside the door, her arm around the St. Dmitri Inquisitor's waist. "He, and the rest of Team Azrael--including Lieutenant Powell. Pardon the intrusion, but I felt we would be needed, and no one answered when we knocked." She smiled at Bradford. "It is good to have you in our group, Colonel."

"Thanks--I'm happy I could be. And we are off duty." Bradford gestured the newcomers to seats. "At least off Enforcement duty, and you and Mike outrank the rest of us in this field."

"As we heard you tell him, yes." Chang and Illyanov took seats. "However, it is we four, not two, who are her primary staff. Your responsibility will be liaison with the Church. Mike and I must guide her into her temporary role. Ivan is to show her that her dual role of judge and exalter is complementary rather than contradictory."

"That's going to be hardest, I think," Bradford said. "I know who she is, and I still have trouble with the Lifegiver as an Inquisitor."

Illyanov smiled. "Did your parents never punish you, then?"

"Yes, and I get the connection--punishment, and hopefully correction before it's too late to change. But the scale is so different!"

"And right now she's more interested in the punishment part than the correction one," Odeon said. "That's not surprising--but helping her change that emphasis has to be Sis' and my first priority."

"That will not keep her from carrying out her punishment and execution duties, will it?" Illyanov asked.

"How could it?" Chang countered. "She is Judge as well as Guardian--and even if it were not so, she could not deliberately fail to perform any legal duty she is sworn to. Even with her knowledge of her destiny deliberately hidden, she is Protector if only for a time, as well as being the true one's Herald, and therefore incapable of sin."

"Which doesn't mean she can't make mistakes," Odeon added. "Being human, she can--both has, and will."

Bradford frowned. "Any idea when she'll realize who she is?"

"Nothing firm, but logic says not until she has to--maybe as late as when she confronts Shannon, or the real Protector surfaces."

"Which gives us time to discuss this more later," Bradford said, glancing at the wall clock. "I did promise Joanie I'd question Powell for her, and . . ." He hesitated, then went on. "I . . . now that I know who she is, I feel I have to watch her work."

"Understandable." Odeon nodded, then gave the Bishop-Inquisitor a half-smile. "Does questioning Chuck have to be formal, or can you enjoy yourselves in the process?"

"Hmm?" Bradford frowned in puzzlement, then smiled. "Since he's already agreed to cooperate, I don't see any need for a formal interrogation. Why?"

"Let's go up to the common-room, and I'll show you."

When they got there, Powell was sprawled comfortably in front of the record player, listening to Melnyikov's "Musical Explorations" and caressing himself. Odeon grinned, at last able to fully appreciate the composer, and tempted to follow Powell's example. Melnyikov's previous works had hinted at eroticism; this one embraced and celebrated it. That made it a popular piece with Enforcement and much of the nobility, frowned on by the Church and most landfolk. Rumor had it that Melnyikov had used biological research--or Shayan's aid--to make "Explorations" so effective; after what he'd learned recently, Odeon suspected a different source. He glanced at Bradford, saw a speculative look, and raised a curious eyebrow.

"You were right to suggest an informal session," Bradford said appreciatively. "I'd almost forgotten his training--I'll probably get better results this way than by the more conventional methods."

"No doubt enjoying yourself in the process," Illyanov said.

"No doubt at all," Bradford agreed, removing his tunic and undershirt. "You're welcome to stay and participate, of course, either with him or setting an example."

"He is strongly attracted to Michael," Illyanov pointed out, "so if the two of you concentrate on him--"

"Ivan and I will set the example," Chang finished.

15. Demon Drops

"Good morning, my dear." Cortin greeted her subject cheerily as soon as she entered the third-stage room. Yes, Mike had had it cleaned; except for the misery and fatigue in her subject's attitude, there was no evidence of what he'd been through the night before. "Are you ready for today's session?"

The man licked his lips, then said, "That captain who was here before called you Azrael. What's that mean--who are you? What're you gonna do to me?"

"Your education has been sadly neglected if you do not know the Angel of Death," Cortin said easily. "I will carry out the sentence you earned when you joined the Brotherhood, eventually. Before that, however, we will share some entertainment, and you will tell me everything you know about the Brothers of Freedom."

"Like hell I will!" But the man's voice held no conviction, and Cortin smiled.

"Oh, not without some resistance, of course." She turned to the cabinets, began laying out instruments and drugs where the subject could see them, taking her time to give him plenty of opportunity to study each one. "I have restricted myself to field-level drugs and instruments until now; I really should be experimenting with the more advanced techniques, now that I have easy access to them. Some of these do look interesting." She picked up several of the instruments again, one at a time, looking thoughtfully from instrument to prisoner and back, but there was no unusual reaction from him.

"The simple infliction of pain holds no particular terrors for you, I see," she commented. "Good, then you can demonstrate some of the drugs for me." That got a reaction, as she'd expected from the previous night; he tried, with little success, to hold back a gasp. "Not algetin, I am quite familiar with that, and you have already given me an excellent demonstration of eroticine." She studied labels on various little jars, again taking her time, stretching his anticipation and fear. "We can also eliminate these, I think, as they are primarily for medical purposes; my medic can handle them, if necessary. That still leaves quite a selection, however. Hmm, this looks interesting." She filled a syringe, turned to him. "Hallucinogens are not really too useful as interrogation drugs, because of both their primary function and their unpredictability. But I cannot resist one called 'demon drops' and described as causing both hallucinations and rapid mood changes--so you get to try it."

"Keep that hell-stuff away from me!"

"There is no point in fighting, you know," Cortin said as she approached him. A light coming on caught her attention; she raised a hand in greeting to whoever had entered the observation room, surprised when she saw the clock at how long she'd been working. She dismissed that, though, and made the injection in spite of her subject's ineffectual struggles. As she'd told him, there was absolutely no point in fighting when you were shackled by wrists and ankles, but she had no real objection if one of her subjects wanted to; it merely emphasized their relative positions. "There--now we will see what happens."

"You go straight to Hell, Bitch!"

"Your colleagues tried to send me there once," Cortin reminded him with a smile. "Now I return the favor, more successfully. Should that be my destination, I have excellent reasons to believe you will be there waiting for me." There was nothing more she could do until the drug took effect, which according to the label should be quickly, but even a brief time should be enough to see who the observer was.

Bradford greeted her as she entered the dimly-lit room with its large window of one-way glass. "Lieutenant Powell didn't have very much except what he already told you--that was one reason you got him to practice on, after all--so I thought I'd come down and watch for a bit. What'd you give him?"

"Demon drops." Cortin shrugged. "I know hallucinogens aren't recommended--but I learned a long time ago to play my hunches, and I think this'll break him."

"I was curious, not objecting," Bradford said mildly. "I've never had any luck with it, but others have; I don't argue with what works."

"I hope this does," Cortin said, watching her subject closely. "If it's what the prewars called a bad trip, and he remembers, it should."

"It doesn't look like it's going to be a good one," Bradford said, chuckling.

"I think you're right," Cortin agreed. Her subject was showing signs of fear, small as yet but promising. "And it looks like I ought to get back to him. If you have any suggestions, I'll be glad to hear them."

"I don't expect to, but if I do, I'll let you know."

Cortin returned to her subject, pleased to see his fear become more open when she entered the room. She wondered what he was seeing; he hadn't been visibly afraid of her only minutes ago, so it had to be something more than a woman in gray coveralls. As she approached him, he started to sweat, trembling, his eyes bulging as he fought to escape whatever he saw. "No--go away, please--leave me alone--don't touch me!"

She must be something impressive, Cortin thought. A demon such as the one the drug was named for, perhaps, to get such a strong reaction. "Why not?" she asked. "What do you think I am?"

"Lord Azrael," the man sobbed. "Go away--send the Inquisitor back! I'll tell her everything--just leave me alone!"

So he'd taken her code name and clothed her in that persona, Cortin thought. Fitting, that he should think he was dying at the hands of the real Angel of Death. "Tell me, mortal. Thy life is forfeit, but if thou shouldst speak quickly and truthfully, I will make thy passing easy. She will not be so merciful."

"You're burning me . . . not so close . . ."

True enough, his skin was reddening as if from sunburn. Cortin had read that something believed strongly enough could affect the body, but this was the first time she'd seen it. She wanted to go closer, test the phenomenon further, but getting information was more important than indulging her curiosity; she stepped back instead. "Speak to me, mortal. Quickly, before the Inquisitor returns and I must leave thee to the slow, terrible death she intends for thee." Cortin had used the "good cop/bad cop" tactic before, many times--it was, for all its age, astonishingly reliable--though this was the first time she'd played both parts for one prisoner.

The man sagged in his chains. "Better you than her, I guess . . . what do you want to know?"

His fear was still there; Cortin read the signs easily. But she could also see defeat, almost resignation. He believed the Angel of Death, where he'd had some hope, however small, under the Inquisitor. "Tell me first of the attack planned on the holy Sisters of Succor."

He confirmed what Powell had told her, adding that the time was set for the High Mass celebrating the Order's founding, and the force involved would be about fifty men. Yes, it was to be a massacre like the one at the

convalescent hospital the previous year, but he didn't know why such attacks were carried out or what the Brotherhood's purpose was; he had joined because farm life was boring and he wanted adventure. He'd tried for Enforcement, but been refused because they thought him unstable. He was quite bitter about being called unstable by a bunch of oversexed killers in uniform, and liked taking part in raids just to get back at them for the insult.

No, he didn't know how many Lawrence Shannons there were; no one did, except the Raidmaster himself and maybe the Brotherhood's High Council. Ten or fifteen, he thought, but that was only a guess. He wasn't sure whether or not the real Shannon would lead the convent raid, but he didn't think so; he'd heard rumors of a major raid around Christmas in one of the other Systems, and the Raidmaster was supposed to be working on that one. No, he didn't know any more about it; it had been only a rumor. The lesser Raidmaster on the convent job might know, yes, though he didn't think it likely. No, he didn't know who'd been Raidmaster on the hospital job; he thought probably the real one, though. That was all he knew, honestly; now he would be grateful if Lord Azrael would let him see a priest before killing him.

Cortin swore silently. She wanted to send his soul to Hell, where she was sure it belonged--but it looked like his hallucination had thrown the fear of God into him, and he was about to make a deathbed repentance. At least she wouldn't have to officiate this time, she told herself; she couldn't be Azrael and Reverend Mother Cortin at the same time. "Thou hast that right," she conceded, beckoning Bradford to join them. Blast it, from now on she'd simply have to make it a point to have Mike or Dave nearby, in case it happened again!

When Bradford entered, Cortin left the room. She didn't care to even witness a Brother's repentance and forgiveness, though she admitted unhappily to herself that she would carry them out again if she had to; she simply wouldn't like doing it, any more than she had the first time.

She took advantage of the break to use the red phone and pass along the additional information she'd gotten--not to His Majesty directly this time; the one who answered didn't sound at all familiar, and promised to pass it along as soon as His Majesty was free. Then she waited, with growing impatience, for Bradford to finish with her subject.

What, in God's Most Holy Name, was going on in there? Surely it couldn't take this long to confess even a Brother's obviously-lengthy list of sins, then receive absolution and Extreme Unction!

When Bradford finally emerged, he was smiling. "He's all yours, Joan. Nice job you did, getting the information and saving a soul--that doesn't happen often. Of course, not many Inquisitors have the help of a blazing Angel of Death, either."

"Mike told him my code name; the demon drops and his own imagination did the rest." Cortin's mouth quirked. "I would've preferred a more conventional interrogation, but I have to admit he had good reason to be afraid of drugs. And I'll keep 'Azrael's' promise; he'll die as quickly and easily as I can manage, even though by rights he ought to suffer as much as his victims did."

"I think you can safely trust God to take care of that," Bradford said drily. "I can't tell you what he confessed, of course, but I can tell you I'm positive he'll be spending a long time in Purgatory."

Cortin grinned. "I'm sure he deserves every year of it." All that was left was killing him, so she got out of her coveralls, put her tunic back on, settled her gunbelt into place, and re-entered the third-stage room. Bradford had freed the prisoner; he was kneeling facing away from her, toward the room's crucifix, his attitude making it obvious he was praying. Cortin frowned, then nodded to herself, silently drawing her pistol. There were far worse ways to die than quickly, while speaking to God, and while he deserved one of those, she had promised otherwise. She took careful aim and shot him in the back of the head.

That, she thought immediately, had been far kinder to him than it had to her! She'd forgotten just how loud a heavy-caliber handgun could be in a confined area, and her ears were ringing painfully. It also made quite a mess at this close a range; blood and brains splattered most of the wall he'd been facing, including the crucifix. The clean-up crew could handle the wall and body, but she felt like taking care of the crucifix herself; careful to avoid getting the mess on her uniform, she took it into the bathroom to clean it.

As she did, she found herself thinking about the man the crucifix represented. Jeshua had become incarnate and sacrificed Himself to protect humanity from the results of sin, though protection from sin itself would have to wait for the promised Protector. In the meantime, Jeshua's sacrifice was on behalf of anyone willing to take advantage of it--and Ivan had told her often enough it was as much an Inquisitor's job to correct as to punish. Maybe, she thought, she was starting to get that through her thick head, because despite her personal distaste for the idea of a Brother's repenting, there was a sense of accomplishment at this one's. It also helped, of course, that Brad had complimented her on being able to manage both information and repentance!

She grinned at herself as she dried the crucifix and put it on the desk in the suite's office. If Shannon was Shayan, which since her vision looked more likely than not, turning Brothers from him to God would be an even better revenge on him than the traditional version would be on them . . . even though she still intended to take that kind on the ones who'd helped rape and maim her.

* * * * *

There was a message on her ground-floor office desk: His Majesty wanted to see her at her earliest convenience between interrogations. It didn't specify dress uniform, and this close to the Palace she didn't need bodyguards, so less than fifteen minutes later she found herself sitting--sitting!--beside His Majesty's desk, sipping a cup of the best ginger tea she could remember tasting and still shocked by the warmth of His Majesty's welcome. It was awesome enough meeting him, though really it was no odder than paying a routine courtesy call on one's new commanding officer; it just felt that way, having the High King himself as your direct superior. His Majesty was clearly familiar with such a reaction, because he was carrying the burden of the conversation until she had a chance to recover. When she began to settle down, he smiled. "Reports of your ability weren't exaggerated, Colonel. I'm quite pleased with the results you've gotten so far."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I'll keep doing my best."

"I'm certain you will. Is Harmony Lodge to your liking and adequately equipped?"

"More than adequately, Sire. I'm still overwhelmed by all of it."

"You are to let me know immediately if there's anything you need or want. We can't take major action against the Brotherhood without the information you provide, which makes you the most important single person in this operation."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Cortin took a sip of her tea, savoring the ginger tang. It was hard to believe she was all that important--she certainly didn't feel it--but her truthsense said His Majesty did believe it, so she had to. "If I may make a suggestion?"

"As one of my Household, that's both your privilege and your duty; go ahead."

"Then I'd say the attack on the convent would be a good time to activate the Strike Force. And with Your Majesty's permission, my men and I would like to participate in the convent's defense."

"That's three things," King Mark said. "Activating the strike force at the next terror attack is something I had already intended; it will be done. Your men may participate in the convent's defense if they wish and Colonel

Bradford permits." He paused. "I am afraid, though, that I must forbid your participation in action against anyone except those you have a personal interest in. You're far too valuable to risk that way, and if I weren't afraid of losing you, I'd forbid you participating in action against even personal enemies. It would be best for the kingdom if you could resist doing so, but--" he paused, giving her a rueful smile, "while I pray for miracles for my people, I've learned not to expect them."

Cortin wanted to object, but reminded herself that she'd known about the restriction when she'd taken the job. "As Your Majesty commands--but it was worth a try."

The King chuckled. "And I can't fault you for making the effort; you wouldn't have joined the Strike Force if you hadn't wanted to see action. I'm afraid you'll see more than I want you to, at that. Now, if I may change the subject, the Royal Press Office has received a number of requests for interviews with you. Whether you give them or not is your choice."

"In that case, Sire, I'd rather not, at least until I finish settling in." She'd rather not do it even then; she'd given more than enough interviews at the Academy and after graduation. One reason she'd done so much field work was to get away from reporters. But she needed publicity--favorable publicity--to get support for her family changes, so she'd have to at least pretend to overcome that dislike.

"They'll have to content themselves with the official biography for the present, then," the King said. "The Press Office will need a current photo, though; you can go by sometime this week and provide it. You'll be safe from reporters as long as you're in the Palace compound or Harmony Lodge, but I can't guarantee the same outside; that will be up to your team."

"I don't really see any need to leave, except on missions," Cortin said. "Harmony Lodge alone has everything I need."

"As you wish," the King said. "I certainly won't insist on you being exposed to any unnecessary danger. But there will be an official reception tomorrow in your honor; you should come, unless you're in the middle of an interrogation."

Cortin was tempted to arrange it so she was, but as far as she was concerned, His Majesty saying she should come made it an order. "I'll do my best to be there, Sire. Full dress uniform?"

"Or formal civilian wear. Though that would mean being unarmed, so I don't expect it." The King raised an eyebrow. "You do realize you are the only person other than members of my personal guard who is allowed in the Royal Presence with a firearm?"

"What?" Cortin stared at him for an instant, then glanced at the pistol on her hip. "No, Sire--I hadn't even thought about it."

The King smiled, then stood. "We have no doubt of Your Excellency's loyalty, and We wish you a long and healthy life as Our Inquisitor."

The audience was over, obviously; Cortin rose and bowed, then began backing out of the office.

"Those who carry firearms in Our presence," the King said drily, "also have leave to turn their backs on Us."

Cortin bowed again, then turned. As she left, the King allowed himself a brief frown. He was certain of his Inquisitor's loyalty, or she wouldn't have the position--but he couldn't deny that she made him uncomfortable. Male Inquisitors were disturbing enough to be around; a woman who enjoyed the deliberate infliction of pain seemed worse, somehow. And one with Colonel Cortin's incredible talent at it was decidedly unnerving.

On the other hand, both Edward and Ursula were thoroughly taken with her, which was unusual for both of them, so Her Excellency must have qualities he couldn't see, even allowing for her scheme to let them have heirs. He touched the cartridge at his neck, frowning again. Unusual qualities, for these to be so popular with the troops that many insisted on having one before going out in the field and swore by their efficacy. Maybe he ought to have her bless a couple of cases of them, make them standard issue . . .

Back to the subject, he thought, leaning back. The idea of polygamy had seemed obscene when Edward first mentioned it, but the longer he thought about it, the more reasonable it seemed to become. As a matter of morality, her argument that monogamy at this point was tantamount to racial suicide had a certain validity, and suicide was a sin. And her argument that marriage laws could be changed was also valid; the Modern Saints had been branded heretics not because of their polygamy but because they had claimed Shayan to be Jeshua's brother. And the theologians were still arguing about that . . .

Then there was his responsibility, as Sovereign, for his subjects' welfare, which tied in with his personal desire to leave his descendants a prosperous, expanding group of Systems . . . which he wouldn't be able to do without some fairly drastic action. If he didn't, in a few generations there would be no Kingdom Systems--a fact he'd known for some time, but had avoided thinking about because there seemed to be no solution.

Now, though, he'd been handed a chance, if he could arrange to implement it. Keep Cortin the focus of whatever happened as a result, of course; even the best Inquisitor was more expendable than royalty. From Edward's report on the airborne conference, Bishop-Colonel Bradford ought to be willing to help get Church approval for Enforcement to formalize the informal group marriages it was rumored they had in some of the more remote areas.

Remote areas? The High King smiled as an idea took form. He'd have to discuss it with his lesser monarchs, because of their agreement that all Royal Inquisitors hold the same rank--but it promised a place for Cortin to offer anyone who wanted a group marriage but didn't want the notoriety that would inevitably accompany the first ones. It would also--a not inconsiderable benefit--silence My Lord of New Colorado's complaints about having to administer territories that cost his Dukedom more than the revenues they generated. Those complaints were justified, the King admitted--but he was incredibly tired of hearing them!

That would have to wait, though. The King switched on his intercom, spoke to his secretary. "Peter, get hold of Bishop-Colonel Bradford. I want to see him as soon as he can get here."

* * * * *

Cortin disliked the reception, leaving as soon as she thought it would be socially acceptable, intending to indulge herself with a new subject. Once she got back to the Lodge, though, she decided she was too tired to do a proper job of starting an interrogation, and Brady said most of the men had gone to the New Eden joyhouse. So she might as well make an early night of it; after a hot soaking bath, she went to bed and quickly fell asleep.

Fifteen years disappeared; it was the night after Graduation, and Mike was holding her close after their first lovemaking, smiling down at her. "Marry me, Joanie?"

"Of course, beloved." Cortin returned his smile, giving him a lingering kiss.

They were married soon after, and she found that married life agreed with her; she remained in the Service, but instead of going into the field as she'd planned, she took postgraduate work and became an Inquisitor. That let her spend time with her husband, when he wasn't out on a mission, and with the three children they had. The youngest was almost a year old when Mike came home with a pleased expression that told her he'd contracted the Satyr Plague.

They lay together in the dark warmth, savoring each other, not hurrying their caresses in spite of their desire. He wanted her to lie still, let him pleasure her with his new capacity--

Her bedroom door opened, bringing her awake with her gun in her hand. "Who's there?"

"Mike--I hadn't expected you to be asleep this early. I hope I didn't interrupt a good dream."

Cortin put the gun down. "Only the best I've had in years. Come on in, if you want; is there something wrong?"

"No, just thought you might like some normal company after that Palace to-do." He entered the room, the hallway light showing, to her pleasure, that he was already undressed. "What was the dream?"

"Graduation night, then the first time we got together after you managed to catch the satyr bug." She was not going to tell him about the impossible marriage and children . . . Letting amused irritation show in her voice, she went on, "Or would have, until you interrupted yourself. Interested in starting over?"

"Any time," Odeon said with a chuckle. "Especially since it seems this is one I owe myself!"

16. Marriage

Cortin lay awake, listening to Odeon's soft breathing and thinking. The dream had been almost pure wish fulfillment, a wish she'd both had and known was impossible since the day she'd met him. She'd never had the slightest interest in any of her schoolmates, or any marriage interest in the Enforcement men she'd met after Mike . . . but Special Ops men didn't marry, couldn't have children, so she'd settled for what they could have.

The dispensation helped, no doubt about that, but it wasn't enough! Even if they couldn't have children, they ought to be able to have some sort of stable relationship--and the only way she could see of giving it to them was to have her new family structure accepted. In fact, everything seemed to hinge on that, from maintaining social stability--although in a new form--to the continued existence of humanity in the Systems. Good as it would be for the parents and the Kingdoms as a whole, though, it would be best for the children--and for Special Ops troops, giving the trooper a real home and the family he married into a second father/husband--or in her case and Piety's, mother/wife--and provider. A mostly-male marriage might be a bit much at times for the wife or wives, though, unless it did include troopers . . .

Cortin felt briefly complacent at that; she could satisfy a shelter full of troopers without a bit of strain! Mike was right that God had been more than generous to her; even the attack had been only a prelude allowing her the increased pleasure men now gave her. It was too bad, in a way, that other women were limited to what she'd had before . . . but they couldn't know, any more than she had then, what they were missing. And they had something she no longer did: the hope, at least, of children. She couldn't help envying them that, the joys of home and family she'd never know. Still, she told herself sternly, she'd accepted that fact months ago, and without the consolations God had granted her since.

She thought about those consolations, frowning. There were a lot of troopers who'd been hurt as badly as she, some maimed far worse, without any corresponding compensations. Maybe Mike was right about that too, and God did have some kind of purpose for her--which was a frightening thought. If He had a purpose for anyone on Team Azrael, it should be Mike; he was the most devout, a natural priest, and he'd been raised by religious. Even though she was making a conscientious effort, at Mike's urging, to dedicate her entire life rather than just her pain to God, she didn't believe she could be called truly devout. Or, much as she enjoyed the exaltation of saying Mass, that she was a natural priest. Yes, Mike was far more suited to serving a divine purpose than she was.

And he was waking; this would be as good a time as any to bring up the part of her vision she was most frightened by. And maybe the part she'd liked best . . . When he started to sit up, she spoke. "I need to talk to you, Mike. Got a few minutes, or do you need to get up right away?"

"I've got all the time you want," Odeon said, settling back. "What's the problem?"

Cortin moved toward him. "I . . . didn't tell everything about what I saw when I was under. Part because it was too frightening, part because it was too . . . personal. I'm not even sure I can tell you."

Odeon took her in his arms. "Okay. The frightening part first."

"I . . . believe Sis now. Shannon is Shayan, or under his direct control." Cortin shivered. "I was in a prewar bio-lab--you know, the kind we've all seen pictures of?" When he nodded, she went on. "It was a Brothers of Freedom lab. I know that, somehow, even though there were no symbols and no one heard of the Brothers for another fifty years. Shannon was there, looking exactly like he does today, and he was engineering the worst of the plague strains. Working with his mind, the equipment was there just for show. And he was proud of himself; he'd just persuaded the ruler of one of those tiny asteroid colonies that if they used his plagues they could take over St. Monica without bloodshed. Mike, the Final War was no accident, or innocent mistake, or even a human horror--it was Shayan, turned loose!"

Odeon stroked her back, trying to comfort her. "The Bible does say he'd be set free for a hundred years before the Protector begins working against him." And that fit too; history said work on the plagues had started in 2464, and she'd graduated--begun work against him and his Brotherhood--in 2564. "So the Protector's here, and working--just not openly yet."

"But why not?"

Odeon shrugged. "I'm only human; you can't expect me to know why God does what He does. All we can do is trust Him, try to help in whatever ways we can."

"That's not terribly comforting." Cortin snuggled closer. "I'd feel a lot better if I knew who the Protector is, at least. Are you him?"

"No." Odeon didn't dare elaborate; she was too likely to pick up on the smallest mistake. Instead he decided to change the subject, hoping to distract her. "What's the personal thing--if you can talk about it?"

Cortin was silent for a moment, then she sighed. "I guess I wouldn't have brought it up if I hadn't intended to tell you, even though it's a little embarrassing--I don't think of you as a child!" After another brief hesitation, she went on. "It was pure wish fulfillment, I'm afraid--the part with you, at least." She moved slightly away, just enough that she could bring his hand to her breast. "You and Sis were nursing, and I was actually able to give you milk. It felt so incredibly good, especially you even though it wasn't exactly sexual . . . I can't describe it, not really. You can't believe how much I wish I could do it again, and not in a dream!"

Odeon cupped her breast, feeling the nipple harden as he stroked it with his thumb. It stood to reason, given the additions he and the other "staff" had developed since being sealed to her, that she could--though possibly, to protect her secret from herself, not until she was sealed to the true Protector. "Maybe you can, Joanie. I'm not the Protector, but while you were under, Sis and I were empowered to carry out some of those functions." He grinned. "The main one is the Sealing--and its purpose, of course, is protection from sin for those willing to give up that option."

"You and Sis?" Cortin was a little disappointed that she hadn't been included, but admitted to herself that the two of them did make more sense. "Mike, you know I've been doing my best to do His will; can you give me

that protection?"

"Gladly!" Odeon thought for a moment, then got out of bed. "Here, the common-room, or the chapel?"

Her bedroom didn't feel like a proper place for a religious ritual, Cortin thought, and she wasn't sure it would be polite to carry out one of the Protector's rituals in a chapel belonging to Jeshua, even though they were Aspects of the same God. "The common-room, I think," she said, getting up. "Do we need icons or symbols, anything like that?"

That hadn't occurred to Odeon, and he said so. "I like the idea, though," he continued. "We can't have icons yet, with the Protector not wanting to be identified, but we should be able to manage something with symbols. For Justice and Life, do you think?"

"Those are supposed to be His main concerns," Cortin agreed. "Scales or a sword for Justice--probably a sword, since we all have those with our dress uniforms. What for Life, though?"

Something sexual, was Odeon's first reaction, because that was the life-creating act--but the Sealing itself wasn't, not really. "The One Who empowered Sis and me mentioned flowers; how about those?"

"Sounds good," Cortin said. "If you'll get the sword, I'll see if I can improvise an altar."

Not long afterward, they had done so. A small table she'd covered with a white silk sheet held Odeon's dress sword and a vase of Peace roses, plus a chalice of milk and a piece of bread he promised she'd understand soon. It was improvised, true, and not even consecrated, but Cortin found herself deeply affected by it.

"What do you think?" Odeon asked.

"I like it, very much," Cortin said. "It feels right--a simple altar, no fancy vestments--" She looked at herself, then at him, and smiled. "None at all, in fact. Is this how He wants it, do you think? An intimate kind of worship, maybe just family and close friends, with the senior spouses as celebrants?"

"Sounds reasonable to me," Odeon said. It was an odd feeling, having her ask his opinion on the proper way to worship the Protector; after all, if it felt right to her, acting in that capacity, who was he to say otherwise?

"To me, also."

Cortin turned, not really surprised to see Sis and the rest of those who'd been at the airborne conference. Under normal conditions she would have been astonished, and probably suspicious as well--but these were hardly normal conditions, with Shayan on the loose, the Protector manifesting to Mike and Sis, and herself having visions. It was normality, now, that would have surprised her. "You and Mike will celebrate it for us?"

"And each other, yes." The nun smiled. "Neither altar nor ceremonial is truly necessary for the Sealing or its celebration, but since we expect both, they add to the pleasure. Unfortunately we have not yet devised a ceremony, so we will have to content ourselves with informal prayers." She approached the altar, embracing Odeon as Cortin and the rest knelt.

As she'd said, the prayers were brief and informal, praising God in His Aspect of the Protector, asking His blessings on those who were worthy of and wanted Sealing but couldn't be given it until the Protector came into the open, offering the milk and bread on the altar in their behalf until they could partake of the true Milk or Seed of Life.

That reference puzzled Cortin, until the two celebrants asked that God make use of them to do the Protector's

work, and were accepted. Something seemed to twist inside her, then she felt the exaltation of Consecration taking hold and she was praying for the new salvation the celebrants offered, not just from the effects of sin but from sin itself. As at Mass, the celebrants took the new Communion first, drinking from each other. The physical actions were little different from some of the things that went on at a shelter party--but the feeling wasn't sexual, it was like her dream of both of them feeding from her: reverent joy.

Then the celebrants were finished, inviting those who hadn't yet partaken and wished to place themselves under the Protector's care to come forward. Almost as if Odeon were pulling her, Cortin approached him and knelt. Except that it was Mike only in form; he had become God, in the same way bread and wine became God at the Consecration during Mass. "I surrender myself to Thee," she said. "I ask for Thy protection and guidance, that I might serve Thee to the best of my ability."

"They are thine, Daughter." Hands on her head guided her to the whiteness welling from him. "Drink thy fill of the Seed of Life, that thou mayst be Sealed to thy Protector."

Cortin obeyed. The droplets were sweet, not the slightly bitter taste she remembered. Taste was minor, though, next to the exaltation that washed through her. His thick sweet fluid was a generous feast, filling her with His love and life. It was forever and no time at all that she finished, reveling in His glorious bounty so freely given.

When He raised her to her feet, the exaltation faded as it did after Communion--not completely, but to a far lesser intensity. She stepped back; Princess Ursula took her place, while the Prince went to Chang.

It was beautiful, Cortin thought, in large part because it was real rather than hidden by symbols. She didn't object to such concealment in its proper place, such as the Mass--letting flesh and blood appear to be bread and wine was easier on celebrant and communicants both! Milk and seed, though, could be given not only without pain but with obvious pleasure; Mike and Sis were both positively radiant. Some people, she knew, would think this obscene, be uncomfortable or worse at taking such nourishment directly from its source instead of from chalice or plate. She knew, but she didn't understand. Breasts were made to give milk, testes to give seed; given and taken in the Protector's Holy Name, how could it be other than beautiful?

The royal couple was done; they returned to kneel with Cortin. The Princess was the last woman in the group, so Odeon waited, relaxed, while Chang fed the rest. Her last communicant was Pritchett--and unlike the others, he had a visible response when he drank.

Cortin found that a good sign, as well as being enjoyable to watch. Chang very much wanted a baby, preferably Pritchett's, though that would take a miracle. It'd be an even better sign to those who hadn't been here if they were granted one today; it'd have to be seen as an obvious indication that this was God's Will. Chang stroked him briefly when he raised his head, then she turned to Odeon and they faced the group for a final prayer.

For Shannon/Shayan's reaction: 16a. Shayan

17. Family

As she experienced, for minutes almost becoming, each of the Sealed men, Cortin's appreciation of them grew. Tony's quiet, unobtrusive competence, Ivan's culture and dry humor, the Prince's devotion to his wife and the Systems, the others' varying individualities--and all of them loving her, she returning it. The full unity proved to be only between man and woman, which she found out when Princess Ursula suckled while Edward was merging with her--but she felt Ursula through him, knew the Princess shared her through him as well, sharing love with both.

Later, it was Tiny and Sis who joined her, Tiny's seed still filling the nun's womb though Cortin smiled, trying to project her delight that its work was done. The fourth person in this union was unformed as yet, but undeniably there, conceived in their unity and bathed in all three's when she and Tiny merged, erupting into each other.

When the unity faded, Cortin kissed both of them. "Congratulations--what're you going to name him?"

"Name who?" Powell asked.

Cortin glanced at Chang, got a nod, and called, "Gather 'round, people!" When they did, she said, "Don't ask me how I know, because I can't tell you--but it's my honor and pleasure to tell you all that Sis is pregnant. The child's a boy, and Tiny's the father."

There was a tumult of congratulations until Pritchett interrupted, looking stunned. "But I'm sterile!"

"You were, legally," Chang said with a serene smile. "That is defined, of course, as a class three or lower sperm count and motility rating--but as long as sperm are present at all, there is a chance of conception, however remote. Since we did conceive, that definition no longer applies; you are demonstrably fertile."

Pritchett hugged both women, then disentangled himself from Cortin to give his full attention to the mother of his child. Cortin stretched, catlike, then stood. Once with each of them had been enough to satisfy her need--though it had also left her with a nagging apprehension. Could a team so emotionally involved with each other, and especially with its CO, continue to function properly?

At least they were gathered around the expectant parents, not her, and seemed to be coming to rapid agreement on something. Of the others, the Prince and Princess looked wistful, and Bradford and Illyanov were approaching her. Bradford seemed worried, Illyanov buoyant. "Problem, Brad?" Cortin asked.

"Maybe, depending on what His Majesty decides to do about two fertile Strike Force troopers, the waivered one of whom is pregnant." Bradford frowned. "Normally, you know, she'd be transferred to base duty or discharged at her option and he'd be transferred to the regulars--but I happen to think moving either of them would be a mistake. So I'm going to recommend waivering both of them as long as you're willing to keep them on Azrael."

"Which will be as long as they're willing to stay," Cortin said. "Thanks, Brad, but that's not the only problem. We also have a Team Leader who's just found out she's in love with her entire team--as well as Their Highnesses and the two of you." She sighed deeply. "I wouldn't want to change a bit of it, but this does put us in one horrendous mess, and if we can manage to salvage anything we've planned, it'll be a major miracle."

"I see no serious problems," Illyanov said cheerfully. "After the miracles we have just experienced, how can you doubt that God will continue to help us?"

His confidence was reassuring; Cortin found herself able to grin. "I don't doubt it a bit. Just remember that we can't count on Him until we've done all we can do for ourselves."

"I am fully aware of that," Illyanov said with a smile. "And I believe you can do more than either you or Colonel Bradford have allowed yourself to realize." He turned, gesturing a request to the Royal couple to join them. When they did, he bowed. "Your Highnesses, what limitations are applicable to a Strike Force Team Leader who is also an Inquisitor?"

"No treason or regicide," Prince Edward said promptly. "Anything else they do, as long as it's directed toward stopping the terrorists--or done in the Kingdoms' interests, a proviso I persuaded my father to get the other

Sovereigns to agree to a few days ago--is covered by their Writs of Immunity."

"An excellent addition, Your Highness," Illyanov said. "And if such an Inquisitor/Team Leader's opinion of what is in the Kingdoms' best interest happens not to coincide with current canon or civil law?"

The Prince frowned. "I don't know," he said slowly. "I was at all the Strike Force planning conferences, and I don't remember that possibility ever being discussed."

Illyanov turned to Bradford. "The same question, My Lord Bishop. As Strike Force commander, you must know the answer."

Bradford shook his head. "His Highness is right--the possibility was never brought up. I know it never occurred to me; now that you bring it up, it frightens me."

"It should reassure you instead," Illyanov said. "If it occurred to none of those charged with the Kingdoms' protection, I think it safe to assume it will not occur to any in a position and with a desire to harm them." He turned back to Cortin. "I would suggest, beloved, that you take your Writ at face value and do whatever you think best."

Odeon had left the team group to listen; now he nodded. "I second that, Joanie. The best way to make a change is to do it--and Sis has agreed to marry us. Will you perform the ceremony?"

"Wait a minute!" Cortin protested. "Are you all telling me that His Holiness and Their Majesties gave us more power than they have themselves?"

"It would appear so," Illyanov said, "since they must obey the law, and you need not if you believe disobeying to be in the Kingdoms' best interest."

Cortin felt a sudden brief hysteria. Standing here naked and sweaty, in definite need of a bath--and they were telling her, with absolute seriousness, that she was more powerful than King or Pope! That was a frightening idea--but Mike was right, making changes required action. Still-- "I . . . let me clean up and think about it. It's too tempting--sounds too easy."

"We do all need baths," Illyanov agreed, putting his arm around her waist and starting to urge her toward her rooms. "It will be far less easy than it sounds, beloved; this merely makes it possible. But we will all help you."

Before, that sort of presumption would have irritated her, or worse--she might not have wanted to bathe with him, maybe not with anyone. Now, though, she realized that she did want company, specifically Ivan's, and she slid her arm around his waist.

They were silent as the tub filled, Illyanov respecting Cortin's need to think. He'd had no trouble accepting her as the Protector, unlike a couple of the others, but he did have the advantage of Dmitrian traditional prophecies and a mother who'd been matter-of-factly certain her eldest son would meet the Promised One and fulfill those prophecies with Her. He'd guessed it might be Joan when she fulfilled part of them by becoming an Inquisitor who assured herself of her subjects' guilt, had thought it highly probable when she'd fulfilled another part by celebrating her restored sexuality with all of them, and had become positive when Michael told him she knew nothing of her mission, also as prophesied. Becoming one with her hadn't been necessary to his belief in her, though he admitted to himself that it was good to know rather than simply believe. The awesome vastness of even the body-limited part of her Self was both humbling and a promise of what humanity in the Systems could become under her protection and guidance. The permanent Protector's later, of course--but most definitely Joan's for now.

Cortin stirred the rising water with her foot, watching the ripples, comforted by the man sitting on the edge of the tub with her, his arm around her shoulders. Taken at face value, her Writ did give her almost unlimited power, and she'd like nothing better than to use it to give those she loved the first expanded Family. Most of them, anyway . . . the royals would have to find other spouses at their own level, Ivan and Brad already had families and intentions of expanding them with friends/lovers, and she . . . well, she knew perfectly well she couldn't be part of the marriage. She'd give them a nice Nuptial Mass, though.

The thought of Mass made her think of Communion, the rapturous absorption in Divinity she experienced sharing Jeshua's Body and Blood. And had experienced earlier today, first drinking from Mike, then in union. It was confusing that three such different experiences could affect her the same way . . .

"Shall we get in before the water gets cold?"

"Huh?" Cortin glanced at her companion, seeing amused sympathy on his face. "Sorry, Ivan. I was thinking about something else."

"Are you trying to teach your instructor to suck eggs?" Illyanov asked, one eyebrow raised. He slid into the thigh-deep water, turned to help her in. "Have you decided?"

"Decided? Oh--yes. I've got to make the effort; I'll marry them whenever they want. And pray the Pope or someone doesn't annul it." She frowned. "I wouldn't be too worried if it was still Pope Anthony--but Lucius is as conservative as they come. I'm not sure what he'll do . . . and for no reason I can pinpoint, I don't trust him."

In that case, Illyanov thought, neither did he--but he kept to the primary subject. "A valid marriage cannot be annulled, and that will be one, under the provisions of your Writ." Illyanov picked up the shampoo, began washing her hair. "It seems to me a good idea to marry them as early as possible, although--like your suspicion of Pope Lucius--I have no specific reason for the idea." He paused, then went on. "I am also concerned with what will happen when he and the Sovereigns realize the power they gave you and those like you. Ex post facto laws are invalid, so they will be unable to negate what you do--but it would not surprise me if they act quickly to restrict those powers."

"How quickly is quickly?" Cortin returned the favor, grabbing the soap and lathering her companion.

"All were involved in issuing the Writs, so all must agree on their modification. I am astonished that Prince Edward's modification was accepted so rapidly, though it was relatively minor; this is major, so it should take a Sovereign's Conference. Even with preparations made as fast as possible, I would be surprised if it could convene in less than a month. Most, you know, take a year or more to arrange."

"I never thought I'd be grateful for bureaucratic delays," Cortin said, "but this time I am." She thought of something, frowned. "Wait--I can't use the Writ yet! Not until we're activated, and who knows how long that'll be? If they catch on before then, either modify the Writs or simply never activate us, I won't be able to do anything!"

"Not true," Illyanov said. "You simply cannot use it openly until then." He grinned. "You are too straightforward for politics, beloved--one of the reasons I love you. Your Writ has been valid since it was issued, as is whatever you have done or will do under it. Marry the team, then lay the groundwork, bring together the rest of those you need for what you must accomplish, let the public--through a reporter, of course--see you at prayer and play as well as work, continue giving out the blessed cartridges."

"Play?" Cortin cocked her head, looking up at him.

"Not this kind, of course." Illyanov returned the look, affectionately stroking her breast. "As Michael said, this can truly be shared only with those we love. I had in mind perhaps a pair of kittens?"

Cortin gaped at him, then grinned and splashed water on his chest. "You learned that about me during unity, while I only get feeling? That doesn't seem quite fair--not that I can complain about what I do get!"

"You know better than to jump at conclusions," Illyanov chided. "Anthony, who has seen you with them, is not the only one who is aware of your fondness for the young of all species, particularly the feline one--a knowledge I got, not from your men, but from your reactions to things like calendar pictures."

"Oops--not thinking too clearly at the moment, I guess. Too many distractions. Sorry, Ivan." Cortin ducked under the water to rinse her hair, but more to hide embarrassment. She did know better than that; her only excuse was the shock of finding she loved--and was loved by--so many people. She'd get over the shock--probably very soon, as nice as it felt--but right now she was almost as much of a mess as the situation they were all in.

"No apologies necessary," Illyanov said when she surfaced. "The . . . total involvement shocked all of us. You may believe me suffering from an excess of my ancestral Russian mysticism, but I felt I was one with God. Turn around, I need to get your back.--You do realize that Eleanor and Joseph's baby is the first human since the Blessed Virgin to be conceived free of Original Sin?"

Cortin turned her head to stare at him. "Is that more of your Russian mysticism?"

"Simple logic, beloved. A child conceived by parents incapable of sin must share that protection, at least until it reaches the age of reason and must decide for itself."

Cortin thought for a moment, then nodded. "That does make sense. I haven't figured out all the implications of not being able to sin, yet."

"None of us have," Illyanov said. "It is possible we will receive some surprises as to what is and is not sinful, as well. While God is infallible, human interpretation of His Will is not." He smiled. "I also have a feeling that we other Sealed Inquisitors will have to imitate you in assuring ourselves of a subject's guilt before going beyond the first stage of interrogation. I pray we are given truthsense to do so accurately, lest we release those who will harm the ones we are sworn to protect."

"That would have to be a part of it," Cortin agreed. "Try some test questions on me. I'll try to lie on one of them; if you've got the same kind of truthsense now that I do, you'll be able to feel which one."

"Questions I do not know the answers to. Having been your instructor, I know you well enough for that to be difficult; let me think."

He had finished bathing her and was being bathed in turn before he was able to think of any. As he'd told her, he knew too much about her for most conventional questions to be evidential, and the unconventional ones he really wanted to ask would tell her too much. "Do you believe the Protector's appearance will make our profession obsolete?"

"No," Cortin said promptly. "We'll be just as necessary, though not always in the same way, I'm sure." She grinned. "Not everyone's going to be willing to give up even the little free will we did, either to be sure of Heaven or to avoid Hell. Criminals still won't give up their information without a fight, and they'll still need mortal punishment; there'll definitely be a place for Inquisitors!"

"That is good to know. Ah . . . let me see. I do not remember that we ever went into your pre-Academy

background, with the exception of your family being a farming one; if the subject would not be too painful, that might be a possible area of evidence."

"My adoptive family," Cortin corrected him. "But I can't say my childhood was any more painful than average, so go ahead."

"Do you remember your biological parents at all?"

"No. As far as I know, I never saw either of them; I was the classic orphan left in a basket on someone's front porch."

"What about siblings?"

"One, an older brother. Though Mother and Father would have dearly loved more; I remember regular Masses for that intention."

"And how did they feel when you went into Enforcement?"

"As surprised as I was, and I think a little disappointed, though they tried not to show it. We . . . lost touch . . . not long after I went to the Academy."

"Not a close family, then."

"Not particularly," Cortin agreed. "When I gave up farming, we had no interests in common any longer, so I suppose it was natural to lose contact. It was my fault as much as theirs; I got so absorbed in my studies that I took longer and longer answering letters, and when I did, it was about the Academy and my classmates. Also . . . I didn't mention it, but I'm sure they knew I was using our dispensation, and they didn't approve."

"Fortunate for us, though not for them." That seemed to close that subject; Illyanov sought for another. "Ah . . . assuming the Protector defeats Shayan and we are able to expand beyond the Systems' present limits, do you believe we will be able to avoid contact with the Empire?"

"I think so, for another couple of centuries at least."

Illyanov quirked an eyebrow. "And that, beloved, is true only as a hope, not a conviction. So we have proven two things."

"That at least under test circumstances lying isn't sinful," Cortin agreed, "and that you--by extension, Dave and Brad too--have a reliable truthsense."

"And we will find out more as we go." Illyanov studied her for a moment. "What do you truly believe about the Empire, beloved?"

Cortin rubbed the back of her neck in a gesture she'd picked up from Odeon. "I'm afraid of them," she admitted slowly. "I can't say it's a totally justified fear--there's been no contact since the Flight, after all, and all the comm intercepts I've heard confirm their non-interference claims. But that's hard to believe of any government."

Illyanov nodded. "I share that particular reservation, though not strongly. I believe contact will be traumatic, but ultimately beneficial. Like your fear, my optimism is not totally justified. It is stronger than a mere hunch, however, and I confess I would like to meet some of them face to face."

Cortin looked at him quizzically. "Even the non-human ones?"

"Perhaps especially those," Illyanov admitted, smiling. "But I fear I am monopolizing your time; perhaps we should rejoin the others." He helped her finish rinsing him, then got out of the tub and gave her a hand up.

Clean and dressed--someone had thoughtfully laid Illyanov's uniform out on Cortin's bed--the two returned to the common-room. The rest were already back, and Brady was serving herb tea and small cakes. Cortin took one, though she wasn't really hungry, and nibbled at it until Brady left. Then she got the group's attention and said, "Ivan came up with an idea a few minutes ago. I don't particularly like it, but I can definitely see where it could be useful: let a reporter spend some time with us, enough to get to know us as people instead of symbols."

That got a mixed reaction, from Degas' wince to Odeon's thoughtful nod. "Personally," her Team-second said after a moment's thought, "I don't like it any better than you do . . . but otherwise, it sounds good. And we can handle anything, for a short enough time."

"A week should be about right," Bradford said. "And I think I know the ideal reporter to invite."

Cortin cocked her head. "That expression says you're up to something, Brad. Just who is this ideal reporter?"

"Sara Blackfeather, of the New Roman Times."

Cortin stared at him in shocked disbelief. "Are you feeling all right? She not only despises Enforcement, rumor has it she's Pope Lucius' mistress!"

"Not just rumor," Bradford said. "You have to remember, though, that in that part of this world, an unmarried man is almost required to have a mistress. If he's faithful to her--and everything I've heard says he is, from the time he acknowledged her when he was Cardinal McHenry--it's only a venial sin. As for her being hostile, what would it prove if, say, Patrick James did a series? He's always been an Enforcement supporter. But if you can turn Blackfeather into a friend--even a neutral--she'd sway a lot of her followers. Even her worst enemies can't argue her honesty; if she does change her opinion, she'll say so."

"True," Cortin agreed. "She's done it before, two or three times that I know of. All right, as soon as I decide on a good time, I'll send her an invitation. And while we're on that subject--Dave, have you asked Betty yet if she and the children want to move here?"

"No--until this morning, I didn't understand how you really felt." Bain smiled. "I'll call her after Mass."

"Why wait?" Cortin returned the smile. "Call now, so we'll all know. It's a good time to move--nice weather, and the children'll have time to make friends before school starts. And if they do come, I'd like to have them here when Blackfeather arrives--I have a feeling I'm going to need the kind of atmosphere only children can create."

"Besides which," Bain said, "your secret's out, to us--you just plain like children." He went to the phone, dialed, and moments later was speaking to his sister-in-law. He explained the new family structure and his part in the first one being formed, then went into the advantages for the children even if she chose not to marry into the group--then he grinned, giving the group around him the thumbs-up, and began discussing logistic details.

"Good!" Cortin exclaimed. "Sis, Mike--we'll need a playground, and the third floor set up for children, and--a nanny, do you think, or--"

"Next weekend be okay?" Bain interrupted to ask.

"The sooner the better," Cortin said. If they could move in that quickly, it might not be a bad idea to invite that reporter for the week around the Brothers' attack on the convent. If she'd never been to a fresh raid scene, she could only have a rough, second-hand idea of the suffering a raid caused. Seeing that might jar her enough to let her really look at what Enforcement did, and why--including the necessity for Inquisitors and the methods it took to stop the terrorists. Cortin wasn't sure it would, but with Blackfeather's reputation for honesty, it seemed to be worth the gamble. "If they'll need help, fly out with whoever you need."

Bain spoke into the phone again, then hung up and turned to the rest. "Two of us will be more than enough, she says. Who wants to be the other?"

Pritchett raised his hand quickly. "I've always been good with kids."

"I would also like to go," Chang said.

Cortin shook her head. "Sorry, Sis. Even if you weren't pregnant, it'd be too dangerous. I know you're no more worried about yourself than any other Strike Team officer would be, but with you at the top of the Brothers' wipe list, if they tried for you, the Bains would get caught in the crossfire."

"I had not thought of that," Chang said. "I would not wish to endanger others, of course. Dave and Tiny, then?"

"Right. On permissive TDY--and," she turned to the designated ones, "with orders to call me if the Transportation Office gives you any static about storing whatever she can't or doesn't want to bring along. Not that that's likely, with both of you members of the King's Own."

"True." Bain grinned. "I kind of hope they do, though. You cannot believe how much I'd like to see their faces if Her Excellency the King's Inquisitor had to talk to them."

"Oh, I'd believe, all right," Cortin said. "I've had all the usual experiences with them myself, which is why I'm kind of hoping you have to call."

* * * * *

Prince Edward tapped on the King's half-open office door. "Good news, Father."

The King looked up from the papers he was working on. "Come in and close the door." When Edward had obeyed and seated himself, the King asked, "How good?"

"Colonel Cortin's just turned Strike Team Azrael into a family, and Lieutenant Chang is pregnant with Lieutenant Pritchett's son. I don't know what the new family name will be, yet."

"That's excellent news," the King said, smiling widely. "I was hoping she'd do something like that, and of course she'd take care of her own people first. Let's see--Chang was waived with undetermined fertility, but Pritchett definitely tested sterile, so I think that can safely be classed as a miracle. Most gratifying."

"You're not surprised?" Edward asked, a little disappointed.

"I had some information you didn't," the King said drily. "Remember at the Sovereigns' Conference, Pope Anthony called Czar Nicholas and myself to a private audience?"

"Yes, of course."

"His Holiness told us that he'd be murdered soon, and that we should take that as evidence for the rest of what he had to say. He was, and we did. I don't think I need to tell you what the 'rest' was."

"Not if it's that this is the time of the Final Coming," Edward said cautiously.

"And that the Royal Inquisitor either Nicholas or I would choose would be, without knowing it, the Protector. From what we know of Colonels Cortin and Stepanov, she's the one. Is that true?"

Edward hesitated, trying to absorb the idea that Cortin's true identity was known--or at least suspected--outside her immediate circle. On the other hand, Pope Anthony had been holy in fact as well as title; it shouldn't be that much of a surprise that God would lay the same sort of groundwork, through him, that Shayan had undoubtedly laid for himself. "Acting Protector, yes, until the real one manifests," Edward said at last. "Ursula and I are Sealed to him through her, along with all of Team Azrael, Colonel Bradford, and Major Illyanov. Captain Odeon and Lieutenant Chang are her priests, as well." He paused, went on. "She's worried about what you'll do with Pritchett and Chang now that they're going to be parents. And what Pope Lucius will do about the marriage."

"I'm certainly not going to take her people away from her," the King said. "Team Azrael isn't subject to the conventional Strike Team dangers, so I can justify exempting them from the sterility rules. The dangers they--and you--will face are of an entirely different nature. One no mortal, I'm afraid, can do anything to protect you against. As for Pope Lucius acting against the marriage--" the King smiled, grimly. "I'm sure he'll try, but considering the celebrant, I doubt very much he'll get very far. 'Whom therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.' The marriage is valid under His--" He paused, with a bemused expression, then went on, "or Her--Law. Though I admit it would be helpful if it were also valid under some temporal laws as well, which I'm working on. I don't suppose she's part of this family she's just created?"

"Not yet--but Captain Odeon is working on a way to correct that."

"Very good. Let me know as soon as he does; if this is going to work, she'll have to have heirs."

"Of course, Father. Uh . . . what about additional spouses for Ursula and myself?"

"I'm working on that, too. God willing, arrangements will be complete for you a new husband and wife by the time I activate the Strike Force, and she'll perform the ceremony."

18. Revelation

Wednesday, 4 Mar 2572

When Cortin got to the breakfast table after Mass, she was amused to find a heated discussion in progress, about what the family name should be. It seemed an odd subject, she thought as she helped herself from the hot-table rather than calling an order to the kitchen--but on second thought, it did make sense. Women were used to giving up maiden-family names on marriage, though a professional with an established reputation would often hyphenate it with her husband's, but the men didn't think too highly of the idea. She listened without interfering; it was their Family, using a new system, so it seemed reasonable to let them determine how it should be identified. If their method looked as if it would work out well, she'd recommend it to His Majesty for general implementation.

It didn't take them long to decide hyphenating all the names together alphabetically was much too unwieldy to work. Hyphenation was fine, they agreed, but more than two names was excessive--the problem now was

which two. Cortin favored Odeon's thinking, that everyone take the name of the senior spouse at the Family's founding, with the other spouses hyphenating their surnames, and that argument seemed to be winning, with the focus changing to whether seniority should be in age or rank. The debate was getting intense when Powell raised both hands. "Since I don't class as senior either way, and Joan's interest seems to be purely academic or she'd have said something before now, why not ask her opinion?"

"Good idea," Odeon said, after looking around at the rest and getting their agreement. "What do you think, Joanie?"

"Senior in rank seems most reasonable to me," Cortin said. "After all, this is going to apply to nobles and royalty, as well as commoners, and you can't expect a monarch or fief-holder to change names. As an alternative you didn't mention, at least for commoners, pick a name the initial spouses can all agree on, since it only has to be established once."

"Now that idea I like even better," Odeon said. "People?"

There was momentary puzzlement, then what he was suggesting dawned on his spouses, and he got nods and murmurs of agreement from the rest. "That's settled, then," he said, turning to Cortin. "Subject to Your Excellency's veto, of course, this will be Family Cortin. With you at its head, equally of course."

Cortin stared at him, then found herself unable to hold back a wide, delighted smile. "No veto, Mike. That's the nicest present I could ever get! Thanks, all of you!"

"No need for thanks," Chang said. "The honor and pleasure are ours. On St. Ignatius, we would now be entitled to call you Mother; is that true here?"

"You've made me head of your--our--family, and I'm a female," Cortin said, "so I suppose that is the proper title. And that means I'll be grandmother to your children!" She smiled again, thoroughly pleased. "Though I hope you'll keep calling me Joan or Joanie, too, and of course we'll have to observe correct protocol in public."

"Of course, Excellency," Chang said with a perfectly straight face.

* * * * *

The news was just too good to keep to herself, and Cortin knew His Majesty had to be the first to know about the Family and her new status in it--though it would surprise her if Prince Edward hadn't already told him about the first part. She was nervous about the result, enough so that she was reluctant to call at all--certainly not before His Majesty could reasonably be expected to have been to Mass, had breakfast, and gotten his morning briefing from his chief advisors. God willing, there'd be nothing in the briefing to upset him--maybe even some news to put him in a good mood.

In the meantime, she told herself she really ought to brief Matthew to expect new residents and a visitor, then write the invitation to Blackfeather. And there was all that mail and paperwork that had been accumulating in her main-floor office; she should at least go through it enough to sort what had to be taken care of from what could be thrown out.

She had alerted Brady, who proved enthusiastic about having children in the house once she assured him they'd be kept very strictly out of her profession, written the invitation, and was starting to work her way through the stack of mail when Powell looked in the open door. "Need some help? I'm pretty good at that sort of thing."

Cortin looked up at him gratefully. "I sincerely hope so, because this is the one part of my job I really don't like. Pull up a chair and see what you can do."

Powell did so, taking a stack of mail, opening and going through it with considerable assurance and more speed than Cortin herself was managing. After a few minutes, she discovered she was doing more watching than working--and being impressed. When he finished with the stack, she took it and scrutinized his work.

That was even more impressive than watching him, because he had dealt with every piece exactly as she would have. Impressive, and a little frightening--but she wasn't about to question a gift from God. "What do you do during the day, Chuck?"

Powell flushed. "Not much, I'm afraid. Read, mostly, between Mass and supper--and entertain myself, of course. It's fun, but I'd like to do something more . . . productive."

"Productive as in?"

"This sort of thing. I'm pretty good at it, I think, and you don't like it--maybe I could be your secretary, or aide, or whatever you'd want to call it?"

Cortin chuckled. "'Great minds' . . . You're more than pretty good, you're incredible--almost as if you were reading my mind. The job's all yours, with my thanks."

Powell flushed again. "It's easy--when we were so close to being one person, you wanted me--maybe all of us--to know you as well as we could. I can sort of put myself in your place, at least enough to handle routine things the way you would. And I enjoy doing it."

"As I said, it's all yours." Cortin handed him the invitation to Blackfeather. "I thought I ought to write this myself, and I'm never sure when I'll have time free, but I don't want it going out until we can be sure she'll get it after the Bains arrive. Can you handle that?"

"No problem." Powell took the paper. "They'll be arriving a week from Saturday, right?"

"That's what I understand, yes."

"Mail it a week from today, then." Powell clipped a note to the invitation and put it in the middle basket of her stack. "Okay, anything else?"

Cortin glanced at the clock and winced. "I have to call His Majesty and tell him about the Family--stick around and give me moral support?"

"Of course."

"Thanks." Cortin made the call, almost wishing the King wouldn't answer. When he did and she identified herself, though, she could hear a smile in his voice.

"Good work, Colonel. Our congratulations to the newlyweds--please bring them to the Palace when you're free, to accept them in person."

"My pleasure, Your Majesty--but there's more." Cortin took a deep breath, hoping she didn't sound as nervous as she felt. "They've adopted me as mother, and taken Cortin as the Family name."

"Outstanding," the King said with obvious satisfaction. "A slight change, then. Bring them all over as soon as

possible--Edward will be waiting to bring you to the Throne Room."

"But what--" Cortin cut herself off. She'd find out soon enough; this was just another example of His Majesty keeping his own counsel. Good thing Dave and Tiny hadn't left yet . . . "Yes, Sire. Ten minutes, unless you want us in dress uniform."

"Service uniform is fine. Ten minutes, then."

* * * * *

As promised, Prince Edward was waiting when they got to the Palace. All except Cortin left their weapons with the armorer, then the Prince led them to the Throne Room. His Majesty was seated on the Throne, in everyday clothes but wearing the Crown and holding the Sword of State, and the rest of the Sealed ones and Her Majesty the Queen were in attendance. It looked like an informal Grand Audience, Cortin thought, but that was a contradiction in terms--yet she'd never heard of Crown and Sword being used at the same time except at a Coronation or Grand Audience, and this certainly wasn't a Coronation!

The King smiled. "Thank you for your promptness, gentles. We congratulate you on your marriage and your choice of a Family head, and We offer Our best wishes for a long and happy Family life."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." His congratulations and good wishes were welcome, Cortin thought, but hardly call for ceremonial . . .

"Neither your marriage nor what We will shortly do must be made public until after the Strike Force is activated, but since it will require you to make major changes in your lives, We have chosen to give you some time to adapt in private." The King stood, descended from the dais to stand in front of the Throne. "Joan Cortin, approach Us and kneel."

Cortin obeyed, puzzled. Whatever was going on certainly wasn't normal! When she knelt, the King said, "We believe your extended family structure to be in the best interest of Our realm and subjects. To demonstrate Our support and approval and to give you temporal power to assist in establishing more such Families, We hereby name Joan Cortin and her heirs to head the Northwest Territory, now the Archduchy of High Teton, as long as this Kingdom shall stand." He touched both her shoulders with the flat of the Sword. "Rise, Your Grace."

Too stunned for immediate reaction, Cortin did as she was told. She'd barely gotten used to being King's Inquisitor; now she was suddenly Arch-duchess as well. Granted that His Majesty was close-mouthed about his plans until he acted on them, he could have given her some warning!

Not long afterward the group was in the Sable Room, a large version of Harmony Lodge's common-room, having hot drinks and cinnamon-cake. Cortin was starting to recover, and realizing it was probably a good thing His Majesty had surprised her. If he'd asked, she would have turned it down; now, it was too late. But--"Your Majesty, I don't see how I can do both jobs properly."

"You can't, of course, and I don't expect you to. I assume you want to keep on as Royal Inquisitor?"

"I think I can do more good in that position, yes, Sire. At least until the Brotherhood is eliminated."

"I agree," the King said, surprising her. "And I have no intention of separating you from your Family, though under normal circumstances your heir would act as your regent while you carry out Royal responsibilities. My son has agreed to act in that capacity until you feel free to relinquish your Inquisitorial duties, or until you want your heir to take over." He paused. "And who is your heir, Your Grace? Since you do not and cannot

have children, I must require you to designate your successor."

"I've hardly had time to think about that, Sire." He was absolutely right, she did have that responsibility to her new lieges--and she dared not waste any time fulfilling it. She was still positive she'd have to face Shannon, and that whatever restraints held him back now were unlikely in the extreme to do so then. Whether he was just Shayan's tool, or Shayan himself, it was the Hell-King's power she'd be facing then, and that was power no mortal could match. She'd probably be killed outright; if not, she could only pray that God would be merciful and not leave her subject to Shayan's torture. At least she had the certainty of dying in a state of grace . . .

"In that case," the King's voice interrupted her thoughts, "might I suggest that the next-senior Family member would be a reasonable choice? That would logically be Captain Cortin-Odeon, true?"

"True, Your Majesty." Cortin glanced at Mike, savoring the sound of his Family name. He was the logical choice--and designating him would have an extra benefit, as far as she was concerned. Once all this was made public and he was openly heir to a major fief, he'd be kept out of unusually difficult situations. He might not particularly like that, but it would certainly be easier for her, not having to worry about him. The same would be true of the rest, though to a lesser degree, as members of the nobility. Yes, it was just as well His Majesty hadn't given her an opportunity to refuse! "An excellent suggestion; I so designate him."

"Designation confirmed," the King said promptly. "As heir to an Archduchess, that makes him a Duke and his spouses . . . hmm." The King frowned, smiling at the same time. "I can see where we need some new terminology to fit the new Families. Calling a man 'Duchess'--or the equivalent for lower ranks--could lead to all sorts of confusion, even though it was the proper term for the spouse in a conventional family. And 'Duke-spouse' is clumsy. Suggestions, anyone?"

There was silence for a while, then Powell raised a tentative hand.

"Yes, my Lord?" the King said.

Powell looked startled, an emotion Cortin echoed until it made her grin instead. She wasn't the only one who'd have some adjusting to do! Then Powell gathered himself and went on. "It's a made-up word, but what about something like 'Dukida'? It's neutral sexually, and in zoology '-ida' is used in forming family names . . ."

"Sounds odd," the King said thoughtfully, "but then new words usually do. And the suffix fits with the other titles of nobility, takes a classical plural . . . Very well, so be it. Thank you, my Lord."

"I'm honored to be of service, Your Majesty."

"Now that we have that settled," the King said, "I understand Family Cortin is expecting its first child?"

"Yes, Sire," Cortin said. "And I hope soon becoming step-parents to three more." She explained about Betty and the children.

"Excellent. That makes me wish even more that I could forbid this entire Family from going into action, but that would defeat one of the new structure's purposes." The King frowned, addressing the entire group. "I have forbidden Colonel Cortin to go into danger except against those who personally harmed her, a ban that will also apply to Duke Michael after the convent raid and to Dukida Eleanor for the duration of her pregnancy. Unfortunately, I have to let the rest of you set an example. Just for God's sake, be careful!"

Odeon glanced at Cortin, then looked at the King. "For the Protector's sake, Your Majesty," he said quietly, "you can be sure we'll all be as careful as humanly possible."

* * * * *

The week and a half between Family Cortin's sudden promotion and the Bains' arrival was one of the busiest Cortin could remember. Besides her regular work, she tried to spend a couple of hours a day helping get the Lodge ready, then in the evenings the rest of the Sealed group came to help the Family get used to its new status and prepare for the responsibilities involved in running a new Archduchy, and after that for the Protector's Communion.

And the first Friday evening, Illyanov startled Cortin by announcing that he'd asked for discharge from St. Dmitri Enforcement, which he expected would be formally granted within two weeks, and that his wife and children would be moving to St. Thomas as soon as travel arrangements could be made.

Cortin stared at him in shock. "Ivan, why?"

"Because I cannot serve in two forces at once. Your Grace is going to require an Archducal Enforcement Service, and I wish to help establish it." He smiled. "I also wish to establish a Family, a desire both my wife and my mistress share. That will be difficult anywhere except in High Teton for some time."

"For anyone except the nobility, at least," Bradford agreed. "Which is why, with Your Grace's permission, I would like to move Strike Force Operations there as soon as practical."

"Granted." That was something she hadn't really considered, but she could see why it would be true; her new fief had a small population, which made it seem safe to assume its inhabitants would be in favor of a change that would allow them to expand. "Have we had enough practice for one night?"

"I'd say so," Bradford replied. "You only slipped once, when Ivan gave you what I admit was a shock."

"Good!" Cortin unfastened the collar of her tunic, sighing with relief. "It certainly was, even though I suppose I should have expected it. He's certainly hinted about moving to this world."

"He won't be the only one," Edward said. "From what I've heard, High Teton is going to have quite an influx of people wanting Families--a large percentage of them Enforcement, with their various Sovereigns' backing. Not all permanent, though."

"They'll be welcome," Cortin said. "I'm glad of the Sovereigns' reaction--but I'm still worried about Pope Lucius', when we go public. I simply cannot see him giving Church approval. I'm a little surprised that he hasn't revoked the Enforcement dispensation, in fact."

"Such a revocation would have little effect," Chang said. "Those I speak to during my work at the hospital have made that clear."

Cortin frowned. "They'd disobey the Pope? I wouldn't, even if I didn't agree with him."

"On the contrary," Illyanov said. "If his decrees conflict with what you think right, or what Michael and Eleanor tell us of the Protector's will, you will have no choice but to disobey. Which is true of all of us who are Sealed, and thus guided directly. We must prepare the Protector's way, and also encourage devotion to all three Aspects of the Triune--they are, after all, complementary--in hopes of protecting as many people as possible from Shayan and his deceptions."

Chang nodded. "There is a certain protection available even to those not yet Sealed. I refer, of course, to the cartridges Joan has blessed."

"Oh?" Illyanov cocked his head. "I know they are growing in popularity, with civilians as well as troopers, but I am unaware of any special protection they might offer."

"I cannot say they truly do," Chang cautioned, "but many troopers, of late, refuse to go into the field without them. It is said that those who wear cartridges suffer fewer and less serious wounds than those who do not. More importantly, not one person with such a cartridge is known to have died under the shadow of mortal sin. There is growing belief that if Colonel Cortin is not the Protector herself, she must be the Protector's Herald."

"To the best of my knowledge, I'm neither one," Cortin said. "I don't want to mislead people, even by omission--but what if that misdirected belief helps pave the Protector's way? Should I say something, or should I keep silent?"

They were getting onto shaky ground, Odeon thought. Their belief wasn't misdirected; it was only Joanie who was unable to believe the truth, and he wondered if she'd noticed the phrasing of her denial. "If it were me," he said slowly, "I'd keep my mouth shut. No one's being hurt by that belief, and it may help. That Brother said piety was necessary, in both senses of the word--this could be what he was talking about. Piety the person, and a pious faith and hope--belief, if you will--in the Protector and His or Her imminent appearance."

"In which case," Illyanov said, "it is a belief worth promoting." He turned to Cortin. "If the idea makes you uncomfortable, beloved, I would suggest you ask Michael and Eleanor to dedicate this evening's service to your guidance, and pray that it be revealed while you sleep. I am sure God will not deny such help to one who has given herself to His service."

"Sounds reasonable," Odeon said. "We'll do it."

* * * * *

Cortin knew in a remote way that she was dreaming, even though it seemed real enough--the clean smell of the mountain air, the sun-warmth, her Family surrounding her with the Archducal Palace behind them. All were in white Enforcement uniforms, like none she'd ever seen, but that seemed right somehow, and she was buoyed by the love she felt from all of them.

In the distance she saw a bright glow. As it grew, she saw it was a man, also in a white Enforcement uniform, his rank insignia a single silver star. When his feet touched the ground in front of her, he hugged her and gave her a thorough, highly enjoyable kiss. When he released her, he smiled. "You asked for help, Joanie; I'm here to give it. The first order of business, though, is to tell you that you're doing as well as anyone could, under these circumstances."

"Thanks--that's good to know." Cortin was calmer than she thought she had any right to be, with the certainty it was Jeshua Himself talking to her--probably His influence, she thought. "You know the problem; what should I do? Or not do?"

"Don't deny the beliefs that concern you," he said promptly. "They're natural ones, since you're fulfilling the prophecies that show the Protector's about to appear."

"But they're supposed to apply to the Protector or His Herald--and both of them are men!"

"Not in anything I've said." Jeshua chuckled. "That's a human assumption I allowed to stand, as harmless. Those with enough power can choose what sex to appear as--see?" With that, he became a woman, wearing the field habit of a Blue Sister. After a few seconds, he changed back. "I'm not exactly what you believe me to be, Joanie, but then neither are most people or things. That isn't particularly significant in this instance, any more than my looks are--or than the Herald's or Protector's sex."

Cortin couldn't help it; she grinned at that before continuing. "I'm certain I'm not the Protector, but you say I'm fulfilling prophecies I never heard of. That sounds like I'm being used as a decoy--or am I the Herald?"

The man returned her smile. "In part, yes. Get Ivan to tell you about the prophecies some day; he grew up with the accurate ones. In the meantime, you shouldn't worry about them. Mike and Sis will guide you, and your Family will support you, as will the rest of the Sealed ones." At this point it would be counterproductive, he thought, telling her she was also acting Protector; she would simply reject the idea. He wouldn't lie to her, but he also saw no point in burdening her unnecessarily, since she could use the aspects of her borrowed powers that she'd need without accepting that temporary part of her identity. And he had no doubt the true Protector would grant her her fondest wish when he arrived.

In part? Cortin wondered, but she decided against going into that; it sounded like something likely to make her uncomfortable if she investigated too closely. Instead, she decided to change the subject. "Am I . . . really going to have to face Shayan?"

"Yes, though not until after the Protector manifests fully, and it probably won't be as you expect."

"Is Shannon Shayan?"

"Yes."

Cortin was getting a little irritated. He was answering her questions, true, but he certainly wasn't being very responsive! What else did she need to know? "You sound like you approve of the Families, but I can't believe Pope Lucius will." She shook her head, bewildered. "And how can your Worldly Vicar oppose you?" She paused, a frightening thought forming. "Unless the Pope's somehow Shannon, as well."

Jeshua sighed. "Pope Lucius is indeed Lawrence Shannon in different physical form. I can't explain to you exactly what's going on; you don't need, or really want, to know. Suffice it to say that his hatred and basic opposition are intact, but his powers, in that position at this time, do serve my purposes."

That was a shock, but Cortin was aware he was shielding her from most of the impact, and she was extremely grateful for the protection. Dear God, Shayan the Pope!

"It's not a desirable situation, true, but as I said, it is necessary, and I promise you as much of an explanation as you can understand when this stage is complete." He gave her a brief smile. "It may help you to know he has no spiritual authority over those who are Sealed, as Ivan told you--and it's Mike and Sis who have that authority over those who are devoted to the Protector. Pass on to them, would you, that the time has come to institute the bread and milk Communion of Promise? It'll give limited protection to those who want to be Sealed but can't until the Protector manifests fully."

"Of course I will."

"Then except for two small personal items, I've done all that is appropriate at this point. Let Mike and Sis guide you, accept the support of the others who are or want to be Sealed, and work for the Protector's objectives." He smiled at her. "The first personal item is to reclaim the symbol Shayan stole and marked you with. You belong to me, not him--as do the other Sealed. Please remove your gloves."

Cortin obeyed, finding as she did that the circled triangles no longer disturbed her. And they didn't look like burns any more; instead they seemed to glow with blue light, somehow comforting. "Will . . . the others have these?"

"If you and they want, yes. It isn't a requirement; being openly Sealed will mark them for Shayan's personal

torture if his people capture them, and he needs no supernatural powers to make that weeks of agony. His millennia of practice are enough."

"My team would never forgive me if I left them out of anything, even if it was risky. They'll want these marks, but I don't know about the others--I can't choose for them."

"True. If they want them when they see yours, they'll get them. The other item is a trade, if you wish. Your back pain for the Stigmata, which will show you act with my approval. To compensate for the inconvenience of bleeding periodically, they won't cause you any pain."

"I could hardly refuse anything you offer--I'll make the trade." She hesitated. "Uh, what about the cartridges? Was Sis right about them?"

"She was indeed, so long as the wearer doesn't commit a mortal sin deliberately. You'll forget about the symbols and trade both until the latter takes effect." He kissed her again, in a brotherly way this time, and vanished as he had appeared.

* * * * *

Cortin woke with a feeling of imminent disaster. It had seemed like a nightmare, especially Shayan on the Papal Throne . . . Still, Jeshua had said there was a purpose to it, and he'd outlined what sounded like the only reasonable thing for her to do. She got up, but instead of dressing--the message she'd been asked to pass along sounded like one that shouldn't wait--she put on a robe and went to Odeon's room.

He'd apparently had a quieter night than she; when he called for her to come in he was still in bed, stretched out in a way that reminded her of a large and perfectly contented cat. "Join me?" he invited.

"Uh-huh." Cortin slipped the robe off and slid under the covers, comforted by his warm strength. "I'm not sure how much help it was, but I did have a visitor last night. He asked me to tell you it was time to institute the Communion of Promise, and I got the impression he meant today."

"Good--I've been waiting for word I could. What about what you wanted to know?"

"I found out, sort of. He said I'm the Herald, 'in part'--I was too chicken to ask what he meant by that--and that I shouldn't deny what I'm being called, even if it's the Protector." Cortin shivered, huddling against his chest. "I found out a couple of other things, too. You know the Protector could be a woman? And that Pope Lucius is Shayan, and you and Sis're the Protector's version of a Pope?"

"The last I'd guessed, the rest I knew, yes."

"And that we're on our own now?"

"I thought that was getting close." Odeon kissed her, holding her snugly and stroking her back. "We need two more people, Ivan says, then we'll be in position to hold the fort till the Protector's ready to surface. I expect Betty'll be one of them, but I don't think we've met the other yet."

To her surprise, Cortin found herself becoming aroused. That didn't seem possible, much less appropriate, after her vision--but it was happening. "Mike--"

"What better way to put what you've just been through into perspective? It took a shelter party to straighten Sis and me out, but I don't think you need anything that extreme." He raised himself as if to get out of bed. "Of course, if you think otherwise . . ."

"I don't, even if a shelter party does sound nice." Cortin shook her head, bewildered. "Shouldn't we be getting ready for Mass, though?"

"Is it your conscience or habit asking that?" Odeon stroked her hair, then caressed a breast. "Trust your feelings, Joanie. You can't sin, remember?"

"I remember." And Jeshua had been specific about telling her to follow Mike and Sis' guidance . . . She closed her eyes, trying to analyze what she actually felt. That was complicated by Mike's continuing caresses, but it did seem her feelings said this was the right thing to be doing now. Mass was important, yes, but she shouldn't go to it in the mood she'd had when she wakened, of impending doom; this was the Protector's way of comfort and reassurance.

* * * * *

Cortin kissed Odeon one last time before getting up. "Thanks, Mike--I'm feeling human again, and I'm in fit condition to say Mass."

"I could tell." Odeon smiled at her. "Glad I could help."

"So'm I. Mind if I use your tub before I go get dressed?"

"Only if you're willing to have company," Odeon replied with a grin.

"I was hoping you'd say that. Come on."

They bathed in comfortable near-silence, then Cortin went to her room to dress. She was feeling better, and it surprised her. The circumstances hadn't changed, the odds against her and her team were still bad, she was still sure she wouldn't survive her next meeting with Shannon--but Mike was obviously a sovereign remedy for what had ailed her. It was hard to believe he wasn't the Protector, but that couldn't be, if the Protector might be a woman. Sis, maybe? Jeshua had appeared in a Blue Sister's habit . . .

She forced herself to stop that line of speculation; the Protector's identity would be revealed at the proper time. In the meantime, speculation was pointless; she'd have enough to occupy her doing whatever the Herald was supposed to do without having instructions. Follow her instincts and Mike's guidance, she supposed.

When she opened the vestry door to approach the altar, she was surprised to see the entire team--except Bain and Pritchett, who were probably at Betty's by now--waiting, along with the rest of the Sealed ones, Their Majesties, and some others of the Household, who normally attended Mass at the Cathedral. Her surprise didn't last, though; as usual, when she approached the altar her mind had no room for anything except the ceremony.

That went normally until the Consecration. When she raised the Host and the bell rang, the pain in her back vanished, and she remembered the trade she'd agreed to. As she raised the Chalice, she felt warm wetness circling her head, and on her wrists, back, side, and feet. Her absorption in the Mass was complete enough she couldn't spare real thought, but she was able to include a wordless prayer of thanks with the Remembrance and other prayers before Communion.

The rest of the Mass went normally--the bleeding stopped as soon as she'd administered Communion to the last of those who wanted it--until the after-Mass prayers were finished. Then she was able to notice a small table had been set up just inside the altar rail--a table like the altar in the common-room--and she knew this was the beginning of the Communion of Promise. But . . . should she give it, or should Mike or Sis? She glanced at them, got the thumbs-up from Mike, and took a deep breath.

Addressing the entire congregation, she gave a brief explanation of the Protector--what she understood, at least--and the Families. She could see doubt on several of the Householders' faces as she described them, mixed with revulsion at her bloody state. She could understand that, from civilians; the Enforcement people, to her relief, seemed more intrigued and willing to believe her. "All of my team, myself included--and a few others--are Sealed to the Protector, with Captain Odeon and Lieutenant Chang as His or Her chief priests." She paused, cocked her head, then smiled. "To simplify things, I'm going to use the male pronoun; just remember the actuality could be either."

She paused again, sobering. "Under their authority as His representatives, I invite those of you who wish to support Him, giving up the ability to sin when He comes into the open and you can be Sealed, to come forward and take His Communion of Promise."

She was pleased that all the Enforcement people did so, followed by the King and Queen. More slowly, a few of the civilian Household followed suit, though most held back. That was too bad, Cortin thought, but she'd known not everyone would accept the Protector fully--some not at all. And she had to admit her condition wasn't the most reassuring; it was entirely possible they'd respond better to another celebrant.

When it was clear that everyone who wanted the Communion of Promise had taken it, she dismissed the congregation and returned to the vestry, where she began removing her bloody uniform. If this was going to happen every time she said Mass, she'd have to have a shower installed here--and get something to wear that wouldn't be ruined, or that didn't matter. Whatever her position, she didn't care to ruin either a uniform or a set of vestments every day!

There was a knock on the door, then Odeon's voice. "Need some help, Colonel?"

"Yes--come in, please."

He did, along with Chang. "That was a little more spectacular than anything we'd guessed at," he said quietly. "How do you feel?"

"Fine," Cortin said. "No pain at all, even in my back. I just look like a mess." She grinned at them. "Jeshua said this trade would help, and I think it did, with the Enforcement troops--but it looks to me more like it scared most of the civs in the congregation."

"Sure it did," Odeon said. "Here, let me give you a hand with that tunic-- What would you expect, the first time? We're trained to cope with the unexpected, they aren't--and I've got to admit I was shocked. Next time everyone'll expect it, and it will help. But--why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I didn't remember till it happened." Cortin pulled herself free of the sticky tunic, looking at it in dismay. "Sis, could you ask someone to get me a fresh uniform? And I'm going to need some help with sponge baths until I can get a shower put in-- Oh, dear God." Her memory of the other "little thing" Jeshua had mentioned was triggered. "Mike, Sis--take off your gloves." She pulled off her own; yes, the burned-on symbols were now smooth pale-blue flesh.

"What in God's Name!" Odeon exclaimed, examining his hands and the symbols that matched Cortin's. Chang's reaction was less emphatic; she merely smiled, then went to pass along Cortin's request for clean clothes.

When Sis returned, Cortin answered Odeon's question. "Was I wrong?" she asked when she finished. "I was sure, but--"

"And you were right; if you'd left us out, you'd've had a major morale problem. We were marked the minute

we put on Special Ops patches, if you remember." He studied the marks on the backs of his hands again, smiling this time. "It's a difference in degree, not in kind."

"But it's a big degree," Cortin pointed out. "I got the impression that Shayan's skill is to mine as mine is to a first-year recruit's. And that's without using any of his powers--if he does use them, he could make it last for . . . years, maybe, knowing you'd be free of him as soon as you died."

"True, but years is still better than forever. And if playing with us keeps his attention away from civs . . . well, that's why we all joined the Service, isn't it?"

"Yes--though I doubt any of us thought, then, that it was Shayan himself we'd be diverting. I know I didn't."

"Not directly, no," Odeon agreed. "But some of the ones under his influence aren't much of an improvement." He paused, changed the subject. "You did a nice job with the Communion of Promise."

"Thanks." Cortin tested the water temperature in the vestry's small sink, then began washing blood off her arms. The wounds on her wrists were as painless as she'd been promised, and looked freshly healed, though she was certain they'd be open again every time she said Mass. "Word of these and the Communion of Promise should reach Rome in three or four hours, which means Pope Lucius will guess--or know--I'm the Herald. He'll have to take some sort of action, even if it's not a direct physical assault." She turned to Odeon, her expression grim. "Much as I don't want it to, Mike, I'm afraid this is going to tear the Church apart."

"So did the Great Revival, back in the 1500s," Odeon said. "It came out of that stronger and healthier than ever--it'll do the same this time, if the Protector wins."

"And if not, Shayan destroys humanity, at least in the Kingdoms."

* * * * *

Being acknowledged as the Protector's Herald--even "in part," whatever that meant; she still wasn't sure she wanted to know--was a relief, Cortin decided. At least also "in part", since she hadn't wanted that kind of responsibility and wasn't at all sure she was up to it--but if nothing else, it did explain why so many things had happened to her so fast. She'd do her best to live up to the position she'd been given, whatever her doubts; as Mike had said, God would test you to the absolute limits of your endurance, but not beyond them.

And she had help. Not only the Sealed ones, but civilians, which had been proven over the last week of getting ready for the Bains, especially the children. She'd expected help from the team and servants; it had astonished her to have the ladies from the New Eden joyhouse show up, several with children, to make the third floor--to quote Madame Bernadette--"a proper place to raise healthy, happy children."

Since the children who'd come along were obviously both, Cortin wasn't at all reluctant to defer to someone who clearly knew what she was doing. While they worked, Cortin got to know several of the ladies, discovering that their enthusiasm for the new family structure shouldn't have surprised her; in spite of the fact they were paid for sex, what they had was more like a Family than she would have thought possible. Most of the men were regulars, and it was common for them to visit for other than the obvious reason--mostly to play with the children. Many contributed to their support, some quite generously. And it wasn't unusual for working wives to board their children at the New Eden during the day. After all, as one of the ladies pointed out, where else would they get more adult supervision? Or, with so many Enforcement troopers as clients and supporters, better protection?

Cortin had to agree. She still hadn't been able to work out a way to provide for unmarried women who wanted--or had--children; the Families were almost certain to face enough popular resistance without their

main proponent advocating the legitimizing of prostitution as well. In spite of that, she had to agree there was considerable validity to the ladies' arguments that they performed a public service and should have the same sort of dispensation Enforcement did. Before the satyr virus' appearance, she might not have thought that way; since it was a fact, it had to be considered, and there were times people would be away from even a large Family. Something would have to be done to accommodate them, male and female both. That would have to wait, though; establishing the Families had to come first.

In the meantime, she extended a standing invitation to the New Eden ladies: they would be welcome at Harmony Lodge, with or without their children, whenever they cared to visit. Prostitutes were becoming more respectable; having the High King's Inquisitor/Protector's Herald welcome them shouldn't hurt the process.

Despite the help, though, she was keyed up when the Family gathered in the downstairs ballroom after Mass to wait for the Bains' arrival. There was no reason for her apprehension, she kept telling herself; she'd never had any trouble making friends with children or animals, and Betty had been married to an Inquisitor's brother; she wouldn't be afraid of one, and the children were too young to have any real idea what an Inquisitor was. Her position as Herald wasn't anything to frighten them, either, and word of her stigmata had hit the news hours after they'd appeared; even those wouldn't come as a surprise. So what in the Protector's Name did she have to be worried about?

Certainly not the Bains' reactions, she discovered as soon as they came into the room and Dave started introducing them around. The two she'd sent to help had obviously given them a thorough briefing; they fit in as if they'd been part of the group for months, leaving Cortin with no doubt that Betty'd be marrying in fairly soon.

She was the last to be introduced, and she saw concern on the two men's faces as they approached. Bain made the introductions, then said, "We heard what's started happening to you at Mass. Does it . . . Are you all right?"

"It's painless, and I'm fine. Once I get cleaned up, anyway. What about you?"

Pritchett looked at his gloved hands, then at hers. "No pain--but what do they mean?"

Cortin explained as she had to the others earlier, then went on to tell them the rest of her vision, pleased to see their expressions go from worry to satisfaction.

"What about the others?" Pritchett asked.

"Brad and Ivan yes, Edward and Ursula I don't know; I haven't seen them since."

"Doesn't seem right, somehow, to keep them covered," Pritchett said slowly. "Now I know what they mean, I think they should be seen."

Cortin looked at him in momentary puzzlement, then shook her head ruefully and removed her gloves, tucking them in the back of her belt. "You're absolutely right, Tiny--with the meaning changed, they should be. I suppose wearing gloves has gotten to be so much of a habit it simply never occurred to me not to."

The older boy tugged on her sleeve. "Can I see, Gramma Joan?"

Cortin knelt, extending her hands to the three children. "Of course, Luke--and Kateri, and George. God willing, you'll have them yourselves some day."

"Pretty," Kateri stated unequivocally. "Want now."

"Sorry, sweetheart," Cortin said. "You can't have them till you're older--but I can offer you some milk and gingerbread our cook made special for you."

"Okay." With that, the three hurried unerringly toward the refreshment table and Cortin rose, chuckling.

"I apologize for their rudeness, Excellency," Betty said. "I am teaching them better manners than that--I'm afraid the trip and the excitement have taken their toll."

"I understand perfectly," Cortin said. "Despite what some people say, I was a child myself once. And Dave should have told you: in private, I'm Joan."

"He did--but I wasn't sure." Betty hesitated. "He and Tiny have told me so much about you and the team that I feel I've known you all for years. I don't know how to thank you for inviting us into your home, though. Or wanting us to be part of your family."

"No thanks necessary." Cortin gestured at the children, who were eagerly devouring milk and gingerbread. "They, and the child Sis is carrying, are the reason for families--or Families." She smiled. "I think I'm going to like being Gramma Joan. I gather you intend to accept their proposal, then."

"Yes--though I'm not at all sure about taking part in group sex."

Cortin raised an eyebrow. "You don't have to if you don't want to; Dave must have told you that. And who knows, you may get to like it."

"From Dave and Tiny's descriptions, I may; I'll try, at least."

"I think that's my cue," Odeon said. He bowed to Betty, extending his hands. "Elizabeth, would you do us the great honor of becoming our wife?"

"I would be delighted." Betty took his hands and kissed him, repeated the gesture with the rest of her spouses-to-be. "When?"

"That," Odeon said firmly, "is the bride's prerogative. Privately, at least; publicly, not for at least ten days."

"As soon as possible, then, once the children finish." Betty looked around, defensively. "Pete taught me never to put off anything important, and this is."

"He was absolutely right," Odeon agreed. A trooper's life was too risky to procrastinate; if you did, you were like as not to get killed before you did what you'd been putting off. That didn't mean rushing into things--but once you thought something through and made your decision, you did it--even if the decision was to wait. "We've all had the same training," he told her. "When the children are done, then."

Betty smiled at him. "Thanks--civilians think I'm being impatient, or even impetuous, when it's not that at all."

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The children were upset at first about not being allowed on the "grown-up" floor except for meals, but got over that quickly when they were shown their floor. And Betty was pleased with her room, though she said it would take her a while to get used to the luxury. And to the servants, and living next door to the Palace, and-- "Well, right now I'm just overwhelmed. Even though Dave and Tiny described it all, that's nothing like actually seeing it." She gestured, taking in the common-room where they'd finally settled.

"You'll get used to it," Cortin assured her, smiling. "The only part of Harmony Lodge that isn't luxurious is the dungeon level, but you won't be going there. And you'll get used to high-ranking visitors, too--though aside from Dave's and my colleagues from the Center, and the rest of the Sealed ones, we haven't had many guests."

"That may change now--" Odeon frowned. "Dave. Betty called Joan 'Excellency'--didn't you tell her about the promotion?"

"No--I was afraid I'd scare her off." Bain turned to their new wife. "Joanie's still Her Excellency the High King's Inquisitor, and you know about her being the Protector's Herald--well, she's also Archduchess of High Teton, what used to be the Northwest Territories." He went on to explain what had happened the morning he and Pritchett had left to pick her up.

"'Dukida Elizabeth'," Betty said slowly. "You wouldn't have scared me off, Dave, it's too good for the children--but if I'm one of those who can be Sealed this early, I think we'd better take care of that, too. I can see where I could be tempted into misusing a noble's power."

"You are," Odeon said. "I'll take care of it at this evening's ceremony."

19. Invitation

Monday, 16 March 2572

Sara Blackfeather read the invitation for the third time, still not sure if it was real or a poor joke. Inquisitors were most emphatically not known for their hospitality, and it seemed incredible that the notorious Cortin, of all of them, would invite a journalist into her home for a week. Especially a journalist who made no secret of her antipathy for Inquisitors in general and Sovereigns' Inquisitors in particular.

It would be a professional triumph, of course, which was what made it an almost irresistible temptation. On the other hand, it could as easily be a trick, to find out if her stated sympathy for the Brotherhood hid actual membership in the organization--though it would seem more logical, if that were the case, not to bother with such niceties, simply have her picked up for questioning. Though, she thought a bit smugly, they weren't likely to be quite so blatant with a reporter!

Fortunately, she didn't have to depend purely on her own judgement, which could be flawed by considerations like professional glory; in something that had this much potential for benefit or harm, she could ask her patron for help. He'd be busy, of course, at this time of day, but she was free to interrupt him--on this, he'd be upset if she didn't!

So, minutes later, she was on the way to his home, the invitation tucked carefully in her purse.

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Lucius studied the invitation, both amused and disturbed. So Cortin wanted Blackfeather to visit for a week, did she? That could be either good or bad, and he couldn't decide which. On the whole, though, he couldn't argue against the visit, since Sara had no valid--no believable, for that matter--reason to turn down such a professionally valuable invitation. "It should be safe enough," he said at last. "She wouldn't dream of hurting an invited guest unless you do something stupid, and you certainly know better than that. You can also find out for me just what the hell is going on."

Blackfeather nodded; he'd made no secret, from her, that he had to be extremely careful about using his "psychic gifts" where Cortin was concerned. "You don't think she knows I'm your mistress?"

"She must--I did acknowledge you as such." Lucius smiled. "By this time I'm sure she has guessed--or been told--my real identity, but that can make no difference to her publicly."

Blackfeather returned his smile. He claimed to be Shayan, and sometimes he used his gifts to assume some of the Hell-King's attributes, but she didn't believe he really was; he was too different from the Shayan she'd been told about while her parents were alive. Her first meeting with him was still vivid in her mind, though she tried to remember only the part where he'd rescued her--something the real Shayan never would have done.

Shannon smiled to himself, reading her thoughts. Rescuing Sara had been little more than an impulse triggered by his respect for courage; a five-year-old who killed one of the men trying to rape her was hardly usual. She'd interested him enough to keep her alive against his men's wishes, taking her home until he could decide what to do with her. She'd proven interesting to have around, and he'd almost immediately discovered that she also added a dimension to his McHenry identity, so he'd quickly decided to adopt her--a procedure his McHenry identity made both fast and simple.

But his then mistress hadn't wanted to be burdened with a child, and hadn't been worth the effort of reconditioning, so she'd left. He really should have replaced her; not doing so, and raising a child alone, had caused a minor scandal. Sara had claimed all his free time, though, and he'd been fascinated by the idea of making her his mistress. She'd agreed, a formality he insisted on from all his live-in partners--except Victor, who'd made himself the exception by his presumption--in spite of the fact that she couldn't possibly know what she was agreeing to. Some simple physical modifications had made her capable of accommodating him, and some judicious conditioning had insured she would enjoy, but never reveal, their "touching games". Even then he'd refrained until her birthday, wanting the first time to be special for her.

It had been, with him changing shapes and techniques to amuse her. She'd enjoyed all of them, not surprising since that was how he'd conditioned her--but he was surprised that she had decided she liked his "classical" shape and technique best, especially that early. And she'd kept that preference through the years. She'd become his mistress openly at 16, causing another minor scandal, but that had only amused her.

He came back to the present, reading her apprehension at the upcoming visit, and held out his arms.

Blackfeather clung to him. "I know you said she wouldn't hurt a guest--but I have a horrible feeling I'll never see you again."

"Don't be silly," Shannon said. "Of course you will--unless you decide Enforcement and Inquisitors are respectable after all, and stay with them. She can be quite persuasive." And, an unwelcome thought said, there was more to it than persuasion. Cortin had dissolved the compulsions he'd imposed on Chang without even knowing it; what if the same happened to Blackfeather? An even more unwelcome thought said that would be for the best, and he concealed a scowl. Sara was the first human he'd cared about as anything more than a plaything; did he really want her spending eternity in his realm, even as his Queen?

"Not that persuasive, I don't think." But Blackfeather's apprehension was still there, and she was reacting as she usually did before a dangerous assignment, with growing desire. "Could we, just in case?"

If she were that worried, Shannon thought, it wouldn't hurt to indulge her. Indulge both of them, rather, because the idea of letting the Enemy have her was becoming more attractive. Most humans were disgusting weak things, not fit to be more than toys for his minions, but Sara was different. She was strong, attractive--and she loved him. Part of that was the conditioning he'd given her, of course, but even at first that hadn't been all of it; she'd taken to him without any prompting, unless you counted the rescue itself. And he hadn't felt Cortin using her power, even unconsciously, for some time, so perhaps it wouldn't be too much of a risk using his own. It would take so little to transport them to his realm, and Cortin should be either asleep or

too preoccupied to notice anyway. Giving in to temptation, he kissed Blackfoot hard, pulling her blouse open to grasp her breast as he set himself for the transfer.

Blackfeather gasped in startled joy as her lover's power surrounded them for the first time in months that seemed like years. She felt a sensation of movement, and they were standing before ruby thrones at one end of a great hall hung with rich dark draperies, brightly lit by flames that moved at random, without burning anything. This had to be an illusion, she told herself at more normal moments, because they could be here for hours, even days, with no time having passed when they returned--but it felt real, and while she was in it, she didn't question that reality. This was Hell's throne room, he its King, and she his Queen.

She remained herself, only her clothes changed; instead of a proper tailored suit, she now wore gold streamers generously sprinkled with rubies. They hid almost nothing even when they fell quietly from shoulders to feet; stirred as they usually were by her movements, they swirled open at random times and places.

But he changed completely, more spectacular in his nudity than even the most ornate robes could make him. Flame-red hair and amber slit-pupilled eyes emphasized alabaster skin, as did huge wings with gleaming jet-black feathers. This was her favorite of his forms--though it shocked her to see that for the first time, he wasn't erect. Taken aback, she stared at him. "Is something wrong, beloved?"

"That is." His wings spread, shadowing them. "I love you as well, you see, which is why I cannot continue to let you love me. It must be love, because I find your welfare more important to me than my pleasure, which is the classic definition. It is also an emotion I never felt before, in all my millennia, and one I find both unfitting and remarkably inconvenient."

Blackfoot started to speak, but he stopped her. "Let me finish. Despite your disbelief, I am Shayan, and I will prove it to you shortly. Although I am inclined to keep you here with me, your welfare demands otherwise. So you will go to Cortin, and you will become one of her followers, perhaps even--" He broke off. There was that possibility, yes, and if it worked it would guarantee her spiritual safety and happiness, though not her bodily survival.

"Perhaps even what?" Blackfeather was confused, a little hurt--though she could feel his harshness was because he had her welfare at heart.

He bent to her, brushed her forehead with his lips. "Let me concentrate, beloved. The Enemy has, by this time, undoubtedly given her a priest or priests to build her a personal staff equivalent to mine; there may still be a place on that staff for you."

"But . . ." Blackfoot was getting even more confused. "Even if there is a place, what makes you think they'd accept me? Or that I'd want it?"

"They would accept you because you know me and are almost sinless--and you will want it once the compulsions that have held you for over fifteen years have been dissolved. Now be silent; what I need to do will be dangerous, even without distractions."

Without waiting for an acknowledgement, he reached out, searching for mental traces he'd never felt before but didn't think he could mistake. The Protector's priests should feel both free of sin and erotic, an unmistakable combination he'd kept from coming together for millennia . . . yes, there was one . . . another. One male, one female--Sister Mary Piety and Father Mike Odeon. Piety was no surprise, but he'd have thought it too early for Odeon's tempering, and he frowned at the timing. He'd expected perhaps another year; now, it seemed, contact and final testing would be within months. Part of him regretted that the speed would cut short his enjoyment of Odeon's suffering--at his hands, anyway; if Odeon survived the tempering and made the correct final decision, his foes in the wars to come would insure far more suffering than Shayan

himself could hope to inflict. Well, time to begin the tempering, with a lesson his "student" would never forget. *Wake up, Priest!*

20. Lesson

Odeon woke, a scream caught in his throat, pain knifing through his head. When it eased, he found himself gasping, staring around in the dark. "Who--"

Do you always ask foolish questions, priest? You belong to the one you call Cortin; you should be able to sense who I am. And you need not speak aloud; survive, and this will be only your first taste of mental speech.

With that clue, I think I do know who you are. Odeon braced himself, wondering what Shayan wanted with him.

A service that will be to both my benefit and Cortin's--and so indirectly to yours. And you're right--I do not generally do things for others, especially enemies. Nor am I changing that policy; this is primarily for myself, if that will relieve your mind enough to listen.

Do I have any choice?

 Odeon asked.

About listening, yes, though only because I choose to give you the choice. About doing what I ask, the choice is totally yours. Will you listen?

In that case, I don't see any unavoidable danger; go ahead.

You're so kind. I gather you're one of Cortin's holy staff?

Of her core group, if that's what you mean, Odeon replied cautiously.

The same thing. Is the group complete?

No comment.

It isn't, then. So you have room for my protege, who will be arriving this coming Saturday.

What!

 Odeon was startled, though only briefly. Because someone had served Shayan didn't mean that person was beyond redemption; theoretically, Shayan himself could be saved, as he'd once commented to Joanie. *I'll consider her when she gets here, but that's all I'll promise.*

That'll be adequate--you'll be surprised, I think, at her spiritual state. She's committed few sins.

That statement was almost as surprising as the Hell-King's peculiar-seeming chattiness. Odeon knew better than to relax his guard too much, but his investigator's curiosity was aroused. *That's hard to believe.*

Nevertheless, it is true. Shayan gave the impression of a sardonic smile. *I'm called the Father of Lies, priest, but that's to salve the feelings of those who don't want to believe me. The truth is a much more versatile and useful tool--and usually a far more painful one. Sara has acted under my compulsions most of her life, so most of what you'd call her sins are chargeable to me instead. And the fact that she's been taking the Sacraments from me doesn't alter their validity, which I find highly amusing.*

It was a good thing for the girl that was true, Odeon thought. *And will you remove those compulsions before sending her here?*

I think not, Shayan told him. *I could, easily--but if I have to lose her to you, you must be willing to pay my price. You will be the one to remove my compulsions, if you want her.*

You know I don't have any choice, Odeon replied. *You'll have to show me how--and tell me the price.*

Showing you how is the price. Giving you that ability involves restructuring part of your mind, which I promise will make you pray you were enduring Inquisitor Cortin's professional attentions instead. I won't injure you--for reasons you do not and cannot now understand, that would not be to my benefit--but I can and will make you suffer. I'd suggest you find a place where you can't be heard screaming, and where you won't injure yourself. It might also be a good idea to use restraints.

It went against Odeon's grain to take anything from Shayan willingly, but as he'd said, he didn't have a choice under the circumstances, either as law officer or as priest. He'd take the instruction--and the suggestions.

What about another of the team, to help?

If you wish. You'll feel me again when you're ready.

Odeon shivered as he felt the contact snap. He'd known he'd have to face Shayan eventually, and he'd been sure it would be an unpleasant experience--but he hadn't expected it this soon, for even a remotely similar purpose, and he'd underestimated the unpleasantness. This definitely classified as something he'd much rather avoid, even though he knew he wouldn't. He prayed for the strength to do it right, then tried to decide who he should get to help.

Joanie was out for obvious reasons, he didn't care to have Sis see him screaming, and Chuck didn't have the experience to handle a situation like this promised to be. That left Tony, Dave, and Tiny--with Priest-Inquisitor Bain the most logical choice.

* * * * *

"Are you sure you want to go through with this, Mike?"

Odeon tested the shackles that held him. Dave had padded them, but otherwise he could have been the Inquisitor's subject instead of his senior officer, spouse, and friend. "Of course not--got an alternative?"

Bain shook his head. "No, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. Okay, you're as ready as I can get you."

Odeon stiffened when he felt Shayan's mind-touch, but the promised pain didn't come immediately. *I had intended to show my lady the less pleasant aspects of my realm,* the Hell-King told him, *but she believes it to be an illusion. So I will show her this operation instead. She will also believe it to be an illusion--until you remove my compulsions. Then she will know the truth, that they could be neither imposed nor removed by a normal human agency. And beneath it she has considerable empathy. Enough to fit into the group you--and you, Priest-Lieutenant Bain--are part of.*

Get on with it! Odeon sent.

Such impatience for torment! Would that I could promise you eons of it--but hours will have to suffice. Both men were fully aware of Shayan's regret at that--and his anticipation. *Still, I can make it last that long, though it isn't truly necessary; the procedure need take no longer than seconds, and would be equally effective if you were unconscious. Either would rob it of what little pleasure I can extract from my lady's loss, however.

So, priest--suffer my pleasure.* All true, Shayan thought, as far as the ability to remove compulsions was concerned--but Odeon's pain, including that of believing the anguish unnecessary, was essential to the tempering process. Seizing the other's mind, Shayan began his mental surgery.

Odeon screamed, convulsing. Bain shuddered as they continued, going on and on, pausing barely long enough for Odeon to inhale. The Inquisitor was sickly grateful to Shayan for recommending restraints; without them, Mike's struggles would be breaking bones. There was no skill involved here, no subtlety, no hope for the subject to end it by confessing when the pain became unendurable--which it did, as quickly as Shayan had promised. Though Bain was no longer sharing their mental contact, his Inquisitor's training let him know when Odeon reached his breaking point and was forced beyond it, to agony no drug could keep a man alive through, much less conscious.

But Odeon did remain conscious, with full awareness that it was Shayan's power keeping him that way--and the understanding, at last, that this was what Joanie and Sis had suffered from the Hell-King. Rape was rape, be it physical or mental--and horrible as the pain was, the worst part was the degrading violation.

Bain prayed. There was nothing else to do until, eventually, it ended. With a final convulsion like he was being shaken, Odeon went limp. Bain hurriedly freed him from the restraints and carried him into the bathroom. Mike'd need a hot soak to relax strained muscles, then days of recuperation--God, what would Joanie think when she saw him?

* * * * *

Cortin didn't sleep well. Her dreams were troubling, nightmares of Shayan tormenting her team in ways she couldn't stop, gloating over them, taunting her with her helplessness. And it didn't improve when she woke; the feeling of something wrong with her people wouldn't go away, even when she told herself it was nothing more than a bad dream.

After a quarter hour of being unable to get back to sleep, Cortin got up and put on a robe. Foolish as it was, it looked like the only way to settle her mind was to make sure everyone was all right.

It didn't worry her too much that Odeon wasn't in his room, though, when she checked there first; he was probably with Sis or Betty. But Sis was in with Tiny, Betty with Chuck, and Tony was sprawled out alone, with a contented expression on his face. It wasn't until she checked the common-room without finding either Mike or Dave that her worry got serious. Dave hadn't said anything about having a subject he needed to work on overnight, and Mike didn't have any plans she knew about. Their not being in their rooms or the common-room didn't prove anything, necessarily--but she couldn't help being concerned. She went back to her room for her dungeon keys and gunbelt, then went below ground.

Her worry got worse when she saw the "In Use" light at Bain's suite. She went into the observation room, which didn't help--padded shackles in the third-stage room?--but still nothing of the missing two.

She left the observation room and stood before the suite's main door for several seconds, debating with herself. If Dave was conducting an interrogation with Mike's help, she'd feel foolish intruding--but if one or both of them was hurt, she'd never forgive herself if she didn't. Deciding, she opened the door. "Mike? Dave?"

"Oh, God," a muffled voice said. More strongly, she heard, "In the bathroom, Joanie. Sis with you?"

"No." Cortin covered the distance to the bathroom in record time, appalled at what she saw when she opened the door. "What happened? Is he alive?"

"Yeah--but he needs help. Take a look."

Cortin did, and crossed herself. There were no apparent injuries, but Mike looked horrible--so pale the scar across his face looked bloody-fresh, his muscles spasming in tiny tremors. It was obvious he'd been severely tortured, though she couldn't imagine how, with no wounds. She still wanted to know what had happened, but that desire was nothing next to her need to remedy whatever had been done to her second-in-command and heir. "Go get Sis--she and Tiny are in his room. Have him bring down as many blankets as he can carry. Then call Ivan, he may have information I need."

"Right." Bain hurried out.

Praying as hard as she could, Cortin knelt beside the tub, touching Odeon's forehead. He wasn't chilled, so Dave was treating him for shock rather than cold. Wrists and ankles were bruised, consistent with the padded shackles--but it didn't make sense! Even if she ignored the impossibility of Dave interrogating one of the team, he wouldn't use padded shackles, and his subject would certainly have more serious injuries than simple bruises! Yet Mike had been terribly hurt, despite his lack of wounds, and Dave had been there--watching, if nothing else. What was going on?

At least Mike didn't seem to be in immediate danger, as far as she could tell. His pulse was weak but steady and his breathing was regular, not labored, though also not as strong as she'd like. The muscle tremors were slowing too, which was a good sign.

Moments later she heard the door open, and turned. "Sis? We're in here."

"Dave told me." Cortin moved aside, making way for the medic to kneel beside her patient. Chang opened her kit and began checking Odeon's condition. "What was done to him?"

"I don't know," Cortin said, controlling her frustration with an effort. "I can't even make a realistic guess--didn't Dave tell you anything?"

"He was too upset to tell me more than the basic information I required--that Mike had been hurt, but only minimally injured." Chang continued her examination for a few minutes, then stood. "He is exhausted, and there may be some muscular strain in addition to the bruises; otherwise, he is well. He requires only warmth, rest, and time for complete recovery."

"He'll get all he needs." Cortin turned to Pritchett, who'd come in while Chang was working. "You brought the blankets?"

"In the office."

"Good. Sis, how soon can we move him someplace more comfortable?"

"When he stops trembling--a few minutes, I should say."

"Will it be safe to take him upstairs, or should I have a bed brought down?"

"It will be safe." Chang smiled. "His hurts are not life-threatening, though he will be easily fatigued and probably uncomfortable for three or four days. Possibly longer, though I would be surprised if he is not fully recovered within a week."

They had Odeon upstairs and settled in his own bed by the time Illyanov arrived, and the entire Family--the rest awakened by the commotion--was gathered in the common-room. Bain had told them he'd really rather not have to go through the story more than once and Cortin had agreed--his distress was obvious--so it wasn't until she'd apologized for getting Illyanov up on what now looked like an unnecessary errand that Bain

explained.

As Cortin listened, she got coldly angry. Shayan was Evil personified, true, but that gave him no right to torment one of the Protector's priests! Kill him, yes--they'd all die, and Service personnel didn't expect an easy death--but not subject him to agony for no reason except the sheer pleasure of it! She was the one who was supposed to face Shayan--and while the thought frightened her, she'd prefer it to having her people do so.

When Bain finished, she said as much. "Not that he had any choice under the circumstances, of course," she added. "But try not to get into similar circumstances, would you all?"

"We will try," Chang said. "However, we may have no more choice in the matter than Mike was given. And you should be in no hurry to face him."

"I didn't say I was in a hurry," Cortin said. "It might be a good idea to get it over with, though. I won't win, but I might weaken him enough the Protector will."

"You must not act prematurely," Illyanov cautioned, frowning. "You have not found all the Protector's staff yet, and there may be other things equally necessary to prepare His way."

"Not act prematurely!" Cortin snorted. "At this point, I don't really feel like I'm acting at all, much less prematurely!"

"If you consider leading an attempt to completely restructure society, extracting information vital to fighting terrorists, and preparing for the Final Coming, to be not acting, I will agree. Otherwise, I would suggest you remain cautious; direct action against Shayan, unless unavoidable, is the Protector's prerogative."

Cortin grimaced. Illyanov's quiet, level words stung; she knew she was doing useful work. It was just that it didn't feel like enough, and--especially after Mike's gratuitous torture--she wanted to take the sort of direct action Ivan said she shouldn't. It would be so satisfying to go into the Vatican during a major public event and challenge Lucius with his real identity, force him to take some sort of action that would prove it! He'd kill her, of course, but it'd be worth it to bring him into the open. "I'll behave, I promise--even though I'd rather not. Isn't there anything I can do for Mike?"

"There is a possibility," Illyanov said thoughtfully. "According to some of our writings, the Herald may be granted the use of some of the Protector's powers--your truthsense may be one. Another should be healing--though as Michael's problem is not life-threatening, that might not come into play."

"It might, though, since it's due to Shayan's direct action." Cortin stood. "I've got to give it a try--if it works, I'll be back with him."

For Shayan's reaction: 20a. Decision

21. Anguish

Tuesday, 17 March 2572

Cortin prayed harder than she could remember ever having done before, resting her hands on Odeon's forehead and chest, trying to give him her own strength in case the Protector didn't see fit to intervene. Mike had been hurt doing the Protector's work; if there was any justice at all, He should at least give Mike back the strength he'd spent on His behalf!

Apparently He agreed, Cortin thought as she felt her hands grow warm. It was a peculiar sensation, as if she were absorbing energy through every pore of her body, channeling it, and pushing it into Odeon. His color improved and he grew visibly stronger, until he seemed to be in a natural sleep rather than a coma. At that point the power-flow stopped; as she removed her hands, he opened his eyes.

When he did, his expression frightened her almost as much as his weakness had. Granted that no one could face Shayan and come out of it unchanged, Odeon looked . . . haunted. "Dave told us about it," she said softly. "So you don't need to talk about it unless you want to."

Odeon sat up, putting his arms around his knees, looking away from her. "I don't want to--but you deserve to know that I may not be much good to you any more. I . . . I don't think I could go through that again--I don't see how you and Sis can even consider facing him."

Cortin sat beside him, resting her hand on his shoulder. She'd suffered the most physical damage, but it was obvious from Sis' and Mike's reactions that she'd been spared Shannon/Shayan's worst torment: he'd kept out of her mind! There was therapy, good therapy, for physical rape; she didn't know of any at all for mental rape. They'd do what they could for him, that went without saying, but she could only hope that'd be enough. "We'll help you, Mike, all of us. And the Protector loaned me some of His power to bring you out of the shock he sent you into. Just remember what you told me: God will test us to our utmost limits, but not beyond them. I know words aren't a lot of help right now, but maybe the Family will be--if you feel up to it, we're gathered in the common-room. Ivan's here too; I thought he might have some ideas how to help you, and he's the one who suggested I might be able to borrow some of the Protector's power."

Odeon didn't really feel like seeing anyone, or even moving--what he did want was to crawl in a hole, pull it shut, and forget what had been done to him. But he couldn't betray Joanie that way, or the rest of the team and Family; reluctantly, he straightened and got out of bed. "Okay . . . I'll be out as soon as I get dressed."

"I'll stay; you're in no condition to be left alone." Cortin grimaced. "I remember how it was when I woke up a couple of times on the flight to New Denver. The medics did their best, but I'd have given anything for a familiar, friendly face. At that point I couldn't have handled anything else, and I don't suppose you can, either--but at least you've got the faces."

"Yeah." Odeon went into the bathroom, took some refuge in the routine of getting ready for a new day. Joanie was right about one thing, at least; he didn't feel able to handle much of anything, especially intimacy of any sort. He wasn't at all sure he could manage to get through his responsibilities as Team-Second and heir to High Teton, though he'd have to try. He couldn't simply shrug off his duties just because he felt like he'd been torn into contaminated shreds, however much he might prefer to. Joanie'd put him back together, at least enough to go through the motions, and he could trust God to keep providing the support he needed to carry out his priestly functions. As Shayan had said, the priest's character--or, in his case, feelings of contamination--had no effect on the validity of the Sacraments.

When he and Cortin got to the common-room, it took an effort to let himself be embraced and kissed; it was impossible to return either more than perfunctorily, and he couldn't bring himself to touch Illyanov's offered hand. Their understanding and sympathy helped, but he felt distanced, remote--as if Shayan had stolen something in the process of breaking him. He looked around at them, shook his head. "Sorry, people. God willing, I'll get over this soon--but right now the only thing that seems to have any meaning at all is that I . . . don't feel like I'm worthy of you. Nothing else matters."

"Which is foolishness," Chang said. "Natural, after what you have been through, but foolishness nonetheless. You will indeed get over it, as Joan and I have. Soon, as you say, if the Protector sees fit to aid you further--which would not surprise me, since He chose you as one of His first two priests."

"In the meantime," Illyanov said, "I am intrigued by this ability Shayan has given you to dissolve his compulsions. Does it apply only to those he imposed on Miss Blackfeather, I wonder, or can you dissolve any of them?"

The change of subject was a relief for Odeon. "I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "Either way makes sense. He wouldn't want me dissolving any except hers, but he probably only used one technique for all of them, since he didn't know--then--that he'd be giving anyone the ability to eliminate his tampering. We'll have to find out, when we have someone else who's been conditioned."

"And I'm intrigued by what he called mental speech," Bain said. "His touch wasn't exactly what I'd expected--more awesome than repulsive, until he started working on Mike. And can you imagine how much more convenient it'd be if we could communicate that way? Especially in action?"

"He said if I survived, that would be just the first taste of mental speech," Odeon said. "I don't know if he meant just me, or the Family, or the Protector's Sealed--I wonder. Dave, do you think his using it with the two of us could've sensitized us enough we could use it without him?"

I don't know, Bain replied silently, *but it's worth trying. Can you hear me?*

"No need to shout," Odeon said. "I heard you fine." He looked around at the rest. "Anybody else pick it up?"

Cortin shook her head. "Not me."

"I heard nothing either," Illyanov said. "That is unfortunate; it could have been useful."

Cortin frowned. "It sure would. Sounds like it's something he does to you by touching your mind, maybe sort of a side effect. What he did to me was purely physical, but--Sis, he mind-touched you; did you hear Dave?"

Chang nodded. "Quite clearly."

"I think I'm jealous--for the first time, I wish he'd mind-touched me."

"Never wish for that," Odeon said grimly. "It's a horrible sensation, though the mind-speech itself isn't bad."

"The mind-speech is called telepathy," Illyanov said. "It is part of what is called Talent, and some rare humans have enough to be trained in its reliable use."

Cortin stared at him, puzzled. "What are you talking about--how do you know that?"

Illyanov smiled. "Since our discussion something over a week ago, I have spent my free time studying the Terran Empire. That particular fact came to light approximately three years ago, when the first non-human Ranger found Talent in one of her human colleagues."

"The Empire!" Cortin exclaimed. "Why in God's name would you study them?"

"Because I had a dream that night. It may have been no more than a normal dream, triggered by that discussion--but dreams, in this group, have of late been highly significant. Treating this one as such can do no harm, and may be of benefit, so I have been doing so."

That was an even better change of subject, and Odeon seized on it. "What was the dream about?"

"The arrival of two Imperial ships, a small one followed by a large. As I say, the dream may have been

nothing more than a reaction to Joan's and my discussion, but my personal feeling is that we should be preparing for contact--perhaps soon."

Odeon frowned. "Before the Final Coming? Or are you saying they're part of the Final Coming? I don't think I like that idea--it makes me uncomfortable."

"I do not like it either, and it may not be the case. Some of the more ambiguous prophecies of that time, however, can be interpreted in the light of such contact without distortion. What, for instance, if the Great King references were to the Emperor rather than the High King? And what if the Protector's form, which 'none can predict', is not human, or at least not fully so?"

Odeon winced. "Ouch, Ivan! That's even worse."

"I am not sure I find it so," Illyanov said thoughtfully. "As I told Joan, I believe contact will be to our ultimate benefit, though it may be difficult at first."

"Even if one of them turns out to be the Protector?"

"Perhaps especially then."

"Do you think Shayan would permit contact if that were the case?" Chang asked.

Illyanov chuckled. "I doubt he will have any choice in the matter. The Protector will manifest, that promise is definite; the questions are only when, and in what form."

"Yeah." Odeon shook his head, rubbing the scar across his mouth, and stood. "I'm sorry, Joanie, folks--I need to be alone for a bit."

"Go ahead, then." Cortin watched him leave, frowning. "Sis--is that a good idea?"

"I believe so, for him. I would be happier if I could be sure he would be doing something other than brooding over his mishandling--but I think it likely he will be; Ivan's speculation could well be providing him that distraction."

"I can distract him further," Illyanov said with a smile. "I received word late yesterday that my resignation has been accepted; with Your Grace's permission, I will ask Michael's help in setting up the High Teton Enforcement Service. Although I do not as yet belong to it, since it has not been officially established."

Startled, Cortin looked at him more closely. He was in uniform, but now she saw he wasn't wearing any rank or territory insigne. "That can be remedied easily enough. As of right now, there is a High Teton Enforcement Service, commanded by Colonel Ivan Petrovich Illyanov. You're out of uniform, Colonel--would somebody please get him an eagle from my room?"

A grinning Powell left on that errand while Illyanov stared at her. "I had not expected to be put in charge, Joan. To the best of my knowledge, no Enforcement Service has ever been headed by an Inquisitor, due to the public opinion of our profession."

"You're the only qualified candidate," Cortin said, grinning. "High Teton's not going to be a normal fief, Ivan; all of the top people are going to be Sealed. And I think the public perception of a Sealed Inquisitor is going to be different from that of a non-Sealed one. So you're it."

"Yes, Your Grace." Illyanov managed a seated bow. "I will, of course, do my best."

"Prince Edward's going to administer it for the present; get in touch with him for what you need. And coordinate with Brad and his Strike Force people." Cortin grinned again. "I don't think you'll have much trouble finding recruits, in spite of the climate. Just make sure you find a good-sized house for your Family, and let me know when the wedding's to be."

"Of course. If you are free at the time, I would be honored to have you perform the ceremony."

"I'll make a point of it," Cortin assured him. "Oh, thanks, Chuck." She took the silver eagle from her aide and pinned it on Illyanov's collar. "There, that's better. Not quite complete yet, but that'll have to wait till you can have territorial insigne made. Go to it, Colonel."

"As Your Grace commands." Illyanov rose, smiling. "If I may be excused, I shall find Michael and discuss the details with him."

* * * * *

Odeon had gone to his room, made himself a cup of herb tea, and settled into his seldom-used armchair to do some thinking. First Shayan's torture, now Ivan studying the Empire and speculating that the Protector might be one of them--maybe not even human!

He stared at the circled-triangle marks on the backs of his hands, deeply disturbed. Maybe he shouldn't be--the idea of the Protector coming from the Empire didn't seem to bother anyone else, though Joanie seemed troubled by the prospect of contact itself. He couldn't pinpoint why it bothered him, since the Protector was by definition divine rather than human, loaning Joanie some of His or Her powers; why should he be disturbed if the physical body was non-human as well?

After several minutes' thought, he still couldn't come up with a reason; all he knew was that he didn't like it. He finished his tea and was going over to the prie-dieu when there was a knock on his door.

He swore briefly under his breath--the last thing he wanted right now was a visitor!--but went to answer it, grinning despite himself when he saw Ivan's new collar insignia. "Come in, Colonel sir. Congratulations."

Illyanov bowed, smiling. "Thank you, Michael. May I ask your professional assistance?"

"Of course. What can I do for you?"

"Assist me in setting up the Enforcement Service Her Grace has just established, with me as its head."

"Gladly. Want some tea?" Odeon put his problems out of his mind, more than ready to exchange them for some practical work.

* * * * *

Friday, 20 March 2572

Cortin lay awake, seriously worried about Odeon. Physically there was no longer anything wrong with him, but his emotional state was frightening. He'd withdrawn further into himself over the past three days, despite Ivan's efforts to draw him out, not speaking except when it was necessary to carry out his duties, not smiling at all even during the Protector's services--though he still seemed to take some pleasure in those--and not touching anyone when it could possibly be avoided.

There had to be something she and the rest could do to help, she kept telling herself, but nothing they'd tried

so far had had any effect. She, Sis, and Betty had all tried to get him to make love, but he'd rejected all of them with what seemed like near-panic, and she and Sis were agreed on the reason: he was convinced Shayan had somehow contaminated him, and was terrified of passing that contamination on to them. That, as Sis had told him, was foolishness--but they couldn't convince Mike.

Maybe that would change when Blackfeather arrived and he broke the compulsions Shayan had put her under. If she was really suitable for the Protector's staff, uncontaminated despite being the Hell-King's mistress, then Mike surely couldn't keep believing a single contact had fouled him too badly to touch.

On the other hand, Cortin admitted to herself, that sort of belief didn't have to have logic behind it, and she wasn't the one who'd felt Shayan's mind invading hers. How would she have felt if she'd had to accept the invasion the way Mike had, without resistance, to save someone else? She and Sis had been able to fight, at least, except for Sis' compelled welcoming of Shayan's last embrace--and yes, that had been the worst of the nun's memories, even knowing the welcome had been compelled. So had Mike's, in a way . . . but his had been self-compelled, by the knowledge that if he didn't allow the invasion, he'd be condemning Blackfeather to Hell.

Cortin scowled at that. She'd changed her opinion of Hell, recently. A place of eternal torment no longer seemed to square at all with the idea of a just and merciful God. Purgatory still didn't bother her; of course you'd have to pay for your sins before being admitted to Heaven, but even the longest and most painful stay there would end in triumph. Hell didn't end, and if what Mike was suffering was a fair sample, its torments went beyond any punishment a human could justly deserve. Even, she thought, the ones she'd sent there believing they did deserve it. If she had it to do over again, she would, of course; the sentences she'd carried out were legally mandated, and she'd carried them out, as required, when she'd satisfied herself she'd gotten all a subject's useful information. Terrorists were a cancer on society and had to be eliminated for its health--but maybe she could use her skill to persuade them to repent. She could manage a mortal approximation of Hell, and that, even if it meant some extra time under her hands, was surely better than an eternity of the real thing! She couldn't do away with Hell, but she could certainly see that Shayan got as few of her subjects as possible!

That, however, didn't solve the problem of how to help Mike. The best possibility, she was convinced, was the emotional unity sex now included, but his fear of touching made that possibility a remote one. Still, if she--or Sis, or Betty--could become one with him, show him that he wasn't fouled . . . but the only way she could think of to accomplish that was feeding him eroticine, which he wouldn't take voluntarily, and it wouldn't be right to trick him even to help him, would it?

Finally deciding that she wasn't going to be able to solve the problem by herself, she got out of bed and dressed. She'd accepted an invitation to say morning Mass at the Cathedral--probably extended out of curiosity about her stigmata, she thought, but still a chance to talk about the Protector's coming and offer the Communion of Promise to civilians. Lucius/Shayan hadn't forbidden it yet, to her considerable surprise; if he didn't after today's, she'd have to do some serious wondering why.

She'd decided to make it a Mass for Travelers, with Edward and Ursula, Bradford and Illyanov starting for High Teton's capital, Archangel, at noon, and she was pleased to see all of them at the Cathedral when she and her team arrived. There was no time to talk; traffic had been heavier than expected, and they were running late, so she and her concelebrants, Odeon and Bain, had to go straight to the sacristy to get ready.

Bradford had agreed with her about ruining a uniform or set of vestments every time she said Mass, and since the purpose of her stigmata was to show Jeshua's approval of her, she couldn't wear bandages, so he'd given her permission to wear just the alb, cincture, stole, and sandals. It looked odd to someone used to seeing mostly a chasuble, but no odder than her fellow priests in uniform and armed; it was being weaponless that bothered her most, though she didn't want to ruin a perfectly good gunbelt and holster, either.

The Cathedral was packed, highly unusual for a weekday and flattering, though it also made her nervous--until she got to the altar and began the ceremony. As always, she lost herself in it, unaware of her surroundings except while she was giving Communion. It was then she realized there were far more troopers here than their percentage of the population would have suggested, which pleased her.

It pleased her even more after Mass, when she explained the Protector's impending arrival and offered the Communion of Promise, that practically all of them came forward to accept it. Some civilians did so as well, though most held back, their expressions either uncertain or disapproving.

When that was over too and she'd gotten dressed, ready to leave, she discovered that the troopers had other plans. Their spokesman, Captain Watkins--she remembered him, the first person she'd administered Confession to--invited her and her team to a breakfast banquet at the Royal Hotel. She accepted gladly; much as she enjoyed being at Harmony Lodge, the idea of going out for breakfast was appealing. It wouldn't do Mike any harm, either, and she liked the idea of having Chuck seen as one of her team by people who might otherwise have trouble believing it.

And Chuck did seem to enjoy being at the head table. "Having fun?" she asked with a smile.

Powell returned the smile. "Sure am! Last time I saw some of these, I was a prisoner remanded to the High King's Inquisitor, thinking sure I'd be dead in a day or so--now I'm your private secretary, Sealed to the Protector, and happy as a puppy with a new kid. What more could anyone ask?"

"Put that way, nothing," Cortin replied, amused. "You also look better in uniform than you did in civvies, if that matters."

"I think so, too." Powell hesitated, then glanced briefly at Odeon and mouthed, "What about Mike?"

Cortin shrugged, wishing again that she and the rest of the team shared the telepathy Shayan had given Sis, Dave, and Mike. Even limited to themselves, unlike the telepathic Talent Ivan described, it would have been useful.

There was no point in fruitless wishing, though, so she turned her attention to the meal and her hosts. "This was very thoughtful of you and the rest, Captain Watkins--we all appreciate it. I, for one, have gotten more out of touch than I intended, that morning at the Eagle's Nest."

"You have had a lot to occupy you, Excellency." Watkins ventured a smile. "It's an honor to have you with us--but I must confess it's a little unnerving sitting next to the Protector's Herald."

"It's more than a little unnerving to be the Herald," Cortin said. "It might not be as bad if I had a decent idea what I was supposed to do, but I'm operating by guesswork. On the other hand, it'll give me a better chance of establishing the Families." She wished she could tell everyone here about her Family, and fief, and coming grandchild, but that would have to wait . . . "Do you have an understanding chaplain yet?"

"Not exactly, but Lieutenant Bain hears Confessions at the Center often enough that we're in a lot better shape than we were." This time, his smile wasn't tentative. "Having the Communion of Promise, and the Herald being an Inquisitor, helps even more. Civs still don't like us, but I've seen less hostility since you got the stigmata."

"That'll help," Cortin said. "I have a feeling we're supposed to be the leaders of the Protector's . . . guardians, I suppose, for lack of a better word. Not to guard Him, of course, He won't need it, but to guard His people from the ones who don't accept Him and aren't willing to let those who do live in peace. As I told Colonel Illyanov once, as long as humans have free will, Enforcement's still going to be necessary."

"Colonel Illyanov, yes." Watkins looked at her quizzically. "Four of the ones Sealed so far are Inquisitors, and two of them have gotten sudden promotions to the top rank; one other was already there. The rest of the Sealed are high ranking themselves or closely associated with rankers--not at all like Jeshua and His disciples."

Cortin shrugged. "That's how I'm told it's supposed to be, this time around. This is the Final Coming, and if the Protector defeats Shayan, He'll be reigning over at least the Kingdom Systems; His mortal staff will have to have some top-level experience to give Him proper support. I think you can expect to see more promotions and other changes in the fairly near future."

"God willing, He'll come into the open soon--promotions or not, I want to be Sealed myself."

"And he's not the only one," an intense-looking young Lieutenant said. "Don't get us wrong, Excellency, we sure wouldn't turn down any promotions, but over half the staff of the Center--maybe three-quarters of the Inquisitors--mostly want Sealed. Myself included."

Cortin's truthsense said they were understating the intensity of their desire for the Protector's chief benefit. Their yearning to be Sealed seemed to be every bit as strong as her desire to avoid the confrontation with Shayan she was sure would cost her her life--and if, she thought grimly, the Hell-King could manage it, with pain even greater than Mike's. She forced that thought back; the confrontation would happen, and a Strike Force member's job description practically guaranteed death in the line of duty--the questions were when and how, not if.

It didn't surprise her particularly that it was the Inquisitors who most wanted to take advantage of the Sealing. Their work, done properly, was a constant strain, with the accompanying urge to take out their frustrations on a subject--or not do what was needed to get vital information. The line between the Warrant-protected violence of their duties and the sin of giving in to personal weakness was a thin one, easy to rationalize crossing . . . "I'm praying for you and everyone else who wants His protection," Cortin said. "And I'm beginning to believe being Sealed is going to be necessary for Inquisitors in His Kingdom. We may never be loved, but having truthsense and being in a constant state of grace, we should at least be trusted, and only criminals will have any reason to be afraid of us."

Watkins smiled. "Theoretically that's true now--but in fact, I'd like to be able to walk down the street in uniform and not have half the sidewalk to myself."

Cortin chuckled. "That's a problem I haven't had lately, but I remember the feeling. I hope you get it soon."

Watkins frowned. "That doesn't sound like you expect to, Excellency."

Cortin looked at the red crossed daggers on her sleeve. "I'm Special Ops, Captain, and I've been told I'll be going face to face with Shayan. That has to mean it's my death that'll signal the Protector's arrival. So no, I don't expect to see His earthly Kingdom."

Watkins nodded. "I understand, Excellency. But I'll pray for it anyway."

"I'd appreciate that. Something else I was told was that piety was crucial--spread the word, would you?"

"Of course." Watkins hesitated. "What about--what you just said, that you'll have to face Shayan yourself?"

Cortin shrugged. "If it had to be kept secret, I wouldn't have been able to say anything about it. Say what you want." She took a deep breath. "I'd rather not think about it any more right now, though, so would you mind if we change the subject? This breakfast looks and smells too good to spoil with that sort of discussion."

"As you say, Excellency." Watkins thought for a moment, then cocked his head. "I've heard Your Excellency is fond of animals?"

"Yes--why?"

"Because I have some six-week-old kittens I'm trying to find homes for. They aren't purebred, though."

"Neither am I," Cortin said. "Yes, I'd like one--two, if that isn't being greedy."

"Two is fine. Whenever you have time to come by and pick them out."

"How about as soon as we're done here?"

"My pleasure, Excellency."

* * * * *

For the first time since learning to drive, Cortin was glad that her rank meant she sat in back while someone else drove. She'd ended up with three of the kittens, and they were currently playing tag around her lap and shoulders, with occasional forays to Odeon. He didn't seem to object to their touch, and once he even seemed to smile for a second when the orange tiger-striped one purred in his ear. He hadn't worked up to stroking them yet, but she hoped that would only be a matter of time; animals were supposed to be good therapy, as well as being fun.

Even the kittens, it seemed, couldn't distract her completely from Mike's problem. He needed help too badly for her to ignore it long, especially when he was right there beside her! He'd helped her when she was hurting; why in God's Name wouldn't he let her help him? She hadn't planned on saying anything, but--"Mike, you must know I'm willing--eager!--to do anything in my power for you."

"I do know," he said. "Blast it, Joanie, you can't think I enjoy feeling this way--afraid of intimacy with any of you!"

"I don't think that at all," she said quietly. "I just wish I could convince you--you must know you can't contaminate us. You're Sealed, Shayan can't corrupt you! Sis and I both know it feels that way, but being victimized doesn't make you any less of a person."

He was silent so long she didn't think he was going to answer, but eventually he said, "Intellectually, I understand that. It's my feelings that're the problem."

"Yes, they are." Cortin paused. "Have you considered taking the advice you gave me once? Offer the hurt to God. You're Sealed to the Protector, His priest as well as Jeshua's; if you ask, I'm sure one or both Aspects will help you gladly."

"I've done that, of course. So far it hasn't worked." He glanced at her, then looked down at the kitten. "Joanie, it's not just what Shayan did to me. That's most of it, but . . ."

Cortin frowned. "What Ivan was saying about the Protector?"

"Yeah."

"I'm scared of the Empire myself--but if it does produce the Protector, I'd have to change my opinion." She sighed. "I'm not sure whether I like the idea or not, but if that's the way it works out, I'll have to accept the

fact. So will you."

Odeon nodded grimly. She was acting Protector, so he couldn't argue that; if the true Protector came from the Empire, he would have to accept Him or Her, and by extension, His or Her place of origin. "Should I start studying the Empire, then, like Ivan did?"

Cortin cocked her head, thoughtful, then she nodded. "It might not be a bad idea at that. I don't have any cosmic hunches or anything, but if he's right, we should be prepared."

"Okay. It might actually be interesting."

Cortin smiled. "I'll settle for that. Between study and little Orange there, you may be combat-ready in time for the convent defense."

"I hope so. But she's Tangerine, not Orange." Odeon's lips twitched in a near-smile as he kept the kitten from crawling into the sleeve of his tunic. "I'll work it out, Joanie--just give me time."

"All I can, but we know there isn't much, and I will not have someone under my command going into combat in that condition. If you haven't straightened out by noon Tuesday, either you let me try unity or you're on the inactive list until you do recover."

"Permanently, you mean," Odeon said bleakly. "After Wednesday, if you remember, His Majesty has ordered me out of action."

"Of course I remember," Cortin said. "Mike, please believe I don't want to hold you back--but I won't let you go into action with almost no chance of survival unless there's absolutely no choice."

"I understand."

22. Sara

Saturday, 21 March 2572 CE

Blackfeather was still apprehensive when she arrived at Harmony Lodge. She'd been met at the airport by a staff car driven by a young man who introduced himself as Lieutenant Charles Powell, Colonel Cortin's aide, though he looked too young to drive, much less be an Enforcement officer. He'd helped with her luggage, then driven her silently but efficiently to the Palace Complex, gotten her through the formalities of a temporary pass, and brought her to the Lodge's main entrance, near the front of the estate.

Servants approached as Powell opened the door for her and helped her out of the car. "They'll take your luggage to your room, Miss Blackfeather," he said. "Her Excellency and Captain Odeon are waiting in her office; I'm to escort you to them immediately."

"I would prefer to clean up first."

"Sorry, Miss Blackfeather," Powell said, not sounding at all regretful. "Her Excellency was most specific; if you will come this way, please."

Young or not, Blackfeather thought, he had the false-polite presumption of an Enforcement veteran. Still, what else could she expect from an Inquisitor's lackey? "Very well, Lieutenant, take me to Her Excellency."

Moments later, Powell showed her into a large office with Cortin seated behind the desk and a tall, grim-looking scar-faced man who had to be Captain Odeon standing to Cortin's left at a stiff parade-rest.

Cortin rose as the reporter entered. "Thank you for coming here first, Miss Blackfeather. While I'm sure you would have preferred to bathe and have a brief rest before meeting my team, we have a compelling reason to've asked you here. Captain Odeon assures me it will take only seconds, then Lieutenant Powell will show you to your room."

Despite her irritation, Blackfeather was intrigued. "What reason, Your Excellency?"

It was Odeon who answered. "Something your . . . patron . . . wanted me to do. You don't remember that you were there when he . . . made it possible for me, but you'll remember once it's done. It won't hurt at all, and it'll only take a few seconds, as Colonel Cortin said. It'd be easier on me if you make eye contact, but that isn't really necessary."

Although Blackfeather normally had no interest in making anything easy for an Enforcement killer, there was something in Odeon's expression that made her waver; she stared into his pale blue eyes.

The promised seconds later, she collapsed in shock, to be caught by strong arms. Larry was Shayan, and he'd had her under compulsions to do things she never would have dreamed of on her own, and he'd done things to her body that were horrible, and she'd enjoyed them and what he'd done with his changes, and oh dear God the horror he'd done to the man who'd helped her in spite of what had been done to him and-- "Sis!" she heard Cortin snap.

"I am here, Colonel," a soft voice said. "Miss Blackfeather?" A pause. "Miss Blackfeather?"

"Go 'way."

"I am a medic. With your permission, I can give you something for shock. Otherwise, I can treat you only with warmth and quiet."

Drugs were bad . . . but the horror of these sudden disclosures was worse. "Do what you think best," she managed.

An immediate needleprick startled her; the quick blackness that followed came as a distinct relief.

Cortin watched Pritchett carry the reporter out, Chang accompanying them, then she turned to Odeon. He looked tired and a little shaken, but nowhere near as bad as he had after Shayan's "lesson". "Are you all right, Mike?"

"I will be, after a nap." Odeon rubbed his temples. "He said the operation would be nothing compared to the lesson, and he was right--but it was rough enough. I don't have the kind of strength he does."

"You're a human, not a fallen angel," Cortin said drily. "I was thinking about emotionally, though--you don't look quite as wound up as you have been."

"Not quite," Odeon admitted. "I do feel a bit more human, now I've made some constructive use of what he put me through. My studies are helping, too, but . . ." He shook his head. "I'm not back to normal, no."

"Close enough for unity? I'm still convinced that's what you need."

Odeon thought for a moment, then shook his head again. "No, I don't think so. I'd like it, but I'm still afraid of

touching you. Give me another day or two of Tangerine and studies, though, and I think I'll be okay."

Cortin looked at him curiously. "Really? A kitten and studying the place our ancestors fled from seem like odd therapy. On the other hand, I'm not about to argue with anything that works."

"Truth to tell, I'm surprised how much the studies, especially, do help." Odeon rubbed the scar across his lips, unsure of himself. "I'm just scratching the surface, of course--can't do much else with nothing but comm intercepts and what's left of the records the Founders kept--but even this early, I'm starting to develop respect for the Imperials. Maybe a little bit of liking, too."

Cortin's expression became quizzical. "That's pretty fast, isn't it? Especially for you?"

"Faster than I'd expect, yeah." Odeon paused, frowning. "I'm not even as upset as I was yesterday about the Protector maybe coming from there."

Cortin grinned. "I'd be looking forward to contact instead of it scaring me if I could believe that; at least then I'd know for sure it couldn't possibly be me. And the Empire'd be less likely to attack us if one of their own became our ruler. Did those ambiguous prophecies Ivan mentioned say anything about the Protector's relationship to the Great King?"

"Nothing I could make any sense out of, though Ivan might be able to. Unfortunately--for me; fortunately for him--Shayan never touched his mind, so I won't be able to check with him till he gets back from Archangel. As for the Empire attacking us--" Odeon smiled briefly, "I don't think I'd waste time worrying about it. They've got a whole new Sector full of non-humans to cope with, as of three years ago; I can't see them wasting resources on a mere dozen planets."

"If Ivan's right, we'll find out soon enough, and frankly, that's a subject I'd rather avoid as long as possible. What's the verdict on Miss Blackfeather?"

"About what he said," Odeon replied. "She's in shock right now, but I got the feeling she's pretty resilient; she should be settled down in a few hours. And she's basically a good person; outside his compulsions, she hasn't committed more than the normal venial sins. She's confessed them, too, as of just before her flight left New Rome, and been forgiven. By him, but as he pointed out to me, the sacrament's validity doesn't depend on the priest."

"And acts committed under compulsion are chargeable to the compellor, not the compelled. Other than that?"

"I think I could get to like her. She's intelligent, honest, and given the chance I think she'd have a decent sense of humor. No more devout than usual, which is hardly surprising considering her patron; if anything, I'm surprised she's as devout as she is. After the shock she just got, she may even be willing to listen to us about the Protector."

"And be Sealed, become part of His staff?"

"I'd bet so. Probably not immediately, though I think we should let her attend services."

Cortin frowned briefly, then nodded. "If Sis agrees. I'm not sure how Blackfeather will react with her background, though. She can't possibly be used to public nudity, much less anything like the Protector's celebration."

"She was Shayan's mistress," Odeon said drily. "He's taken her to Hell, though only his palace--we might both be surprised what she's seen. And she's adaptable."

* * * * *

Blackfeather wasn't feeling particularly adaptable when she woke from Chang's drug; she was still too shaken by what she'd found out when Odeon had released the compulsions that had held her for so long. It was a relief to find a woman sitting beside her bed--and almost a relief that the woman wore Enforcement gray, with a medic's specialty badge. "You're the one who gave me the shot?" she asked as she sat up.

"I am. Medic-Lieutenant Eleanor Chang, otherwise called Piety or Sis. I regret that your welcome to our home was so traumatic, though the drug should have helped. We have waited lunch, in case you cared to join us."

To Blackfeather's astonishment, the medic's words made her realize she was hungry--and the idea of eating with Enforcement troopers was more attractive than not. After what Odeon had suffered to help her, she was willing to believe there might really be more than talk to their motto of "We Serve, to Protect". She might not manage to feel protected just yet, but at least she no longer felt threatened. "Do I have time to clean up a bit, Lieutenant?"

"Of course. Colonel Cortin has asked me to apologize for her earlier insistence on meeting you immediately, and hopes you will understand and forgive her."

"Let's just say I'll withhold judgement until I find out more. Though . . . I can't deny I'm grateful to Captain Odeon."

"He is a good man, Miss Blackfeather, a priest of both Jeshua and the Protector. He is also, though he would probably laugh at the term, a wise man. He is, however, deeply troubled by the Hell-King's touch, so if he should seem wary of you, please realize it is nothing at all personal."

"I think I can manage that," Blackfeather said. She went into the bathroom to take care of her needs, then emerged to dress. When she was done, Chang led her to the dining room--where she was astonished to find three young children munching on cookies, and an apologetic-looking Colonel of Enforcement.

"They were hungry," Cortin said. "I'm afraid I'm not as strict as I should be--but they did want to see you. Do you mind?"

"Not at all," Blackfeather said. She'd never been all that fond of children; on the other hand, she did know they were humanity's future, and fewer than a replacement number, here in the Systems, were being born. "They aren't yours, I know; more company?"

"Not exactly." Cortin studied the reporter. "If I give you some background information, will you treat it as confidential until I say you can publish it? That should be less than a week."

"Of course!"

"I'll brief you while we're eating, then."

* * * * *

When the meal was over, Blackfeather was full, but scarcely aware of what she'd eaten. Taken as a whole Cortin's revelations, even delivered in the unemotional tone of what she'd called it, a briefing, were a shock. Blackfeather had anticipated or guessed at parts, which along with her training helped her conceal that shock, but didn't lessen it. Especially since she remembered that Larry had expected and intended her to become part of the Protector's staff, opposing him.

She didn't want to go into that right now, though. A nice safe neutral topic would be better . . . if she could think of one, and something touching her ankle provided the perfect subject when she bent down to pick up the tiny culprit. "Children, and now a kitten--not at all what I expected when I got your invitation, Excellency."

"More normal and civilized, right?" Cortin smiled. "I'm not offended, Miss Blackfeather, so you needn't look defensive. Until recently, I was careful to conceal such things; a reputation can be most useful to an Inquisitor. Since the situation's changed, I can let the truth be known." She grimaced. "And since I've found out myself what the truth is, which was a shock at times."

"I can sympathize," Blackfeather said with feeling. "All these years I've thought I was free . . ."

"And I thought I was immune to love--free in a different way. But I'm glad I was wrong." Cortin looked around the table at her Family, smiling. "In my admittedly biased opinion, you won't find a better group of people in the entire Kingdom Systems, and I couldn't be more delighted that they adopted me. I'm sorry Mike had to break your conditioning so abruptly, but I hope that having it broken will let you enjoy your stay here."

"It'll make it possible, at least," Blackfeather said. "What I'm sorry about is what he had to go through to help me."

"I was simply doing my duty, Miss Blackfeather," Odeon said, startling her. "I had no choice, and given the same circumstances, I'd have to try doing it again. Though I'm not sure I'd be able to, a second time."

"Since I don't think I could have done it the first time," Blackfeather said, "I certainly couldn't fault you for that! And duty or not, I am grateful, and I feel I owe you a debt."

"No debt," Odeon said. "You don't owe me--us--any more than you owe anyone else you write about. All we ask for is objective observation and reporting, in spite of the fact that most of us are Enforcement."

"My word on it," Blackfeather said. "I can't promise favorable reports, but they'll be as honest as I can make them."

* * * * * Monday afternoon, 23 March 2572

Cortin grinned as Odeon entered her room and took one of the armchairs, his lap immediately occupied by the kitten who'd become his almost-inseparable companion whenever he was available. "I know it's a day earlier than the deadline I gave you, but--"

Odeon chuckled. "I'm fine, Joanie, between Tanj here and the studying." He rubbed the kitten's ears, smiling at her loud purr. "She's a little darling, and I'm almost afraid to say I'm really enjoying my research, as much as I got teased for it in school. I don't think that's what you called me in for, though."

"To find out exactly how you're doing, yes; the details of your research, no. And I hadn't expected you to bring your little friend along."

"Who brought her? I can't keep her away! Don't worry, though, she won't interfere."

"And just how do you know that?"

"A trip to the New Eden in the wee hours this morning, when I started feeling interested for the first time since Shayan worked on me. If I recall my explorations here correctly, you were with Chuck and Dave, Sis and Betty with the other two, and I didn't want to wake anyone. I also didn't want to take Tanj, but you know

what a sucker I am--even worse than you, where kids and animals are concerned. So she went along, in my pocket. She watched, the first couple of times, then went to sleep. A pillow on the floor, if you're curious."

"Not primarily about that," Cortin said. "May I be nosy and ask how many you enjoyed?"

Uncharacteristically, Odeon flushed. "Uh--I can't match you, but--all the ladies who were awake. You know what it's like when you've been dry for a while."

"I sure do." Cortin tried to look stern, but failed miserably and gave up, grinning instead. "I should chew you out for not waking me, Captain. I assume, however, that you're back to normal and willing to demonstrate?"

"Willing and eager, Excellency."

* * * * *

Both of them were far more relaxed when they dressed for dinner, though Tangerine meowed plaintively at Odeon and tried to climb his trouser leg. He shrugged, grinning at Cortin, and sat down. "Part of her routine this time of day, I'm afraid," he apologized as the kitten jumped to his shoulder and began nibbling at his earlobe.

"Has you pretty well trained, doesn't she?" Cortin said, chuckling.

"Uh-huh." Odeon dug into a pocket, unwrapped and handed the kitten a piece of something Cortin couldn't identify but Tangerine obviously could; she hopped down to his lap with a sound halfway between a purr and a growl, eating her treat. Odeon let her finish, then put her on the floor. "I'm cleared for the convent defense, then."

Cortin nodded. "You are. I just wish I were, too."

* * * * *

The following evening, Cortin went to Odeon's room shortly before supper. "Mike, got a minute?"

"Any time. What's up?"

"Not that, this close to supper--will you and Sis be holding services this evening?"

"Of course. Are you going to bring Blackfeather?"

Cortin hesitated. "I don't know," she said at last. "She'll have to be exposed to it sooner or later, but I'm not sure an evening before the team goes into combat is the right time. If she reacts badly to either the nudity or the ceremony itself, it might make things harder on them."

"She's going in too," Odeon pointed out.

Cortin grimaced. "I know, blast it! She can and I can't--so you tell me which would be less damaging."

"In your place, I'd brief her, then let her decide whether she thinks she can accept it as a religious function." Odeon grinned. "As I may've said, I don't think anyone who's spent time in Hell is going to be shocked by anything as mild as that--my only hesitation is about how she'll react otherwise."

"Understood. All right, that's what I'll do."

* * * * *

In spite of Cortin's briefing, Blackfeather had trouble at first accepting a nude man and woman as real priests conducting a real religious rite. That changed quickly, though, in large part because of the Family's obvious acceptance of precisely that, and their equally-obvious devotion to the Protector. She didn't--yet, anyway--share that devotion, and if it hadn't been for Larry's certainty that the Protector was real, she thought it unlikely she'd have believed what was going on was an act of worship.

But Larry--no, she chided herself; she ought to start thinking of him by his real name--Shayan was certain of the Protector's existence and imminent arrival. Or . . . Blackfeather looked sharply at Cortin. Her lover hadn't said it in so many words, but now that she thought back, he'd certainly given the impression that Cortin was the Protector!

Even though it had seemed pointless at the time, Blackfeather now found herself wishing she'd paid more attention to prophecies of the Final Coming. Nothing she could remember from them said Cortin couldn't be the Protector instead of simply the Herald, which was disconcerting enough. A lot of things, in fact, pointed to it, now that she began to analyze everything she'd heard and read about Cortin and her unprecedented, rapid rise from being a curiosity as the only female Enforcement officer to High King's Inquisitor and Archduchess--not to mention her tumbling of some of Enforcement's strictest regulations, such as Special Ops' lack of close family, not only with impunity but with the backing of all the Sovereigns. And working for drastic changes in the social and religious systems with divine sanction that became obvious every time she said Mass.

Cortin wasn't reacting the way Blackfeather would expect from a divine incarnation, though. Desire for revenge after rape and maiming was a human thing the Protector should be beyond. So was becoming an Inquisitor, nothing like Jeshua's forgiveness of His enemies and His gentle nature. Still, she thought, there was precedent, if you went back to the First Testament; she'd never been comfortable with things like the innocent Job being tormented simply as a demonstration to Shayan, or the she-bears being sent to kill forty-two children whose only offense had been to tease Elisha about being bald. Cortin at least confined the punitive parts of her Inquisitorial attentions to criminals, and her truthsense let her be certain who those criminals actually were.

23. Raid

Wednesday, 25 March 2572

The next morning, when Powell offered to help her into lightweight Enforcement body armor, Blackfeather accepted gladly. She'd found out the previous evening, at the same time she'd found out what the term 'unity' meant to those who were Sealed, that his Enforcement commission was another of the exceptions surrounding Cortin; he was barely seventeen, and his pose of being a veteran was exactly that, a pose. But he was no rookie inside, and that unity had given her considerable respect for the Protector's youngest Sealed.

"How does that feel, Sara?" he asked when she was suited up. "I can adjust it some, if it doesn't fit quite right."

Blackfeather moved experimentally, then grinned at him. "It's fine, Chuck. Now what about Sis?"

"She doesn't need armor; she won't be going in until after the action's over. Mike doesn't want her going in at all, but she says if he can, so can she, and he couldn't argue that. At least she's promised this'll be the last time till after she has the baby."

"And the Colonel? Even if His Majesty has forbidden her, I'm surprised she'd stay out of her team's--and Family's--first official action."

"She doesn't have any choice," Powell said regretfully. "It's a legal order and her Enforcement oath is valid; disobeying would be a sin, and that's something none of the Sealed can do. If we had reason to believe any of the ones who tortured her would be among the attackers, she'd be free to go with us, but none of the information we have even hints at that. So she's stuck here."

"In her place, I'd hate that," Blackfeather said, feeling more sympathy for the Inquisitor than she'd have thought possible a few days ago. "At least we can make sure we give her a complete report."

* * * * *

The only thing that helped Cortin's frustration at being kept out of the convent defense was saying Mass, and that only helped for the brief time it was going on. By the time it was over, though, she'd come to one conclusion: His Majesty had ordered her not to get into the action, but he hadn't said anything about not going to the Palace communications center to listen to the tactical radio!

But following the defense that way was less informative than she'd hoped. She wasn't familiar enough with the terrain to visualize the deployment, which made movement orders impossible to follow. About all she could be sure of was that the Royals were winning, even though they were taking heavier casualties than she liked or had expected. She couldn't help praying that none of her people were among the dead and wounded, though she felt a little uncomfortable asking for that sort of special consideration; if the casualties weren't from her team, they had others who'd care as strongly about them.

At last it sounded like the fighting must be about over; Bradford was ordering the prisoners taken to a holding area and calling in the medevac units. As further transmissions showed things were winding up, she decided she might as well go back to the Lodge and make one final check of her preparations before prisoners started arriving. She was thanking the communications techs for their courtesy when Bradford's voice again came from the radio. "Palace Com, this is Strike Leader. Request Azrael be contacted and asked to join us at her earliest convenience."

"Azrael is on scene, Strike Leader," the tech said. "One moment, please."

Cortin took the microphone he offered. "Azrael here, Strike Leader. What's the problem?"

"Prisoner evaluation. We have some here who present unexpected problems, and I would appreciate your expertise."

"Unexpected problems?" That didn't sound too likely, Cortin thought--Brad and Dave both had more specialty-time than she did, though she had to admit that her position had probably given her a wider variety of cases. Still, likely or not, she wasn't about to argue with anything that would get her out into the field, however briefly. "I'll be there as soon as I can find transportation. Azrael out."

To her surprise, fifteen minutes later she was airborne and well on her way to the convent. His Majesty had both ground and air transportation available at no notice, of course, and as one of the King's Own she was allowed to use elements of the Royal Fleet--but she hadn't expected to be able to use one of the alert craft!

The pilot circled the battlefield, more to avoid throwing dirt and rocks on the wounded than to let her observe--though it did that as well--following a ground controller's orders to land on the convent lawn near the temporary prisoner holding pen. Before, she'd always been in combat gear, exiting a helicopter; this was easier, in her service uniform, though she did have a little trouble holding onto the wide-brimmed hat. When

she was clear and the copter had lifted off, moving back several hundred meters to wait for her, she took another look at the battlefield from this more familiar perspective. It was clearer to her this way, a bigger scene of carnage than she'd imagined it could be, and she found herself appalled at the unnecessary damage and loss of life. Compassionate Mother of God, what could the Brothers hope to gain from all this? At least the convent showed no major signs of damage, nothing worse than a few bullet pocks, and the Blue Sisters were working with Enforcement medics, as usual, to help the wounded.

She heard the rustle of heavy cloth behind her, and turned to see Bradford--who looked surprisingly comfortable, for a senior officer, in battle gear--and a nun she supposed to be Reverend Mother Superior Mary Gabriel. She returned Bradford's salute, bowed to the nun. "I hope none of the sisters were hurt."

"No, thank God," Bradford said. "We were able to warn them, then ambush the terrorists far enough away the Sisters were never in any real danger. Would Your Excellency care for a copy of my report?"

"Thank you, Colonel, but it won't be necessary; Team Azrael will brief me. I would appreciate it if you have time to visit Harmony Lodge this evening, though. Ah--were any of Team Azrael hurt?"

"Not seriously," Mother Gabriel said. "Lieutenant Degas was hit in the side, Lieutenant Powell in the leg. They are in no danger, and are able to travel, but I think it would be best if Your Excellency permitted them to remain here for three or four days."

"Whatever you think best, Mother Superior. May I see them?"

"There would be no point, Excellency; they are still under anesthetic. I will be glad to tell them you asked for them, however." She smiled, more warmly than Cortin had learned to expect from healer to Inquisitor. "I understand we have Your Excellency to thank for Enforcement's timely intervention and the welfare of our patients."

"And Lieutenant Powell," Cortin said. "He's the one who infiltrated the Brothers and came back with the original information that let me know what questions to ask."

Mother Gabriel frowned briefly at that reminder, then her expression smoothed. "It has become obvious Your Excellency does God's work with His full approval, whatever I may think personally of the means employed. We are grateful for your help, and we would appreciate your blessing."

That was a perfectly understandable attitude from a healer, Cortin thought. Raising her hand, she drew the Triune's symbol in the air. "May all three Aspects of God protect and guide you and the holy Sisters."

"And pray for the Protector's appearance," Odeon said, approaching. "The prisoners are ready for you, Colonel."

"Thank you, Captain. If you'll excuse us, Mother Superior, I'd like Colonel Bradford to accompany us." When Mother Gabriel nodded, she and Bradford followed Odeon toward the holding pen. Her second-in-command had a bloody bandage around his left bicep, but it didn't seem to bother him, and Mother Gabriel hadn't mentioned it, so it was probably no more than a flesh wound--not worth worrying about, so she didn't comment on it. Instead, she asked, "How did Blackfeather react? Did she give you any trouble?"

"Not at all. In fact, if she hadn't called a warning, Chuck would be dead instead of wounded, and she's the one who gave him first aid."

"Oh? Quite a change from her former attitude, isn't it?"

"Considerable," Odeon agreed. "Enough that I told her I'd ask if she could listen while you interviewed the prisoners. She won't interfere, I'm sure of it."

"In that case, all right." Cortin stopped while they were still out of earshot of the prisoners. "Ask her to join us, then go get Tiny; I think the two of you flanking me ought to provide a certain amount of incentive for the Brothers to answer my questions."

Odeon grinned. "Will do--I like that idea."

As he left, Cortin turned to Bradford. "Okay, Brad, what's this about unexpected problems? You and Dave should be able to handle anything that came up in the field as well as I could. Especially with your new truthsense."

"In that respect, yes," Bradford acknowledged. "But he and I think what we've found out is going to take your authority to deal with. I don't want to prejudice you, though, so I'll let you do your own questioning and deciding."

Cortin was both puzzled and intrigued by his statements. Something unusual was definitely going on here, and since she'd be finding out in a few minutes anyway, she decided not to push Bradford on that subject. She didn't see Odeon on the way back yet, so she changed the subject. "How was the inspection trip?"

"Better than we expected," Bradford said. "A lot of Archangel's public buildings survived better than we had any right to expect--not intact, but not needing major repairs, either--so there are facilities available with minimum expense for both Archducal Enforcement and Strike Force HQ. The Governor's Mansion should make you a decent Archducal Palace, and some of the hotels can be modified for Family living."

"What about the people? They must have gotten some idea of what's going to be happening."

"Just speculation, so far, but what I heard was pretty accurate--and popular. I'd say His Majesty knew what he was doing when he picked you a fief."

Cortin grinned. "From everything I've seen, His Majesty usually does. I'm glad to hear it went so well--did Ivan come back with you?"

"Yes--and he's come up with a 'territorial' insignia I'd love to wear."

Cortin would have pursued that, but there was no time; Odeon was returning, with Blackfeather and Pritchett close behind him, and Bain was approaching from the holding pen. She moved forward, signalling Bain to stop. When the group had joined him, now within earshot of the prisoners, she asked, "Have you done any preliminaries, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, ma'am, but with some exceptions Colonel Bradford has probably told you about, nothing very productive. None of the hard-cores want to volunteer anything, and Mother Superior won't hear of an Inquisitor working on a wounded man under her care."

"Of course not." Cortin couldn't blame her for that, though getting immediate information would have been helpful. "All right, bring them over one at a time. It shouldn't take more than two or three questions to separate them--though with you and Colonel Bradford talking about unexpected problems, I could be wrong."

"Not exactly," Bain said. "Best you see for yourself, though; to me, it's at least close to the worst of the Brothers' atrocities."

Cortin frowned, more puzzled than ever. A Brothers' atrocity she hadn't heard about seemed impossible, but Dave believed what he was saying, and Brad was nodding agreement. Well, she'd learn about it in a few minutes, from the ones who'd done it. "All right, have the first one brought over."

Bain turned to face the holding pen and gave the appropriate hand signals, then turned back; moments later, troopers brought the first prisoner out. He looked about 45, his expression frightened, but seeming hopeful as well--not at all a normal reaction, and it puzzled her. She frowned to herself, but decided her curiosity would have to wait. "Were you in charge of this raid?" she asked.

The man shook his head. "No, Lady," he said respectfully. "I wasn't in charge; I'm not even a Brother."

"True. Well, then, do you have any information you think I might find useful?"

The man shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Lady."

Cortin frowned again, this time openly. He was afraid, yes--but his fear seemed to be of the idea she'd think him a Brother or have any information, which was interesting. And worth pursuing, even though she was supposedly here to evaluate prisoners. "Not likely that you have any information, or not likely I'd find it useful?"

"Either, Lady. I'm an honest farmer. Or was, till those bas--uh, Brothers--killed my wife and kidnapped my little girl. They said they'd kill her too, unless . . . unless I helped them." His shoulders slumped. "They've probably killed her anyway--or worse. But I can't take that chance."

Cortin took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Dave was right, she thought; this was one of the worst of the Brothers' atrocities, and it made her coldly furious. Forcing outsiders to help in horror-raids by threats to their families went beyond her conception--until now--of even the Brothers' depravity. "I believe you," she said, and showed him the back of one hand. "Any Inquisitor who wears this mark knows when someone's telling the truth, and no one who hasn't committed a crime will be punished. You'll be taken to the Detention Center, though, for detailed questioning. Enforcement will use any information you can give us to try to rescue your daughter, so be as thorough as you can; sometimes a tiny detail you think useless can be the key. After that, I'm afraid, you'll be kept in protective custody--" She broke off at his expression. "Protective custody, I said! Think, man--if we turn you loose, the Brothers can still use that threat against you. There's no guarantee what'll happen with you and whoever else is in the same situation in custody, but there's no doubt what'll happen if you're not. And I'll see it's as comfortable for you as it can be. Do you know how many others are in your situation?"

The man shrugged. "Maybe half of this group; I couldn't say how many anywhere else. You will save Catherine?"

"We'll do our best," Cortin promised. "In fact-- Colonel Bradford?"

"Yes, Excellency?"

"Can you arrange for a special Enforcement task force devoted to finding these . . . hostages?"

"As soon as we return to base, Excellency. And may I suggest you offer these men employment in Archangel under Strike Force protection until their families can be rescued, or confirmed dead?"

"Mmm. It would give them something to do and provide income . . ." She turned to the man. "Would you be interested in that sort of offer?"

"Yes, if it was something I could do--better than sitting around sweating it out."

"Reconstructing and fixing up some prewar buildings," Bradford told him. "Headquarters for His Majesty's Strike Force, and Her Grace's Archducal Palace and Enforcement headquarters."

The man looked from Bradford to Cortin. "I can do that, Lady. Thank you. And I believe you will find Catherine, if she's still alive."

"As I said, we'll do our best." Her job-related questioning over with this man, she thought it reasonable to ask about his odd phrasing. "Now--why do you keep calling me Lady?"

"I can't think of any other good term, Lady."

"Interesting," Cortin said slowly. "I have plenty of titles, yet you pick one of the few I can't claim. Who or what do you think I am?"

"Not think, Lady Protector--I know." The man knelt, bowing his head. "I've just confessed to the Priest-Captain--may I have Your blessing?"

Cortin looked at Odeon, feeling a twinge of dismay. This man honestly believed she was the Protector, not just His Herald--and that was a frightening idea, one she wanted to deny. Odeon was nodding slightly, though, and Jeshua had told her not to deny it if she were called either Herald or Protector--so she blessed the man, then raised him to his feet, disturbed by the expression of open worship on his face. If she couldn't deny being the Protector, she supposed she'd have to learn to live with that attitude--but she didn't think it would be easy.

"One last favor, Lady, if You don't mind?" the man said hesitantly.

"What is it?"

"I'd . . . like to pay You the proper respects, if I knew how. The right ceremonies, any special devotions . . . You know."

That was something Cortin could understand and agree with; even if the man was misdirected, piety was important to the Protector's success. And if one Aspect told her not to deny being its object, surely the Triune would take it as it was intended . . . She turned to Odeon. "Will you and Lieutenant Chang see to that, Captain?"

"With pleasure, Excellency," Odeon said, then turned to the man. "Want a cartridge, until Lieutenant Chang and I can brief you? I usually carry a couple of spares."

"Cartridge? Oh!" The man's initial puzzlement turned to eagerness. "Yes, Captain, please. Does that mean you're Her priest as well as Jeshua's?"

"Lieutenant Chang and I, yes; Her priests'll generally be working in pairs." Odeon dug into a pocket and handed the man one of Joanie's holy-medal equivalents. "This isn't as helpful as the Communion of Promise, of course, and certainly not up to the Sealing, but we'll get those to you too, as soon as we can."

"I appreciate that, Father." The man turned to Cortin, genuflected. "Thank You, Lady."

"My pleasure," Cortin replied--realizing, to her surprise, that it really was. She turned to Bain. "See that he and the rest who turn out to be press-ganged are interviewed, thoroughly but courteously, then interned according to the terms Colonel Bradford and I discussed."

"Of course, Excellency." Bain turned to the man. "Shall we go? Her Excellency has a lot of work to do."

As they left, Cortin signalled for the next prisoner to be brought. This one also turned out to be a conscript, but the next two were actual Brothers, and the one after that looked like Shannon, though his eyes told her he wasn't; he was the leader, despite his attempts to deny it. She had him held separately, to be taken to the Lodge, then continued the evaluation.

She'd lost count of how many she'd questioned, but only a few remained in the holding pen when she realized she'd seen this one before, in far different circumstances. Smiling grimly, she rubbed the backs of her hands as though the Seals on their backs were still scars.

"Colonel?" Odeon said softly.

"He helped put the originals there," Cortin said, just as softly. "I recognize him; I want him to recognize me too, and I look a lot different from the way they left me." The man's face was burned as deeply into her mind as the Brothers' marks had been into her hands; while this one hadn't been the leader, he'd had no hesitation in taking part in the massacre, or in helping to beat, rape, and maim her. She planned to really enjoy this first truly personal part of her revenge, she thought as the guards brought him to a halt facing her. "You know me," she said, making sure he saw the backs of her hands. "You helped inflict the originals of these, among other things; I'm sure you remember."

The Brother's lip curled. "I remember all right, Bitch. Next time you won't get off that easy--the Raidmaster says we're going to have real Inquisitors of our own soon, with His Holiness' blessing--so we can free the Systems of you and your blasphemies!" He grinned at her, not pleasantly. "And dear God, how I'd love to see them playing with you!"

"If you enjoy threatening, go ahead," Cortin said, a little surprised at herself. She'd thought she might be frightened if--or rather when--she came to confront her torturers again; she was pleased to find that this time, at least, that wasn't the case. She was more disturbed by the idea of trained terrorist Inquisitors working with Shayan's backing. At the moment, though-- "I doubt you'll be around to know if your threats are realized, much less enjoy the results. Lieutenant Pritchett?"

"Yes, Excellency?"

Odeon's voice interrupted, urgently. "By Your Excellency's leave!"

Cortin glanced at him in surprise. "What is it, Captain?"

"This is one of the Brothers I also have a personal matter to settle with, Excellency. A severe beating of someone I love, in addition to the other things done to her."

So that was his personal reason for joining the Strike Force! It'd taken her long enough to learn it, Cortin thought, since she hadn't thought it a good idea to ask him. "In that case, Captain, yours had best take precedence. Just make sure, please, that he isn't damaged too badly for questioning."

"No worse than second stage," Odeon promised. He'd like to do more, but he wouldn't interfere with either her job or her revenge. "Lieutenant Bain has agreed to monitor, to assure that."

"In that case, he's in your custody; secure him in Suite Bravo when you're finished, and inform me. Lieutenant Pritchett, please provide any assistance Captain Odeon requires."

"With pleasure, Excellency." Pritchett reached out a big hand and pulled the Brother toward him, grinning

widely. "Come with me, little man. We've got some real interesting plans for you." He turned to Cortin. "We'll turn him over to guards for the trip to the Lodge, Your Excellency, then be right back."

"Very good, Lieutenant." When they left, Cortin continued the separation, but her primary concern remained her former tormentor and what he'd said about the Brothers soon having real Inquisitors of their own. They'd always had amateur Inquisitors, of course, and occasionally--temporarily--a real one who'd gone rogue. That was something else she'd definitely have to question him about, but just the information she had so far was enough to disturb her deeply. Civil Inquisitors were necessary to investigate, and in many capital cases punish, crime. That was difficult enough, sometimes, even though crime for the most part was objective, not dependent on intent. Sin, on the other hand, was dependent on intent, and the ancient Terran Holy Inquisition had proven that religious Inquisitors were more likely to drive people away from God than bring them to Him.

Which, she thought grimly, would serve Shayan's ends perfectly. She couldn't be certain why he wanted souls, but the fact that he did was beyond question. Any people his Church Inquisitors drove away from God would end up as his subjects in Hell--and if they were effective enough at that, there could be an Infernal population explosion.

Population explosion. Cortin frowned at that thought. If they were accepted, Families could, and hopefully would, provide that sort of increase in the Systems. Which would give Shayan a chance at the larger number, which would explain why there'd been nothing from the Vatican objecting to that part of what she was trying to do. Her theory might be wrong, she acknowledged, but it felt right, and she knew nothing that would contradict it. At least it was some sort of explanation, better than the total lack she'd had before.

* * * * *

Cortin joined her team for the return to Harmony Lodge, riding in a command van for what felt like the first time in years. It took longer than the Fleet helicopter would have, but by the time they got home, she'd been fully briefed on the action, and her opinion of Blackfeather had gone up several notches.

As they entered the outskirts of New Denver, she turned her attention to the reporter. "The convent raid ends the cover on the Strike Force, Sara. Their Majesties agree that news should be broken by a Sealed representative; as the only Sealed member of the press, and the only reporter who was there, you're the logical one to do so. At my request, you'll also be allowed to do the first stories about the existence of Family Cortin and the new Archduchy; no other reporters will be officially briefed until tomorrow morning. That should give you adequate time, I think."

"More than adequate," Blackfeather said. "Since I knew I'd be able to publish soon, those two stories are already written--but I hadn't expected that much of a lead. Thanks!"

"You've earned it. And thank you for saving Chuck's life."

Blackfeather shrugged. "I've changed my opinion of Enforcement, Colonel. Before Mike did what he did for me, I'd probably have enjoyed watching a trooper die, though I can't be sure since it never came up. I'm glad to find out that now I'm not like that." She shook her head, her expression rueful. "It seems my attitude's become exactly the opposite of what it was, in fact. I used to defend the Brothers, you know."

Cortin nodded. "I know, and say the troopers who were hurt or killed fighting them deserved what they got. The only thing I could find in your favor then was that you believed what you were saying."

"I couldn't do that now," Blackfeather said. "It's not just seeing Brothers and troopers in action for the first time, though that did help crystallize my new feelings. Mostly it's seeing the Family being a family, seeing the Special Ops troopers I thought were the worst playing with kids and kittens, and . . . well, the part I'm not

going to be able to write about because no one who hasn't at least been around it could possibly believe it. But being troopers--especially an Inquisitor--gives you a whole new kind of understanding."

"You liked being part of Dave, in particular?"

"Oddly enough, yes." Blackfeather hesitated. "They're all good men, but there's something special about Dave . . . something I have a hard time describing, even if I am a reporter. A special kind of idealism, maybe . . . tougher, not that any of them are soft . . ."

"I know what you mean," Cortin said, glancing around at the rest of the team and getting nods. Unity during sex was most intense between man and woman, but it was there between any Sealed; they'd all felt what Blackfeather was talking about, with her, Bain, or both.

"He reminds me of Larry, in a way," Blackfeather went on, surprising them. "So do you. Because in his own way, he's an idealist too--even though I'm not sure he knows that, or would believe it. An idealist who's turned cynical, soured against just about everything--but I believe there's still a tiny bit of him that wants the same things we do."

Chang gave the reporter an appraising look, then turned to Cortin. "I believe we may have a truly virtuous person among us, Joan. Not merely sinless, but virtuous--willing to believe the best of people, which I find surprising for a reporter."

"I doubt I'll be a reporter much longer," Blackfeather said. "What Sis calls a virtue isn't, in my particular field; once I've filed these three stories, backing Enforcement, the Families, and Colonel Cortin, I fully expect to be fired. So would any of you happen to know of any job openings for an ex-reporter?"

"How about historian?" Odeon asked. "We need one, with a reporter's training, while it's still early enough to get an accurate account of what's happening. The First and Second Testaments were written by groups, edited by others, and translated by still others; after that many opportunities for intentional or accidental change, we might not know what the originals really said." He made a wry face. "Yes, I believe everyone involved was inspired. As investigators, though, we all know humans are fallible--with or without inspiration. But they didn't have modern publishing; given a press run of ten or fifteen thousand, by one writer and in the original language, there'll always be a totally genuine version somewhere."

To Odeon's surprise, Blackfeather snickered. "You've got your historian, Mike--but if you believe a press run as low as ten or fifteen thousand, it's sure clear you're no publisher! On this particular subject, especially with Colonel Cortin involved, go up a couple of orders of magnitude. A million or million and a half copies wouldn't be an unreasonable estimate of sales, even at a price double or triple that of a standard book. A copy she autographed would be worth . . . well, even my imagination isn't quite that wild!"

"Even better," Odeon said.

"You do know, though, that it'll mean interviews to get everything you remember that has anything to do with Joan--and that the result won't leave you much, if any, privacy. You don't get a major social revolution by hiding the sort of personal behavior you're trying to encourage--even though other people may choose to do so."

"Sis and I figured as much," Odeon said. "We talked it over, between us and with the rest of the team, and it's necessary. There's going to be a lot written about what we're doing, one way or the other, and we're agreed one of them has to be accurate. So you'll get full cooperation."

"Including an Inquisitor's help," Bain said. "Colonel Bradford's the best you'll find at the memory-enhancing

techniques we use with cooperative subjects, but I'm no slouch; you may get more information than you can use."

"More than I can include, maybe," Blackfeather said, "but not more than I can use, if only as background." She turned to Cortin. "What about you, Colonel?"

Cortin grimaced and looked pleadingly at Odeon. "Do I have to, Mike?"

"You're my Family head, Archduchess, and Commanding Officer, not to mention the Protector's Herald; I can't say you have to. But I'd recommend it pretty strongly."

Cortin sighed. "Mike, for someone who claims to be a subordinate, you give the most convincing orders . . . all right, all right, I'll cooperate." She turned to Blackfeather. "I will, too. But I don't promise to like it--and you probably won't like what you hear if you think you need to go into what I do in my interrogations."

"I'd rather not, but I probably will." Blackfeather made a face. "Being both Larry's mistress and several Enforcement officers has given me a new perspective on that, too. Especially, as I may have mentioned before, being Dave."

Several of the team chuckled. "You did," Bain said, "and it was flattering--but if you want to be two of the best in the business, ask Brad and Ivan. I'm good, or I wouldn't be on Team Azrael; those two are second only to Joan."

"I'll have to ask, then, next time I see them," Blackfeather said.

"That should be tonight," Odeon said. "I invited Brad, and he said he'd pass it on to Ivan; if they possibly can, they'll both be at our home Communion service."

Blackfeather smiled. "Good!" Then she sobered, turning back to Cortin. "I don't like to mention this, Colonel, and I'll like getting involved with it even less, but the history should definitely include your work, too."

Cortin was silent. Blackfeather was right, inarguably so; the Protector whose Herald she was embodied Justice as well as Love, and Justice wasn't always pleasant. It could be, of course, when rewarding virtue, but punishment was usually pleasant only to the punished's victims or their survivors--never to the punished, seldom to observers, and only through God's Mercy was it satisfying to the punishers.

"Very well," she said at last. "You may have access to the films of my interrogations, and observe any you think necessary from now on. But I have to warn you, you won't find any of it enjoyable."

"I don't expect to," Blackfeather said. "My job's gotten me into unpleasant situations before, though, and I can cope. I think I should start with the one you and Mike have personal reasons to work on."

"You know our reasons?"

"I'm sure of yours--it was in the news enough--and I can guess at Mike's, yes."

"As you wish, then," Cortin said. "It's too late to get started tonight, though, and Brad and Ivan should be here any minute. Why not get your stories filed, then we'll take the rest of the night off?"

* * * * *

Their guests arrived while Blackfeather was still working. The Family adults greeted them warmly, but waited

for more till Blackfeather was finished and had rejoined them in the common-room. When she had, Cortin pointed to the new insignia on both men's collars. "Ivan, I know I told you to design a territorial emblem--but isn't that a bit presumptuous? And Brad, how come you're wearing it?"

Illyanov smiled. "It is not presumptuous at all, beloved, nor is it really territorial. I could think of nothing, so I prayed, and that night dreamed of this. We are the Protector's, after all; what more natural than that we should wear the sword and rose you and Michael chose for our first altar?"

"And as he said," Bradford continued, "it isn't really territorial. It didn't make much sense to us to have Sealed troopers limited to one jurisdiction, and Their Highnesses agreed. So did His Majesty when they approached him, and the other Sovereigns when King Mark approached them--because we were informed shortly after my return to the Palace that we are now extraterritorial. Not just Strike Force, but all Sealed troopers--so all of you need new insigne, which we've brought." He smiled, handing them out. "Ivan had several hundred made, for when the Protector manifests, but these are all we need for now. I sent some to Tony and Chuck, too, so they'll be in correct uniform when Mother Gabriel releases them."

"That was thoughtful of you--thanks." Cortin smiled, then glared at both of them. "One of you could have called me with a little advance warning, I should think! Isn't it bad enough that His Majesty keeps pulling this sort of surprise on me?"

"It is fun to surprise you when we have the chance," Illyanov said. "Would you deny us a bit of harmless entertainment?"

Cortin chuckled ruefully. "Put that way, of course not--how could I? But someday I may be able to pull the same thing on you, be warned!"

"We shall consider ourselves properly warned indeed," Illyanov agreed.

"Good enough." Cortin moved her shoulders uncomfortably, but maybe it would help the discomfort she still felt if she did talk about what had happened with the farm-folk this afternoon. "Until then, I need some moral support. Something scary happened while I was questioning the first conscript today--since you weren't all in earshot, and Ivan wasn't there at all, can I describe it?"

"Please," Illyanov said.

Cortin did. When the description was over, she said, "I can't really describe how it felt, though. He honestly believed I am the Protector, was worshipping me. I was told not to deny that identification, so I didn't--but dear God, it was frightening! And several of the others were almost as bad. Being treated like the Herald is awful enough; being treated like the Protector Herself is . . . I don't know, I don't have the right word. I don't think I'd like it even if I were Her. Or Him."

"Whether you did or not would have little bearing," Illyanov said. "God does not need to be worshipped; He--or She--requires it of us because it is we who need to worship, and if we do not worship God, we will worship someone or something less worthy."

"That makes sense," Cortin said. "It's not what I'd choose, but I've been frightened and embarrassed before, without a Family for support. I suppose I'll learn to live with it--I'll have to, since I don't have any choice."

"You also have the support of the rest of us who are Sealed," Illyanov said, leaning over to kiss her. "Would you like me--or us--to spend the night?"

"Either or both, any time--which you know. But what about your families?"

"Mine went directly to Archangel and is busy moving in, with Delia's help. Brad's, I believe, is preparing for the move."

"They are," Bradford said, "so I can't stay past Communion--I have to help, as long as I'm in town."

Cortin grinned, her mood lightening. "Too bad for you, Brad; that means Sara'll have to wait for unity with you. Though not with Ivan, if he's willing."

Both men bowed in the historian's direction, and Bradford spoke first. "I'm sorry to have to postpone something so delightful, but hopefully it won't have to be for long."

"I, on the other hand, will be pleased to join you as soon as you wish," Illyanov said, smiling.

Bain grinned. "Don't waste any time, Sara; grab him right after Communion."

Blackfeather was definitely attracted to the handsome Inquisitor-Colonel, but she wasn't used to such openness about sex yet; though she remembered the previous evening's post-Communion lovemaking clearly, it didn't seem quite real. Now she was being urged to make love to a man she'd barely met . . . at least she'd known the Family men, if only briefly . . .

Chang chuckled. "It is not difficult to see you find him attractive; with both of you Sealed, that is a strong indication you are compatible. Given that, what better way to become friends?"

Odd though it seemed, Blackfeather thought, that was reasonable. "After Communion, then, if that's agreeable."

"Most agreeable," Illyanov said. "Michael?"

"Just a minute," Cortin said. "Can I get a couple of quick updates first?"

"Of course."

"Thanks. Brad, what about the special rescue teams?"

"Being organized. I put Major Grunwald on it, so they should be ready to go in a week."

"Good! Sis, Mike--the press-ganged ones?"

"They are in the Detention Center's spare barracks," Chang said. "Dave and Mike heard confessions, then Mike got permission to say Mass a second time for them, and we gave them the Communion of Promise. I believe we shall also have to devise some additional forms of both public and private devotions."

"I suppose so." Cortin sighed. "Brad, do you have anyone who can handle that? None of us are liturgists."

"As it happens--" Everyone, Bradford included, laughed--"Inquisitor-Lieutenant Andrews at the Center is good, and would appreciate the challenge. I'll call him as soon as I get home. And this time I will warn you: he's one of those who believes you are the Protector, so you probably won't appreciate his efforts. But they'll be well-done."

Cortin grimaced. "As Ivan said, devotions are for the devotees, not the objects of that devotion. If He doesn't mind, I don't suppose I can. And I suppose I should take a look at whatever your liturgist comes up with. So should Mike and Sis."

"He'll expect that, and to have you critique his work. He's conscientious; he'll want to be sure it's right. Can we dedicate tonight's service to that intention?"

"I don't see why not," Odeon said. "Sis?"

"It seems most fitting. I would suggest we also ask that the Protector ordain more priests, either through us or through the Herald, to be prepared when we may begin Sealing those outside the current group."

"You're Herald, Joanie," Odeon said. "What do you think?"

"Since we don't have any idea when He'll manifest, I'm in favor of it. Anyone who feels the call should be ordained, even though the only ones who can feel it are the ones Sealed to Him."

"Right. Everyone ready for services, then?"

For Shayan's reaction: 23a. Waiting

24. Revenge

Thursday, 26 March 2572, New Denver

After Mass and breakfast, Odeon, Bain, and Blackfeather went to the dungeon. There was no question, Blackfeather thought, of her giving up her work as Cortin's historian, even though she'd joined Family Illyanov during her unity with Ivan last evening; while both of them regretted the separation, it would be only until Family Cortin and Strike Force HQ moved to Archangel--probably, Cortin and Illyanov estimated, by late winter or early spring.

To give them time to do whatever Odeon intended to the Brother both of them had claims on, Cortin went to her main-floor office and read the morning New Denver Times, which had picked up Blackfeather's reports and front-paged them, along with news of the Brothers' raid on the convent and Enforcement's successful defense. The Times maintained its reputation for strict reportorial impartiality; Cortin had to turn to the editorial pages to find reaction rather than the facts she already knew.

Not much to her surprise, the reaction was cautious. The editorial writers acknowledged that Families probably would stop or reverse the population decline, but were doubtful that they would be widely accepted, even though the Pope, when approached, had said he could see no objection. The creation of her Archduchy and her ennoblement were acknowledged, along with the creation of Family Cortin, as probably good for the new Archduchy and definitely good for the Family, an honor the Inquisitor-Colonel had earned, though she sensed the writer was relieved not to be in her fief. The Sealings weren't commented on at all. On the other hand, praise for the convent defense was unstinting, and Cortin was singled out for taking swift action to protect the press-gang victims and find the hostages, with the writer expressing the hope she would carry out equally swift justice on the captured Brothers, particularly the one who had helped maim her. There was no mention of revenge, but there was the implication the writer thought it would be appropriate for her.

Cortin put the paper down, frowning. It was true that she had been looking forward to her first chance at personal revenge ever since the attack on her--but now that she had it, the opportunity didn't seem anywhere near as attractive. There was no question but that the Brother deserved the revenge she'd planned for him, and more; his crimes undoubtedly deserved more punishment than she could possibly inflict.

But punishment wasn't the problem with this one, any more than it had been with any of her earlier subjects. It was the revenge part that bothered her, though it certainly wasn't illegal--or sinful, for Enforcement troops, since they were carrying out God's vengeance even when it had a personal component. So why had the idea of

taking her revenge on this Brother suddenly lost its savor?

She mulled that over for some time before she was able to come to what seemed like a reasonable hypothesis. The Father had claimed vengeance as His own, but Jeshua had concentrated on mercy, even though some of His priests had been fighters. The Protector emphasized love and justice; possibly those who represented Him weren't supposed to indulge in vengeance. She'd have to talk to Mike about that, find out if he'd run into the same thing.

Maybe she could tell without talking, though, so she went down to Suite Bravo's observation room--Suite Alpha held the Brother team-leader--and joined Blackfeather. The reporter looked pale and had turned the speaker off, but was managing to control herself; Cortin greeted her with approval, then turned to watch Odeon.

Odeon's back was to her, so she couldn't see his expression. His manner, though, was more professional than passionate, which supported her hypothesis so far. The same went for Bain, who was holding the prisoner, though that was less evidential; to the best of Cortin's knowledge, he'd never expressed any desire for personal revenge against the ones who'd maimed her. She'd only be sure of it regarding him if they happened to capture one of the terrorists who'd tortured his brother.

"If he was on one of Larry's personal teams, he won't be able to tell you anything," Blackfeather said, interrupting Cortin's train of thought. "Larry did something to them, and to all his doubles, so they couldn't."

"Unfortunate, but not entirely unexpected," Cortin said. "Whatever I think of him otherwise, I know he's not stupid; it stands to reason that he'd give his closest associates the best protection he could. Especially if it also protected him at the same time."

"What will you do to him, then? Turn him over to the courts? Or take your revenge?"

Cortin looked at her sharply, but saw none of the disapproval the words implied, only curiosity. "Neither. If I gave him to the courts, he would simply be turned over to another Inquisitor for punishment and execution--probably one who wouldn't give him the time or opportunity to repent."

"Repent!" Blackfeather exclaimed, looking confused. "Joan, you can't believe--"

"I'll try, but I don't expect him to take the opportunity." The historian still looked uncertain, so Cortin continued. "He deserves far more punishment than I can impose, but I no longer believe anyone--even Shayan himself--deserves Hell for eternity. So I'll put this one through as much as he can survive of the kind of torment he gave his victims, though my methods will be different since I have both skills and equipment he didn't--but I will also pray for him, and if he repents, give him the Sacraments and allow him to finish his punishment in Purgatory."

"You don't want revenge?"

"Not any more. I think vengeance is for those who can't accept justice, and maybe for those who've been denied it. From the way I feel, I'd say it's not for the Protector or His people--though Mike may feel differently."

"He said about the same thing before he and Dave got started. At the convent, he wanted revenge, but by this morning, he was past that stage. And I think that frightened the Brother more than the revenge did."

Cortin thought for a moment, then nodded. "It probably would me, too. You can get to someone who's emotionally involved, if only to egg them on and end it quicker; a professional doing a job doesn't have that

kind of handle."

"I can see that--" Blackfeather broke off as Odeon turned, rubbing his knuckles, and switched the sound back on.

"Is Colonel Cortin with you, Sara?" he asked.

"I'm here, Captain," Cortin said. "You have the subject ready for me?"

"Yes, Excellency. How would you like him?"

Cortin hesitated before answering. She had intended to start by raping and gelding this one, but since she now had to take Sara's history into consideration, that no longer seemed appropriate. Although he'd undoubtedly raped and maimed quite a few besides herself, making it appropriate in that sense, the fact that he had done it to her would give it the appearance of personal revenge rather than impersonal punishment. Better to use techniques with less chance for misinterpretation. "Standard position, I think. At least to begin with."

"Our pleasure, Excellency." Odeon bowed slightly, then he and Bain took care of securing the prisoner as she'd asked, and Bain left.

Cortin explained her change of plan and the reason to Blackfeather, and got a nod. "I made the assumption you'd want to see at least one session," she finished, "but if you'd rather it be later, that's up to you."

"I don't want to, but I definitely should," Blackfeather said. "And I suppose this is as good a time as any."

"Let's go, then." It wasn't until she was entering Bravo's third-stage room that Cortin thought to ask, "Do you want me to describe what I'm thinking as I work? Though I doubt it'll be suitable for publication."

"As I said earlier, even what I don't publish will be useful for background--knowing your thought processes will be a big help."

"All right--but it'll mean leaving the speaker on. Want me to mute him after I finish the preliminary, so you don't have to hear screams?"

"I-- Yes, please." Blackfeather managed a shaky grin. "I never thought I was the squeamish type, but there's something about this kind of violence that bothers me, even when I know it's necessary."

"That's normal," Cortin said. "Nothing to worry about, as long as you don't get carried away, like some Terrans did, and worry more about the criminal's pain than the victim's. Compassion is good, but you have to remember who deserves that and who deserves punishment."

"I know--being squeamish doesn't mean I've gone soft in the head. I'd rather not butcher my own meat, either, but I'm grateful to the ones who do it."

"Fair enough." God willing, she thought, Sara would never get over what she called squeamishness; humanity needed far more of that type than it did Inquisitors, or even regular Enforcement troopers.

The prisoner spat as she approached him to begin her preliminary evaluation. "Do your worst, Bitch--you'll get nothing from me!"

"So I have been informed, by a far more reliable source. I will be asking you no questions." Wait, though. And think aloud, for Sara. "Not immediately, at least. You have been protected against conventional

questioning, even an Inquisitor's--but that means only that you cannot be forced to speak; it does not mean you cannot speak if you choose. Preliminaries first, however."

Those went better than she had expected. Mike was developing a good ability to anticipate the way she intended to work on a subject, and had been careful selecting the areas to sensitize. When she finished her evaluation, she went to her cabinets, studying their contents. "I'm ready to silence him. Something that won't do more than minor damage, preferably, which leaves out surgery . . . yes, this should do." She removed a vial, filled a syringe, and returned to her subject. "My observer prefers that you not scream, and since I can tell from your reactions if you should wish to confess, I am free to oblige. Paralyzing your throat muscles should serve the purpose nicely."

To her surprise, he didn't fight the injection. "Do you expect him to save you somehow?"

The man shook his head, sneering.

"To give you an easy death, then?"

He shrugged.

"You believe it possible, though he avoids me and did nothing to save you from Captain Odeon's beating."

"On the other hand," Blackfeather said through the speaker, "he could very well be using your punishment for his own ends. He told me once that letting a failure die under an Inquisitor's questioning was a good preliminary to what would happen once said failure died and arrived in Hell."

The man stiffened, mouthing Blackfeather's name.

Cortin nodded. "I see he did not tell you he sent her to us. Miss Blackfeather is now Sealed to the Protector, and a part of His team. I cannot offer you either, but should you repent during this part of your punishment, I will see that you die in a state of grace."

"Go to Hell, Bitch!" the man mouthed.

"Sara, were you able to read his lips?"

"No. What was it?"

"The usual; he wished me in Hell." Cortin's attention went back to her subject. "That is not my destination. In an attempt to keep you from going there, however, I will provide you the closest approximation I can manage to its torments. You will die painfully here, and continue to suffer afterward--but as long as you live, you have the chance to reject Shayan, make your torment a brief prelude to Heaven."

* * * * *

After a couple of hours, Cortin could no longer ignore a niggling feeling she'd had since entering the dungeon; she broke off her interrogation, signaling Odeon and Blackfeather to join her in the suite's office.

"You feel him too, huh?" Odeon asked, as soon as the door closed behind him.

"I feel something like being watched, yes. It's not Sara, but she's the only other person here--what 'he' are you talking about, and how could he be watching anything?"

"Shayan," Odeon said flatly. "There's a different feel to his mind-touch--I couldn't sense any menace from him--but after what he did to me, I can't mistake his identity."

"Shayan!" Cortin and Blackfeather exclaimed in unison.

"But I didn't sense anything," Blackfeather continued. "I would've thought any time he was around, physically or otherwise, I'd know it."

Odeon shrugged. "I can't say about that, Sara--all I know is what I've just told you. He's watching us, for whatever reason, yet I feel very strongly that he's not going to interfere." He rubbed the scar across his mouth, frowning in puzzlement. "Impossible as it sounds, I get the impression he intends to help us somehow. Not that he likes us--any but Sara, anyway. The feeling's more like . . . it's vague, not based on deliberate communication, but I'd call it something like a determined, if reluctant, alliance."

Cortin frowned. "Are you sure?"

"It's vague, like I said, but I'm as sure as I can be under the circumstances. I don't think it's possible to lie, mind to mind--could be your truthsense is a special form of telepathy."

"Shayan helping us. That doesn't sound possible." Cortin paused, still frowning. "I hate to ask, Mike, and I'll understand if you don't want to--"

"But you'd like me to ask him directly." Odeon rubbed the back of his neck, sighing. "Okay. Just don't be surprised if I go into another funk." He turned his attention to the Hell-King. *You've been listening; you know what I want.*

You are quite correct about both the alliance and the reluctance, came the reply. *This, however, is not the time to go into that; the discussion we need to have will take longer than Cortin should give her prisoner to regroup. I am observing primarily so I will know when you are free for that discussion; I will not continue it now. For the moment, suffice it to say I will be pleased if her efforts to obtain this one's repentance are successful, though I very much doubt that will be the case.* With that, the direct contact broke, though Odeon still sensed the observation.

"Are you okay, Mike?" Cortin asked anxiously. "You look pale."

"Yeah, just a little shaken. By what he said, not the contact itself this time." Odeon repeated what he'd been told, seeing astonishment to match his own on the women's faces.

"He'll be pleased if this one repents?" Cortin asked in disbelief.

"Uh-huh. And he doesn't want you giving him too much of a break."

"That doesn't sound like Larry, unless . . ." Blackfeather paused, cocked her head. "He's got something to gain. Something that outweighs all his other interests--so I'd recommend very strongly that Your Excellency take his advice and return to your subject."

"Since it would seem what he has to gain coincides with our interests, at least temporarily, that would seem to be the best, yes."

* * * * *

Cortin peeled off her coverall and went upstairs with the other two, feeling a peculiar combination of

satisfaction and disappointment. Her subject had been punished as thoroughly as she could manage for nearly ten hours--but he'd been as intransigent as Shayan had hinted, and he'd died cursing the Protector.

That was a blow, though she'd known she couldn't possibly turn all--maybe not even most--of her subjects to God. She'd tried her best with this one, she reminded herself, and if she hadn't been able to turn him, no one could have.

The odd part was that Shayan had wanted her to turn him, which she still didn't understand. While most of her wanted to avoid any possible contact with him, a small part was so curious about why he was cooperating that she couldn't help wanting the discussion he'd mentioned.

25. Discussion

The rest of the Family had waited supper, except for the children, who'd already finished and, to Cortin's relief, gone back to their floor. She and Odeon showered and got back into uniform while Sara told the rest about their brief communication with Shayan.

There was little conversation during the meal, though Cortin did comment that she'd expected him to make contact again as soon as her subject died.

"He says there isn't that much of a rush," Odeon reported. "He also wants to know how you'd prefer the discussion to take place: phone, mind-touch, or in person. He's offering to heal Chuck and Tony, too, then bring them home, to seal the alliance."

"An offer I'll definitely accept," Cortin said. "And I'd prefer a meeting in person, if he can get here without frightening the servants."

"He says he can. Tony and Chuck will be here as soon as they get dressed, and he'll join us himself when we're in the common-room and ready for him."

* * * * *

The reunited Family had spent a few minutes celebrating, then Cortin had ordered refreshments set up in the common-room. When that was done and the servants had left, the Family pulled chairs into a circle and seated themselves. Moments later, with no fanfare, the empty spot was occupied by what looked like a slim elderly man in a white cassock.

"Shayan," Cortin said, keeping her voice level.

"I prefer Lucius, if you don't mind."

"Lucius, then. I knew I'd have to face you eventually; let's get it over with."

The Pope held up both hands, shaking his head. "This is a simple discussion, Colonel, not the decision point. You must have realized that for yourself, to have accepted the alliance and this meeting."

Cortin sighed. "It could've been a ruse. I was almost hoping so, just to finish the matter."

"No ruse," Lucius assured her. "My motives must remain my own, but it is in my self-interest to support the Strike Forces and the Families, as well as promoting devotion to both Jeshua and the Protector. For that reason, and that reason alone, you may count on my unstinting support for . . . I would estimate the next couple of years, perhaps more."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because of your truthsense." Lucius smiled briefly. "I like you, Colonel Cortin."

"Which is a flat lie." Cortin nodded. "All right, between that evidence and your claim that your support is due to your own self-interest, I'll accept it as real. What about the Brotherhood?"

"I have ordered it disbanded and recommended the members repent their sins and return to the Church." Lucius paused, smiling again. "Don't expect much from either order or recommendation, however; I recruited among, and accepted only, the most disaffected of those susceptible to the idea of becoming terrorists. I can think of only one major error in that selection process, and he is presently a member of your team and Family."

"Me, right?" Degas said.

"Yes. I would tend to believe, now, that I was under outside influence when I selected you--but I doubt very much any of my other selectees have your characteristics."

"Considering the ones I met, I'd tend to agree," Degas said.

"To get back to the subject," Cortin said, "which of your personas ordered the Brotherhood disbanded? And what reason did you give?"

"Shannon gave the order, of course, as you'll see in the news. That is the only one with any chance of influencing them, though as I said, the results will be minimal. 'Peace and Justice' may be their slogan, but it is not their true desire, and it is extremely difficult to lead such men where they do not wish to go. As for the reason--Lawrence Shannon seldom gives reasons, but I did say the Brotherhood had outlived its usefulness."

"That's easy enough to understand. What about Shannon himself?"

"Good question. I'm sure, given what I observed today, that your choice would be for him to repent and surrender?"

Cortin nodded. "It would, but considering Shannon's true identity, I'd say that's not likely."

"Correct, since I have no intention of repenting, and you wouldn't cooperate in such a pretense. He can simply disappear, or I can arrange the murder or suicide of one of my doubles, to provide a body."

"Which wouldn't give the victim even a minimal chance of repentance." Cortin shook her head. "Of those options, I'd prefer the disappearance."

"So be it; Lawrence Shannon no longer exists. Nor do the compulsions he imposed, to prevent Brothers from seeking the Sacraments. Some of the lesser members will take advantage of that, though I doubt any of the leadership will do so."

"Which you regret, even though you won't do it yourself," Odeon said. "That doesn't make a whole lot of sense."

"To you, perhaps. I am doing what I see as necessary, which does not include my own repentance." He paused, studying the scar-faced man. "Has it occurred to you, Captain Odeon, that I may be too set in my ways to change, particularly in such a basic way?"

"It hadn't, and I don't believe it for a minute." Odeon returned the other's scrutiny. "I told Colonel Cortin once that not even you are beyond redemption, and what you're doing now just reinforces that conviction. It may take something drastic to convince you, but I'm positive enough that I'm going to add it to my Mass intentions from now on."

Lucius was silent for almost a full minute, then he nodded, once. "I can hardly tell you not to, Captain, though after what I did to you, I would expect you to hate and curse me instead."

"I hate what you've done, but I keep remembering that you were once one of the greatest princes of Heaven, and I'd like to see you back in that position."

"We shall see." Lucius made an abrupt gesture with his hand, then turned his attention back to Cortin. "Would you care to concelebrate Mass with me Sunday, Excellency, then be present for my announcement of these policies?"

Cortin thought about that, then said, "What do you think, Captain Odeon? Would that be appropriate for the Protector's Herald?"

Lucius frowned, sent Odeon a thought. *She is still unaware of her true status?*

Yes. Jeshua said she'd be happier not knowing, and I agree.

Happier, perhaps, but what makes you think she will be able to remain ignorant, now that she is being hailed and worshipped as Protector? Although it is small as yet in her case, that worship does generate energy, and it is focused on her; she will soon begin to feel and manipulate it, whether she recognizes it or not. I suppose trying to protect her as you are doing is praiseworthy, but I question both its wisdom and its fairness.

Umm. I don't like it, but you may have a point.

I do indeed. Will you tell her, or shall I?

I'll do it, since you don't seem to be leaving me much of a choice. Odeon looked around at the Family, then concentrated on its head. "Joanie . . . I've just been told I've--we've all--been doing you a disservice, thinking it was a favor."

Cortin frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Michael--" Chang said cautioningly.

"If I don't tell her, he will." Odeon sighed, rubbed the back of his neck. "And there's no way to break it easy--"

"I am the Protector, then," Cortin said flatly. "When that man called me that yesterday, I had the oddest feeling . . . tried to tell myself it was only because he believed it, but . . ."

"Acting, but yeah. He says you're going to start feeling the worship directed at you soon."

"I already have, I think. The other part of what made me think he was right. Sort of a cross between extra energy and feeling like I've eaten too much." Cortin smiled at him. "Keeping it from me this long was a favor, Mike--and now, telling me that I'm only Acting is a definite relief. I can handle it for awhile, knowing I won't have to do it forever." She turned to the Pope. "How long, and who's the real one?"

"Less than six months, and I do not know. If I did, I am certain I would not be allowed to tell you." He gave

her a thin smile. "Despite my powers, I do operate under constraints; only the Creator is all-powerful, and I, like you, am one of the created."

Cortin chuckled. "Less than six months I can handle, and I'm sure I'll know the real one when He or She appears."

"At the proper time, if not immediately. In the meantime, can you answer my question?"

"Mike?"

"I don't see any harm," Odeon said.

"I'll do it, then. Provided Mike and Dave are also concelebrants."

"That would be even better," Lucius agreed. "It would also be well if Lieutenant Chang were to offer the Communion of Promise afterward."

"I would be pleased to do so," Chang said. "Does your change of heart include reparations for the damage you did to Colonel Cortin?"

"I hadn't considered that, but I suppose it should include correcting the damage, though I will not modify the added sensitivity you gave her; that is the best I can do in the way of reparations." He paused for a few seconds. "There, done. I can do nothing about your fertility, Colonel; that, if it is done at all, will be up to the true Protector."

Cortin smiled. "I never thought I'd be saying this, but thank you. This whole thing is a great relief to me--the real Protector coming, the Brotherhood ordered disbanded even if most of it won't obey, you supporting the Families and promoting devotion to the Protector . . . I wouldn't have believed any of it a day ago. Everything coming together so well, and so suddenly--a much better ending than I'd dared hope for."

"Ending, Colonel?" Lucius shook his head, his expression grim. "An end to this phase, perhaps, and some time to prepare for the next--but this phase has been nothing but a preliminary. We have not yet even reached the decision point--which will, by the way, not be the sort of confrontation you fear; no one will come to harm there. The decision made at that point will be the true beginning, and the best-case outcome will be a war more destructive of life than any so far in this universe's history."

26. Imperial Contact

St. Thomas, Monday, 27 July 2572 CE

A soft knock on the door and a barely-audible "Excellency?" from outside it woke her. It was Matthew's voice, so she let the gun stay under her pillow and got up, grumbling to herself as she put on a bathrobe and went to open the door. "What is it, Matthew?"

"A call from His Majesty, Excellency. He apologizes for waking you, but we've just captured an Imperial scoutship, and he would like you to be ready to interrogate the prisoners as soon as they're brought in. That should be about two hours."

"So they finally got this far out. Damn. Is His Majesty still on the phone?"

"No, Excellency; he was confident of your response." Matthew smiled. "Breakfast will be ready as soon as you finish Mass--shall I wake Captain Odeon to assist?"

"What time is it?"

"Five o'clock, Excellency."

"Late enough he'd be upset if I didn't--go ahead." As her butler left, Cortin scowled. The Kingdom Systems couldn't avoid Imperial notice forever--they'd been lucky to get the roughly four hundred years they'd had--but she wasn't at all sure she cared to live under the Terran Empire's rule.

Not, she thought as she showered and got into uniform, that they'd probably have much choice in the matter. The Empire claimed to be a benevolent umbrella government, that it didn't interfere in local affairs unless absolutely necessary, which Mike's studies of comm intercepts tended to confirm--but it was hard to believe that their non-interference policy could stretch to include the Kingdoms. Well, she'd find out--at least she'd find out whatever the scoutship's crew knew or believed about it.

She got her usual deep pleasure out of saying Mass, assisted by both Mike Odeon and Dave Bain, who claimed he'd been awake anyway. Cortin had her suspicions of the reason, with Sis at the unusually early Mass, and approved heartily. Sis was five months pregnant, but that was no reason to deny herself the pleasures of any of the Family's husbands, and Cortin was of the opinion that Dave was good for her.

After Mass, the clean-up that had recently become necessary afterward, and breakfast, Cortin, Odeon, Chang, and Bain went to her ground-floor office to wait for the prisoner. They were silent at first, but at last Bain said, "Joanie?"

"Hmm?"

"We're in trouble, aren't we?"

Cortin sighed. "I can't be sure, but I think so. That's because they scare me for some reason--even though there's no evidence I can point to that'll justify that fear. But I'm the wrong person to ask about the Empire; Mike's the one who's been studying them."

Bain turned to his co-husband. "Mike?"

"I can't agree with Joanie on that issue," Odeon said. "As I told her a few months ago, I'm only able to scratch the surface--comm intercepts and the little bit of the Founders' records that survived the Final War don't give you much. Still, what I've seen in those don't scare me at all--truth to tell, I think it's reassuring. You know they ended a ten-year-long war about three years ago?"

"Vaguely. Some sort of non-humans surrendered, didn't they?"

"Not exactly. The Traiti were losing badly, but if I'm reading the intercepts right, they have a psychological block against surrender. Instead, they took a Ranger prisoner, and a couple of months later, their leaders petitioned for membership in the Empire."

"Huh?" Cortin looked at him in astonishment. "They petitioned to join their enemy?"

"That's how I read it," Odeon confirmed. "My point, though, is that the Empire accepted them and is in the process of integrating their worlds and military--to the point where the Traiti leaders are now Imperial nobles, and quite a few of their fighters have transferred to the Navy and Marines. They kept their previous ranks--hard to believe, but since a couple are now in command of Imperial warships, that part has to be true."

"One of them's the non-human Ranger I heard about?" Cortin asked.

Odeon shook his head. "No. You're thinking of the felinoid--I can't remember the race's name, though hers is Losinj--who reported a rebellion and was found to have the abilities one of those needs. I can't tell you what the abilities are, unfortunately; I'm not sure they've ever been mentioned."

Cortin started to say something, but the familiar sounds of a prisoner-escort team interrupted; seconds later, the team brought half a dozen handcuffed men and women in Imperial Navy working khaki into her office. "The first group of prisoners, Excellency," the officer in charge said. "Would you like us to stay?"

"That's not necessary," Cortin told him. "Just ask Matthew to have the rest of my team report, and wait till they arrive. In the meantime, I assume the one with what looks like major's leaves is in charge?"

"Yes, Excellency. He says his rank is Lieutenant Commander, but since his position is Captain of the IAS Columbus, he goes by that rank as well."

"Odd." Cortin turned her attention to the Lieutenant Commander/Captain while the trooper left to speak to her butler. "Which should I call you, Imperial?"

The man shrugged. "Whichever you want, Colonel. Either one's correct."

"And your name?"

"Ivan DeLayne, Lieutenant Commander, Imperial Terran Navy, ident code HERIE-1935-8586. Your Excellency."

Cortin chuckled, amused at the man's insolent tone.

"Excellency--" Odeon said behind her, sounding angry.

"Take it easy, Captain," Cortin said, smiling. "He doesn't know any better." She studied the Imperials for a moment, then said, "But I should caution you that my team is more protective of my position than I am myself, Captain DeLayne. It would be wise not to agitate them unnecessarily."

DeLayne stood silent, and Cortin nodded. He wasn't going to carry on a conversation, lest he inadvertently give her some information he didn't want to--but he wasn't reckoning with her truthsense. She didn't want to go to extreme measures with him unless she had no other choice--he wasn't a criminal, after all--but she did need some basic information, and yes-or-no questions would give her that whether he cooperated or not. "Were you looking for our worlds in particular?"

No answer, of course, but his reactions were clearly negative.

"No. All right." She turned to the troopers guarding the Imperials. "How far into our space did they get?"

"We caught them a parsec from St. Michael, Excellency. They sent off a message shortly after we came into sensor range, before we could destroy their transmitting antennas."

"Damn. So the Empire knows we exist." Cortin sighed, not bothering to hide it.

"What's so bad about that?" a young Imperial asked. "There's no reason to be afraid of the Empire!"

"Shut up, Conley!" DeLayne ordered.

"I don't think she ought to," Cortin said quietly. The other members of her team were entering by then,

replacing the regular troopers. "Miss Conley--I can't read your rank insignia, to use your proper title--although my second in command disagrees, I believe we have every reason to fear an Empire we fled from some four centuries ago because our religious views were condemned. A number of conditions we've encountered since, causing changes in our way of life, can only make that condemnation worse, possibly--even probably--causing persecution that would wipe out the Kingdom Systems. Three ships held us then; now, we don't have enough to carry a tenth of our population to safety."

"Should you be telling them that, Excellency?" Odeon asked.

Cortin shrugged. "What can it hurt, Captain? They weren't looking for us in particular--but they did send off a message, so more Imperial ships will be coming. Which could doom most of our people, whether I talk to these honestly or not."

"NO!" Conley burst out. "The Empire's not like that, truly it's not!"

"Whether that statement's true or not, you believe it," Cortin said dryly. "Would you mind talking to me in more relaxed surroundings?"

The young Imperial didn't notice DeLayne's beginning objection or Tiny Pritchett's silencing of him. "Yes, sir, if you think it would help."

"At worst, it can't hurt." Cortin stood, addressing her team. "Take the rest to . . . hmm. The small guest suite, I think. Captain Odeon, Lieutenant Chang--let's talk to Miss Conley in the common-room of our floor."

As soon as the team and other prisoners left, Cortin signalled Odeon to remove Conley's handcuffs. When that was done, she smiled at the younger woman. "Since you're willing to cooperate, I see no reason to treat you as other than a guest. Would you care for anything to eat or drink?"

"Uh . . . do you have coffee?"

"Certainly. Sis, would you ask Matthew to serve us coffee in the common-room?"

"Of course. I'll meet you there."

"Thanks. Mike, Miss Conley--shall we go?"

As they left the office and went upstairs, the young Imperial said, "Excuse me, Excellency . . . may I ask you something?"

Cortin was amused at the not-quite-apprehension in her voice. "Go ahead."

"The ones who captured us called you the High King's Inquisitor. What does that mean?"

Cortin chuckled. "Exactly what it says. St. Thomas--this world--is the foremost planet of the Kingdom Systems, ruled by High King Mark. I'm the best Inquisitor in the Systems, so when the Sovereign's Inquisitor positions were established, I was persuaded--" bribed, she thought, would have been more accurate, "to take the position. So I'm the Systems' chief Inquisitor, though we all hold the same rank of Colonel. That's why the first captured Imperials were brought to me for questioning."

"Do you . . . hurt people?"

"If necessary, but you don't have to worry; I don't even make faces at people who cooperate with me."

Odeon chuckled at that; after a second, Conley joined in, and by that time they were at the head of the stairs, entering the common-room. The young Imperial caught her breath, looking around. "It's beautiful!"

"Yes, it is," Cortin agreed. "I don't really need this kind of luxury--at times I still feel guilty wearing boots on the carpet--but His Majesty says my position is such that I have to make a proper showing. Not that the High King's Inquisitor gets many casual guests; usually the only ones here are family and Enforcement Service friends."

"Uh-oh." Odeon made a quick grab, intercepting an orange streak heading for the guest. "Forgot to warn you about Tangerine," he apologized, stroking his prey's soft fur. To his combined relief and disappointment, Tanj was no longer fixated on him, though he told himself she did still like him best. "She's not called the attack kitten for nothing--she'll go after whoever's closest, just to get attention, though I'm her favorite target. And she likes to land about rump-high, with all claws out."

"Thanks for the rescue, then--I like cats, but that sounds painful."

"It is," Cortin assured her. "Worse now than when we first got her, since she's bigger, but even at six weeks old, she made herself felt." She gestured to the couch in front of the fireplace. "Have a seat. Matthew should be here soon with the coffee."

"Thank you." Conley sat down, Odeon joining her, while Cortin pulled up a nearby chair. "Will the others be okay?"

"Unless they do something stupid," Odeon said. "Like attack someone who's armed when they aren't."

Conley chuckled. "None of our crew is Sandeman--for one of them, it might work."

"The genetic warriors." Cortin frowned. "The ones you forced into the Empire--what, about thirty years ago?"

"That's when, yes, but we didn't force them," Conley objected. "We had to stop their invasion of Sector Five, of course--we couldn't let them just take over! I've talked to some, though. They weren't happy to be stopped, but when Ranger Medart showed them our weaponry and told them that if they joined the Empire they'd be able to use it, well, they jumped at the opportunity."

"I was impressed by how quickly and completely that war ended," Cortin admitted. "I'd like to meet one of your Rangers, especially Medart, if it weren't for the consequences--" Forget that caveat, she told herself. The Columbus had gotten a message out; the consequences would happen whether she met a Ranger or not. Though--she felt a sudden lift of hope--maybe a Ranger could mitigate the damage to the Systems. "Is there any way you could get him to intervene on our behalf?"

"Huh?" Conley gaped for a moment. "Sure, but you can do it yourself, and it'd mean a lot more coming from a Colonel than from a Spacer Third. Since you're obviously of Terran origin, you're legally Imperial citizens; you have the right of direct appeal to the Sovereign if you don't think there's any other solution."

Cortin stared at her, bemused. "It can't be that simple!"

They were interrupted by Sis and Matthew entering with the coffee service. Sis pulled up a chair opposite Cortin while Matthew served; when he left, Sis asked, "What can't be how simple?"

Cortin recapped the conversation, seeing Sis' growing hope. "What do you think?" she asked at last.

"The same thing I believe you do," the nun replied. "Either you or King Mark should call the Emperor and

request Ranger Medart's assistance in determining our position in regard to the Empire."

"Mike?" Cortin asked.

"Agreed. Though His Majesty's not likely to either do it or be willing for you to, despite--" He broke off, glancing at the Imperial, and finished, "the regard he holds you in personally."

Cortin grimaced. "True; His Majesty's even more apprehensive about the Empire than I am. That means it's up to me."

Odeon nodded. "I agree."

"Good." Cortin turned her attention to the Imperial. "Now, Miss Conley, how do I go about contacting your Emperor?"

"You call the Palace--you must have ultrawave?"

"Yes. We avoid transmitting on your frequencies, of course, but we can use them; we do monitor. I believe your contact channel is One?"

"Yes, sir. Do you know the access codes?"

"No; do you?"

"Of course. I can punch them in for you, if you'd like."

"I'd appreciate that." Cortin led the younger woman to a small table beside the door; it held both a telephone and one of the rare private ultrawave terminals. "Go ahead."

Conley did so, rapidly going through a number of screens till she got one that seemed to read "Palace" in the odd Imperial English letters. "Okay, Colonel. When Palace Comm answers, explain to them; they'll probably transfer you to someone in the Admin Service, but if Emperor Davis was given our message, he may want to speak to you directly."

"Thank you, Miss Conley." It was only a few seconds before the screen cleared, to show a human operator.

"Palace Comm," the man said. "How can I help you?"

"I am Colonel Joan Cortin, High King's Inquisitor for the Kingdom Systems. The crew of your scoutship Columbus is in my custody--"

"One moment, please, Colonel," the operator interrupted. "His Majesty left orders that any communications about the Columbus be transferred directly to him."

The screen blanked for several seconds, then cleared to show a lean, gray-haired man Cortin recognized from intercepts as Emperor Charles Davis. "I understand you have information about one of my ships," he said calmly.

Cortin repeated her introduction, then went on. "I don't intend them any harm, Your Majesty, in spite of the fact that they intruded in our space and I fear what their arrival means for our Systems. Since we cannot resist you, I ask that you send Ranger Medart to ease your annexation of the Kingdom Systems; he seems to have done that quite well for the Sandemans."

"It isn't as inevitable or as horrible as you seem to think," the Emperor said mildly, "but if you have that kind of misapprehensions about us, I agree that sending a Ranger in would be a good idea. And James Medart is our cultural specialist, so he's the logical one; he'll be on his way within the hour. Should he talk to you, or one of your Kings?"

"That is something I cannot answer at the moment, Your Majesty. That is up to High King Mark; I do not know who he will choose to handle it." Probably her, she thought, considering she was acting Protector as well as High King's Inquisitor and Archduchess of High Teton--but she couldn't be certain.

"You're doing this without his knowledge?"

"Yes, because I believe it to be the least bad of the options open to us, now that contact has been made."

To her amusement, the Emperor looked dismayed. "I . . . see," he said slowly. "I hope Ranger Medart will be able to improve your opinion of us, Colonel. If your Systems should choose to become part of the Empire, I'd like you to be my guest in the Palace for a month or so."

Cortin inclined her head. "That is most gracious of Your Majesty. In that event, I would be honored."

"Until that time, then, Colonel."

The ultrawave screen went blank, and Cortin picked up the telephone handset, dialing High King Mark's private number. When that screen lit, she said, "Is Your Majesty aware that the Imperial scouts got a message out before they were captured?"

"I was not, Colonel. I assume that means we can expect more of them soon."

"I can guarantee it, sire." Cortin took a deep breath, released it slowly. "Rather than risk an automatic military response that could destroy the Systems, I took advantage of information one of my prisoners gave me. I appealed to the Emperor, based on their laws granting citizenship to anyone of Terran origin, and direct access to the Sovereign if necessary; at my request, he is sending one of his personal representatives to ease our inevitable absorption into the Empire."

There was a long silence, then the High King sighed. "If you think that best, Protector, I can hardly argue. I assume you'll take complete charge of the negotiations?"

"If that is Your Majesty's wish."

"You have resources I do not, and at least as much devotion to our mutual home; yes, it is my wish. I'll make the necessary announcement immediately."

"I feel inadequate, Your Majesty, but I will carry on as well as I can." Cortin stood silent for a moment, then returned to her seat. She'd hoped King Mark would take over, and was disappointed he hadn't. She had no diplomatic experience, and, she suspected, no skill in that field; how could she possibly bring about the sort of non-destructive Imperial takeover that would save the Systems and her Family?

"Joanie?" A voice finally broke into her abstraction.

"What is it, Mike?"

"Is there anything we can do to help?"

"I can't-- Yes." Cortin straightened. "If I'm in total charge of our relations with the Empire, I'm going to work on the assumption that we can become a fully functional part of it, with as much independence as it allows--as much as I understand the Sandemans and now, according to you, the Traiti, have. Tell Dave to release the rest of the prisoners and ask Captain DeLayne to join us, then have Matthew assign them all guest quarters. Find out if their ship will fit into the Lodge's grounds, and if so have it brought here; otherwise, they're to have free access, including transportation, while it's at the spaceport. Miss Conley?"

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Do you have any idea how long it'll take Ranger Medart to get here?"

Conley shook her head regretfully. "I'm afraid not, sir. I don't know where he is, and I'm not even too sure where we were when your warship captured us. Captain DeLayne might know."

"Thank you." Cortin wasn't sure whether to hope for no delay or a long one. The first would get the suspense over with; the second would mean a longer true freedom for the Systems. "Will you be subject to any discipline for cooperating with me?"

Conley grinned. "Since it worked out, no--I might even get a commendation. If it hadn't, well . . . but I had a hunch I could trust you."

"I'm the last one to argue against following hunches," Cortin said, "but I should point out that doing so can sometimes get you in trouble."

"I know, sir. Uh . . . your King called you 'Protector'. What's that?"

Cortin studied her guest. "I'm not sure I ought to go into that particular subject, Miss Conley. It's a religious title, and since it was our beliefs that caused our Founders to flee the Empire, I think it wise to avoid religious discussion as much as possible."

"Yes, sir--though it may relieve you to know that religion's not a very big deal in the Empire, most places, and the Empire itself is strictly neutral." She paused. "I'm sorry, Colonel, but I have a bit of a personal problem. Is there a 'fresher' anywhere around?"

"A what?"

"A 'fresher. Let me think--restroom? Bathroom?"

"That we have, yes," Cortin said with a chuckle. "We call them bathrooms. Sis, would you show Miss Conley the nearest one, then her guest room?"

"Gladly." Chang put her arm around the Imperial, smiling. "This way, Miss Conley--may I use your first name?"

"Please--it's Gwen."

The two had barely gone out a side door when Odeon led the rest of the team and their former prisoners through the main entrance. Since they were guests now, Cortin gave them a courteous bow before asking, "How much did you tell them, Mike?"

"Only that they're free; I thought you'd want to tell them the rest."

"Where's Conley?" DeLayne asked, his voice concerned. "Is she all right?"

"She's fine," Cortin assured him. "She asked for a bathroom, then Lieutenant Chang's taking her for a brief tour. They should be back in a few minutes. It's thanks to Miss Conley's cooperation that you're free and Ranger Medart will soon be on his way to the Kingdom Systems."

"Huh?" DeLayne, Cortin thought, looked like he'd been hit with a sledge-hammer.

"You heard me correctly," Cortin said. She explained briefly, amused by the changes in his expression from disbelief to comprehension, then to determination.

"For someone who's afraid of the Empire," he said when she was done, "you're making one hell of an effort to bring it in. If you'd like some help, I'll ask for a temporary assignment here when I report we've been released."

Cortin considered that briefly, then nodded. "Any preliminary groundwork we can lay should help reduce transitional problems. Thank you for your offer, Captain." She paused, then said, "The troopers who brought you in mentioned you were the first group. How many of you are there in all?"

"Four hundred ninety-eight. Except for me, they decided to bring you a random sample; the only Navy ship class that has this small a crew is a courier."

"I can't offer all of your rooms here, then. Is your ship small enough to fit on a ten-acre estate?"

"Yes--equatorial diameter's two hundred meters--but since you can't have a dock, we'd leave a rather large hole. Just how big depends on how solid the ground is."

"Fairly solid, and if the Kingdoms survive this, filling a hole will be no problem. As soon as King Mark makes his announcement, then, it might be a good idea to bring your ship here."

"Agreed, Excellency. My Marines can supplement your troops if you think there's a chance of attack, that way."

"Very little," Cortin said. "Being prepared is never a bad idea, though." She turned to Odeon. "Mike, would you call Brad, brief him, and ask him for the loan of any Strike Force troops not on anti-Brotherhood operations?" She grimaced. "Not that I like asking them to camp out this time of year!"

Odeon grinned. "Be glad to, Joanie--and I don't think they'll mind, for you." He went to the phone to call Colonel David Bradford, Commander and Bishop of the St. Thomas RES Strike Force.

DeLayne shook his head. "I don't know what you've been taught about us, but it must've been fierce. And you're on our side!"

"I am not on your side," Cortin said. "If I didn't believe aiding a peaceful transition to be the Kingdom Systems' only chance to survive as a society, I would be fighting you to the best of my ability. You may be able to change my mind--under the circumstances, I'd like nothing better than to believe the best of you and your Empire--but right now, I'm no more than a reluctant ally."

"A reluctant ally's better than an active enemy, Excellency." DeLayne grinned. "You must have an ultrawave, to've spoken to His Majesty; may I use it to report in and request assignment here?"

"Yes--it's beside the phone Captain Odeon is using. If you can, please also find out how soon Ranger Medart

will be arriving, and ask that he be informed I have been named sole negotiator for the Kingdom Systems."

27. Interim

DeLayne's call was fruitful, more quickly than Cortin had expected. As soon as he identified himself, he was transferred to Ranger Medart. Cortin studied him while DeLayne reported. She'd seen photos of the Ranger before, but that had been before she had any expectation of meeting him, or having her society's future depending on how she dealt with him. But now everything about him was meaningful.

Except for some graying around his temples, he looked young--normal for an Imperial officer, with the anti-aging treatments they got. But there was something in his bearing that made it obvious he was no innocent, even if she hadn't been acquainted, however vaguely, with his handling of the Sandeman annexation. He was, she decided, the sort of man she could respect--which meant she'd have to be careful not to let that feeling hinder her judgement during the negotiations.

She frowned when Medart, informed she'd been named negotiator, asked if she were available--long-distance negotiations didn't strike her as a good idea--but when Delayne replied that she was, she had no choice but to go to the ultrawave. "I am Colonel Cortin."

"Ranger James Medart," the man on the screen replied. "Pleased to meet you, Colonel. I'm also pleased to hear you'll be the one I'll be talking to. Do you have any objection to Captain DeLayne and his crew acting as Special Liaison until I get there?"

"I would appreciate their assistance, though I am not sure what you mean by Special Liaison."

"In this case, a demonstration of what Imperials are really like," Medart said. "Maybe by the time I get there, you'll have decided we aren't the sort of monsters you've apparently been taught."

"That is possible," Cortin said. "I gather you do not intend to carry out our discussions long-distance?"

"No." Medart grinned. "All our experience says long-distance negotiations are much less productive than face-to-face ones, especially something that looks like it might be tricky--such as working with a culture I know nothing about. So I don't plan on anything except this type of talk, and that only if you insist; I prefer to get my data in person. If there's anything you think I can do to help, of course, don't hesitate, but I won't be able to go beyond advice. Unfortunately, even an IBC can't go over three lights per hour, and I'm over five hundred hours away."

Roughly three weeks, Cortin calculated. "I should be able to manage for that time; if not, I am the wrong person for this job. Until your arrival, then."

"Agreed. Medart out."

Cortin looked around, spotted one of her team and a couple of the Imperials watching TV, what looked like a news special. "Chuck!" she called. "What's up?"

"Aaron Spence's analysis of the Imperials' arrival and His Majesty's designation of you as the sole authority regarding them," the young man called back. "He doesn't like the first, but he's in favor of the latter, of course."

"Of course." Cortin chuckled. Spence was the only commentator who supported her completely, so he was naturally Family Cortin's favorite. But the fact that he'd gotten past the news to the analysis told her what she needed to know: her authority in regard to the Imperials was public knowledge. Odeon was done with the

phone; she dialed the main spaceport, told its commander the Imperial scoutship was being transferred to Harmony Lodge, and asked him to connect her to its Bridge.

When that was done, she turned the phone over to DeLayne and listened as he gave the necessary orders for its move to her estate. She wasn't sure that was the right move, but with the Brotherhood becoming increasingly active, it seemed the safest one. Her team, the Imperial Marines she knew better than to underestimate, and possibly-- "Mike, did you get through to Brad?"

"Uh-huh. He'll be glad to lend us any local Strike Force troops not otherwise occupied--though he warns you he may need to take 'em back if the Brothers stage any more terror raids--and says to tell you he's asking all the Strike Force priests to include you in their Mass intentions until further notice. Which Dave and I, at least, will do gladly."

Cortin grinned at him. "All of which I'm grateful for. I'll have to thank him personally next time he comes over--did he give you any idea how soon they'll start arriving?"

"About an hour," Odeon replied. "Shelters will be here about an hour after that. I told Matthew to have the groundskeepers get things ready."

"Good. That should be after the Columbus lands--or will she need more time, Captain DeLayne?"

"Less, Colonel. She should be airborne by now, landing any minute. Scouts sometimes have to lift off at almost no notice, so regulations forbid a complete engine shutdown outside Imperial space."

"Sensible," Cortin agreed. "I seldom get to watch spacecraft land; would it be safe to go out and watch yours?"

"I don't see why not, as long as we stay close to the house."

* * * * *

Even a small spacecraft was large--fitting hyperdrive in anything less than a hundred meters long seemed to be impossible--and Cortin knew this scout was one of the smallest of the Imperial ship classes. But that didn't seem to help as she watched it descend into her side yard. Nothing that big should be able to move under its own power!

But it did, settling slowly onto the grass, sinking until she wasn't sure it would ever stop. Finally, though, it did, and she thought ruefully that her head gardener was probably wishing her in Hell for what she'd done to his beloved lawn. And this wouldn't be the worst of it; the entire estate grounds would soon be a mess, with troops camped and living on them. Well, so be it; she'd been consigned to Hell often enough, especially by the Brothers and assorted other terrorists and criminals.

When the ship's main hatch opened, DeLayne turned to her. "Normally I wouldn't invite someone from outside the Empire aboard my ship, but under the circumstances, you're welcome any time." He grinned at her. "Someone who's called for Imperial help isn't going to sabotage us, after all."

"Quite true, and I'd like to take advantage of your offer when time permits, but His Majesty didn't say anything about my workload being reduced. So until he does, or Ranger Medart arrives and I don't have time for anything else, I think I should keep to my usual schedule."

"Or lack of it," Odeon put in.

"Or lack of it," Cortin agreed. "As active as the Brotherhood's been of late, I don't get much time off; my only semi-free day is Sunday. If you have no objection, I would like to visit then."

"As I said, you'll be welcome any time." DeLayne hesitated. "You've mentioned this Brotherhood several times, in context that makes it sound like it could be a threat to my crew. What is it?"

"The Brotherhood of Freedom," Cortin said. "They're a collection of terrorists, the worst in our history. Their leader, Lawrence Shannon, ordered them to disband before he disappeared about four months ago, but except for a few low-ranking ones, that didn't happen. Yes, they could be a threat to your people. I doubt they'd be stupid enough to attack Harmony Lodge, though I prefer not to take chances--which is why I wanted the extra Strike Force troopers. Outside the grounds is likely to be a different story, though, so I'd strongly recommend any of your people leaving the compound have at least one trooper with them, and that they be armed. If they are attacked, I'd appreciate it if they'd shoot to wound, rather than to kill; we can't get information from the dead."

"We can do that easily enough," DeLayne said. "I'll order blasters set on stun--with that request, I gather you don't have that option?"

"Bullets don't stun, no," Cortin said. "You intrigue me--could I try one of those blasters?"

"I don't see why not," DeLayne replied. "The ship wouldn't let your people into our armory, so we have plenty. Let me get my quartermaster to bring you one."

"I'll be glad to do it, sir," Conley put in.

"Very well, Miss Conley. Have it logged as a permanent transfer, along with a spare powerpack and charger."

"Yes, sir." Conley boarded the ship, emerging moments later with the specified equipment, as well as a holster and pouch for the blaster and spare powerpack. She handed them to Cortin, smiling. "I'll be glad to show you how to use them, if you'd like."

"I would, if your Captain doesn't mind."

"No objection," DeLayne said. "In fact, if you don't mind, I'd like to appoint her as our individual Special Liaison from the Empire to the Kingdom Systems until Ranger Medart arrives. She can stay at your Lodge, but I think the rest of us should go back to living on the Columbus."

"If you wish, Captain." Cortin smiled at the young woman. "But the final decision will have to be yours, Miss Conley. I should warn you, associating with an Inquisitor will do nothing to improve your social standing in the Systems; we may be respected, but we certainly aren't popular."

Conley laughed. "Since I won't be in the Systems long, I'm not worried--I'd love to learn what I can about you and your people, and--" she glanced at her Captain, hesitating.

"And a stint as Special Liaison would look good on your record, I would imagine." Cortin chuckled. "We share that much, at least. Consider yourself accredited, Miss Conley. And Family Cortin's guest, until your superiors require you to return to your duties."

"I'd like that--thank you, Excellency. When would you like to learn how to use your blaster?"

"As soon as I can. What facilities do you need?"

"A standard target range will do fine for the blaster function. If you want the stun function demonstrated, you'll need a volunteer and some good strong headache medications."

Cortin frowned. "I thought stunning wasn't harmful."

"It isn't," Conley said. "At least, it doesn't do any physical damage--unless the fall itself injures you, of course. But it does leave you with a nasty migraine for most of a day."

"Interesting," Cortin said thoughtfully. A weapon that caused pain without injuring its target sounded like an extremely useful tool for an Inquisitor. "Does it cause actual unconsciousness, or is it the pain itself that's incapacitating?"

"At standard intensity, it causes about four hours' unconsciousness. The headache's just a side effect we can't seem to get rid of."

That was even more interesting, Cortin thought. If Kingdoms scientists could isolate the "side effect" and eliminate the unconsciousness, the severe migraine would do very nicely to intensify an Inquisitor's other attentions. She didn't want to upset the young Imperial with that line of thought, though. "I should be able to find a suitable test subject," she said. "Not right now, though; I need to get to work. Let's go back inside; you can explain the controls, then I can familiarize myself with it if I get any breaks."

"Just a moment, please, Excellency," Odeon said. "I know you're busy, but there are going to be a lot of troopers here soon, and if the Imperials go into town, they may stop at the joyhouses; don't you think they ought to know about our favorite plague?"

"Plague!" DeLayne exclaimed, his expression horrified.

Cortin chuckled. "Yes--the only one I know of that most people wanted to catch. But you might not want to export it to the Empire, so Captain Odeon's right; I ought to warn you. It's called the satyr plague, which should give you some idea of its nature."

DeLayne nodded. "I think so--but I don't care to guess at the details, so tell me about it, please. And what a large number of troopers has to do with it."

"The troopers first," Cortin said. "Because of the hazardous nature of our work, the Royal Enforcement Services have both Church and civil dispensations from the sexual restrictions that apply to everyone else--except their partners at the time, of course. So they won't have any hesitation asking any of your people they find attractive, or accepting offers from them. The joyhouses don't have that dispensation yet, but since the plague appeared, working in or patronizing them's no more than a venial sin and a misdemeanor the RES pays attention to only if there's a complaint; we have far more serious crimes to worry about."

"The plague itself, of course, is sexually transmitted. There's no danger of infection from casual contact, only about a one percent chance from kissing, but the odds improve with the intimacy of contact. As far as we can tell, intercourse with someone who has the plague guarantees you'll get it; other genital contact is high-probability but not certain."

"But what does it do?" Conley asked.

Cortin grinned at Odeon, who answered. "What it does, Miss Conley, is increase both sexual desire and capability. That's most noticeable in men, though it affects women as well. As you can probably imagine, it's had quite an effect on our society the last three decades."

"What about immunization or a cure?" DeLayne asked.

"Who'd want it?" Odeon asked in reply. "I damnsure wouldn't; I like what it's done for me. And for our wives and Family head."

DeLayne raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. "We'll work on both, then, if you could provide a blood sample from someone who's infected."

"How big a sample?"

"A few drops should be enough." DeLayne grinned. "Scouts may be small, but we get state of the art medical equipment, and people to use it who want a challenge."

Odeon turned to Cortin. "If you don't mind, Colonel, I'll give him his sample, then come help you."

"Fine. Take as long as you want, maybe get a tour of the ship." She paused, thinking. "Yes . . . under the circumstances, I think I'd better change your primary duty." She turned to DeLayne. "Captain Odeon has been studying your Empire as well as possible from comm intercepts and what's left of our Founders' records. If you're willing to loan him books or have some of your people talk to him, I'd like to make those studies his top priority. He can then brief me on whatever he considers important."

DeLayne nodded. "Comm intercepts and fragmentary records won't give you very good information, especially since your Founders obviously weren't at all fond of the Empire--I'll be glad to help him learn as much as he wants." He turned to Odeon, grinning. "Come on, Captain--we'll go by Sickbay for the blood samples, then I'll give you a ship tour and introduce you to teaching tapes. Can you read Imperial English?"

Odeon looked up at the ship's name as he followed DeLayne up the gangplank, then shook his head ruefully. "If that's a sample, no--I can recognize most of the letters, but they don't make sense."

"Easy enough to remedy." DeLayne saluted the armed guard at the hatch. "Permission to come aboard, sir? Myself and one of our hosts."

The woman returned his salute. "Granted, sir. Are you permitting him aboard armed?"

"Yes. And no one's to leave this estate--definitely not the compound--unarmed. I'll make that--"

"Captain?" Odeon interrupted.

"Yes?"

"If I were you, I'd have them armed any time they leave the ship. And I'd have Miss Conley sent one of those blasters as soon as possible."

DeLayne frowned. "The Brotherhood's that dangerous?"

"Probably not here at the Lodge, as Colonel Cortin said--but we don't know how they'll react to the Empire's presence, and I don't think we should take any chances."

"Neither do I. Okay, I'll make the announcement and put it in the standing orders." DeLayne turned to the guard. "No one's to leave the ship without a sidearm, Corporal; pass that on to your relief. I'll make the all-hands announcement as soon as I show Captain Odeon to Sickbay."

"Aye, sir."

Odeon wasn't sure what he'd expected the ship's interior to be like--similar to an airplane, maybe. Once they got past the airlock and a series of large lockers, though, what he saw could have been the inside of a large, modern building. If he hadn't just watched it land, he wouldn't have believed himself inside a vehicle. "Your guard's uniform was black--a Marine?"

"Right. SecuDiv--sorry, Security Division; I doubt you know our abbreviations--like all the ones assigned to Columbus." DeLayne smiled at his guest. "I'd better warn you, Captain--my medical people will probably want more from you than a blood sample. I don't know how your people feel about doctors, but don't let Drulet intimidate you into more than you're comfortable with."

"I won't. I don't have anything against doctors; I owe my life to several of them." Odeon paused, thinking. Joanie was taking them into the Empire, which knew even less about the Kingdoms than the other way around, so-- "Since you've got to start learning about us, too, I'll go as far as a complete physical--provided it doesn't include the use of any drugs."

"It doesn't. He'll be delighted."

* * * * *

The examination didn't take as long as Odeon expected, less than three hours, but it was the most complete he'd ever had--and the least understandable. The doctor tried to explain, but Odeon didn't have the background to make sense out of body scans, biochemical and genetic analyses, or other procedures. After a bit he told the doctor so, to Drulet's amusement. "Okay, Captain, no more jargon. I'll wait till we're done and just give you the results, okay? If you want them."

"The results, sure, if you can keep them down to a layman's level. I'm not even trained in our medicine, and this--" Odeon gestured to the equipment around them, "is so far ahead of ours it isn't funny."

"I think I can manage that. Okay, nothing but chit-chat until we get to my office. Do you like coffee?"

"I'll drink it, but given a choice, I really prefer herb teas. Something with a tang, like cranberry or ginger."

"I know just the thing." Drulet grinned. "I'll stick with coffee, and you can try Blue Ginger. That originated on Herbert's World--have you heard of it?"

"Afraid not."

* * * * *

Odeon sipped his tea, then nodded appreciatively. "This is good, Doctor. Okay, what's the verdict?"

"You're healthy as the proverbial horse, Captain. More injuries than I've seen on a single individual before, but no lasting damage--and contrary to what you told me about your medical history, you've never been sick a day in your life. No chickenpox or measles, no colds--and no satyr plague." He shook his head as Odeon started to object. "Oh, you're a carrier, all right; the pseudo-virus is in your body fluids. It just isn't inside your cells."

"But I've got all the symptoms!"

"Yes, you told me--the diagnostic ones being the increased sexual capacity and the penile moistening during

arousal. The tests are conclusive, though; in your case those are genetic, not disease-caused."

Odeon frowned. "Then how come none of it showed up till the day after I had intercourse the first time? Because that's when the urge got strong and I started getting wet."

Drulet shrugged. "That question I can't answer; I don't know enough about the disease. Could be pure coincidence, or maybe the virus' presence in your body pulled the genetic trigger, so to speak. Possibly any physical stress or trauma could've set it off, once puberty hit. But that's all guesswork."

"I understand." That part, anyway, Odeon thought. Why he'd have a genetic condition that mimicked the satyr plague was a whole 'nother question, and one he knew the doctor wouldn't be able to answer, so he dropped the subject. "Would you mind sending my commanding officer a copy of your report, so it can go in my medical records? I'm due my annual physical next month, but with this one so recent and so much more thorough, that can be waived."

"Be glad to. If you don't mind, I'll forward a copy to Ranger Medart as well. His eyes only, of course."

Odeon didn't particularly like that idea, for no reason he could pinpoint--he'd taken the examination so Imperials could learn about Kingdoms people, after all--but he nodded. "I suppose so."

"In that case," DeLayne's voice broke in, behind Odeon, "you wouldn't mind if I also send him anything I learn from you."

"No--but he did say he wanted to get his data in person."

"What's the difference if I send him the ship's record tapes of our conversations, or he talks to you himself?"

Odeon frowned. "The ship tapes everything? You don't have any privacy?"

"Everything in the public areas, yes. Admiral Columbus, please tell Captain Odeon how you handle monitoring of private quarters."

"Yes, Captain," came from the air, startling Odeon. "I monitor those only for sounds of distress or people requesting my attention, and permanently tape only those situations; everything else is wiped automatically within approximately one microsecond."

"Your ship talks to you?"

DeLayne and Drulet both chuckled at Odeon's incredulity. "Yes, she does. All Imperial ships of this class or higher--which means all but couriers or landers--have AI-level ship-comps."

Odeon was silent for a moment, then he said, "Okay, I'll bite; what does that mean?"

"Sorry," DeLayne said. "That's a ship-wide computer complex enough to be classified as an artificial intelligence. That means that if you didn't know you were talking to a computer, you'd think it was a very intelligent human. I gather you're not too familiar with computers?"

"That's one way to put it; I've never used one, and only seen a few. None of those talked, and I never heard of any being intelligent!"

DeLayne chuckled. "Any time you want to talk to one, address her the way I did. She'll answer you, as long as you don't get into classified information."

"That may take me a while to get used to. No offense intended, Admiral Columbus."

"I do not have feelings, so I cannot take offense, Captain Odeon, but I thank you for the courtesy."

"You're welcome," Odeon replied automatically, before turning to DeLayne. "Even the little bit I've experienced so far--this Sickbay and talking to your ship--is awesome. It makes me feel . . . I don't know. I'm competent enough in the Kingdom Systems, but it's pretty clear none of us are anything but total incompetents in your terms. I don't like that feeling."

"Neither would I, in your place. But don't worry about it; as I told Colonel Cortin, we aren't monsters, and we don't force ourselves on anyone. If she does decide the Systems should join the Empire, we'll offer but not impose education about us and our science. Also whatever you need to bring yourselves to our level."

"Like you offered to teach me?"

"Exactly. Ready to get started?"

"Definitely." Odeon allowed himself a brief smile as he stood. "Let's go see one of these 'teaching tapes' you mentioned. Are they anything like a book?"

"Nothing at all. They aren't really tapes, either; they just got called that, back when they were invented, and the name stuck. Let's go to my cabin, and I'll introduce you to them. Admiral Columbus, please have a reader and basic-language tape waiting in my fabricator."

"Yes, Captain."

"Fabricator?" Odeon asked as they left Sickbay, going deeper into the ship.

"Yes. Do you know anything about molecular physics?"

"No." Odeon sighed. "I'm really in over my head, aren't I?"

DeLayne chuckled. "Not really; that's one of my degrees, is all, and I enjoy discussing it when I get the chance. Most people haven't the faintest idea how fabricators work; they just use them. We don't manufacture small items any more; once a prototype's developed, the pattern is scanned and recorded. When you want one of that item, you code it into your fabricator, and the fabricator constructs it, with any modifications you specify in the coding, from reconstituted raw materials. When you're done with it, you feed it back into the fabricator's raw material storage for re-use."

Odeon whistled. "That's incredible. Things like your uniform?"

"Among others, yes."

"And I thought the plague and Families were causing a major social upheaval. What you're going to do to us . . . Maybe Colonel Cortin's right to be afraid of you after all, though not for the reason she thinks."

"I can't deny there'll be stress," DeLayne said soberly. "You won't have to join, and you won't have to accept anything from us that you don't want--but just making open contact will cause changes, yes. It's a good thing for your Systems that Colonel Cortin was able to get Ranger Medart, too. Any Ranger would be good, but he's the Empire's best at anything involving cultural differences--which we don't try to destroy, as you probably already know. To quote a twentieth-century writer by the name of O'Sullivan, our aim is to 'preserve the unique viewpoints of different groups, but at the same time require that each group be tolerant of the others'."

We see harmonious diversity as a good thing."

"I'd gotten that impression, but not in so many words. The Sandemans and Traitit, from what I've studied, both maintain their own cultures within their Subsector and Sector."

"And so do the cloudcats, on Ondrian. They're another race Ranger Medart managed to bring into the Empire peacefully--damn good thing for us, since that's the only place miracle-weed produces usable rapid-heal."

"I never heard of any of those."

DeLayne chuckled. "Learning from comm intercepts would tend to be fragmentary, especially when the ultrawave beams aren't aimed at you and you don't have the cultural background to understand a lot of what you do hear. That's what we're in the process of remedying. And here's my cabin." He put his hand to a small plate beside the door, which promptly opened onto a small living area. "Have a seat while I go get the tape and player--my fabricator's in the bedroom."

Odeon obeyed, rubbing the back of his neck. He wasn't afraid of the Empire, and as he'd told Joanie months ago when he first started studying them, he already had some respect for them. DeLayne was adding to that, even as he was overwhelming Odeon with casually incomprehensible references. Fabricators, cloudcats, miracle-weed, rapid-heal . . . and teaching tapes. DeLayne was emerging from the bedroom carrying what looked like a small book and a thin box of matches, though Odeon was sure those had to be the reader and 'tape' he'd mentioned.

"Here we go," DeLayne said, pulling up a chair. He handed Odeon the reader, which turned out to be a screen with a row of words underneath--all of which, to Odeon's gratification, he was able to puzzle out--and showed him how to insert the tape, then explained the touch controls for tape direction and speed. "The older models have electrodes that have to go on the temples," he added, "but the new ones don't need them. Some people have a mild reaction, disorientation or a touch of nausea; if you do, slowing the tape down usually gets rid of it. Whenever you're ready, just touch the "Go" button."

"Okay." Odeon did so--and promptly doubled over.

Alarmed, DeLayne grabbed the tape player and shut it off. "What's wrong, Captain?"

"I thought you said . . . mild nausea and disorientation. Not stomach cramps and . . . the worst headache I've ever had."

DeLayne frowned. "I've never heard of a reaction that bad, or I would've warned you. Let me get Dr. Drulet to prescribe you something."

"Thanks, but no thanks; I'll be okay. It's fading already." Odeon straightened cautiously, shaking his head. "I don't think I'd care to repeat the experience, though. Do you have any ordinary books I can use instead?"

"No, but I can have the ship print you out what's on the tapes. Normally I'd suggest you try a standard reading tape, but after that reaction, printouts would probably be the best idea. They're a hell of a lot slower than teaching tapes, though; it'll take you a day or so to learn what the tape would've given you in a couple of minutes."

"I'll take the day, and the printouts."

"You've got them. Imperial English, or should I have the ship transcribe everything into the pre-Imperial alphabet?"

"Imperial," Odeon said, after a moment's thought. "I'm going to have to learn it sooner or later, so why put it off?"

"That makes sense. And I don't think I'd better let any of your people try taking a tape till the Lindner gets here. An IBC has better research facilities than a scout; they may be able to find out why you reacted so badly, whether it's an individual reaction or something everyone in the Systems shares, and how to avoid it."

"That makes sense, too. Thanks, Captain. Aside from the alphabet, what would you recommend I study first?"

"In your place I'd start with basic history and Imperial structure. Once you know that, you're in a better position than I am to decide what else you'll need."

"I'll do that, then."

27a. At Harmony Lodge

28. Aboard the Lindner

James Medart was looking forward to his arrival in the Kingdom Systems. Another new culture to study, this time a group whose ancestors had fled the early Empire in an attempt to escape religious persecution. From Captain DeLayne's reports, that had been about four hundred years ago, and even though they refused to discuss religion, DeLayne said that from their symbols and occasional references, they were a Roman Catholic variant.

DeLayne's primary informant was Cortin's second-in-command, who was also studying the Empire with considerable interest, DeLayne said, but making slow progress because he had a strong negative reaction to teaching tapes. That was unfortunate, Medart thought, but Odeon's attitude was a distinct improvement on Cortin's fear. He admitted to being a priest, once DeLayne asked about some of his insigne, but was reluctant to go beyond that, and said most of their Founders' records had been destroyed in the Final War. He couldn't provide the historical background Medart would have liked, then, so the Ranger decided to see what he could find from the Imperial side.

After several days' research, he studied what he'd been able to put together from obscure and also incomplete records--not typical of the time, and he found himself wondering if that could be deliberate. Sabotage, maybe, by some who had stayed behind, to protect those who had left?

The group that founded the Kingdom Systems had begun as a large Roman Catholic parish in the Southwestern United States, conventional except that it was allowed to use the Latin Mass. In 2148, however, they were assigned a new priest. Until his arrival there, he had seemed equally conventional, though he had already gained a reputation for great charisma and persuasiveness. When he became parish priest, however, he began preaching about the Final Coming--not of Christ, but of a Third Aspect of God he called the Protector. This Aspect would appear after Satan had been released from Hell and allowed to wreak his will for a hundred years. He also called for the ordination of women, a priesthood allowed to marry, and numerous other changes.

To the Vatican's dismay, he attracted a large number of followers from all over the world. Many moved to his parish, while those who disagreed with him moved out. The entire group was excommunicated in 2156, branded a heretic cult, and generally scorned by outsiders. At this point, it began implementing the priest's suggested changes, including new terms for Satan and Jesus--now Shayan and Jeshua.

All this got them greater notoriety and contempt. To escape that, the priest persuaded his followers that it would be best to flee this persecution and the Empire that permitted it--though in fact the Empire was simply

maintaining its strict neutrality regarding religious matters--and, in 2158, the group left Terra, fleeing in three surprisingly large and well-equipped ships. Nothing had been heard of them since, and apparently no one had particularly cared; there had been no investigation or follow-up of any kind.

Another deliberately self-"lost" colony, Medart thought. At least this one wasn't fighting them, and from Odeon's medical records there didn't seem to be any genetic tampering, as in the case of the Sandemans--just a pseudo-virus, one that enhanced the sex drive, which had surfaced about thirty years ago, and a mutation in Odeon that somehow mimicked it. That, Medart was certain, was natural rather than engineered; the Kingdoms' medical care was more advanced than the Sandemans' had been at Annexation, but it certainly wasn't up to genetic engineering.

He spent the rest of the trip studying the tapes DeLayne transmitted, including what teaching tapes he'd transcribed for Odeon, and brushing up on Roman Catholic theology of the mid-twenty-second century. The church had been starting to splinter then, but from what little Odeon let slip, it seemed safe to concentrate on what was currently called the Traditional branch--while keeping firmly in mind that this was a variant, possibly in more than the Persons of the Trinity and the names of God and Devil.

29. Arrival

The Columbus left as soon as Medart's ship, the Empress Lindner, entered orbit. Battle cruisers were far too large to land in a gravity field as strong as St. Thomas', so he came down in one of the bus-sized landers along with a single pilot/bodyguard. There was none of the pomp or ceremony Cortin would have expected when royalty from one realm visited another, but Colonel Bradford had decided to leave the Strike Force troops in place because of the Brotherhood, so she was able to have a proper military formation, at least. The Ranger had asked for informality, though, so she and Odeon were the only ones who approached to greet him when he emerged from the lander, followed by his bodyguard. They exchanged introductions, and Medart confirmed Cortin's guess that the small, dark-skinned blond was indeed one of the genetically engineered Sandeman warriors, Lieutenant Keith DarElwyn.

"I thought it might reassure you," Medart said, "if I brought along one of the people we were able to make friends with thirty years ago. I've got Traiti aboard as well, but I don't think you're quite ready for them." Cortin, he thought, was more impressive in person than on screen. She was medium height and build, with straight brown hair not quite shoulder length, wearing a gray uniform with wide-brimmed hat--but it was her eyes that struck him. They were a light brown, with pupils that seemed blacker than space, making them seem to look through you.

Even though he was familiar with Odeon from DeLayne's tapes, he found the scar-faced man more impressive in person, as well. He was a good twenty-five centis taller than his commander, strongly built without looking like a weight-lifter--and the nasty-looking scar that cut across his right cheek down across his mouth and into his chin seemed more a distinction than a disfigurement. Both officers reminded Medart irresistibly of predators, though he couldn't pinpoint the reason . . . maybe that neither seemed to have any softness about @.

It had become almost a reflex for Medart to do a quick mental scan of anyone he met, and under the circumstances, he would've scanned Cortin and Odeon anyway. Mike Odeon was average, with no mind-screen or perceptible Talent other than very minor telepathy, but Cortin was an entirely different story. She had an incredible degree of Talent latent, though it wasn't like any he'd felt before. Still, three and a half years of experience didn't make him an expert in Talent varieties--especially human ones, since that had been discovered only the same three and a half years ago. Her mind-shield had a potential strength even greater than a Sandeman warrior's, though she wasn't using it. She also had a strong telepathic potential, of which she was using a small, untrained portion--and there was another aspect, one he hadn't encountered before, that it felt like she was using fully, though unconsciously. It was a good thing, Medart thought, that he seemed to be immune to that particular aspect. His focus had to remain on the Empire as a whole; he couldn't afford--and

had no desire--to fall in love. He was less sure about Keith's immunity, though; even in this brief a time, he could sense a sort of mellowing. He'd have to keep an eye on that, he thought; if Cortin could affect a Sandeman, even one of the rare unshielded warriors like Keith, it might be risky letting her around too many Imperials. On the other hand . . . He made a mental note to contact DeLayne when he was alone, and find out what effect she'd had on the Columbus' captain and crew. Probably none, since he hadn't said anything about it, but best to double-check.

Cortin nodded to the Sandeman. "It would be interesting to get his reactions to the Empire first-hand."

Keith bowed. "I look forward to the opportunity, Excellency."

"Let's go inside, then, and I'll introduce you to the rest of my Family. Did Captain DeLayne brief you about the satyr plague?"

Medart chuckled. "And the Strike Force's . . . ah . . . 'enthusiastic use of their dispensation' was how he phrased it. We've both been immunized, just in case."

"Yes. Well, one of the social changes it triggered, and I helped bring about, was an expanded family structure to allow for the variety it makes you want, while still providing stability for the family itself, particularly the children. Family Cortin began as Strike Force Team Azrael, and most of it still is, though we've added a civilian wife. I understand Sandemans have a strong privacy drive?"

"Very strong," Medart agreed. "Why?"

"Because Family behavior on the private floors can best be described as uninhibited, particularly in the evening," Cortin said. "If open sexuality disturbs him--either of you, for that matter--I'm not sure what to do. You want to learn about us by living with us, and that's part of our life. I certainly can't put one of your rank in a field shelter!"

Medart chuckled. "It doesn't disturb me, but Keith would probably be seriously embarrassed." He enjoyed it, in fact, any time he was on one of the worlds where open sexuality was the norm--particularly where outsiders were allowed or encouraged to participate. That was a preference, though, that Sandemans definitely didn't share. He turned to Keith. "Would you prefer staying in a shelter or the lander, Lieutenant? With this many troops around us, I don't think I need a full-time bodyguard."

"I would, thank you, sir. The lander, by preference."

"You will still eat with us, won't you?" Cortin asked. "We don't generally relax to a degree that should make you uncomfortable until after supper, and the ground floor is always formal."

"I intend no disrespect, Excellency. I will be honored to eat and visit with you."

"Good. Let's go introduce you to my Family, then." As they entered the Lodge and went upstairs to the common-room, she said, "To spare you some confusion about our names: we're all Cortin, since Mike and Sis--the senior spouses--wanted me as head of the Family and named it after me. So Mike's full name is Michael Patrick Cortin-Odeon, but around the Lodge or people who know us well, he's Mike or Captain Odeon, depending on circumstances. Since he's also a priest, you'll sometimes hear adults calling him Father, too."

They were in the living room by then, where the rest of Family Cortin was waiting; she introduced them to the visitors. "Medic-Lieutenant Eleanor Chang, otherwise known as Piety or Sis, the Family's senior wife; Elizabeth Bain, our only non-military adult; Communications-Lieutenant Joseph Pritchett, generally called

Tiny; Armorer-Lieutenant Anthony Degas; Demolitions-Lieutenant David Bain, who's also a priest like Mike and myself, and my backup Inquisitor; Lieutenant Charles Powell, who doesn't have a rated specialty but acts as my secretary; and our children--legally my grandchildren, though I can't have children of my own--Luke, Kateri, and George."

The two Imperials bowed slightly, and Medart did the honors on that side. "I appreciate your hospitality," he said then. "Before Colonel Cortin and I can do any productive negotiating, we have to get to know each other and each other's cultures. You got a bit of a head start with Columbus' crew, but I'm deliberately starting from scratch, except for the little Captain Odeon gave Captain DeLayne."

"With first names," Cortin said, "since you're guests in our home; formality's for the ground floor and below. Unless that's considered rude in the Empire, which I doubt from the time Gwen spent with us."

"In the Empire it'd be undue familiarity from anyone except my parents, other Rangers and the Sovereign, or the captain of my ship. But this isn't the Empire, so we go by your customs, not ours; I'm Jim."

Cortin smiled. "Joan--maybe Joanie, if you feel like joining our Family pleasures some evening." She sobered. "Now--I agreed to let you observe me, and I won't go back on that. But I do have to warn you that, based on people's reactions here, you'll probably find my work extremely unpleasant. I know Mike didn't go into detail about it with Captain DeLayne, because I told him not to." She paused, using the brief silence for emphasis. "I'm an Inquisitor, Jim. Normally, that would mean I question prisoners, and turn them over to a judge for sentencing if the evidence warrants it. But I'm the High King's Inquisitor, which means I deal only with capital crimes of the worst type; by the time a criminal gets to me, he's either proven too stubborn for other Inquisitors, or he's under sentence of prolonged death. So far, only one of the prisoners remanded to me has left Harmony Lodge alive, though with your help there may be a second."

"That," Medart said with considerable aversion, "sounds like you torture people to death."

Cortin nodded. "If you restrict 'people' to 'heinous criminals', you're absolutely right. I have never gone beyond first stage interrogation--simple questioning--with an innocent, and truthsense lets me be sure the ones I kill are guilty of the crimes they're sent to me for." She smiled, grimly. "I don't even have to ask, since they all protest their innocence."

"You said that if I help, a second prisoner may leave here alive. What help do you need?"

"Your mind-probe, if it doesn't require the subject to answer verbally." Cortin explained about her anomalous prisoner, then said, "It's probably nothing significant, but I don't like it. I can't find the Inquisitor who conducted the interrogation, and there are rumors the judge who sent him here has ties to the Brotherhood. If he was sent here under false pretenses, my prisoner should be freed and given compensation, and the judge should take his place."

"The probe doesn't require verbal answers, no," Medart said. "And since it may mean saving a life, I'll have a probe unit and operator come down." He paused, considering. He could use telepathy to get the answers she wanted, and her own--the small part she was calling truthsense--would let her be sure he was reporting accurately. That would be quicker than waiting for the probe; the question was whether it would be wiser to reveal his Talent or not mention it at all.

Use it, he decided. Odeon had read about the White Order rebellion and Corina's discovery of human Talent in Medart, then others; he might not know the details, but he did know the basics, and it would be logical to assume he'd passed the information along. "That'll take several hours, though, and there's a faster way, if you want. I'm a fairly powerful telepath; I can read his mind as well as a probe could, and I'm already here."

It was Cortin's turn to hesitate. Mike had mentioned Talent, yes, and had some telepathy himself, with anyone Shayan had mind-touched; the idea wasn't that odd, really, and Medart's offer would save time. Still--"Are you reading my mind?"

"No. I touched you briefly when we met, enough to learn you're not a threat, though I did pick up a little other information. Otherwise I seldom use it unless I'm invited or there's an emergency."

Her truthsense agreed, so Cortin nodded. "If an injustice is being done, it should be corrected as soon as possible; I accept." She turned to her people. "Mike, Dave--would you take that prisoner to my first-stage room, please, while I give our guests a brief tour of the dungeon?"

"Of course," Odeon replied. The two left, and Cortin turned back to the Imperials.

"I was making an assumption perhaps I shouldn't," she said. "It's your choice to accompany us or not, Lieutenant DarElwyn."

The Sandeman bowed. "I would be honored to do so, Excellency."

Something in his tone made Medart glance at him, then do a quick surface scan. Cortin's unconscious Talent had done its job; the warrior was thoroughly in love with the High King's Inquisitor. That, Medart thought, was a complication he didn't need--but it was also one he couldn't do anything about, so disregard it for now. Just make a point of getting hold of DeLayne as soon as he could find a reasonable excuse to be alone.

"Let's go, then." Cortin led them outside and to the rear of the Lodge, where a cave-like entrance led underground. Above it was carved, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

"Dante's Inferno," Medart commented. "I take it, then, that this is the prisoners' entrance?"

"Right," Cortin agreed. "It isn't really Hell, of course, but it is the anteroom to it for most. A few escape that by repentance, but they still have to pay the worldly penalty for their crimes. What happens after that is between them and God; all I can do is administer the Sacraments and finish my work. If it's an interrogation, though, I'll kill one who repents as soon as he's given me any information he has."

"You don't even try to save them?" Medart asked.

"Their bodies, no," Cortin said, leading them down the stairs. "I told you, I get the stubborn ones. By the time I break them, forcing them to live longer than necessary would be a torment even Cortin the Bitch doesn't care to inflict."

At the end of a short passage, she unlocked a massive door and gestured them through, into a dimly-lit corridor with doors along both sides, some with small lights turned on above them. "These are the holding cells, under constant monitoring from the Detention Center and periodic monitoring by my people. Troops from the Center take care of the prisoners, then remove bodies when Lt. Bain and I are done. Or our colleagues, who're free to use any suites we aren't, if they have an overflow."

Halfway down the passage, she unlocked another door. The corridor this one led to was wider and brightly lit, much like a hospital corridor; she led them straight across, to a door marked "Interrogation Suite Alpha", the "In Use" light above it lit. "This is the one I normally use," she said, ushering them into the office area. "The layout's standard, but it's bigger than usual, and I have quite a bit of experimental material, both equipment and drugs. This section's normally used for Stage One, which rarely happens here; today is unusual." She nodded in the direction of her desk, and the chair in front of it which held a prisoner, flanked by Odeon and Bain. "He's all yours, Ranger. Do you need anything special?"

"A chair would help, so I'm not standing over him; otherwise, no."

Cortin nodded; Bain left, returning moments later with a folding chair he handed to Medart.

Medart positioned himself facing the prisoner and introduced himself, then said, "Colonel Cortin has some doubts about your guilt, but since you can't talk, she can't question you very well. I can read minds, so I don't have that problem. Do you understand?"

The man nodded, but his attention was obviously on Cortin, not the Ranger, and when Medart mind-touched him, all he could read was fear. He turned to the Inquisitor. "He's so terrified his fear's acting like a mind-shield, Colonel. I could get through, but not without hurting him; is there anything you can do to calm him down?"

"That might be difficult," Cortin said. "I generally want my subjects afraid of me; this is the first time I've had to calm one." She turned her attention to the prisoner. "Kenneth Shelton, isn't it?"

The man nodded.

"I'm sure you've heard the usual rumors of my methods; it should be at least a little reassuring that you're dressed and in this suite's office, rather than hanging naked in my third-stage room."

The man nodded, mouthing, "Why?"

"Because, as Ranger Medart said, I have several reasons to wonder about your guilt." She detailed them, ending with, "In particular, the fact that you were muted, apparently to keep you from talking to me--which is the only way I can rely on my truthsense for more than basics. Since I knew the Imperials were coming, and that they had a method--not this one, though it should be equally effective--which would insure truthful, if non-verbal, responses, I used my prerogatives as High King's Inquisitor to postpone your execution, and if my suspicions prove well-founded . . . we'll see. Does that help?"

Shelton nodded, with Medart agreeing. "The fear's going, Colonel; his primary emotion now is gratitude. When that fades a bit, I'll be able to read him."

"Gratitude," Cortin said, her expression grim. "He is innocent, then. I owe you a personal debt, Ranger; I have never harmed, much less executed, anyone who didn't deserve it. Thanks to your assistance, this will be no exception."

"My pleasure," Medart told her. "I think he's settled down enough now for me to get through without hurting him." He closed his eyes, concentrating on the prisoner. The light touch needed for simple communication wouldn't be enough, though he paused briefly at that level to reassure the other. *Mind-reading is painless, Shelton, even though I'm going to have to go deep enough for direct memory access. I won't trigger the memories, so you won't have to relive them; I'll just copy them to myself, so I can report accurately to Colonel Cortin.*

I understand. The man was nervous--naturally enough, Medart thought--but there was a basic stability to him the Ranger liked. *Do what you have to--and God bless you for helping.*

Thank you. With that Medart went deeper, scanning memories until he found the relevant set. They were as nasty as he'd expected, and he didn't like the idea of experiencing them, but to accomplish his objective, he didn't have any choice. He "reached" for them.

Cortin watched with interest but no understanding as the Ranger closed his eyes and sat silent for several

seconds. Then he shuddered, tensing, and she watched sweat stains appear and grow on his uniform. By the time he opened his eyes again, almost half an hour later, he was soaked and looked exhausted. She wanted to ask about her prisoner, but instead said, "Are you all right?"

"I will be after a bath and nap," Medart replied. "Reading minds, except for the simplest communication link, isn't like reading a book; on any deeper level, you share the other person's thoughts--and feelings. This is my third time at that level, and by far the worst." He stood, moving around to ease the kinks. "He's committed no crimes, Excellency, but he's damnsure been the victim of some. He's a small farmer; he and his family were sitting down to supper one evening when several men broke in. They restrained him while they killed his family, making sure he knew they were making it look like he'd done it. Then they changed to Enforcement Service uniforms and took him to an Inquisitor. The Inquisitor already had his report written; all he did was cut out Shelton's tongue and beat on him to make it look like he'd resisted interrogation. When that was over, the phony troopers took him to a judge, who sentenced him to you. The rest you know."

Cortin didn't even try to hide her cold anger. "I'll need more details, of course, but that's enough to let me get started. Did you happen to check on whether he was given the Sacraments?"

"Sorry, that didn't occur to me." Medart sent a quick thought. *Were you?*

By the Brotherhood? Shelton's thought was bitter. *No, and I need them--if you'll help me with Confession?*

"I'm Omnist, not Catholic," Medart cautioned aloud. "I'll relay if you want, though, and anything you say will be treated as Empire Secret."

Please. Shelton's thought held a trace of wan humor. *You have some of my memories; why should I mind you reporting some of my sins?*

Medart managed a chuckle. "Put that way, no reason."

* * * * *

"Ego te absolvo in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen."

"Amen," Medart relayed. "He'd like Communion, but without a tongue, he's not sure he can manage." He paused, grinned. "We may be able to help there, too, unless you've developed regrowth techniques."

"Spiritual Communion is as effective as physical," Cortin reminded the penitent, "though I admit it doesn't feel the same." She turned to the Ranger. "We don't have regrowth, no, but I do seem to remember hearing something about it. Only as a rumor, though."

"It's quite real. We learned it from the Traiti, and the Lindner's doctors are trained in the procedures. Initiating it will only take a few hours, but the regrowth itself usually takes a couple of weeks."

"A couple of weeks shouldn't matter, and since it's possible, it should be part of his restitution. What will such treatment cost?"

"No charge," Medart said. "Civilians can be treated at military facilities if there's space and what they need isn't otherwise available, both of which are true here." He turned to the Sandeman. "Take him up to the ship when Colonel Cortin's done, please."

"Yes, sir."

"I'd suggest," Cortin said, "that you bring a few extra bodyguards when you come back, Lieutenant. I learned from an earlier prisoner that Imperials are at the top of the Brotherhood's wipe list, and after the way he helped me today, Ranger Medart will be a particular target."

Medart frowned. "A Sandeman warrior's the only bodyguard I've had since they joined the Empire. And that's more symbol than necessity."

"In the Empire, maybe so," Cortin said. "For a major Brotherhood target, a bodyguard is a necessity. And it's a good idea to have physically impressive ones. Despite their abilities, Sandemans are impressive only to people who're familiar with them, which most in the Kingdom Systems aren't."

"You're the expert here," Medart said. "Okay. Keith, ask Colonel Williamson to detail me a standard team, the biggest people he's got. You'll be in charge of them, of course. Oh, and you can stay aboard overnight, if you'd like."

"Yes, thank you, sir." Keith smiled briefly, and Medart hid a grin. If Cortin thought he should have physically impressive bodyguards, that could be arranged--along with an evaluation of the Systems' attitude toward non-humans, though if it weren't for her suggestion, he'd have put that off for a while yet.

"Good," Cortin said. "Captain Odeon, would you show Ranger Medart to his suite, please?"

"Of course, Colonel. If you'll come with me, sir?"

30. Interview

Upstairs in the Family section, Odeon turned to Medart. "Thanks for helping her, Jim. That's one the Brothers hadn't tried before, tricking her into executing an innocent man."

"It was a nasty frame, all right, for both of them," Medart agreed. "She seems to take a lot of pride in confining her torture to criminals; killing someone who didn't deserve it under your laws, even if it was on false evidence, I'd say would be a major blow."

"One that would lessen her effectiveness, and that'd be a major victory for the Brotherhood." Odeon led Medart to one of the Lodge's guest suites and showed him in. "This is yours as long as you want to stay. If you'll authorize one to go aboard your lander, a servant will bring your baggage."

"Damn--I forgot you don't have fabricators." Medart touched his throat, activating his comm implant. "Empress Lindner?"

When the ship answered, he went on. "Have a standard travel kit made up for me, please, for an indefinite stay. Lieutenant DarElwyn will be up shortly; he can bring it with him when he comes back. Medart out."

"You can communicate with your ship with no equipment?" Odeon asked.

"Not exactly; the equipment's in my throat and behind my ear. It's called a comm implant, and most senior Imperials have them. Normally I initiate the contact the way you just saw, but the ship can contact me if necessary, or I can tell it to monitor full-time if I think there could be a need."

"Still a lot I don't know," Odeon said ruefully. "I'd recommend the latter whenever you leave the Lodge." He hesitated, then asked abruptly, "How do you feel about Joan?"

"I'm not in love with her, if that's what you're asking."

"It was, but how--oh. You felt it when you mind-touched us right at first. I'm not surprised; you don't seem the type to become an Enforcement trooper. In case you're worried, that's the only personality type she has that effect on. I'd say the Sandeman is, though."

"He is," Medart said, then, "You felt my mind-touch? That's never happened before, unless I did it deliberately."

Odeon grimaced. "I had some . . . mental surgery . . . a few months ago. It left me able to release the compulsions Shannon could impose, and it gave me a strong sensitivity to mental contact. I can't do anything with or about the contact, unless it's with someone else he mind-touched, but I know when it happens."

Medart sensed the other's reluctance to pursue that subject, so he returned to practicalities. "Since you don't have fabricators, and what I'm wearing is all I've got till Keith gets back with my kit, is there any way I can get my clothes cleaned in the couple of hours I'll be napping?"

"Easily," Odeon said, clearly relieved. "We sometimes have unexpected overnight company, so the guest suites are equipped with robes, pajamas, and standard toiletries. If you'll change, the servants can have what you're wearing clean and back to you in about an hour."

"I'd appreciate that."

* * * * *

When Medart woke, his uniform was hanging up inside the bathroom door, his underwear was folded neatly on top of the clothes hamper, and his boots and other leather items had been polished. He showered and dressed, decided not to call DeLayne since he'd gotten the necessary information about Cortin's odd Talent from Odeon, and checked the time. He'd slept longer than he expected; it was about 1730 Standard, about an hour later local time.

He left his suite, followed sounds of talk and laughter to the living room--and was pleasantly surprised to be greeted with a hug and enthusiastic kiss from the Inquisitor. He returned both with equal enthusiasm, got a similar greeting from Sis and a more restrained one from Betty--right, she wasn't a trooper, didn't share their dispensation, so more wouldn't be appropriate. Then Odeon approached, his expression inquiring.

Medart shook his head with a smile. "I'm flattered, Mike, and I don't want to offend you, but I'm afraid you aren't my type."

"Thanks, and none taken," Odeon said. "Too bad, though--does being around it bother you?"

"No, not at all--it just doesn't do anything for me, either."

Odeon chuckled. "It would if you'd had the plague and been out on remote patrol. There aren't many women in Enforcement, so all but a very few troopers go both ways, especially in the field."

"I can understand that," Medart said. "The ones I've seen, on a couple of worlds where sex is considered an art form, didn't leave any doubt they were enjoying themselves, either."

"That's all very well," Cortin said, sounding plaintively amused, "but would you mind going into reminiscence and philosophy later? I, for one, am ready for supper and after-dinner relaxation."

Her semi-complaint drew chuckles and agreement; the Family and guest went to the dining room.

* * * * *

After breakfast the next morning, Cortin asked Medart to accompany her to her ground-floor office. When they were seated in the conversation area there, she said, "While you were napping yesterday, I called Colonel Bradford and asked him to go into the details of what you found out from Shelton. I'm the best in the Kingdoms at third-stage, but he's the best at first, especially the memory-enhancing techniques we use with cooperative witnesses. I'd like you to work with him this morning; you can join me this afternoon, if you want to observe an execution."

Medart grinned briefly, then nodded. It was almost half a century since he'd taken orders from anyone except the Sovereign--but he wasn't in the Empire now, he was Colonel Cortin's guest; he'd go along with her arrangements, as long as they didn't interfere with his duty. "As you say, Colonel."

Cortin returned the grin. "Pretty good, for someone Captain DeLayne told me gave orders rather than taking them."

"That depends on circumstances. One of my colleagues, not quite twenty years ago, took orders from a fourteen-year-old who'd rescued him from rebels--but if I may change the subject, did DeLayne and his people have any effect on your attitude toward the Empire?"

Cortin sobered. "In that they were all proud to be citizens and part of your military, a little. They got along well with the troopers, and Spacer Third Class Conley made a very favorable impression on my Family, so I can say your ordinary citizens would probably get along with ours. And Mike is convinced that joining the Empire would be good for us, after a transition period he does think would be difficult--he says that's the only thing I have any real reason to worry about. None of the Columbus' people were on a policy level, though."

"And I am. Yes." Medart was silent for a moment. "Our basic policy is pretty simple, really, though some of the corollaries can get complex. People everywhere in the Empire have the same basic wants and needs: a stable environment, a secure home, safety for their family. Those can be achieved in any number of ways, and a way that's ideal for one person may be totally abhorrent to another. That's why we try to preserve cultural diversity, even at the cost of some order and efficiency, and whatever we may think of some aspects of a given culture. If it can provide most of its citizens with the opportunity for those basics, the Empire won't try to change it."

Cortin frowned. That matched what Mike had reported, and Medart believed it implicitly, but it was still hard for her to believe it could be true. She started to say as much and challenge him, but was stopped when Matthew knocked on the door and announced Colonel David Bradford.

Cortin made the introductions, then smiled. "You two don't need me, so if you'll excuse me, I have a multiple rapist-murderer I've been looking forward to."

Bradford chuckled. "I've heard about him--how long do you think he'll last?"

"I think I can stretch him a day and a half, maybe a little longer."

"Good. I may come down and observe for a bit, if this doesn't take too long."

"Fine. If not, I'll see you Sunday."

"I wouldn't miss it." As Cortin left, Bradford turned to Medart. "I understand you actually have Shelton's memories, in full detail?"

"Of that particular series of events, yes. Not of his entire life."

"That series is all we need." Bradford smiled, though Medart didn't think he meant it. "You should be as relaxed as possible for this interview; I'd suggest you lean back, or perhaps lie down on the couch."

"In a moment. How long will this take?"

"That depends on several factors, but probably not over two hours. Why?"

"My new bodyguard team's due down sometime this morning, and I want to be there when they arrive." Medart touched his throat. "Empress Lindner, what's Lieutenant DarElwyn's departure time?" Subvocally he added, "Monitor till I tell you otherwise."

"Yes, Ranger," came the answer only he could hear. "He is preparing for launch now."

"Ask him to delay for two hours, please," Medart said aloud. "And make sure he's bringing a shelter for the team; they'd be pretty cramped in the facilities available here." He paused. "Oh, and program my chrono to display local time as the primary."

"Yes, sir. Is there anything else?"

"That's it; Medart out." Turning his attention back to the Inquisitor, Medart settled back in his chair. "All right, Colonel. I'm ready."

* * * * *

Bradford's questioning, Medart thought when it was over, was the most thorough and probing debrief he'd ever been through. It hadn't been pleasant reliving those memories of murder, family loss, torture and maiming--his, even though he hadn't been the one the originals happened to--and he was relieved when Bradford called a halt, saying he'd gotten all the useful information Medart had. His smile this time was more genuine. "You're a good subject, Ranger. You've given me all I need to have that judge arrested, as well as identify and arrest the rogue Inquisitor and the rest of those Brothers."

"If they haven't gone into hiding." Medart checked his chrono and rose. "My bodyguard team should be down in ten minutes or so, if you'd care to meet some non-humans."

Bradford hesitated, then nodded. "I don't really care to, but if Colonel Cortin's right, I'd better start getting used to them."

Medart smiled. "If you join the Empire, yes. I'd planned on giving you a bit more preparation, but Colonel Cortin suggested my bodyguard be the biggest people we have, and those are Trait. The Empire includes standard humans, human variants like the Sandemans and the Narvonesse Dragon-Kindred, and non-humans, like the Trait and Irschchans. One of my fellow Rangers is Irschchan, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if she became Empress some day. Plus there are occasional genetically-engineered variants who're so far from the human norm they'd be classified non-human if that weren't their root stock."

"I understand."

Medart was thinking hard as they went outside to wait. He would have liked to get a reaction uninfluenced by prior information to his bodyguards' appearance, but from Bradford's response to the mere mention of non-humans, that didn't seem like such a good idea. He'd warn the spectators, then, and see about having pictures circulated before he went out in public with them. Bradford was right: if there was a chance these

people would join the Empire, they'd have to start getting used to their fellow citizens.

He'd barely finished a brief description of the Traitit when the sound of null-grav engines made him look up. It was the lander, making a fast but otherwise sedate approach. Medart hid a grin as spectators drew back, expecting a crash. Sandeman reflexes made the speed perfectly safe, and if they thought this was something, they should see the type of landing a pilot trained at Clan Leras preferred. Given a choice, especially on a non-Sandeman world, those would stunt a craft till it was barely a couple of meters off the ground. That usually resulted in one of the watchers panicking and calling the local emergency services before a safe, if overly dramatic, landing.

The lander touched down, and moments later the hatch opened. Keith disembarked, followed by four enlisted Marines. Despite Medart's caution and description, the massive gray-skinned Traitit drew sounds of astonishment--and, Medart thought, some fear--from the troopers, and an exclamation of "Dear God!" from Bradford.

The team stopped about a meter from Medart and saluted. When he'd returned the salute, Keith introduced the team members. "Do you have work for us right away," he asked then, "or should I have them set up their shelter?"

"The shelter," Medart said. "And it might not be a bad idea for them to circulate, let these people get used to them. You can do that as well, or join Colonel Bradford and me; we'll be observing Colonel Cortin at work."

"I'd prefer to join you, sir." Keith turned to the senior NCO. "You're in charge here, Sergeant Tovar."

"Yes, sir." The sergeant smiled, exposing shark-like teeth. "You need not worry, sirs. This is not our first time among humans who haven't seen Traitit before. It's just too bad there are no children here."

"Children!" Bradford exclaimed in disbelief.

"Children," Medart confirmed with a chuckle. "Traitit adore children, anyone's children--and the youngsters have some way of knowing it. Five minutes or so after they meet, they're fast friends."

"I think I would like my children to have such friends," a woman said behind Medart. He turned, to see all of Family Cortin except Cortin herself, Odeon, and the children. Chang stepped forward, one hand brushing the bulge of her abdomen. "I do not know why, but I find these Traitit . . . comfortable."

Medart smiled. Sis had a trace of empathy, not enough to be called Talent but clearly enough for her to sense the Traitit regard for children and women--especially pregnant ones--of whatever race.

Betty looked from the Traitit to the Family's senior wife, thought for a moment, then nodded. "I trust Sis' feelings; they can come out after lunch."

Breakthrough! Medart thought as all four Traitit smiled and Tovar bowed to the women. If Cortin's Family allowed their children to play with non-humans, it would have to have a favorable effect, at least on those who saw them.

"We thank you, ka'naya," Tovar said. "Not having children around is one of the most difficult parts of military life; we will treasure this opportunity."

"They will, too," Medart told Bradford as the three made their way to Cortin's underground suite. "If they can't be at home, the Traitit version of perfect shore leave is a park-full of kids."

Bradford didn't have anything to say to that, so the three were silent until they got to the observation room door, where he paused with his hand on the knob. "Colonel Cortin says she told you briefly what she does. I have to add that she's extremely good at both making the punishment fit the crime, and at making that punishment last. If you're at all squeamish, I'd strongly recommend that you not follow me through this door."

"I'm here to observe," Medart said. "I don't expect to like it, but I can't form an accurate assessment of this society if I only observe the positive side. Would you mind telling me what this one did?"

"Of course. He's attacked three families, in all cases raping and killing them one at a time, while the survivors watched. Children first, then the mother, with the father last. Grandfather, in one case. He claims more, but Enforcement has found only those fifteen bodies. Even Colonel Cortin can't make him suffer for that many, so any more would be academic as far as his punishment is concerned."

Medart grimaced. "I see what she meant about getting the particularly nasty ones. Do you know what she has in mind for him?"

"That depends mostly on how he reacts to her preliminary examination. Most people have one major fear, criminals usually more; when she discovers his, that's what she'll concentrate on. But since he's a rapist, that'll definitely include sexual pain."

"She'll geld him, of course," Keith said.

"Probably," Bradford agreed, "but not immediately; intact genitals are too useful for producing both physical and psychological pain to waste them early. Especially with one like this, where they're powerful ego points."

For the torture scene:

30a. Cortin's point of view

30b. Medart's point of view

30c. Odeon's point of view

30d. Keith's point of view

31. Explanation

Medart wasn't hungry at all by the time Cortin and her new sworn man were finished with their prisoner, but he did feel better when they left the third-stage room, better still when they left the dungeon. As soon as they got to the main floor, he touched his throat, activating his comm implant. "Empress Lindner?"

When the ship replied, he went on. "Show Lieutenant Keith DarElwyn released from Imperial service effective this date; reason is oath of personal fealty to Colonel Joan Cortin of the Kingdom Systems. All back pay and allowances are to be sent to her in whatever form she specifies. Have his personal belongings--and copies of all reference materials we have pertaining to Sandemans, transcribed into pre-Imperial English--sent down as soon as possible. And I'll need a replacement pilot."

Cortin frowned. "Why me? It's his money."

"How to explain best is difficult," Medart said slowly. "I've been in a 'na's mind, and I'm still not sure I understand it completely. When you accepted his oath, he became a part of you--literally, by their reckoning, to the point where Sandemans would consider you the father of any children he might engender."

"Dear God! I thought the oath was extreme, but I didn't dream . . ." Cortin trailed off, staring at her 'na.

"Going to extremes is a Sandeman characteristic," Medart said drily. "As another example, he'll want the tattoo I mentioned on his face to show he's yours. Their custom entitles him to it--and if he does anything against their custom with other Sandemans around, it protects him from punishment or dishonor, because they'll see it as doing your will."

And, Cortin thought, if their negotiations took the Kingdom Systems into the Empire, there would definitely be other Sandemans around. She turned to Keith. "Do you want that?"

"Yes, Thakur, very much."

"It's your face; is there any particular mark you'd prefer?"

Keith thought for a moment. "Since you're an Inquisitor, a question mark like the one on your badge might be appropriate."

"It would, yes--and since I'm High King's Inquisitor, there should be a crown on top." She cocked her head. "I don't know much about the local tattoo artists, but I'm sure someone here does; if you're as eager as you look, I can find out who's best and have him brought here to do the job."

"I am eager, Thakur, but not enough for you to go to extra trouble."

Cortin grinned. "Sometimes I enjoy going to extra trouble for my people. Let's get up to the Family floor and see who knows about tattooing experts."

"Thank you, Thakur!"

"My pleasure."

On the way upstairs, Keith began to feel something odd. Not really odd, he corrected himself; just inappropriate in these surroundings and certainly not the sort of thing he'd expect a proper 'na to feel toward his thakur! Honor, respect, devotion, of course--but desire? Custom was silent on the subject--naturally, with almost all such relationships between warriors--so sex wasn't forbidden, exactly. On the other hand, it didn't quite seem properly respectful, either.

The feeling subsided a bit as his thakur spoke to her team, then had Tony call an artist he knew, but it didn't go away completely. And, oddly enough, he seemed to be sensing her feelings, maybe even a shadow of her thoughts, in spite of his lack of Talent. That was a blessing he hadn't expected, and he sent a quick prayer of thanks to the gods for it; if he could know her thoughts, it would make doing her will far more certain.

They had supper while waiting for the artist to arrive; Medart excused himself as soon as the meal was over, saying he wasn't in the mood for sex and had some thinking to do.

For Keith's experiences: 31a. Tattoo

32. Briefing

Medart went to his suite, preferring to be alone rather than spoil the Family's evening. It wasn't their fault he didn't consider torture a valid form of punishment--and never would, though he had to accept that in many cultures it was exactly that--or that watching it made him feel he wouldn't be comfortable company for several hours. The best thing for him in a mood like this was privacy, a long hot soak, and either something to study

or an action-adventure tape that didn't take much thought.

The suite's 'fresher provided the first, and there was a bookcase in the suite's sitting room that, while it didn't have either of the other two, did have enough variety and interest to keep him occupied until a reasonable time, local, to go to bed and do some thinking until he fell asleep. If you were alone, he'd found, bed was one of the best places possible for concentrated thought: dark, quiet, and with no interruptions.

One thing he'd have to do fairly soon, he decided, was have a serious discussion with Odeon about religion. It was clear even from the little he'd seen, never mind Odeon's conviction that God and Devil had cooperated in healing Cortin, that religion was far more important in the Systems than it was in the Empire.

After that, though, what? The Brothers of Freedom seemed to be the Kingdom Systems' biggest problem; it would have to be a big plus if he and the rest of the visiting Imperials could help wipe out that sort of threat.

He wasn't prepared for what happened next. He felt a mind-touch, more powerful than he would have believed possible. *You needn't be concerned about the Brotherhood, Ranger. They are my concern, and the Protector's.*

What the-- Who are you?

I have many names. You call me Satan, people here call me Shayan, and at present I call myself Lucius. You are absolutely correct about the other, however; you should indeed have a talk with Michael Odeon, and soon. Tonight, I think.

Satan, huh? The other believed that, and his mind-touch was definitely both powerful and non-human, though it reminded him in a way of Cortin's. But the actual Christian Devil? *That's a bit hard to swallow.*

You will come to accept it. I would say, from what I sense going on in the common-room, that Cortin is in the process of transferring her Protector role to the one who will hold it permanently. That means a decision point crucial to this entire universe will arrive within days, perhaps hours, and you should have the same information I was permitted to give Family Cortin. Medart got the impression of a sardonic smile. *Cortin's role in the primary drama has ended, save for the formality of bringing the Systems into your Empire, and the Protector will be, as I am, restricted to the Systems, at least for a time. The true focal point here is, and always has been, Michael Odeon; his birth and development are the culmination of the history you studied on the way here, and his decision will determine the fate of this universe. He does not know that, and you will be no more able to tell him than I am--but I would urge you most solemnly to influence him in the Empire's favor, to the point where he would leave his family to serve it.*

Medart frowned, sitting up. *If I can't tell him, why tell me? Who'll stop us? How could one man's decision affect an entire universe? And, most important, if you're who you claim, how come I sense anxiety from you instead of hostility?*

The last question first, then. This universe is going to be invaded soon, by beings who frighten even me. If Odeon's decision is for the Empire, that invasion will lead to the most life-destructive war in the universe's history. If he decides for his family, instead of war there will be simple massacre, which will include me and my demons. So I act as I do out of pure self-interest. That also answers your first and third questions. Knowing my identity, you should be able to tell me who will stop us.

Assuming you are who you claim to be, it'd have to be the Creator.

Yes. While He--A, in your Omnist terms--wants the same choice we do, Michael must be allowed his freedom. An odd concept, to me, but one He insists on.

Mike's more than he seems, then. And that's got to be one rough enemy, to have someone like you worried; even if you're not Satan, you've got the strongest Talent I've ever felt. When's the invasion, so I can tell His Majesty?

Medart sensed amusement. *Your skepticism should anger me, James Medart, but I find it refreshing instead. If Odeon makes the proper decision, you will come to belief in the appropriate god at the necessary time. It is indeed 'one rough enemy', but I am not allowed to identify them to you further, and since the timing of numerous incidents in the defense is crucial, I doubt you will be able to tell anyone except Odeon any of this conversation. It is even possible that, once the decision point is passed, my Adversary may edit some of your memories to prevent inadvertent premature revelations.*

I don't like that idea, but if you're right, I won't have any say in the matter, so there's no point in worrying or complaining. What about Mike?

I am not permitted to go into his background. I can, however, tell you that, should he decide in favor of the Empire, the Protector will give him Ranger-level abilities--including, if he chooses, the necessary mind-set.

Umm. Medart got out of bed and put on a robe. An invasion he couldn't report, by an enemy that frightened someone as powerful as the one who was briefing him, with the best-case scenario for the Empire a devastating war--that didn't sound good at all. And it all hinged on one man! Well, at least it included the possibility of a new Ranger, which was definitely to the good. Tarlac assassinated right after the Traiti War, Menshikov, Ellman, and Steinhauer killed during the brief White Order revolt--even though he'd recruited Corina Losinj during that revolt, they were still three short of the average, and even that wasn't enough. *Will I be able to use that possibility in convincing him?*

I believe so, though he does not at present have the scope to fully comprehend what a Ranger is. I have told you what is possible to me and necessary to you; we will not be in contact again until the decision point.

With that, the contact broke. Medart shook his head, then went into the living room and made himself a cup of coffee. Instant from a microwave didn't match what he got from a shipboard service panel, but it was coffee, and he had a bad habit that way.

33. Discussion 2

A knock on Medart's door didn't surprise him. "Come in, Mike--I've been waiting for you."

Odeon entered, tying the belt of his robe. "You've had some sort of odd experience too, then?"

"Yeah. A mental visit from someone who calls himself Satan, or Shayan, or Lucius. Want some coffee?"

"I'll make myself some tea, thanks." Odeon busied himself doing so, thinking that it was clear both of them were in seriously unfamiliar territory. "Did he tell you anything useful?"

"Yeah, sort of, though it seems I can't talk about all of it."

Odeon snorted a laugh. "That doesn't surprise me! So much of this is keeping secrets from various people, I'd be astonished if you could tell me everything. At least I can tell you that the permanent Protector's shown up, so Joanie doesn't have that problem any longer."

"Whoever it was did tell me that was happening. What nobody's told anyone in the Empire is what the Protector is."

Odeon frowned, staring at his cup. "That's because Joanie told us to avoid talking about religion. But I don't think we're going to be able to avoid it any longer. You know I'm Catholic, and the bio sketch I read on you says you're Omnist--which I'm afraid doesn't mean much to me."

"Not practicing, but yes. And your version of Catholicism is a variant; I studied Traditional theology on the way out here. In that, and in other Christian faiths outside the Systems, there's no mention of a Protector. Instead, it's Christ's second coming that's supposed to start God's kingdom."

Odeon's frown grew deeper. "No Protector? But the Bible says--"

"Your Bible," Medart corrected. "I'm a little surprised you didn't do any religious study, even though Joan told you not to discuss it. If you want, I'll have my ship make you a copy of the Traditional Catholic version, along with an outline of their teachings; except for the doctrine of the Protector, that seems to be the branch your Founders belonged to."

"I'd . . . appreciate that," Odeon said slowly. "You're telling me we've been lied to?"

"Not necessarily." Medart paused, studying the other. "Will you be offended if I give you the Omnist position on different religions?"

"I'll try not to be."

"Good. The primary tenet is that all religions are true in part, none in totality--Omnism included. While the Creator's both infallible and unchanging, the creations aren't; we change, hopefully mostly for the better, and He gives us different religions to reflect our changing needs. I'd say that for some reason, your Founders were given a revelation about the Protector. I can't say how faithfully they recorded it, or if any interpretations were accurate, but another of our primary beliefs is that the Creator plays fair with His creations. He doesn't lie, though we may misunderstand or otherwise screw up what He shows us." Medart grinned. "You told me yourself the real Protector's shown up, which should ease your mind on that score. Do I know @, by the way?"

Odeon managed a smile. "You brought him. Joanie had Keith given his tattoo, then made a comment about being anxious for the permanent Protector to take over. Keith offered to take that burden from her and had that offer accepted--I'm not sure by Joanie. Then he sent me here to visit you, telling me I had a lot to learn."

"Keith, huh? Mind telling me what you believe the Protector is, now that we know who he is?"

"Until a couple of minutes ago, I was certain the Protector was the Third Person of the Trinity. Now you tell me there's nothing known about him outside the Systems, when God is universal. So . . . I don't know. Did Lucius tell you anything about him?"

"That he and the Protector are both restricted to the Systems, at least for a time, and that the Brotherhood's their problem. Of course, if he's who he claims to be, that could be a lie."

"Damn." Odeon rubbed the back of his neck. "He told me months ago that his reputation as Father of Lies comes from humans who don't want to believe him, that the truth was more useful and painful. Since that hurts, it probably is true."

"It makes you feel betrayed."

"Yeah." Odeon sighed. The Ranger wasn't mind-touching him, but he was certain that wasn't necessary; he'd never been very good at hiding strong feelings, and his current feeling of betrayal was as strong as his anguish

at Joanie's maiming had been. "What would he be, then?"

Medart shrugged. "All I can give you is a guess."

"I understand."

"Okay. Bear in mind that I don't share your faith and ours uses different terminology, so I'll have to do some more explaining, and you may find that sacrilegious. Especially since you're a priest."

"I'm properly warned; go ahead."

"We'll start with the basic point we agree fully on, then. There is one Creator of all the universes, right?"

"I only know of one universe, but other than that, yes."

"There are more. You'll have to take my word for now, but I'll give you proof later. Anyway, you believe the Creator is three beings in one, a belief I don't share. We do agree, though, that there are lesser supernatural beings. Right again?"

"The various kinds of angels and demons, yes."

"And the souls of those who've died?"

Odeon thought about that, then nodded slowly. "I suppose so, though I don't usually think of them that way."

"Even the saints, who work miracles?"

"God works the miracles through them," Odeon corrected. "Okay, I can go along with all of that."

"Good, because the next step is where you're going to get upset. Since everything ultimately comes from the Creator, including the power to work miracles, Omnists don't see any practical difference whether these lesser beings intercede, as you believe, and the Creator works the miracle directly, or He delegates the power and they work the actual miracle independently. Since demons in almost all theologies can work the negative equivalent of miracles, and I don't think it likely they'd ask the Creator's permission, I tend to the latter view."

Odeon didn't like that, but looked at from a purely logical viewpoint, he couldn't argue. It was for damnsure Shayan could do things on that order. "Go on; I can handle it so far."

Medart smiled. "You're doing better than I expected. Maybe you won't blow up on me at this stage after all."

"I've heard a couple of Imperials swearing 'by the Creator and all the gods', so I can make a guess. I don't like it one little bit, but I'd say what we agree on as the lesser supernatural beings are what they mean by the last part of that phrase."

"Exactly right! The Omnist definition of a god is a being subordinate to the Creator who is the proximate cause of a miracle. It's not a judgement of good or bad; it's a simple term to distinguish those who work miracles from those who don't. And if the Creator chooses, He can grant a material being the powers and knowledge normally restricted to those on the supernatural plane. From what you tell me, He loaned Joanie those powers temporarily, and has just given them to Keith--maybe permanently."

"Umm." Odeon mulled that over for almost a full minute. That was a little better than the absolute betrayal he'd felt before, but not by much. "We were promised the Final Coming of God, and His Kingdom--not a

human transformed into an embodied angel or saint."

Medart sighed. "Mike, I wish I could offer you what you really need, but that's the best I can do. If it's any consolation, I know and respect Sandemans very much; you couldn't get anyone better for a Protector than one of their warriors. The only change I can see necessary for him to function that way, besides enhancing his natural attitudes and abilities, would be for him to be given a more open outlook sexually."

"I think he's been given that; at least he undressed when we did, and said he'd take my place conducting his service. But--part of the protection is from sin. How can he do that when he doesn't even know what our sins are?"

"How do you know he doesn't, now? Giving him that information would hardly be beyond the Creator's power."

Odeon rubbed the back of his hand, studying the blue circled triangle on each. "Do you know what these mean?" he asked abruptly.

"No. I'm curious, but elsewhere it's one of the symbols of the Trinity, so I didn't think I should ask just yet."

"It is? Here it started out as the Brothers' symbol, and when you see it burned into someone's hands, it's a mark of their particular hatred. When it's normal skin with a blue glow, like mine, it's the Protector's Seal--means the person with them has given up the ability to sin." He studied them for several more seconds. "Considering what I think about being tricked the way we have been, I'm a little surprised he hasn't taken these away."

"You're thinking standard human, not Sandeman warrior. I'm sure he thinks you're perfectly justified in feeling betrayed, since he's not what you were promised. While he can and will carry out the functions, since he accepted the position, and in Omnist terms has apparently become a god, he certainly isn't the Creator." Medart paused, wondering if this were the time to broach the subject of Odeon becoming a Ranger, or at least claiming his Imperial citizenship and moving to Terra. Before he could decide, Odeon solved that problem for him.

"Jim--can I ask you something?"

"Of course. I'll answer it as the private individual I am here, or as a Ranger, whichever you prefer."

"What's the difference?"

"As a private individual, I can take your feelings into consideration, and the answer doesn't have to be complete. As a Ranger, you get it all, with no shading. And I'll warn you in advance: most people don't ask us questions, because they don't have the first option and they know they probably won't like our professional answers."

Odeon managed a grin. He didn't mean it all the way, but Jim's response did deserve something. "At this point, I'm feeling like nothing can go right, and I don't know what to do about it. I've got to work something out, so you might as well give me the professional version."

"Okay. In that case, I'm going to give you one more out. Lucius told me something that makes me want--need, under our present circumstances--to get you into the Empire and a job that'll regularly get you into dangerously interesting situations."

"I'm Strike Force, Jim, even though I was taken off active duty four months ago because I'm Joanie's heir.

Danger's normal for us; it's only by God's grace I survived my first year, much less made it to age thirty-seven. And right now, I've got to admit I wouldn't exert a lot of effort to avoid getting killed. What job are you talking about?"

"Let me get to it more gradually, okay?"

"Okay, if that's your professional opinion."

Medart chuckled. "It is--and that answer gives me a lot of hope. Besides feeling betrayed, I'd bet that being relieved of active duty, and now having Keith take over your work with Joan, have you feeling useless as well. Am I right?"

Odeon nodded, reluctantly. "I've been trying to avoid thinking about that, but . . . yes, you're right. With Keith the Protector now, he probably won't be helping her the way I did--she probably won't need a helper any more, if he gives her the gifts the Herald was promised--and I didn't really like the work, but it was the only productive thing I was doing. Betrayal, uselessness--and I'm damn close to losing all my faith."

Which sounded like it was tearing him apart, Medart thought. A lot of people, even a few Rangers, needed a religious faith to feel complete; it wouldn't be a violation of the separation doctrine to try and help him regain his. "Don't give up till you read the Traditional church's Bible and teachings, Mike. They might be just what you need."

"I hope so." Odeon hesitated, then decided to go on; as a police officer, he knew that having all the facts was essential to reaching a good decision, and he wanted the best Medart could manage. "The night I was Sealed to the Protector--Joanie then, of course--Jeshua appeared to me in a vision. One of the things he told me was that I'd be tested by pain and loss great enough I'd be seriously tempted to reject him. I thought earlier that Shayan torturing me was that, but I was wrong. This is, and I hate it. It's a horrible feeling."

"I can tell," Medart said sympathetically. "Hang on; let me have that material brought down right away instead of waiting till morning." He touched his throat, gave the necessary orders. "Okay, they'll be here in half an hour or so. Unfortunately, we don't have any Traditional Catholics aboard, or I'd have asked one to come down and talk to you."

"The Bible and outline should be enough, if it's going to work at all. I have a funny feeling I'm going to be up all night reading and praying . . . Would you mind if we get back to the main subject?"

"Sure. I can't do much else about your feeling of betrayal, but I'm hoping to get rid of the useless feeling for you." Medart paused, smiled. "Even if you decide against the job I want you to take, if those feelings are strong enough that you feel you have to leave the Systems, all you need to do is claim your Imperial citizenship, then exercise your option to change your world of residence once at Imperial expense--in this case, aboard my ship."

"They're strong enough," Odeon said, "but I've still got a Family I love and responsibilities I can't just run away from. I'll claim citizenship, yes--the other, not unless you can persuade me the Empire has more of a claim on me than my Family and the Archduchy of High Teton do."

"I think I can manage that. Welcome to the Empire, Mike--I think you're the first Systems person to take that step officially. Now what's this about being Joan's heir, and an Archduchy? I don't remember anything about you being part of the nobility."

"What?" Odeon frowned, thinking back over the past three weeks. "You know, I don't think the subject ever came up. Joanie's Archduchess of High Teton, and she named me her heir, which makes me a Duke. Local

nobility only, of course."

"Of course," Medart agreed, pleased that Odeon was showing even that tiny trace of humor. "Shall I start calling you 'Excellency'?"

"I don't feel much like an Excellency at the moment. Just stick with Mike, please."

He'd better slow down, Medart told himself. Mike was good, but he wasn't Ranger-level yet, and if Medart screwed up, he never would be. "Sorry; I was just trying to lighten things up a bit. If you decide to take the job, you won't be able to inherit. Is the succession set up?"

Odeon nodded. "If anything happens to me, Sis' baby would inherit, with her acting for him until he's of age."

"Good. No extra arrangements to make if you accept, then. Okay, Mike, let me talk you through working out what job I want you to take; you don't have the background to accept it if I just come out and ask."

"I asked for your professional help; we do it your way. I think I'm starting to see where you're going, though."

"I hope so; that'll make it easier for both of us. I know you've read about recent Imperial history, so you're aware of our losses during the Traiti war and the White Order rebellion."

"Uh-huh--specifically the four Rangers, if I'm reading you right."

"You are. I was incredibly fortunate to find Ranger Losinj during the rebellion, but we're critically short even when we have the average of ten, and right now we're down to seven."

"You want me to be number eight, I'd say. We both know I don't have even the widely-known qualifications, and I can't believe you'd consider for a second lowering the standards, so--" Odeon broke off. "Who's supposed to make the changes? If it's Shayan, forget it!"

"He told me about it, but it's the Protector who'll make you Ranger-level, if you agree to the changes. Including the mind-set we have to have, but again, only if you agree."

"That's a tremendous offer, Jim, and I can't deny it'd be a useful and satisfying job--but I can't give you an answer just yet. First I've got to work out my spiritual problem, and decide whether or not I'd be willing to leave my family even for something like that."

"I can't do anything for you about the first, but maybe I can ease your concern about the latter a bit. The one who mind-visited me said he gave Family Cortin some of the same information he gave me; did that include anything about an upcoming invasion I'm not going to be allowed to warn the Empire about?"

"He didn't mention that part, but yeah, a super-nasty one. Why?"

Medart chuckled. "You don't need me to answer that; you can do it for yourself, but I'll give you a hint if you want."

Odeon thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Don't bother. It's pretty clear that someone who can command fleets would have a lot more effect against invaders than a Strike Force officer who's been ordered off active duty. Which means I could do more for the people I love by leaving them than I could by staying with them." He paused, then shook his head. "And that hurts too--especially since one of the public things is that Rangers don't have any close personal ties, so if I take the job, I won't even love them any more. Will I?"

Medart hesitated, but he couldn't either lie or refuse to answer. "No, you won't. That's an emotion I've never had, other than maybe for the Empire as a whole. Liking and respect for individuals, yes--love, no."

"And I won't miss it. I think that may be the worst." Odeon sighed. "But you hit me in my vulnerable spot, Jim, and I think you know it. I've spent my entire adult life doing my damndest to protect and help people; if I can get past my spiritual problem, I'm going to have to accept the job."

"If it's any consolation, none of us asked for the job, or particularly wanted it--my own plans were to go through the Academy, have a Naval career, and then retire to Herbert's World with a cattle ranch. Every one of us, Corina included, took it on out of a sense of obligation."

34. Transformation

Odeon was right; he didn't get any sleep. He'd left Medart as soon as a messenger from the ship delivered the materials the Ranger had ordered, and spent the next few hours comparing the Traditional Catholic Bible with the one he knew so well, and studying their doctrines.

With the exception of a couple of name changes, the Final Coming, and the Third Aspect being the Holy Spirit instead of the Protector--and, of course, the accommodations the Systems Church had made for Enforcement and the Satyr Plague--the two were almost identical. Where they differed otherwise were matters of discipline, with the Systems version stricter. It was even possible, he told himself, that the Third Aspect used both names, and the Protector's appearance in the Systems didn't rule out Jeshua's Second Coming to the rest of the Empire. It did bother him that Jim had said the Protector was limited to the Systems, but he reminded himself yet again that a mortal could never truly understand the Mind of God; all he could do was accept.

It wouldn't be difficult for him to make the necessary adjustments, either, though he'd definitely have to see the Terran Pope if he decided to take up either of Jim's offers. It probably wouldn't be a good idea to tell him Pope Lucius' true identity, even though he was certain it wouldn't be believed. But it wouldn't hurt to tell him about having the Systems Pope's permission to celebrate Mass more than once a day, and find out what would be expected of a priest who was also a Ranger.

Odeon sighed when he got to that point. He'd managed to avoid facing the fact so far, but he couldn't put it off forever; by bringing his Family's welfare into the equation, Jim had made it impossible for him to turn the job down. He'd known that even then, he thought, but he hadn't wanted to accept it.

And he still didn't want to. He loved his Family too much to want to leave them, particularly when it would mean he'd no longer be able to love them. But as Jim had made him work out for himself, he could do them a lot more good in the upcoming war by leaving to take a high Imperial position than he could by staying. Dear God, but the prospect hurt, though!

He sighed again. For the first time in his career, he was reluctant to act on a decision as soon as he made it. This was the first one that would bring about major changes in his essential self, and that prospect frightened him. Even Shayan's mental surgery hadn't changed what he was; it had only given him a couple of new abilities--very minor ones, from what he'd read of Talent.

The memory of that surgery didn't help, either. Even though Shayan had assured him it could've been done painlessly and in seconds, he couldn't shake the association of mental changes with agonizing, prolonged pain and violation. As he'd told Sara, though, if someone needed his help as badly as she had, he didn't have any choice but to try giving it, even though he wasn't sure he could endure such surgery again.

That lack of choice was even more emphatic since the ones needing his help included his Family. He had to submit to that surgery, endure it to the best of his ability, and pray he'd have the strength to survive it.

Live or die, he thought grimly, he'd be losing those he deeply loved--and he wasn't sure whether he should indulge himself, tell them all goodbye, or if it would be better to just go ahead and do it. That decision could wait, though; he didn't want it to be obvious he hadn't slept or--yet--that he was bracing himself to leave. He had just about time to clean up and say Mass before he'd have to go in to breakfast.

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Odeon removed his stole and kissed it, then folded it and put it in his tunic pocket. Saying Mass had helped more than he'd expected; he was feeling somewhere between resigned and serene when he went to the dining room for breakfast. He'd also decided or been guided, he wasn't sure, that since he was going to go, he might as well get it over with. Brief goodbyes after breakfast, then ask the Protector to make the necessary changes.

Fortunately for his peace of mind, he thought, the children weren't there--maybe deliberately, because the Family's expressions told him they knew something was going on. And, to his surprise, the new Protector was sitting between Joanie and Jim, his plate holding more food than Odeon would've thought reasonable for someone his size--if an Aspect of God had to eat at all. Still, Jeshua had . . .

As Odeon sat down and began filling his own plate, Keith chuckled. "As long as I'm in body," he said, "I do have to eat. And a Sandeman warrior has a pretty high metabolic rate, so I have to eat a lot. Yes, your Family knows what you've decided to do, and that you made that decision primarily to help them. They also know I won't hurt you in the slightest. We'll take care of it after breakfast, as you're thinking. All right?"

"As you will it, Lord."

Keith grinned. "Better start getting used to giving orders instead of taking them, Michael. Do you want just the abilities, or the mind-set as well?"

Odeon tried to return the smile, but was sure it came out more like the grimace he really felt. "I don't think you need to ask, Lord Protector. If I'm going to do it, I'll do it right; I'll take whatever you see fit to give me."

At that, he felt the other's approval. "So be it, Michael. You'll be a real asset to your--and your Family's--new home."

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After breakfast, the entire group went to the common-room. Odeon said his goodbyes, embracing and kissing his Family head and spouses while tears ran down his face.

Medart watched sympathetically. Odeon's feelings of betrayal and uselessness might not have been enough to bring him to this point; protecting his Family to the best of his ability, even if it meant giving them up to do it, had done the job--something Medart had seen the previous night, though Odeon hadn't yet realized it. He regretted the man's present pain, but he was certain that once the Protector made the necessary changes, Mike would find he job every bit as challenging and satisfying as Medart himself did.

When Odeon was finished with his goodbyes, he turned to the Protector. "I'm ready. What do you want me to do?"

"Find a comfortable chair, and tell me whether you want to remain conscious for the procedure or not."

Odeon sat down in the nearest armchair, grateful to his Family for gathering around as the Protector stood in front of him. Medart held back, which made Odeon grin briefly. "You ought to be here too, Jim; I made the decision I did because you forced me to face the fact I could do my Family more good this way than I could any other."

"Decision?" Cortin asked sharply, as Medart joined the group. "The decision point was Mike's?"

Keith saved Medart from having to answer. "Yes. You all protected him by your certainty that the decision would be Joan's; now it's his turn to protect all of you." He turned to Odeon. "Which would you prefer?"

"Since you say it won't hurt, I'll take it straight. I don't think I could handle that kind of pain again."

Keith smiled. "You underestimate yourself, Michael; you are far stronger than you believe. The only part of your basic personality I'll need to modify at all is detaching you emotionally enough that you'll no longer have or form close personal ties that would affect a Ranger's necessary impartiality. The rest will be additions, or speeding up attitude changes you'd be going through anyway."

"I think that's a relief," Odeon said. "Let's take care of it, okay?"

"Okay."

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Keith stepped back and smiled. "Done, Michael. You and James need to take care of some details, so we'll leave in a couple of minutes. I gave you everything a Ranger needs, in some cases more, and took care of a couple of your problems--such as removing your allergy to teaching tapes; you'll be able to use them now, and you'll need them. Your intelligence has doubled; you have and know how to use a powerful Talent that includes telepathy, mind-shield, teleportation, and materialization; and you have the other abilities and attitudes proper for a Ranger. I also removed the satyr virus from your body, so you're no longer contagious, a service I will perform for anyone else who leaves the Systems. I made only one overt physical change, since you've chosen the Traditional Church, which means you can't be my priest or devotee any longer. I've reset your biological clock to where it would be if you'd been selected in the usual manner, but to maintain it there, you'll have to go on anti-agathics; my powers, as James told you, don't extend beyond the Systems. Otherwise you look and feel exactly the same--but if you should need them, I've given you a complex of hidden changes, all of which will activate if any one of them is required. Again, with improvements." He smiled again. "You'll do well, Michael, both as Christ's priest and as a Ranger. Joan, you reached a decision yourself while I was working; you ought to tell them what it is."

Cortin looked from Medart to Odeon, then back. "If Mike thinks anything about the Empire is important enough that he'll give up Family Cortin for it, I'll trust his judgement; as sole negotiator for the Kingdom Systems, I am empowered to say the Systems will join the Empire. I ask that you give us all the help possible to reach the level of the rest of the Empire, and show us how to take our proper place in it."

"Gladly, Excellency, and welcome. We'll be happy to help our newest citizens. Do you need military support as well?"

"Familiarization and upgrading only," Keith said. "They have the basic tech level, with minor exceptions. Medical training and learning about the Empire are their primary needs, though other things will be needed as they gain the population base to support them."

"Right. Admin Service teachers and a couple of heavy destroyers ought to take care of those; anything else you'd recommend?"

"Not at this time, Ranger, though it might help if you could leave a detachment from the Lindner. I'm sure Colonel Cortin would provide them lodging, and Lucius and I will protect them from the Brotherhood."

"I'll see to it."

"We'll leave you to brief Mike, then."

"Thank you, Protector."

* * * * *

Once they were alone, Medart spent a few moments studying Odeon. "You do look the same, except for your hands," he said at last.

Odeon looked at his hands, which no longer had the blue circled triangles. That was a relief, now, not the terrible loss it would have been before his talk with Medart last night. "You heard him confirm that I'm still a Catholic priest, Jim. I would've thought that would violate the separation doctrine."

Medart shook his head. "Not necessarily. Most of us are Omnist or agnostic, that's true. Once in a while, though, there's a deeply religious one, and there's nothing prohibiting a priest." He grinned. "If you want to get technical, I'm a priest myself, and so are a couple of the others--but since that's true of all adult Omnists, nobody pays much attention to it. They'll pay attention to you, since you're the first non-Omnist priest, but that attention in itself doesn't violate the doctrine. As long as you don't try to impose your beliefs on others, or imply that the Empire in any way favors one religion over another, your beliefs and devotions are between you and your God or gods."

"I can handle that, I think, if it won't prohibit me from exercising my priestly functions for Catholics who need them."

"It won't, though it'd be best if you do any of that in private. It may never happen, either; I'll warn you right now that Catholics are a tiny minority, the Traditional branch only one of half a decade or so."

"That's the impression I got from the studying I did on Columbus. I'm not thrilled about it, but it isn't unexpected." He paused. "Mind if I change the subject?"

"Go ahead."

"I had limited telepathy before, as a side effect of Shayan's mental contact. I'd like to try the Talent version, but mind-touching you might not tell me anything, since he spoke to you last night."

Medart chuckled. *The feel is totally different--see?*

Yeah. I like this version a whole lot better.

So do I. Ready for me to introduce you to His Majesty, so he can name you one of us officially?

How-- Oh. Mentally, of course. Odeon hesitated, shook his head. *Jim, what's happened to me? I couldn't have figured that out before--or at least not that fast.*

I'd venture to guess it's the doubled intelligence, Medart sent drily. *You're the first person to be given Ranger-level abilities, rather than growing up with them, so I can't be positive, but that's my best guess. Don't worry, you'll have time to get used to it; the trip to Terra will take us about three weeks, and even if you

weren't very adaptable before, you are now.*

Getting used to the way my mind works now may be the hardest part of this whole thing. But I've known everyone except Shayan that I've mind-touched before, and he initiated that one; how do I contact His Majesty?

You know me, and I know him, so you ride along, so to speak, when I contact him. Just let me know when you're ready.

Any time you are.

Okay, let's go.

Odeon felt Medart's mind reaching out, and strengthened his contact so the illusory "movement" wouldn't lose him. Almost immediately he felt another mind-touch, similar in general feel to Medart's but different in detail, and Medart made the introductions: *His Majesty Emperor Charles Davis, Ranger-candidate Captain Michael Odeon.* Then he briefed Davis, in a series of rapid thoughts.

The Emperor sent a chuckle. *That's quite a background, Captain Odeon. A unique way of qualifying as a Ranger, but I have no doubt you are qualified, particularly with a Sandeman warrior making the necessary changes. Jim didn't describe what being a Ranger involves, other than being dangerous at times, so did that process inform you?*

Yes, sire, it did. But it didn't intimidate me into changing my mind.

Glad to hear it. Welcome to Imperial service, then, Ranger Odeon.

Thank you, sir. Odeon paused briefly, then continued. *I'm qualified, yes, but I was given only the most basic information about the Empire--not much more than I'd studied on my own. If I'm not needed for immediate assignment, I think I should spend some time learning about it.*

We'll make that your first assignment, then. You can start on your way to Terra, then do as much more here as you can till a more urgent assignment comes up--which shouldn't take too long, there's never a shortage of work for Rangers. Normally I'd have you work with Jim for two or three years as OJT, but none of the others came from out-Empire, so your suggestion is the most sensible--and the reason for putting a Ranger on the job immediately is that most of the jobs you'll get are unique; there isn't usually any real preparation possible.

Both my studies and Jim made that perfectly clear, sir--but the Protector removed my allergy to teaching tapes, so I'll be able to cram in a lot more information than I would've been able to earlier.

Understood, but there's still a tremendous amount of information for you to absorb. Davis sent another smile. *You know how much getting a new Ranger means, and I'd like to spend more time with you, but I'm getting ready for a Grand Audience I can't put off just to chat. So I'll talk to you later.*

Yes, sir.

With that, contact broke, and Odeon's consciousness returned to the common-room. "What now?" he asked Medart.

But it was Keith who answered, entering the room. "You change uniforms, Your Highness. Don't worry about the change in your sidearm; you know how to use a needler, and you're as accurate with it as I am--a lot more so than you were with your slugthrower."

With that, Odeon was wearing comfortable forest green, rather than the snug gray he was used to. "Thank you, Lord Protector. I don't care to wear a uniform I'm no longer entitled to."

Cortin followed Keith into the common-room, looking to Odeon like she'd been crying. "Mike--the Protector told me I should ask your advice, if you were willing to give it."

Medart swore to himself. This didn't sound like a promising start for his new colleague . . . *Mike, don't say yes unless you're willing to face the consequences. This is part of the Empire now, you don't have the option I gave you yesterday of answering as a private individual.*

Odeon's answering thought was grim. *I know, but I can't refuse her. I can give her the same warning, though.* "Make sure you want the advice, Joanie. As Jim told me last night when I asked him for some, most people don't ask Rangers questions because they won't like our answers."

"Keith told me the same thing. I'm still asking."

"In that case, I'll answer. What's the question?"

"What's the best way to handle your . . . change? You're still senior spouse of Family Cortin and my heir, among other things."

Odeon thought about that briefly, then the answer was obvious--and as unpleasant as Medart had suggested it might be. "We both know that, even though I haven't changed much physically, I'm not the same person I was at breakfast. The fastest and most economical way to handle my change would be to have Captain Michael Patrick Cortin-Odeon declared legally dead, a declaration Ranger Odeon will not contest."

Cortin winced, then nodded. "It makes sense, Mike--too damned much sense. Okay, that's how I'll handle it . . . but in that case, it'd be best if you weren't around."

"I won't be, for long; the Emperor wants me to go to Terra, and I need to start learning a whole lot more about the Empire as soon as I can, so I'll be going up to Jim's ship, probably within an hour or so. It would probably be better if I don't come back to the Systems unless I have to on assignment."

"Yeah." Cortin started forward as if to embrace him, then dropped her arms and stepped back. "That wouldn't work, would it? Keith told me about your detachment . . ."

"No, it wouldn't. I won't forget any of you--but I don't feel anything beyond liking for you any longer, either. The kindest thing to do is break off now." Odeon studied her for a moment, then decided it would be best to make the break with no delay at all. He made the sign of the cross in the air between them. "God bless you and Family Cortin, Colonel."

She returned the gesture. "And you, Ranger Odeon. You will have our prayers."

Odeon bowed, then turned to his colleague. "I'm going up to the ship, Jim. See you later."

This continues in the novel Resurrection

[Preparer's note: This is the end of the main story. The material following this note is the supplementary material linked to from elsewhere in this file.]

St. Thomas, Wednesday, 19 June 2571

"The goddamned Bitch is still alive, Raidmaster."

Lawrence Shannon looked up from the shabby table he was using as a desk, smiling as one of his doubles threw a newspaper down in front of him. "Yes, excellent. Thank you, James."

"Excellent!" the double snarled. "I said she's alive!"

"You weren't mumbling," Shannon assured him. "If I'd wanted to kill her then, I would have. I chose to let her live for now, maimed and crippled; that will make it all the more satisfying when I do decide to kill her." He smiled in a way that made his double flinch. "Isn't it better to have her alive and in pain than dead and free of it? Doing something of the sort to her was my purpose in leading that raid, after all."

"But I thought--"

"Yes, I know." Shannon raised his hand, silencing the other. "For you Brothers, the hospital was the target; for me, Cortin was. We both accomplished our objectives, without casualties and with bonuses. I also warned you from the beginning not to question my motives. I use my powers on your behalf because our desires generally coincide and your help is convenient, not because you are necessary to me."

"You've made that clear often enough," the double admitted. "If I had your powers, though, I'd wipe out the Church, the aristocracy, and Enforcement so we could rebuild from scratch."

"Which is precisely what you would be doing," Shannon chuckled at the man's turn of phrase. "But there's a much more artistically satisfying way of accomplishing the same end--one which will also increase their suffering many-fold. Would you deny me that little pleasure?"

"Not me, Raidmaster!" the double exclaimed hurriedly, his face paling. Shannon was normally a charming man, polite and undeniably attractive, his blue eyes and wide smile almost irresistible--but the double had seen what happened to a Brother who cut short Shannon's enjoyment of a priest's slow death, and the memory still sickened him.

"Good." Shannon read his subordinate's discomfort, and projected encouragement. "You really must learn to control your sympathy for the oppressors, James. Our work is difficult enough without that."

The Raidmaster smiled again, and this time his double relaxed. "Damn straight! It just seems so slow!"

"Anything worthwhile does take time," Shannon said, "and you have to expect setbacks. The raid was a success, the whoring Bitch can't any more, and she bears the marks of those who brought her justice on her hands. Not a bad accomplishment, all in all, don't you think?"

"Not bad at all, Raidmaster. What's next?"

"I haven't decided," Shannon said thoughtfully. "Any raid will be far more hazardous now that Special Operations is going to be responding to all of them, and for at least a couple of months we can count on them being after revenge for the Bitch as well as doing their jobs. So we'll have to pick our targets carefully." He tapped one of the papers he'd been working on. "Until we get them out of our hair, we can't do anything constructive. And we haven't enough people or resources yet to strike their strong points, so while they're on an increased state of alert, it might be interesting to attack their recreational facilities."

The double smiled. "I like your thinking, Raidmaster. Such as the whorehouses they frequent?"

"Exactly," Shannon agreed. "Pass the word along to your colleagues, please. And I'd say you've had enough theoretical training; unless you need specific help, I'll expect you to plan and carry out your operations with as little inter-group communication as possible. Keep me informed, of course--but as far as others are concerned . . . well, what they don't know, an Inquisitor can't force them to tell."

The double grimaced. "True--but can't you protect us against them?"

Shannon smiled briefly. "It's more economical to use them. Anyone incompetent enough to get captured deserves their attentions, and it saves me the bother of reprimands. Maintain reasonable security, and you should have no serious problems."

"Yes, Raidmaster." The double would have expected Shannon to prefer handling his own punishments, but he did have a good point about making use of the Inquisitors. "If that's all, I'll go pass along your orders."

"Thanks, James." Shannon sketched the Brothers' sign in the air. "Revenge for the oppressed."

"And death to the oppressors." His double returned the gesture and left.

Shannon looked after him for a moment, then stood and went to look out the window. He was putting a good face on it, he thought, but in truth he'd like nothing better than to have Cortin dead and in Hell, or at least lying bloody at his feet.

But that wasn't to be. Not yet, at any rate, and perhaps never. She was as vital a part of this damnable charade as he himself, so he could neither kill her nor cause her death, at least until after her role was played out. He couldn't even use many of his powers against or around her until she realized and began using those that would be hers for a time. He could do anything short of those, however--and he smiled at the delicious memory of torturing her.

Although he'd known it would cause her relatively little distress--far less than a normal woman, and certainly far less than being branded with the marks he'd suggested to the Brotherhood--he had particularly enjoyed raping her. It would have been even better if she'd been a virgin, but given what she was being primed to accomplish--whether she realized it yet or not--and the fact that she was an Enforcement trooper, he'd known better than to even hope for that. Still, it was the rape she'd get support and treatment for, when the marks were the real violation; he could take comfort in that.

He cursed the fate that was making him fight to preserve the prewar morality. It served his purposes, true, but having to live by it himself--having to set a God-loving example!--was going much too far. Celibacy was definitely not his style. At least his favorite sado-sexual activity was expected behavior from terrorists, even those calling themselves freedom fighters--but it was so hellishly long between opportunities, and when they did arrive, he usually had to restrain himself!

The Brotherhood of Freedom had, after all, started out as the champions of freedom, family and justice they still claimed to be. To lead it, he had had to seem the most conservative of them all--and much as it went against his personal inclinations, he reminded himself yet again that it did serve his purposes. The Adversary's as well, unfortunately, but the Adversary was willing to tolerate his existence; those who were going to invade this universe could and would destroy him as easily as any human. So he had no choice but to cooperate. He'd be living with these attitudes for some time yet, so he really should learn to tolerate them, at least in others.

That thought made him smile. In others, yes, as long as it was he who controlled their behavior--and really, he should only have to live by those old standards himself for a brief time. There was ample precedent for a charismatic leader like himself to be free of the constraints that bound his followers--and to be so with their full knowledge and consent, because of his "special needs and burdens". It wouldn't hurt, either, that they

were already accustomed to the idea of special dispensations, such as the one Cortin had enjoyed until he took the ability away from her.

Cortin! Shannon fumed at that name. Maimed and crippled as he'd left her, he had no illusions that she was harmless. Not that she could be and still fulfill her role, he conceded grudgingly, and the other two currently alive would be worse yet, never mind the one who would be returning from his tomb. But they were all necessary to his continued existence, even though they would seriously reduce his influence. The living one yet to arrive in the Systems would provide no entertainment, but much of Cortin's and the other's development involved considerable stress and pain, for them and those around them--which he could and would enjoy.

Return to main storyline: 2. Hospital

2a. Musing

St. Thomas, June 2571

Within five days of Cortin's arrival at the New Denver hospital, Shannon had managed to get three Brothers working there, with orders to keep him informed of anything and everything she did. His agents' first report, the following day, told him that Cortin was under constant guard by a minimum of two troopers, and usually had Captain Michael Odeon with her during the day.

As the report continued he frowned, wondering if he shouldn't laugh instead. Odeon had brought her texts for the Academy's Inquisitor-specialist students, and that evening the course's ace instructor had spent several hours with her. Cortin, studying to become an Inquisitor? Not only didn't it seem her style, he wouldn't have thought her capable of the toughness or the deliberate violence it required.

He could be wrong, he acknowledged--he'd been wrong before, about her and other humans too--but it seemed impossible he could be that far wrong. In his harshest moment, he couldn't truthfully call her exactly soft . . . but on the other hand, he'd never respected her for her resolve. He'd be astonished if she turned out to have the necessary toughness now--but if she did, he certainly wouldn't hesitate to make use of it. Because if she were able to pass muster as an Inquisitor at all, the Bitch would be the Systems' best--a suitable punishment for any of his men who managed a particularly bad foulup.

As reports continued to come in, it became clear that she was not only excelling in her studies--Illyanov's evaluations said she was doing quite well, which for him was extravagant praise--she was apparently enjoying them, which Shannon found almost impossible to believe. This was only the theoretical work, though, he reminded himself. While he conceded that she could endure considerable pain, the question was whether she could deliberately administer it.

And that answer would have to wait. In the meantime, he had a campaign to plan.

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Cortin was recovering faster than Shannon liked. That she was recovering at all, of course, was unfortunate--but given that, he couldn't honestly be surprised at the speed of her recovery. It looked like her return to duty would be about the time that collection of Special Ops men--and the woman auxiliary who'd once been his "lover"--was complete. He was concerned about that; the necessary limitation of his powers made him dependent on normal systems of information, and security around the gathering was unusually tight. Since there were similar gatherings in every Kingdom, it was obvious the Sovereigns were planning something that promised no good for the Brotherhood and his plans, but he couldn't find out what without taking a risk of alerting Cortin.

Since there was nothing constructive he could do about that, he let himself reminisce about the auxiliary. Eleanor Chang, since age eighteen a professed Sister of the Order of the Compassionate Mother of Succor and known as Sister Mary Piety. Shannon had a particular dislike for that order, since they specialized in caring for seriously wounded or ill Enforcement troopers, sometimes accompanying them as medics.

That was Sister Piety's specialty, and she'd been handling one of its more difficult aspects when he'd encountered her almost a year ago. He'd been on St. Ignatius then, picking and training some of his subordinate raid-masters, and he'd given in to the urge for some recreation. That had taken the form of a raid on the clinic where she'd just brought a trio of wounded from her last mission, and it was a raid he remembered with considerable satisfaction.

The clinic was in the country, to let the troopers recover or die in the most pleasant surroundings the Order could manage--and it was remote enough that Shannon and his raiders could take their time, with troopers and nuns alike. Piety caught his attention immediately, being the youngest and most attractive of the women as well as the most spirited, and he promptly claimed her for himself. His subordinates were welcome to the rest.

To his satisfaction, she fought him. Not with any skill, but with enough energy and determination to excite him as no woman had in far too long. Stripped of her habit, she was even more attractive--and better yet, she continued to fight, even as he pinned her arms and forced her legs apart. Starting into her, he felt resistance that told him his hopes of her had been fulfilled. He paused, relishing that for some moments while he made certain adjustments to his body. He respected courage, even in an enemy; add that she'd managed to remain a virgin, surrounded by Enforcement troopers, and he was inclined to give her a fair chance. Like the pre-Empire Terran game show, if she said the magic word, she would win--not money, but her life. And her fighting had bought her a clue to that word.

Her eyes widened as she felt the change. She struggled harder, shaking her head and gasping negation, but her sudden panic was no match for his strength. He rammed into her all the way, savoring the hot blood that flowed out of her when he ruptured the membrane.

She screamed his name, winning her life--though Shannon took pleasure in the certainty that she'd rather die. She shivered under him, her screams gradually subsiding to sobs, until she was close to passing out with pain and horror. Shannon could have kept her conscious, but he'd be having her again later, and there were the troopers to play with; he finished in a series of rapid, violent thrusts, then kissed her roughly and pulled out.

* * * * *

"One more before we go, sweet Piety." Shannon's voice was almost gentle; over the last six days, he'd developed an unusual--and, he thought, delightfully perverse--fondness for the nun. It was nothing like his feelings for Sara, his mistress; those were totally unprecedented, not simply unusual. He couldn't pinpoint the reason he had taken to Piety, though it probably had something to do with the fact that she managed not to hate him. Fear, disgust, revulsion--he could read all of those and more, even pity. But there was no hatred.

"Please," she said tiredly. "Not again . . ."

"One last time, then we will part." It was unfortunate that she no longer fought him physically, but he'd learned to get the same excitement from her emotional upheavals; when he picked her up and they began to boil, he came to his full size almost immediately. "I'm afraid there won't be a show to entertain us this time, though. Your former companions and patients are beyond even my power to revive." Not precisely true--it was more accurate to say he no longer thought them worth the effort--but it was close enough for her. "Still, the act itself should be entertaining enough."

He put her on the floor, and was starting to mount her when an intriguing idea occurred to him. He smiled

slowly and stood, picking her up again, and carried her outside to a sweet-smelling grassy area surrounded by peonies. He put her down again and this time lay beside her, gently caressing, using his powers to soothe her.

There was still fear when she stared at him. "What . . . what are you doing?"

"Making sure, sweet Piety, that this time it's you who enjoys me." Yes, that revolted her very nicely. He stilled her beginning objection with a long kiss, then smiled down at her, continuing both his physical caresses and mental pressure. "I've kept you sane," he said softly. "The refuge of insanity is one you can never take, now, and there's no point in hoping I can't do something else equally simple. You will remember this week clearly, and today will be by far the worst. Because you are going to enjoy me, in the full knowledge that I'm compelling your pleasure as thoroughly, if not in the same way, as I compelled your pain and the others'." He smiled, running a hand down her belly to tease thick curls. "I'm sure you've heard I can be a skillful lover when I want, not so?"

"Yes." His compulsion was working; he could sense her starting to relax.

"Good. I had planned to leave in a few minutes, but a proper demonstration takes time; you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I . . . think so."

"You will, believe me."

* * * * *

She did, though it wasn't as easy as he'd told her or expected it would be. He'd felt her mental strength, but her tenacity and resilience still surprised him, finding any gap in the net of compulsion he imposed, which made it nearly half an hour, instead of a few minutes, before he was able to make her feel the pleasure he wanted. He paused then, thinking. While he respected her courage, her unexpected resistance at this late hour had irritated him, and he wanted to take it out on her. So should he make her cooperate with him, rather than simply remain passive and enjoy whatever attentions he chose to give her?

He smiled slowly. Yes, that would certainly add spice, and it would make her memories all the more painful. With the groundwork laid, that took only a few moments, and she was eagerly returning his caresses.

He took his time with her, knowing that the thoroughness of her enjoyment now would determine how much she suffered later. He'd told her there would only be one more act of intercourse, so that was what it would be. He'd said nothing, however, about details, so he played with her, teasing her with repeated small orgasms by mouth and hand, letting her know silently that these were only preludes. He felt--and helped--her desire grow with each one, building into desperate need, until she was writhing against him, begging and frantically struggling to get him into her.

It was a temptation to reject her at this last moment, but he resisted in the interest of future pleasure. He obliged her, giving her the tremendous orgasm he'd teased her with--starting with his entry, prolonging it through a coitus that would seem to her like hours, and peaking it when his own climax sent jets of icy fire into her.

He left her body first, smiling down at her. "You liked that, didn't you, sweet Piety?"

The nun sighed happily. "You know I did . . . does that really have to be the last time?"

"I'm afraid so." Shannon rose, still smiling. "I've enjoyed you a lot, but I have to get back to work, and it's

time for you to report our little party to the nearest Enforcement post. You can tell them everything except my name and how you knew me; all they need to know on that subject is that I'm the Raidmaster. Not just a raidmaster, the Raidmaster. You'll be sure to point that out for me, won't you?"

"Of course."

"Very good." Shannon double-checked the barriers he'd raised to keep her from the refuge of insanity, then he released his other compulsions. She reacted beautifully, her expression turning from pleasure to revulsion as she retreated from him, turning to run but falling to her knees racked with convulsions of nausea.

* * * * *

Shannon's attention returned to his surroundings. He'd left St. Ignatius then, thoroughly satisfied with the interlude, and memories of Sister Piety had cheered him several times since. It was an interlude he dared not repeat now, though. Cortin might sense something as simple as using his power to modify his physical attributes, and now that she was personally aware of him thanks to the attack, she'd have to sense his use of it on others.

Return to main storyline: 3. Center

4a. Shannon's Reaction

Shannon had decided to take advantage of Cortin's skill during the afternoon session. It had been some time since he'd combined his two preferences purely for pleasure instead of as an "object lesson"--since Piety, in fact--and he was overdue for some recreation. He'd told his aide he was tired and would be napping after lunch; Cortin would provide the violence, Victor the sex. Victor was homo, raised in a family that saw the Church's increased tolerance in the last two and a half centuries as abhorrent. But Victor couldn't deny his drives; the best he could do was conceal them, feeling guilt whenever they became strong enough to make him take action.

Shannon had picked him for that, perhaps more than for his administrative ability, then arranged for Victor to find him apparently asleep, naked. Since then he could count on the man sneaking into his room several times a week; it relieved some of the tension, and Victor's guilt not only added spice to the affair, it made him even more devoted to the one he thought he was victimizing. And, Shannon thought smugly, he couldn't possibly be faulted for being an innocent victim.

Stretched out, with only a sheet covering him, Shannon waited for Victor to decide he was asleep. In the meantime, he considered the two ordinations that had just taken place. He found them abhorrent, even though he was aware of their necessity. His continued existence could well depend on four humans who would, except for the approaching invaders, be major enemies--two here, one in the Terran Empire, and one currently dead. Three of the four, to his disgust, had to be priests of the Crucified One. That was galling enough, but the worst part was that he had to promote faith himself! Not necessarily in that particular deity, though it would benefit most, he thought bitterly. There were times he was tempted to rebel again, tell the Adversary to do it all, instead of having to drive people toward that one, rather than urge them away as he preferred. Existence, though, wasn't something to be given up, even if maintaining it meant doing some things he found truly repugnant.

Cortin, of course, was his immediate concern, though Odeon would ultimately be the source of far more difficulty for him. Before then, though, the scar-faced man could be made to suffer--which would be a very enjoyable procedure indeed, after the problems that particular individual had caused him since their last encounter. And there was always the chance Odeon would make a bad decision--though considering the effect that would have on Shannon himself, he couldn't seriously wish for it.

To main storyline: 5. Azrael

4b. Mike Odeon's First Mass

Odeon smiled as he entered the Detention Center chapel's small sacristy to prepare for his First Mass. He'd gone to Mass every day it was physically possible since childhood, made Spiritual Communion otherwise, and he'd thought himself long since resigned to not being the celebrant. That resignation, he realized now, had been only superficial; the anticipation he felt as he took out the stole Bradford had given him made it clear he'd never really given up hope of actually going to the altar.

He studied the stole, glanced from it to the vestments hanging up, and smiled again. He'd like to wear those, but it didn't seem too likely he would; except in very unusual circumstances, Bradford had told him, a Strike Force priest would remain in uniform, his only vestment the stole. Odeon kissed the piece of cloth, then murmured the proper vesting prayer as he put it around his neck.

The congregation and a server were waiting when he entered the main part of the chapel, so he contented himself with a brief introduction to the latter before turning to the altar. Since he hadn't had any formal liturgical training, he was a bit apprehensive about how well he'd be able to perform the ceremony, but his apprehension vanished as soon as he blessed himself for the opening prayers. He was filled with a sense of rightness and certainty, feeling himself absorbed in an awesome Presence that would give him flawless guidance. He gave a silent prayer of thanks, then lost himself in the glorious joy he'd always imagined saying Mass would be. Joy became exaltation at the Consecration, lasting until he finished giving Communion, then returning to the lesser joy until he finished the final prayers.

When he returned to the sacristy and removed his stole, it was with another prayer of thanks. That sort of direct guidance wasn't normal, he knew, and he had no idea why an undistinguished Enforcement Service officer would be granted such an exceptional--and marvelous!--grace, but he certainly wasn't going to reject it. He also wasn't going to bring the subject up, he decided. He wouldn't lie about it, of course, if anyone noticed and asked, but he didn't care to make any claims that might get him investigated by Church authorities. It wasn't that he had anything to hide; he'd committed few sins beyond the chronic mild profanity he couldn't seem to break himself of, despite his intentions--and he'd confessed those and gotten absolution, especially before saying Mass. He was definitely no saint, though, and with Cardinal McHenry in charge of investigating miracle claims, he'd just as soon avoid even a suspicion of claiming anything unusual.

Return to main storyline: 5. Azrael

16a. Shayan

Shannon's stomach churned in sick disgust, and he found it hard to keep from vomiting. He'd known that she'd be given a dozen helpers roughly equivalent to his doubles, so he hadn't been surprised when she, as acting Protector, was helped to set her seal on the first two, or when they passed it along to others. He hadn't even needed to eavesdrop; that was such a potent use of power it was impossible for anyone with the slightest degree of sensitivity to miss.

So, unfortunately, was the revolting spectacle going on in Harmony Lodge. It was positively obscene! He'd done humanity a favor, letting it couple without real involvement being necessary; why couldn't the Adversary have left it at that until after the decision point?

It did have one advantage, he conceded grudgingly, an advantage he was astonished the Adversary would yield--though since this wasn't truly a conflict, perhaps the advantage was also illusory. When they were broadcasting those repulsive emotions to each other and at him, they were also broadcasting information--especially in the throes of unity. For the first time since he'd decided it was no longer safe to

eavesdrop, he knew Cortin's thoughts and intentions--and knew them more thoroughly than if he'd managed to plant a spy in her private office.

Shannon sighed in relief as the broadcast stopped. He'd have to find some way to screen those emotions, without losing the information carried with them. Damn the weaknesses of human bodies! In one of his own forms, or able to use his powers, he wouldn't be affected so severely--if he were affected at all. The obvious way to avoid the worst of her excesses was to have sex himself, properly isolated from his partner's feelings; was there anyone here who could serve the purpose?

Too bad he'd had to leave Victor on St. Michael, but his aide was needed to deal with the Brothers there while he set up the Dmitrian operation that, if the crucial decision was made incorrectly, would trigger a Systems-wide conflict.

And Sara was too valuable to get involved in the conflict, even so marginally. Drugs, then--they were no more acceptable for his image, but they didn't require a partner, and he should have no trouble getting some from the pharmacy unobserved.

Damn, she was starting again! Degas this time, with Illyanov at her other breast eager for a chance at her--information or not, if she was going to keep this up, he had to find shielding! Worse, there was another couple starting at it, broadcasting less strongly but no less sickeningly--that unspeakable Piety and a big black she thought of as Tiny. Cursing in an effort to keep his mind clear, he hurriedly left his office to get the drugs he needed.

Return to main storyline: 17. Family

20a. Decision

Monday, 16 March 2572

Shannon had sent Blackfeather home to get ready for her trip, and was distracting himself from her loss by studying. He hadn't wasted his time in Odeon's mind; besides teaching the priest how to remove the compulsions he'd put Sara under--and, more pleasantly, just how much agony a human could be subjected to with the proper support--he had extracted considerable information.

Most of it was useless, though some was mildly interesting; it was Cortin's fears that intrigued him. She was primarily afraid of the confrontation--decision point, actually, which concerned him as well, though for different reasons--but there was fear for her people, for the Church, and of what he would do about the Families.

Shayan sighed, feeling all too human in his frustration. He had enjoyed Odeon's pain, no question about that, but the tempering did mean the confrontation both he and Cortin dreaded was less than half a year away.

Which meant he had his own choice to make, right now. Just how badly did he want to live?

There was no guarantee he would, of course, even if Odeon made the correct choice; there was no guarantee any life at all in this universe would survive the invasion that was to come. It had been easy enough, four centuries ago, to promise cooperation--but he'd had private reservations, cooperating on the surface while continuing to pursue his own goals and pleasures.

Now, though, with the decision point so close and the invasion to follow shortly afterward, that no longer seemed adequate. To improve his odds, he'd have to go further. As much as the idea galled him, he'd have to put aside his own agenda until things returned to normal after the invasion--if they did--and cooperate to the

best of his ability.

That would be tremendously difficult. Even his grudging cooperation hadn't been easy . . . He took a deep breath, sighed again. Life was more important than the pride that had been his downfall; he'd do what was necessary to preserve that life now, and worry about pride later. If Odeon made the correct decision and the invasion resulted in war rather than simple massacre, faith and worship would be far more important weapons than ships and disruptors; he'd have to begin actively promoting both, even though he didn't share either.

He took time to grimace at that repulsive thought, then he settled down to work with the information he'd gotten from Odeon. What should his--and the Church's--official position be? Positions, rather, with this Communion of Promise Cortin had instituted at Odeon's urging. That, unlike the Sealing he couldn't officially know about, was both public and taking place in church, though not--quite--as part of the Mass.

He would be expected to condemn both that and the Families, as Cortin anticipated--but should he? It was a delicate question, since his first priority had to be doing what little more he could to prepare Odeon for his critical choice, working through and around Cortin while awaiting the Protector-to-be's arrival. Then came the propagation of faith and worship.

He smiled slowly. He might be able to derive some amusement, if not pleasure, from this full cooperation after all, if he did it properly. He'd never been accused of moderation, for excellent reason, and saw no reason to change that particular aspect of himself.

Back Cortin and her team--now become a Family--to the hilt, then. That would serve both his modified purposes, with the side benefit of confusing the Sealed ones, who knew his identity, no end. Since the only thing he could know about by normal means right now was the Communion of Promise, and he wanted to make the greatest impact he could on the Sealed ones, he'd simply announce he was studying the prophecies and would issue a decision later; conditionally, he'd allow them to continue.

As for the Families and Strike Force, he could undoubtedly trust Sara to publicize them as soon as she was permitted to, probably after the convent raid. That would be good timing, since the raid's aftermath would provide Odeon and, incidentally, Cortin, the last of his pre-decision lessons. He'd contact them after Sara's stories were published, invite the Protector's Herald and acting Protector to concelebrate Mass--though since he was now helping her, perhaps he shouldn't mention the Protector role. Nor would he have to be concerned about her powers any longer, since her truthsense would assure her he was no longer--for now, at any rate--a threat.

And what about the Brotherhood? It had served him well, his doubles and Victor in particular, increasing the population of his realm quite nicely. That, however, was no longer his objective--worked against the faith-and-worship weapon system, in fact. He'd have to order it disbanded, urge the members to repent their sins and return to the Church and sacraments. They'd still have to pay the worldly penalty for their crimes, but as long as they ended up in Purgatory rather than Hell, they could still contribute. Again, not until after the convent raid, and he'd have to work through one of his doubles.

Unfortunately, he'd also have to change his plans for the Imperials once that crucial contact was made. It would have been pleasant to torment them, make them special targets--but that would be counterproductive.

Ah, well, life over pride, he reminded himself. And he'd wasted enough time; he had an audience to conduct, then he should see what he could do about special devotions that large numbers of people would find attractive.

Return to main storyline: 21. Anguish

23a. Waiting

Thursday, 26 March 2572 (Morning, New Rome)

Shayan smiled as he read the New Roman Times while eating breakfast. Sara had done excellently; these stories gave him all the details he needed to take action. The Strike Forces, the Sealing, Cortin the Herald and acting Protector being hailed as Protector despite her own disbelief in the role, a liturgist working on services to her--she undoubtedly hated that--yes, there was plenty revealed openly now for him to take action on. Not just yet, though; his announcements would have more impact if he made them with the Herald's knowledge and approval, perhaps even in her presence.

It was too early, in New Denver, for her to even be awake, and Odeon had to learn one thing yet today, so he shouldn't make contact until they were done for the day. Since he'd decided on full cooperation, he no longer needed to fear waking her powers prematurely; that would take her perceiving a threat, and he no longer provided even a minimal one. So he would be able to observe, then phone her when she had her prisoner settled for the night.

Or should he mind-call her, thus giving her the limited telepathy three in her Family already had? Since it would also let him sense her feelings at his unexpected support, that was an attractive thought. He had a couple of hours yet before she woke, then several more until she called it a day, and he had work of his own to do; he'd decide what method to use when the time came.

Return to main storyline: 24. Revenge

27a. At Harmony Lodge

The next three weeks went by both too quickly and too slowly for Cortin's taste. It took the Imperials only a couple of days to find a plague vaccine, but they were unable to find a cure; according to their medical people, it caused permanent physical changes. That was fine with Cortin. She'd put a lot of time and effort working for the social changes the plague had made necessary; she had no particular desire to have that work wasted, and she wanted even less for her Family and herself to go back to their pre-plague selves.

To Cortin's amusement, when Conley was introduced to the rest of the Family she developed an almost instant crush on Tony Degas, the most classically handsome of the Family men. That, since Degas enjoyed the attention, kept them both busy while Cortin was working, and often afterward.

There were only two untoward incidents during the three weeks before Medart's arrival. The first was the arrival of a prisoner for execution, which wasn't at all unusual in itself--but the interrogation report she got with him didn't feel right, and the prisoner had been muted, which, with the other, could mean someone didn't want her questioning him. She didn't normally do that with execution subjects--they'd been questioned and sentenced before coming to her--but she decided to delay executing this one until Medart arrived. Mike said the Empire had something called a mind-probe, and thought it likely a battle cruiser would have one, unlike a scout; with that, she should be able to question the prisoner and get responsive answers.

The other was an attack on half a dozen Imperials and two Strike Force troopers on the way back from town, by twice that many Brothers of Freedom. There were casualties on both sides, but to Cortin's unconcealed delight, no fatalities on either. She left interrogation of all but the leader to the Detention Center's staff of Inquisitors, since they were unlikely to be either knowledgeable or particularly difficult to break. Even the leader wasn't too promising, given the Brotherhood's secretiveness, but Cortin took him anyway; these Imperials were her responsibility, and she wanted to personally punish the one in charge of harming them.

And she did get some useful information from him. The Brotherhood's still-anonymous new leader was no fonder of the Empire than she was, but instead of bowing to the inevitable and making the best of it, he vowed to destroy all he could. Killing Imperials was to take priority even over killing Strike Force members, including Cortin the Bitch herself. When Cortin passed that information along and it reached the public, the general attitude toward the Imperials became more favorable; for most people, anything the Brotherhood wanted to destroy must have its good points.

Return to main storyline: 29. Arrival

30a. Torture (Cortin's point of view)

Cortin was conducting the first part of her preliminary examination when Odeon interrupted. "Someone in the observation room, Excellency."

She turned that way. "Colonel Bradford?"

"Yes," Bradford replied over the intercom, "with Ranger Medart and Lt. DarElwyn."

"If you'd care to, you're welcome to join me in here." Normally, she wouldn't permit anyone except Mike or another Inquisitor to be in the same room while she was working, but these were unusual guests. And there was something particularly appealing about the Sandeman . . .

"The interview went all right?" she asked, as soon as the three entered.

"Quite well," Bradford replied. "I'll get the operation moving as soon as I get back to my office."

"Good--thanks, both of you." Cortin turned back to her prisoner, still addressing the observers--primarily, for some reason she didn't understand, Keith. "This one's nothing special, except in the number of his crimes and the fact that he wanted witnesses until he got to the last victim in each series. It was the rapes that were his particular thrill; the murders were enjoyable, but more of a side effect. So I'll be concentrating on the punishment for rape."

She continued with the preliminaries, both enjoying herself and trying to evaluate the Sandeman as well as she could when her primary attention had to be elsewhere. He, unlike Odeon and Medart, seemed to have a true appreciation of her intent, which she wouldn't have expected--but which she found highly gratifying. It was several hours before she was satisfied with the prisoner's general condition: his entire body except the genital region so bruised or abraded that even a light touch brought curses.

She stepped back to survey him, then smiled at her audience. "That takes care of the preliminaries; now we can get to the real punishment." She went to a cabinet, removed a vial and syringe.

"This is eroticine," she said, forcing the liquid in the vial down her prisoner's throat. "In small doses, it's a male aphrodisiac. In larger ones, like this, it forces an erection and increases semen production by several hundred percent. He has no way to stimulate orgasm, so that is forced out by simple hydraulic pressure--quite uncomfortable, I've been assured. This dose is oral, so he'll be that way for about twelve hours." She picked up a syringe, cleared it of air. "And this is algetin, a pain-enhancer that's most effective on swollen tissue such as an erection. It's a combination I think particularly appropriate for a rapist."

"An intriguing combination," Keith said. Moments later, when the prisoner's erection firmed and grew moist, she saw curiosity. "Is that wetness normal, or is it a drug effect?" he asked.

"Neither, Lieutenant; it's a side effect of the satyr plague."

"I see." Keith paused, cocking his head. "You said he can't bring himself to climax, Excellency, and this does seem effective--but what would happen if he did? Would it be a temporary relief, or would the algetin make it as much an agony as it usually is a pleasure?"

Cortin stared at him in astonishment. That was the sort of question she'd expect from an Inquisitor-Trainee, not an Imperial Marine! After several seconds, she said thoughtfully, "We're cautioned against it in training, since it's presumed orgasm would bring relief; if anyone had experimented and found otherwise, it should've been reported in the professional literature. Since I've never read about such an experiment, I doubt it's ever been tried--but now that you suggest it, the idea seems plausible. If you'd like to try, Lieutenant, be my guest."

"No," Medart said firmly. "He can observe, since this is within your law; taking part would go against a number of the laws that govern the Imperial military." He turned to the Sandeman. "What's wrong, Lieutenant? You're not acting like any warrior I've ever met--including yourself, a couple of days ago."

"I feel fine, sir--I'm just not embarrassed by his display, the way I'd have expected, and I . . . admire Colonel Cortin's work, which I wouldn't have expected at all."

"Just how strong is this admiration, Lieutenant?"

Keith looked from Ranger to Inquisitor and back, his expression answering Medart's question before he spoke. "Strongly enough that if I thought there was any chance of acceptance, I would offer her my fealty."

Cortin looked at him thoughtfully, then smiled. "If that means what I believe it does, Lieutenant, you'd be in no danger of refusal."

Keith returned the smile, then acted on her promise and knelt. "Colonel Joan Cortin, I wish you as my chosen lady, if that should be your will. I offer all that is in me to give: body and mind, will and honor, whatever courage is mine. And death itself may not deny the service I offer, in whatever afterlife is to come."

Cortin had no idea of the words a Sandeman would use in such a position, but she doubted if Keith would care. She extended her hands, smiling again. "I accept your service and yourself with thanks, warrior."

Keith took her hands and rose, then bowed to her. "You do me great honor, Thakur."

"The honor is mine," Cortin replied. "Are there any formalities that need to be taken care of?"

"I'll handle those when we finish here," Medart said. "His release from service, back pay and allowances--but it'll be up to you to notify his clan and make arrangements for his tattoo."

"When we're done here, as you say." Cortin turned to her new sworn man. "To give you a status recognized here, I'm commissioning you a Royal Enforcement Service officer. Now, would you like to test your theory?"

"Very much, Thakur." Keith paused, then continued apologetically. "I'm afraid I don't know how, though. One of our strongest customs forbids any same-sex physical intimacy. Since it seems yours doesn't, that no longer applies to me, of course--but the fact remains that I have no such experience."

Cortin chuckled. "That can be remedied easily enough, if you decide you want to, but for your present purposes you don't need experience. All you have to do is take hold of him, snugly enough to provide a friction surface but not tight. The eroticine will make him take care of the rest."

"That sounds simple enough." Keith reached for the prisoner.

Cortin watched critically as her new sworn man began his experiment. It went against conventional theory--but then one of her more spectacular successes had come from the use of a hallucinogen, a procedure theory said was useless.

Hmm, that was interesting . . . Keith had told her, truthfully, that he had no sexual experience with men, but he was starting manipulation as effective as she'd ever seen. That surprised her almost as much as the fact that he had time to--with such a strong dose of eroticine, she'd have expected the prisoner to erupt within seconds.

She wasn't quite sure what he'd meant by saying his people's strongest custom no longer applied to him--his oath, it had to be--but if he could get the idea this quickly, and implement it, she was willing to bet he'd enjoy the other parts of homosex. It would be almost as nice seeing him enjoying himself with Mike or one of the others as it would be enjoying him herself-- She told herself firmly to stop daydreaming. She had no idea if his oath covered sex with his chosen lady--she suspected it could if she wanted it to--but either way she was supposed to be evaluating a new technique, not thinking about who to take to bed.

Wait a minute--that was a smile on the Sandeman's face as the prisoner's show of pain increased! Keith was actually enjoying his first attempt at third stage, something so rare she knew of only three others beside herself who'd done so. Mike had been ill at first just watching her work, had taken a week to get where he could help at all, worked as her assistant only because she needed him. Keith could free him of that unpleasantness. Get the Sandeman some training to go with his talent, and he'd be awesome . . . Very good, he was able to keep stimulating the prisoner as movements grew frantic, gasps and cries turning to screams of agony as semen spurted--dear God, what an Inquisitor Keith would make!

Keith turned to his chosen lady. "Was that satisfactory, Thakur?"

"Most satisfactory," Cortin said with unconcealed admiration. "You've just given me--all Inquisitors, once I get it published--what promises to become an extremely useful standard technique, especially with rapists. I'll see you're given full credit, of course." She smiled at Keith. "You've also changed my plans for him. That degree of pain, administered repeatedly, can be lethal--and I can't think of a more fitting end for a rapist. We'll let him drip overnight, then give him a fresh dose and see how many times he can take what he forced on others. What do you think?"

Keith looked flattered that she asked his opinion, but . . . "I don't share your expertise, Thakur, so my opinion may not be valid. Still, it sounds appropriate to me."

"So be it, then." Cortin smiled at him, approvingly. "Would you like to help? You seemed to enjoy yourself as much as an Inquisitor would, and Mike doesn't have that particular quirk; he helps because he loves me, not because he likes the work."

Keith hesitated briefly before answering. "It surprises me, Thakur, that I did enjoy it. But I would not displace Captain Odeon from something that brings you two close."

Cortin looked at her second in command. "What do you think, Mike?"

"If he wants it, he's got it," Odeon replied promptly. Turning to the Sandeman, he went on. "As she says, I don't have the mental quirk that lets me like hurting people; I'd be glad to get out of the job."

"It seems I do," Keith said. "At least since she wants this one to hurt, I took a great deal of pleasure in causing him as much pain as I could."

"It's all yours, then," Odeon said promptly. "With my thanks, by the way--which I'll demonstrate later, if you want."

"In the meantime," Cortin said, "I'm hungry. Let's go up to supper."

Return to main storyline: 31. Explanation

30b. Torture (Medart's point of view)

The scene through the observation room window wasn't as bad as Medart had expected. Or not as bad yet, he cautioned himself; it appeared that Cortin was still conducting her preliminary examination.

What she'd called the third-stage room resembled, more than anything else Medart could think of, a twentieth-century operating room, with cabinets of supplies and equipment, monitoring machinery, even a surgical table. But operating rooms didn't have chains hanging from the ceiling, and patients weren't held spreadeagled, naked, between those and eyebolts in the floor.

A couple of minutes after they entered, Odeon glanced toward the observation room, raised a hand in acknowledgement, and said something to Cortin. She turned toward them. "Colonel Bradford?"

"Yes," Bradford said, "with Ranger Medart and Lt. DarElwyn."

"If you'd care to, you're welcome to join me in here."

"Thank you, Excellency." Bradford switched off the intercom and turned to the others, looking surprised. "That's a first; she doesn't normally allow anyone in there except Captain Odeon or other Inquisitors. The disadvantage is that you can't avoid her prisoner's screams by shutting off the intercom."

"Even so," Medart said thoughtfully, "if an invitation's that rare, we ought to accept."

The three entered the larger room, which smelled of antiseptic--rather to Medart's bemusement. Why should Cortin care about infection in people she was torturing to death? He kept that question to himself, though.

"The interview went all right?" Cortin asked.

"Quite well," Bradford replied. "I'll get the operation moving as soon as I get back to my office."

"Good--thanks, both of you." Cortin turned back to her prisoner, still addressing the observers. "This one's nothing special, except in the number of his crimes and the fact that he wanted witnesses until he got to the last victim in each series. It was the rapes that were his particular thrill; the murders were enjoyable, but more of a side effect. So I'll be concentrating on the punishment for rape."

Medart tried not to pay too close attention to what she went on to do, sometimes with Odeon's assistance. He had to learn about this culture's less pleasant aspects as well as its more enjoyable ones, and he definitely had to learn all he could about Cortin herself; that didn't mean he had to like, or even approve of, what he found out.

This was one of those things. Medart couldn't reasonably argue against the criminal's execution; most societies, the Empire included, had death penalties for some crimes, and Medart himself had ordered or carried out a few. Those, though, had been quick; Imperial justice didn't demand vengeance.

Kingdoms justice did, and by the time Bradford left a few minutes later, Medart had no doubt Cortin enjoyed exacting that vengeance. Before he had to raise his mind-shield to protect himself from the criminal's pain, Medart got the feelings both she and Odeon were broadcasting. Odeon didn't like the work; he helped only because he loved Cortin, and there were things her own torture and maiming by the Brothers had left her

physically unable to do, until Jeshua, and later Shayan, had healed those injuries. Medart caught a strong visualization of a seriously injured Cortin before Odeon forced his thoughts away from that subject.

After that image, Medart was surprised to find no trace of personal revenge in Cortin's broadcast. She was determined to exact vengeance, yes, but as she'd said, on behalf of the criminal's victims and their families. She got considerable pleasure out of it, but again it wasn't the type Medart would have expected. There was no sadism involved; what he felt from her was, in a sense, worse. Her emotions in causing the most prolonged and agonizing death possible were intellectual--the pride in skill and workmanship of any professional doing a challenging job to the best of @'s ability. As for the healing--Medart frowned to himself at that. Odeon seemed like the practical sort, yet he was firmly convinced that God and the Devil had cured Cortin. He'd have to get one of them past that reluctance to talk about religion, and given their differing attitudes, Odeon would be the one to work with. Later.

Keith, unlike Odeon and Medart, seemed to have a true appreciation of Cortin's intent and ability. Not, Medart told himself, that that was really unexpected; Sandemans considered it perfectly honorable to torture a captured enemy for information, and certain offenses against honor or custom demanded the offender's lingering death. But they were more direct about it; a beating was the usual method.

That, bloody as it was, seemed somehow cleaner than Cortin's cool, meticulous precision. It was several hours before she was satisfied with the prisoner's general condition: his entire body except the genital region so bruised or abraded that even a light touch brought curses.

She stepped back to survey him, then smiled at her audience. "That takes care of the preliminaries; now we can get to the real punishment." She went to a cabinet, removed a vial and syringe.

"This is eroticine," she said, forcing the liquid in the vial down her prisoner's throat. "In small doses, it's a male aphrodisiac. In larger ones, like this, it forces an erection and increases semen production by several hundred percent. He has no way to stimulate orgasm, so that is forced out by simple hydraulic pressure--quite uncomfortable, I've been assured. This dose is oral, so he'll be that way for about twelve hours." She picked up a syringe, cleared it of air. "And this is algetin, a pain-enhancer that's most effective on swollen tissue such as an erection. It's a combination I think particularly appropriate for a rapist."

Medart didn't agree that an aphrodisiac combined with a pain-enhancer was necessarily appropriate for anyone, but it was clear the Sandeman did approve.

"An intriguing combination," Keith said. Moments later, when the man's erection firmed and grew moist, he looked curious. "Is that wetness normal, or is it a drug effect?"

The question was so out of character for a Sandeman that Medart was shocked, but Cortin seemed to take it as a matter of course. "Neither, Lieutenant; it's a side effect of the satyr plague."

"I see." Keith paused, cocking his head. "You said he can't bring himself to climax, Excellency, and this does seem effective--but what would happen if he did? Would it be a temporary relief, or would the algetin make it as much an agony as it usually is a pleasure?"

Medart and Cortin both stared at him in astonishment, for different reasons. After several seconds, Cortin said thoughtfully, "We're cautioned against it in training, since it's presumed orgasm would bring relief; if anyone had experimented and found otherwise, it should've been reported in the professional literature. Since I've never read about such an experiment, I doubt it's ever been tried--but now that you suggest it, the idea seems plausible. If you'd like to try, Lieutenant, be my guest."

"No," Medart said firmly. "He can observe, since this is within your law; taking part would go against a

number of the laws that govern the Imperial military." He turned to the Sandeman. "What's wrong, Lieutenant? You're not acting like any warrior I've ever met--including yourself, a couple of days ago."

"I feel fine, sir--I'm just not embarrassed by his display, the way I'd have expected, and I . . . admire Colonel Cortin's work, which I wouldn't have expected at all."

Neither would Medart, because of both his heritage and the Academy psych testing that weeded out people with such inclinations. That meant Cortin's peculiar Talent was going beyond influencing Keith to love her, it was giving him some of her personality quirks. The first was probably due to his lack of mind-shield; the second, since her Talent hadn't affected Odeon to anywhere near the same degree, was probably due to the Sandeman tendency to extremes. Medart hid a sigh. "Just how strong is this admiration, Lieutenant?"

Keith looked from Ranger to Inquisitor and back, his expression answering Medart's question before he spoke. "Strongly enough that if I thought there was any chance of acceptance, I would offer her my fealty."

Cortin looked at him thoughtfully, then smiled. "If that means what I believe it does, Lieutenant, you'd be in no danger of refusal."

Keith returned the smile, then acted on her promise and knelt. "Colonel Joan Cortin, I wish you as my chosen lady, if that should be your will. I offer all that is in me to give: body and mind, will and honor, whatever courage is mine. And death itself may not deny the service I offer, in whatever afterlife is to come."

Cortin extended her hands, smiling again. "I accept your service and yourself with thanks, warrior."

Keith took her hands and rose, then bowed to her. "You do me great honor, Thakur."

"The honor is mine," Cortin replied. "Are there any formalities that need to be taken care of?"

"I'll handle those when we finish here," Medart said. "His release from service, back pay and allowances--but it'll be up to you to notify his clan and make arrangements for his tattoo."

"When we're done here, as you say." Cortin turned to her new sworn man. "To give you a status recognized here, I'm commissioning you a Royal Enforcement Service officer. Now, would you like to test your theory?"

"Very much, Thakur." Keith paused, then continued apologetically. "I'm afraid I don't know how, though. One of our strongest customs forbids any same-sex physical intimacy. Since it seems yours doesn't, that no longer applies to me, of course--but the fact remains that I have no such experience."

Cortin chuckled. "That can be remedied easily enough, if you decide you want to, but for your present purposes you don't need experience. All you have to do is take hold of him, snugly enough to provide a friction surface but not tight. The eroticine will make him take care of the rest."

"That sounds simple enough." Keith reached for the prisoner.

Medart frowned as the Sandeman carried out his torture. It was hard to believe anyone, particularly a Sandeman, could change so drastically in such a short time. His mindprobe of Gaelan DarShona, thirty years ago, had given him the experience of briefly being a Sandeman warrior, so he felt, as well as knew intellectually, how deeply unacceptable Keith would have found his present actions before he came under the influence of Cortin's Talent. Seeing a man stripped as part of punishment was no problem, that was normal Sandeman procedure for particularly serious violations. But handling another man's genitals was enough to earn death in disgrace if you lived that long--unlikely, since it was far more likely to get you killed on the spot. And while warriors enjoyed fighting, would torture for information, and a chief would inflict slow death

for serious violations of custom, they didn't get any real pleasure from doing it. Nor would Keith have, earlier--but it was clear he enjoyed what he was doing, now.

The Sandeman's smile grew as the prisoner's moves became faster, more urgent--and he climaxed in a prolonged series of spasms, screaming in agony.

Keith turned to his chosen lady. "Was that satisfactory, Thakur?"

"Most satisfactory," Cortin said with unconcealed admiration. "You've just given me--all Inquisitors, once I get it published--what promises to become an extremely useful standard technique, especially with rapists. I'll see you're given full credit, of course." She smiled at Keith. "You've also changed my plans for him. That degree of pain, administered repeatedly, can be lethal--and I can't think of a more fitting end for a rapist. We'll let him drip overnight, then give him a fresh dose and see how many times he can take what he forced on others. What do you think?"

"I don't share your expertise, Thakur, so my opinion may not be valid. Still, it sounds appropriate to me."

"So be it, then." Cortin smiled at him, approvingly. "Would you like to help? You seemed to enjoy yourself as much as an Inquisitor would, and Mike doesn't have that particular quirk; he helps because he loves me, not because he likes the work."

Keith hesitated briefly before answering. "It surprises me, Thakur, that I did enjoy it. But I would not displace Captain Odeon from something that brings you two close."

Cortin looked at her second in command. "What do you think, Mike?"

"If he wants it, he's got it," Odeon replied promptly. Turning to the Sandeman, he went on. "As she says, I don't have the mental quirk that lets me like hurting people; I'd be glad to get out of the job."

"It seems I do," Keith said. "At least since she wants this one to hurt, I took a great deal of pleasure in causing him as much pain as I could."

"It's all yours, then," Odeon said promptly. "With my thanks, by the way--which I'll demonstrate later, if you want."

"In the meantime," Cortin said, "I'm hungry. Let's go up to supper."

Return to main storyline: 31. Explanation

30c. Torture (Odeon's point of view)

Maybe an hour after Cortin began her preliminary examination, Odeon glanced toward the observation room, raised a hand in acknowledgement when he saw the light on above the window, and spoke softly to Cortin. "Someone in the observation room, Excellency."

She turned that way. "Colonel Bradford?"

"Yes," Bradford replied over the intercom, "with Ranger Medart and Lt. DarElwyn."

"If you'd care to, you're welcome to join me in here."

"Thank you, Excellency." Moments later, the three entered the large room, while Odeon hid his surprise. Joanie didn't normally allow anyone around during a third-stage session except Odeon himself or another Inquisitor!

"The interview went all right?" Cortin asked.

"Quite well," Bradford replied. "I'll get the operation moving as soon as I get back to my office."

"Good--thanks, both of you." Cortin turned back to her prisoner, still addressing the observers. "This one's nothing special, except in the number of his crimes and the fact that he wanted witnesses until he got to the last victim in each series. It was the rapes that were his particular thrill; the murders were enjoyable, but more of a side effect. So I'll be concentrating on the punishment for rape."

Although he'd been her assistant for a little over a year, Odeon--as Illyanov had predicted--still didn't like the work; he helped only because he loved Cortin, and there were things her own torture and maiming by the Brothers had left her physically unable to do, until Jeshua, and later Shayan, had healed those injuries. She could do most of them now, everything that didn't require a man's extra muscle, and he could've asked to be excused, but she liked having him around, and they were both used to the routine. So he stayed--though part of him regretted the end of his three-week "vacation", studying with DeLayne.

Keith, unlike Odeon--and Medart, from his expression--seemed to have a true appreciation of Cortin's intent and ability. Not, Odeon told himself, that he should be surprised; from his studies, Sandemans considered it perfectly honorable to torture a captured enemy for information, and certain offenses against honor or custom demanded the offender's lingering death. But they were more direct about it; a beating was the usual method.

It was several hours before Cortin was satisfied with the prisoner's general condition: his entire body except the genital region so bruised or abraded that even a light touch brough curses.

She stepped back to survey him, then smiled at her audience. "That takes care of the preliminaries; now we can get to the real punishment." She went to a cabinet, removed a vial and syringe.

"This is eroticine," she said, forcing the liquid in the vial down her prisoner's throat. "In small doses, it's a male aphrodisiac. In larger ones, like this, it forces an erection and increases semen production by several hundred percent. He has no way to stimulate orgasm, so that is forced out by simple hydraulic pressure--quite uncomfortable, I've been assured. This dose is oral, so he'll be that way for about twelve hours." She picked up a syringe, cleared it of air. "And this is algetin, a pain-enhancer that's most effective on swollen tissue such as an erection. It's a combination I think particularly appropriate for a rapist."

"An intriguing combination," Keith said. Moments later, when the man's erection firmed and grew moist, he looked curious. "Is that wetness normal, or is it a drug effect?"

"Neither, Lieutenant; it's a side effect of the satyr plague."

"I see." Keith paused, cocking his head. "You said he can't bring himself to climax, Excellency, and this does seem effective--but what would happen if he did? Would it be a temporary relief, or would the algetin make it as much an agony as it usually is a pleasure?"

Odeon frowned to himself. That sounded more like Joanie than it did like the Sandemans he'd read about. Still, this was the first one he'd actually met . . . and Joanie was considering her answer.

After several seconds, Cortin said thoughtfully, "We're cautioned against it in training, since it's presumed orgasm would bring relief; if anyone had experimented and found otherwise, it should've been reported in the

professional literature. Since I've never read about such an experiment, I doubt it's ever been tried--but now that you suggest it, the idea seems plausible. If you'd like to try, Lieutenant, be my guest."

"No," Medart said firmly. "He can observe, since this is within your law; taking part would go against a number of the laws that govern the Imperial military." He turned to the Sandeman. "What's wrong, Lieutenant? You're not acting like any warrior I've ever met--including yourself, a couple of days ago."

"I feel fine, sir--I'm just not embarrassed by his display, the way I'd have expected, and I . . . admire Colonel Cortin's work, which I wouldn't have expected at all."

"Just how strong is this admiration, Lieutenant?"

Keith looked from Ranger to Inquisitor and back, his expression answering Medart's question before he spoke. "Strongly enough that if I thought there was any chance of acceptance, I would offer her my fealty."

Cortin looked at him thoughtfully, then smiled. "If that means what I believe it does, Lieutenant, you'd be in no danger of refusal."

Keith returned the smile, then acted on her promise and knelt. "Colonel Joan Cortin, I wish you as my chosen lady, if that should be your will. I offer all that is in me to give: body and mind, will and honor, whatever courage is mine. And death itself may not deny the service I offer, in whatever afterlife is to come."

Oh, dear God! Odeon thought in a mixture of fear and awe. An oath like that, to the acting Protector? And Ivan's prediction that the true one could come from the Empire, which he'd accepted without really believing. And the timing--over four months ago, Shayan had declared himself their reluctant and temporary ally, informing them the true Protector would manifest in less than six months. He sent that ally a thought. *It has to be Keith, doesn't it?*

He felt Shayan exploring his recent memories, then agreement. *It would seem so. I cannot say when or how the exchange will be made, however.*

Then will come what you've been calling the decision point.

Indeed. Were I you, I would increase my devotional activities, particularly the Mass--I give you leave to say it as often as you wish--the Rosary, and the Litany of the archangel whose name you share. Now I would recommend you get back to work.

Yes, Your Holiness. Odeon's attention returned to his surroundings in time to see Cortin extend her hands to Keith, smiling.

"I accept your service and yourself with thanks, warrior."

Keith took her hands and rose, then bowed to her. "You do me great honor, Thakur."

"The honor is mine," Cortin replied. "Are there any formalities that need to be taken care of?"

"I'll handle those when we finish here," Medart said. "His release from service, back pay and allowances--but it'll be up to you to notify his clan and make arrangements for his tattoo."

"When we're done here, as you say." Cortin turned to her new sworn man. "To give you a status recognized here, I'm commissioning you a Royal Enforcement Service officer. Now, would you like to test your theory?"

"Very much, Thakur." Keith paused, then continued apologetically. "I'm afraid I don't know how, though. One of our strongest customs forbids any same-sex physical intimacy. Since it seems yours doesn't, that no longer applies to me, of course--but the fact remains that I have no such experience."

Cortin chuckled. "That can be remedied easily enough, if you decide you want to, but for your present purposes you don't need experience. All you have to do is take hold of him, snugly enough to provide a friction surface but not tight. The eroticine will make him take care of the rest."

"That sounds simple enough." Keith reached for the prisoner.

The Sandeman didn't look too sure of himself, Odeon thought, when he took hold of the prisoner's erection and the man began moving. Well, Keith had said he had no experience with men . . . It looked like he was a quick study, though--starting to rub and squeeze in a way Odeon was sure he'd like to experience. Without the drugs, of course.

And, Odeon thought, it seemed pretty clear that Keith enjoyed the pain he was inflicting. That brief smile as moans became cries reminded him again of Joanie; Keith's reaction to his first third-stage was a far cry from Odeon's own. Still, he told himself, maybe Keith's pleasure shouldn't be a surprise, since the Protector's role included the punishment of sinners.

The Sandeman's smile grew as the prisoner's moves became faster, more urgent, and Odeon was surprised he could keep hold, but he managed--and the prisoner climaxed in a prolonged series of spasms, screaming in agony.

Keith turned to his chosen lady. "Was that satisfactory, Thakur?"

"Most satisfactory," Cortin said with unconcealed admiration. "You've just given me--all Inquisitors, once I get it published--what promises to become an extremely useful standard technique, especially with rapists. I'll see you're given full credit, of course." She smiled at Keith. "You've also changed my plans for him. That degree of pain, administered repeatedly, can be lethal--and I can't think of a more fitting end for a rapist. We'll let him drip overnight, then give him a fresh dose and see how many times he can take what he forced on others. What do you think?"

"I don't share your expertise, Thakur, so my opinion may not be valid. Still, it sounds appropriate to me."

"So be it, then." Cortin smiled at him, approvingly. "Would you like to help? You seemed to enjoy yourself as much as an Inquisitor would, and Mike doesn't have that particular quirk; he helps because he loves me, not because he likes the work."

Keith hesitated briefly before answering. "It surprises me, Thakur, that I did enjoy it. But I would not displace Captain Odeon from something that brings you two close."

Cortin looked at her second in command. "What do you think, Mike?"

"If he wants it, he's got it," Odeon replied promptly. Turning to the Sandeman, he went on. "As she says, I don't have the mental quirk that lets me like hurting people; I'd be glad to get out of the job."

"It seems I do," Keith said. "At least since she wants this one to hurt, I took a great deal of pleasure in causing him as much pain as I could."

"It's all yours, then," Odeon said promptly. "With my thanks, by the way--which I'll demonstrate later, if you want."

"In the meantime," Cortin said, "I'm hungry. Let's go up to supper."

Return to main storyline: 31. Explanation

30d. Torture (Keith's point of view)

Keith was surprised to find himself more intrigued than anything else at the scene through the observation room window. What she'd called the third-stage room resembled, more than anything else the young Sandeman could think of, was a museum exhibit of a twentieth-century operating room he'd seen once, with cabinets of supplies and equipment, monitoring machinery, even a surgical table. But operating rooms didn't have chains hanging from the ceiling, and patients weren't held spreadeagled, naked, between those and eyebolts in the floor--and he'd had no particular feeling toward the doctor in the display, where he'd developed a strong fondness for the Inquisitor.

A couple of minutes after they entered, Odeon glanced toward the observation room, raised a hand in acknowledgement, and said something to Cortin. She turned toward them. "Colonel Bradford?"

"Yes," Bradford said, "with Ranger Medart and Lt. DarElwyn."

"If you'd care to, you're welcome to join me in here."

"Thank you, Excellency." Bradford switched off the intercom and turned to the others, looking surprised. "That's a first; she doesn't normally allow anyone in there except Captain Odeon or other Inquisitors. The disadvantage is that you can't avoid her prisoner's screams by shutting off the intercom."

"Even so," Medart said thoughtfully, "if an invitation's that rare, we ought to accept."

The three entered the larger room, which smelled of antiseptic--rather to Keith's surprise. Why should Her Excellency care about infection in people she was torturing to death? He might ask her later, if it looked like she wouldn't mind discussing her work.

"The interview went all right?" Cortin asked.

"Quite well," Bradford replied. "I'll get the operation moving as soon as I get back to my office."

"Good--thanks, both of you." Cortin turned back to her prisoner, still addressing the observers. "This one's nothing special, except in the number of his crimes and the fact that he wanted witnesses until he got to the last victim in each series. It was the rapes that were his particular thrill; the murders were enjoyable, but more of a side effect. So I'll be concentrating on the punishment for rape."

Keith watched attentively. These were the preliminaries, obviously, but he was interested in anything and everything she did. It was several hours before she was satisfied with the prisoner's general condition: his entire body except the genital region so bruised or abraded that even a light touch brought curses--and by that time, Keith was admitting to himself that what he felt for her was more than fondness.

Cortin stepped back to survey her prisoner, then smiled at her audience. "That takes care of the preliminaries; now we can get to the real punishment." She went to a cabinet, removed a vial and syringe.

"This is eroticine," she said, forcing the liquid in the vial down her prisoner's throat. "In small doses, it's a male aphrodisiac. In larger ones, like this, it forces an erection and increases semen production by several hundred percent. He has no way to stimulate orgasm, so that is forced out by simple hydraulic pressure--quite uncomfortable, I've been assured. This dose is oral, so he'll be that way for about twelve hours." She picked

up a syringe, cleared it of air. "And this is algetin, a pain-enhancer that's most effective on swollen tissue such as an erection. It's a combination I think particularly appropriate for a rapist."

"An intriguing combination," Keith said. It sounded rather like a peculiar form of induced need, with no intent of release--and he had to agree with the Inquisitor; it did seem appropriate for a rapist. That reaction made Keith more than a little surprised at himself. Since this was a punishment situation, the prisoner's nudity hadn't bothered him; that was a normal part of punishment for serious violations of custom at home. But that didn't include sexual arousal, even drug-induced. He should have been seriously embarrassed, to the point of having to leave; instead, he found himself intrigued by the phenomenon as the man's erection firmed and grew moist. "Is that wetness normal, or is it a drug effect?" he asked curiously.

Cortin glanced at him. "Neither, Lieutenant; it's a side effect of the satyr plague."

"I see." Keith continued watching, pleased by the prisoner's increasing discomfort, his moans and small spasms as semen began oozing. "You said he can't bring himself to climax, Excellency, and this does seem effective--but what would happen if he did? Would it be a temporary relief, or would the algetin make it as much an agony as it usually is a pleasure?"

After several seconds, Cortin said thoughtfully, "We're cautioned against it in training, since it's presumed orgasm would bring relief; if anyone had experimented and found otherwise, it should've been reported in the professional literature. Since I've never read about such an experiment, I doubt it's ever been tried--but now that you suggest it, the idea seems plausible. If you'd like to try, Lieutenant, be my guest."

"No," Medart said firmly. "He can observe, since this is within your law; taking part would go against a number of the laws that govern the Imperial military." He turned to the Sandeman. "What's wrong, Lieutenant? You're not acting like any warrior I've ever met--including yourself, a couple of days ago."

"I feel fine, sir--I'm just not embarrassed by his display, the way I'd have expected, and I . . . admire Colonel Cortin's work, which I wouldn't have expected at all." And herself, to an even greater degree . . .

"Just how strong is this admiration, Lieutenant?"

Keith looked from Ranger to Inquisitor and back, certain his expression was answering Medart's question before he spoke. "Strongly enough that if I thought there was any chance of acceptance, I would offer her my fealty."

Cortin looked at him thoughtfully, then smiled. "If that means what I believe it does, Lieutenant, you'd be in no danger of refusal."

Keith returned the smile, feeling a blast of elation, then acted on her promise and knelt. "Colonel Joan Cortin, I wish you as my chosen lady, if that should be your will. I offer all that is in me to give: body and mind, will and honor, whatever courage is mine. And death itself may not deny the service I offer, in whatever afterlife is to come."

She extended her hands, smiling again. "I accept your service and yourself with thanks, warrior."

Keith took her hands and rose, wishing he could display his elation, but that would be improper with others around. Instead, he bowed to her. "You do me great honor, Thakur."

"The honor is mine," Cortin replied. "Are there any formalities that need to be taken care of?"

"I'll handle those when we finish here," Medart said. "His release from service, back pay and allowances--but

it'll be up to you to notify his clan and make arrangements for his tattoo."

"When we're done here, as you say." Cortin turned to her new sworn man. "To give you a status recognized here, I'm commissioning you a Royal Enforcement Service officer. Now, would you like to test your theory?"

"Very much, Thakur." Keith paused, then continued apologetically. "I'm afraid I don't know how, though. One of our strongest customs forbids any same-sex physical intimacy. Since it seems yours doesn't, that no longer applies to me, of course--but the fact remains that I have no such experience."

Cortin chuckled. "That can be remedied easily enough, if you decide you want to, but for your present purposes you don't need experience. All you have to do is take hold of him, snugly enough to provide a friction surface but not tight. The eroticine will make him take care of the rest."

"That sounds simple enough." Keith reached for the prisoner.

He grasped slippery flesh, pleased when the man winced and tried to pull away. That should be a good sign. He followed the flinch, keeping the snug hold his thakur had recommended--and she was right, the prisoner began pumping, almost immediately accompanied by cursing and moans. For a bit, Keith remained still, getting used to the feel and rhythm. This was all he had to do, she'd said, and Keith was sure it would have the desired effect--but she wanted the man to suffer as much as a human could. Sure that there had to be a way to elicit more pain on the way to its peak, he tried modifying his grip, going with the prisoner's movements, kneading gently at the end of each thrust.

He was rewarded when moans grew louder and curses became incoherent cries. He wanted to turn, see if his thakur was pleased, but he didn't allow himself the distraction, contenting himself instead with a brief smile. He was surprised at the ease with which he'd been able to make even this sort of sexual contact with another man, but his primary emotion on that subject was gratitude; since his thakur clearly had no objection to man-loving, even seemed to actively approve, he had to do so as well, and it was kind of the gods to make such a drastic change so easy for him.

He was less surprised, though still a bit so, by his unexpected enjoyment of a painmaster's role, since Sandeman did have some circumstances where such was appropriate, though it had no professionals. That was a fortunate turn, since it saved him another adaptation--though if he were to serve his thakur properly in this capacity, he really ought to get some training; a true painmaster should be getting at least some screams by this time.

The prisoner's movements became faster, more urgent, and Keith smiled again. A few more seconds . . . yes, good! The prisoner convulsed, thrashing as wildly as his bonds would permit, but warrior reflexes let Keith keep his grip while the man climaxed in a prolonged series of spasms, his screams eloquent testimony to his agony. Keith felt a sense of accomplishment at that, a deep pleasure that didn't end even when the climax was over, the flesh in his hands softened slightly, and the prisoner sagged, going limp but kept from fainting by the algetin.

Keith turned to his chosen lady. "Was that satisfactory, Thakur?"

"Most satisfactory," Cortin said with unconcealed admiration. "You've just given me--all Inquisitors, once I get it published--what promises to become an extremely useful standard technique, especially with rapists. I'll see you're given full credit, of course." She smiled at Keith. "You've also changed my plans for him. That degree of pain, administered repeatedly, can be lethal--and I can't think of a more fitting end for a rapist. We'll let him drip overnight, then give him a fresh dose and see how many times he can take what he forced on others. What do you think?"

Keith was flattered that she asked his opinion, but . . . "I don't share your expertise, Thakur, so my opinion may not be valid. Still, it sounds appropriate to me."

"So be it, then." Cortin smiled at him, approvingly. "Would you like to help? You seemed to enjoy yourself as much as an Inquisitor would, and Mike doesn't have that particular quirk; he helps because he loves me, not because he likes the work."

Keith hesitated briefly before answering. "It surprises me, Thakur, that I did enjoy it. But I would not displace Captain Odeon from something that brings you two close."

Cortin looked at her second in command. "What do you think, Mike?"

"If he wants it, he's got it," Odeon replied promptly. Turning to the Sandeman, he went on. "As she says, I don't have the mental quirk that lets me like hurting people; I'd be glad to get out of the job."

"It seems I do," Keith said. "At least since she wants this one to hurt, I took a great deal of pleasure in causing him as much pain as I could."

"It's all yours, then," Odeon said promptly. "With my thanks, by the way--which I'll demonstrate later, if you want."

"In the meantime," Cortin said, "I'm hungry. Let's go up to supper."

Return to main storyline: 31. Explanation

31a. Tattoo

To Keith's amusement, the artist did his work after using a topical anesthetic, saying it was to prevent a flinch from spoiling the design. Remaining still and with no more than minor sensations of pressure on his face, though, seemed to be making him more receptive to what had to be his thakur--the things he was feeling certainly couldn't have had their origin in a properly-raised warrior!

For one thing, the idea of the Family's sexual activity no longer bothered him, even with the certainty that it would include man-loving. His thakur's approval and enjoyment of watching such things meant he should as well, and he seemed to be making the adjustment. He might not be able to take part himself just yet, though the men on his thakur's team were beginning to seem more desirable . . . It was generous of the gods, he thought, to make even such a drastic change to his thakur's values and standards so easy for him.

Eventually the artist was finished, and handed Keith a mirror. "What do you think?"

Keith studied his cheek for a moment, then nodded. "Your skill is worthy of my thakur. I thank you."

"You're quite welcome." The artist turned, bowed to Cortin. "By Your Excellency's leave?"

"Granted; Lieutenant Degas will take you to your home or your studio, as you prefer." She turned to Degas. "Tony, give him his fee--plus a bonus for the house call and inconvenience. Double should be about right."

"I'd say so," Degas agreed. "Maybe a little extra since Keith's happy with it?"

Cortin grinned. "Triple, then. And get back as soon as you can."

"Yes, ma'am." Degas returned the grin, then escorted the artist out of the common-room.

As soon as they were gone, Keith got his first experience of Family informality; within minutes, he was the only one in the room with clothes on, and he seemed to sense his thakur's desire that he also be nude. That wasn't what she said when she smiled at him, though. "If you'd rather not join us, Keith, we'll all understand; you're free to do what you wish. I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"I'm not, Thakur." To his gratified surprise, that was true; his only discomfort was being dressed when she wasn't, and that was easy enough to correct. When he did so, he could feel her approval--and her arousal, as she looked at his genitals. "Thakur . . ."

Cortin smiled at him. "Take it easy, Keith. You're a beautiful man, and I'd like to have sex with you--but I don't want to get you in just because you feel obligated from having sworn to me. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, Thakur." Keith smiled. She seemed to be projecting the idea that sex in any consenting form was good, but she also didn't want him doing anything he considered wrong. That was simple, since by definition nothing she wanted of him could be wrong for him, and her words confirmed what he seemed to be feeling from her. "Now?"

"We have a family religious ceremony first. I know you're not a Catholic, and this is an extension of the Catholicism practiced elsewhere, so if you'd rather not attend, I don't want you to. The choice is entirely yours."

"I appreciate that, Thakur. I don't think I'd be comfortable participating, at least not yet; may I simply watch?"

"Of course. If it makes you uncomfortable, and you want to leave, go ahead."

"I will, Thakur, but I don't expect to."

Cortin smiled. "Somehow I don't expect you to, either. Right now I'm the object of that ceremony, as acting Protector, but I've been promised the true one will appear soon, so don't be upset when someone else takes over. I sure won't be; I'm looking forward to it." She grimaced. "I don't mind being the Herald, but I have to admit I don't like being Protector. It's more of a burden that I feel capable of carrying, even as long as I have."

Keith knelt, looking up at her. "If it is a burden I may free you of, Thakur, I would do so gladly."

Cortin studied him for a moment. If she'd known this might happen, she wouldn't have accepted his fealty--while she wasn't fond of being Protector, she wasn't fond of passing the burden along to anyone else, either.

Keith was fully aware of her thought this time, and he smiled up at her. Freeing his chosen lady of an unwanted burden would be a joy, not an imposition! "You wouldn't be, Thakur--as Ranger Medart said, in accepting my oath you made me your other self. Let this part take over and rejoice in what that one finds intolerable."

"Oh, dear God." Cortin felt a sudden surge of power, her hands going to his head on what felt like their own accord. "You better mean that, because it's happening."

"I mean it with all my heart, Thakur."

Odeon watched as the two began to glow, and went slowly to his knees. So Keith was the permanent Protector! That would be a relief for Joanie, but the Sandeman's apotheosis meant the confrontation--what Shayan called the decision point--was imminent, and that frightened him. It meant the war or massacre she had to make some decision about was also imminent, and with Shayan afraid enough of that to promote

devotions to his Adversary and His saints . . .

He was never sure how long the apotheosis took, but when it ended, there was no doubt of either Joanie's relief or Keith's new power. What was going to happen now?

Keith rose, turning and smiling at him. "You please me, Michael, but there is much you must learn yet. It might be wise for you to visit Ranger Medart, this evening; I will conduct my own service."

"As you wish, Lord." Odeon rose and bowed, then left the common-room, grabbing a robe on the way out.

Return to main storyline: 33. Discussion 2

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