



AMBUSH

A Terran Empire vignette

by Ann Wilson

Palace Complex, 2578 CE

It wouldn't be easy ferreting out the identity of the field agent who'd saved his bio-father's life twelve years ago. It wasn't supposed to be easy -- ideally, it would be impossible -- and Nevan was sure he owed his own life, perhaps several times over, to the Imperial safeguards he was trying to break. More, he understood why those safeguards wouldn't be relaxed even to allow an ex-agent to search out a still-active one -- but he had what he considered two excellent reasons to do exactly that.

The first was that his bio-father had died, and had wanted Nevan to give the anonymous agent his personal weapons: two forearm throwing knives, a belt knife, and a needler. The one he had sworn fealty to had agreed that his father's wish made it a matter of honor that he try, and had given him permission -- but on condition that he use only his own training and skills, taking no advantage of the fact that he was sworn to one of the most powerful people in the Empire. Nevan was certain in his own mind that if he failed, she would see that the agent got the weapons intended for him, but his thakur's overt reason for agreeing was that it would make a good test of IntelDiv's security. If he were arrested, she would have him released and commend the people who had done it; if he got through, she would have security procedures tightened. Neither paid serious attention to the fact that if he were caught under certain circumstances she would have no chance to protect him; he would be shot on sight.

Nevan thought that perfectly reasonable. He was a Sandeman warrior, after all, and his thakur was an Irschchan; risks were a normal part of life for both of them, to be accepted and even savored for the spice they

added.

He had done all he could here, in the Records Section; he lowered his mind-shield and reached out. *Thakur?*

Her answer was prompt, and he smiled to himself, enjoying the cool clarity of her mind-touch. *What results, thakur-na?*

 she asked.

About what we expected. Kelly told me the agent was Logistics Officer at a base on Piper's World during the Traitir counter-attacks there, but he never told me which base, and the description he gave fits five of them. I was able to eliminate two of those because the Logistics Officers were female -- but that still leaves three. I'm going to have to go under cover to find the right one.

He "heard" the amused purr that was the Irschchan version of a laugh. *A return to the field work you enjoy so must be a terrible sacrifice, my Nevan.*

Nevan let his thoughts lapse into High War Speech, chuckling. *Nay, Thakur, as thou knowest well -- save that it does mean I must conceal thy mark, lest it identify me and make thy object in this attempt no true test.*

Aye, but it should not be for long.

And I knew when I swore that I might have to do it, Nevan agreed. *Until my success or failure, then.*

Three days later he was far from Terra, the violet-flower tattoo on his cheek concealed by synthskin, in a small Kanchatka-class courier ship. That was a definite luxury for a private individual, though not unreasonable for a Sandeman warrior who'd done well securing private employment and wanted more -- who was, in short, a very good, very expensive hired killer. There weren't many, granted; killing for its own sake wasn't highly regarded on Sandeman, especially if anything more honorable was available, but there were enough to make his cover plausible.

This, he had decided, was going to be fun.

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A couple of days later, he was less sure. He'd come away from the Palace Complex with as much solid data as he'd ever had starting a mission, and with as much enthusiasm, but he'd begun feeling less than comfortable about this one. Part of it was because he was pursuing someone he would probably like to have as a friend; the unknown agent didn't deserve to be hunted, though Nevan had to reluctantly concede that it was probably the best way to accomplish his thakur's mission. The other part was that he couldn't seem to decide whether or not he really wanted to catch his target. He wanted to make sure the weapons were delivered, yes, and since his chosen lady wanted a good test of IntelDiv's security, he had to want it too -- but he wasn't happy about what those desires implied: It was almost inevitable that he'd have to use some of a field agent's less savory skills. He'd used them before, often enough, and without qualms -- against the Empire's enemies. He had never used them against people who had done nothing to deserve such treatment, and he didn't really want to.

He didn't have any choice, though. He would do whatever proved to be necessary to accomplish his objectives.

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Three weeks, five planetfalls, and almost 1500 light-years of routine checking later, Nevan discovered his quarry's name: Kiyoshi Owajima. So far he'd had to resort to nothing more drastic than reading and casual conversation, but learning he was after Owajima left him both disgusted at the gods' whimsical ordering of

things and positive that things would be getting unpleasant rather shortly. He'd never met Owajima, though he'd wanted to, and when Nevan had left IntelDiv on swearing fealty to Ranger Losinj, Owajima had taken over the top field agent rating. Owajima was no Sandeman, but IntelDiv rumor had him close; he was supposed to have been a Kai-school ninja before joining the Corps, and his exploits since hadn't done anything to contradict the rumor. Nevan scowled at that; he hated having to depend on rumor. Doing that tended to get agents killed -- but unless you worked in the classified section of Personnel Records or knew the agent personally, rumor was all you'd have on one. And in Owajima's case, as in Nevan's own, there wasn't even much rumor.

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Kiyoshi Owajima concealed a scowl when he finished decoding his informant's message and read it. He had a pursuer, it seemed -- a Sandeman warrior named Vance DarLowrie, and the informant was convinced DarLowrie was one of the rare, expensive, and fearsome Sandeman free-lance assassins. That conviction was strengthened by the fact that DarLowrie had his own ship, the Last Resort, and it was registered to him personally rather than to Clan Lowrie. The Sandeman would neither confirm nor deny that occupation, of course, but the simple fact that he was attempting to trace an IntelDiv field agent lent still further credence to the informant's conclusion.

Owajima would have liked more information, but it seemed prudent to act on the informant's suspicions. The Sandeman had filed a flight plan for Olathe, where Owajima had spent some time and built up a respectable net; that seemed most promising. It was unfortunate, Owajima thought, that he was unable to investigate DarLowrie himself; that would have to wait until he was finished with the final touches on his present case, a matter of a day or two.

Still, he could begin making preparations. He would be entitled to a leave after this mission, and he had planned to take it at home on Nippon-Ni; that was now an even better idea. His contacts on his home world made his networks elsewhere, good as they were, seem like children's clubs -- and it should not be difficult at all to permit DarLowrie to "discover" those intentions. It would undoubtedly be unpleasant for the one he discovered them from, since it was unlikely DarLowrie would believe information he obtained too easily.

That, however, was not a serious problem; a number of his Olathe network owed him enough that he could call on them even for such a service. It would take DarLowrie perhaps a week to reach Olathe, another week and a half to get to Nippon-Ni; that would give Owajima time to make adequate preparations, then visit with his family for several days. He smiled to himself, transmitted the necessary messages, and returned his attention to his immediate mission.

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Nevan entered the Lucky Bull, a medium-priced bar near the Olathe City spaceport, and ordered a glass of chocolate milk before finding a table near the rear of the main room. In the early days after Annexation, he'd heard, bars had carried alcoholic beverages almost exclusively, and Sandemans were made fun of for drinking only the non-alcoholic variety, but by the time he'd started frequenting bars as an excellent source of information, the sweet high-energy beverages Sandemans preferred were as normal as alcohol.

If he had Owajima figured correctly, someone at one of his last two or three stops should have been in his target's network, and contacted him. Even if, as Nevan thought probable, Owajima was working on the Bracei case, he'd make time to have a presumed assassin investigated. That was why Nevan had made no secret of his last destinations, following his flight plans precisely as he'd filed them. That, and the fact that a Sandeman hired killer shouldn't display the subtleties and precautions that would mark him as having had Imperial training of any sort, particularly a field agent's training; the two simply didn't go together.

A tall man in Marine service dress with captain's bars approached Nevan's table, carrying a drink. "Mind if I join you, warrior?" he asked.

"If you wish, Captain."

The other sat, looking him over; Nevan returned the scrutiny, waiting.

"I'm Kim Johansen, of SecuDiv," the Marine said at last. "You're Vance DarLowrie, just in on the Last Resort?"

Nevan nodded. "I am, Captain Johansen. What of it?"

"If you're what rumor calls you and your ship's name implies, I'd advise you to lay low. The Baron here takes a dim view of assassins."

"Most people do, except those who have need of one. I thank you for your concern, though; I will be careful."

"Good." Johansen sipped at his drink, frowned. "A warrior of your clan saved my life during the war. I feel a certain obligation to repay that debt, even if I don't particularly approve of your occupation myself."

"There's no proof I'm what you guess."

"The fact you don't deny it will be enough for most." Johansen showed brief distaste, swallowed the rest of his drink, and rose. "I can't wish you luck, since that'd mean wishing someone else dead. But I can wish it for your clan, and I do."

Nevan rose to bow. "I will pass your wishes, and word of your repayment, to the Lowrie. Go in peace, Captain Johansen -- and please accept my wishes for your well-being. Whatever you think of me or my profession -- " most Imperials were as dubious of field agents as they were of assassins -- "I want only the best for the Empire and its officers."

"Sandemans don't lie, so I accept that," Johansen said. Then, grudgingly, "Thank you, warrior." With that he left, abruptly.

Nevan allowed himself a small smile, then went to get more chocolate milk. Not too promising so far, but he hadn't been here long, either.

Perhaps half an hour after he returned to his table, another man approached, this one in an expensive suit. "Vance DarLowrie?"

"Yes." Nevan recognized the type; a businessser who'd made enemies and wanted either protection or one of them eliminated. "I am not available at the moment."

"You have other employment?"

"That's none of your concern."

The businessser sat. "It is if your target is Kiyoshi Owajima, as I've heard. I have reason to want him . . . out of the picture."

"Oh?" Nevan remained noncommittal, but allowed himself to show a trace of interest. "I understand he's an Imperial officer -- a dangerous target. Killing him would earn the death penalty or life imprisonment -- death,

if done simply for pay. That's a foolish risk, when there are any number of almost riskless targets around."

"I can tell you where he's going when he finishes his current mission."

"Interesting, if true," Nevan acknowledged.

"It's true," the businessser said.

Reading his face and body language, Nevan agreed. The man knew, was eager to say -- and would report to Owajima as soon as he could. Nevan made himself look skeptical, which wasn't hard; this was obviously a setup. "Even if he were my target, which I do not say, I would want more than your unsupported word. Will you submit to truth drugs, or shall I use Sandeman methods?"

"Torture, you mean." The businessser grimaced. "In my position, I don't dare submit to truth drugs. And I've no desire to use my pain to convince you I'm telling the truth."

Nevan shrugged. "Those are the alternatives." He didn't particularly like torture himself, and especially disliked using it on one of a field agent's network. But an enemy would have no hesitation, and until he caught up with Owajima -- or was caught himself -- he was acting in that capacity. "If you are convinced Owajima is my target, and you wish to assist me in finding him, you will choose one. Otherwise, you will depart."

The businessser looked angry, but Nevan could see he'd expected something of the sort. "The torture, then. When and where?"

"My ship, now." Nevan stood. "Come along."

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Nevan scowled down at the unconscious businessser. He'd restricted his open questioning to Owajima's plans and next location -- his homeworld, not surprisingly -- but he'd done some questioning covertly as well, making comments about Owajima and reading the answers from his subject's face and body language. The man had confirmed an opinion Nevan had formed early: given the opportunity, he and Owajima could easily become friends.

This man, for instance. He'd owed Owajima a debt, true, but it had been loyalty rather than obligation that had led him to help the way he had. Assuming he was successful in this mission, Nevan thought, he'd have to see the businessser got some sort of compensation. Though the man had definitely been in serious pain, Nevan had inflicted no real damage beyond bruises; when the man woke, he'd be able to function normally.

Nevan was tempted to clean the man up, put him to bed, and dose him with rapid-heal -- but that wasn't how one with his cover occupation would act. Instead, he got an injector of energine and triggered it into the businessser's carotid artery. Seconds later, the man's eyes opened and he groaned. "Are you done yet?"

"Yes. You may get dressed and leave. I would advise you to waste no time; liftoff is in ten minutes."

"I'll be gone." The man struggled to his feet and into the small 'fresher, where Nevan had had him leave his clothing; less than two minutes later he was leaving the ship.

Nevan had his flight plan ready by then. He transmitted it to the spaceport controller, got clearance, and was lifting off at the specified time. Not long afterward, he was far enough from the planet to make the transition to hyperspace, and did so.

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Owajima smiled as he read his agent's decoded message. DarLowrie had acted precisely as could be expected from a Sandeman assassin, it seemed, though Owajima was pleased his agent reported nothing more serious than bruises. He frowned, though, when he reached the last paragraph.

"Personal impressions: I can't pinpoint it, but something about him reminds me of you. The feeling you give me of being looked into more than at, maybe. It's not the typical Sandeman arrogance that makes you feel like you're not worth the bother of looking at -- it's more like being under a microscope. I'm sorry to be so vague, but as I said, there wasn't anything definite I can point to."

A feeling of being looked into rather than at. Owajima frowned more deeply. That bore an uncomfortable resemblance to a particularly observant person's reaction to someone who was reading 's face and body language. That was not a common skill, particularly among Sandemans -- though he had to admit it would be as useful a skill for an assassin as it was for a field agent.

In which case, it was possible DarLowrie had obtained more information than Owajima had intended -- including that the information had been set up for him to find. And where had DarLowrie learned such a skill? Not on any of the Sandeman worlds, which weren't given to such subtleties. The only places Owajima knew, in fact, that taught more than the most basic such reading were the Kai school here, and the Imperial field agent school on Terra. No Sandeman had ever studied here, and he was aware of only one who had successfully completed field agent training -- his predecessor as top agent, Nevan DarLeras, now sworn to the Crown Princess by the totally-binding Sandeman personal-fealty oath.

That left a graduate of one of those two schools as DarLowrie's teacher. An ex-field agent was by far the more likely, if only because there were many more of them, and few Kai-school ninjas left Nippon-Ni. Take that as a working hypothesis, then. In that case, was it likely the agent had taught DarLowrie only face and body reading?

It would be safest, Owajima thought, to operate on the worst-case assumption that DarLowrie had learned most, if not all, of an agent's skills. He would need them, if he had any intention of assassinating Owajima on his home territory and then escaping.

Should he simply eliminate DarLowrie, or would it be better to capture and question him? The second, Owajima decided almost immediately. That would be more difficult, but it might be a good idea to discover the agent reckless enough to teach such skills to anyone able to pay -- and discourage .

He was going to do it himself. He could and would ask for help from his former colleagues, the Shogun's secret police -- but attempted murder of an Imperial officer was an Imperial crime; they didn't have jurisdiction. He could call in assistance, but that was something field agents were, as an occupational characteristic, disinclined to do unless there was no other way to get the job done -- which, at this point, was not the case.

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Nevan spent the first two days of his flight to Nippon-Ni studying everything the Last Resort's ship-comp had available about that planet. It sounded interesting, and he decided he'd like to visit sometime when he could do so openly; it had been settled by Japanese who wanted to return to the days of the Samurai, without giving up modern conveniences or an industrial base. They even called their Baron the "Shogun", on-planet.

But it also looked like a dangerous place to operate. The Shogun's secret police force was made up of the Kai-school ninjas Owajima was rumored to have been, and it seemed possible he'd been one of them before

joining the Corps. If so, he'd undoubtedly use them for backup -- which meant going in, Nevan thought, would be like sticking his head in a balik's den. A female balik's, with newborn cubs. One alerted field agent would be bad enough; a police force of agent-equivalents . . . the smart thing would be to call it off, go back to Terra, set up a new identity, and start over. He did know who his quarry was, now; he wouldn't be starting from scratch.

He was reluctant to do that, though. He'd done nothing even the most fanatical secret police could legally arrest him for; it seemed a shame to abandon his mission when he was so close to accomplishing it. Being arrested without cause would be justification for mind-calling his thakur, and he was sure she'd intervene; Owajima had to be the only agent with an entire planetary police force to call on for backup, which made him an unrepresentative opponent. Besides, Nevan admitted, he relished the challenge. He hadn't had the opportunity to really use his abilities in longer than he cared to think about.

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Owajima answered his phone, to see the chief of spaceport security. "Yes, Captain?"

"The Last Resort just called for landing, Colonel. Do you want us to detain DarLewies?"

"No, thank you. Permit him to land and do as he wishes, but keep him under close surveillance. Discreetly, of course."

The security chief smiled. "Of course, Colonel. We will keep you informed at all times. Will you need any further assistance?"

"I do not believe so, but if I should, I will ask."

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Nevan had to land at the New Tokyo civilian spaceport, but he was likeliest to be able to get current information about Owajima at the nearby Imperial Navy base, so he rented a car and drove the twenty kilometers north. He'd been on so many worlds that he didn't find Nippon-Ni particularly remarkable, though he was pleased that the temperature was high enough he didn't need a jacket. And the smell of chocolate chip cookies or a close local equivalent coming from a shop he passed was tempting enough to make his mouth water, but he kept going; Nevan DarLeras' fondness for those was well enough known in the wrong circles that he didn't dare indulge it when he was under cover.

Things were definitely not going his way, he decided as he neared the base. Traffic was too heavy for a normal workday, and he found out why when he got close to the main gate: a banner over the road welcomed visitors to the annual Base Open House. Nevan addressed a caustic, "Why me?" to the gods he only half-believed in, but it might look suspicious if he turned and left; instead, he kept going with traffic, which took him to a parking area that would need major help to look like a lawn again after being used this way.

There wasn't anything useful he could accomplish during an open house, with all the base offices closed, so he decided he might as well bow to the inevitable and try to enjoy himself. Such events did have their good points; the various units' hospitality stands tried to outdo each other, so the quality and variety of food and drink available was truly impressive. He should be able to find treats he liked almost as well as chocolate chip cookies, but ones that wouldn't blow his cover. He walked toward the exhibit-covered landing field, glad that he'd kept his identity as a Sandeman warrior; as crowded as the area was, he was given plenty of room to move. He was impressed despite himself by the exhibits, too. Whoever was in charge of this open house had managed to get a heavy destroyer for a static display -- and while those were nowhere near as big as the kilometer-diameter battle cruisers, which were far too big to land, they were quite big enough to have the

visitors making awed comments.

Curious, Nevan walked around the ship until he found its ID -- and then he sent another caustic comment to one of the newest gods. *Dammit, Kelly, if you want me to deliver your blades to Owajima, how about some cooperation instead of all these problems?*

The destroyer was the IHD Warleader Riordan, a ship from the Fiftieth Fleet, which meant it was crewed primarily by Sandemans. That was bad enough, but a good percentage on this particular ship were from Clan Leras, so even the ones not directly related to him would know him on sight. And they weren't IntelDiv; they wouldn't know not to recognize him. He turned and began walking away, hoping against hope that the crew was still all aboard ship. He'd been lucky enough not to get caught in such a situation during his active career; maybe that luck would hold long enough for him to get out of this one.

"Nevan!"

The happy voice from behind him made it all too clear his luck had changed. He turned and bowed respectfully to the approaching warriors'- woman in Imperial Marine service black. "Good day, Lady Morna. You're looking well."

She looked at him with affectionate appraisal, and shook her head ruefully. "I can't say the same for you, I'm afraid. How long have you been on the meds?"

"Almost a month," Nevan admitted. He might have been able to get away with lying to another w'woman, but the lady Morna could tell -- whether by looking or by some form of Talent -- almost to the day how long a warrior had been using anti-need medications. And she didn't approve of them being used any longer than was absolutely necessary.

"I thought so. Are you going to be around long enough for me to give you a natural release?"

Nevan was tempted, but he shook his head. He'd have to leave as soon as he could; now that his cover was blown, he had no choice but to give up this try and start over. "I'm afraid I have to get back to Terra."

Morna nodded, glancing at the synthskin-covered cheek. "Of course; I didn't realize. But when you do, promise me that you'll find a w'woman or warrior and get a decent natural release."

"I will, lady," Nevan replied, grateful for her understanding. "Or a Trait; some of the Palace Guard have given me good combat releases."

"That will do." Morna smiled at him. "At least you haven't gone six months on the meds, the way you had when I first met you! But can you stay a little while? Our autochef bakes good cookies. Including chocolate chip."

Nevan chuckled, deciding that an hour or so shouldn't really make any difference. "I'd like that; thanks."

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The receiver in Owajima's ear chimed softly; he turned on his throat mike -- not the surgically implanted comm unit many ranking Imperials were given, but the external type used as far back as pre-atomic times -- and answered. "Owajima here."

"DarLowrie went to the open house, Colonel -- and one of those on the destroyer static display recognized him. His name is Nevan, and he has accepted an invitation to visit the ship."

"Nevan!" Owajima exclaimed. "What clan, do you know?"

"It was not said, but the largest clan group aboard is from Leras."

"Ah." Owajima was silent for several seconds, absorbing that. "Is there a tattoo on his right cheek?"

"There is not."

"Interesting -- thank you. I will need some assistance after all, it appears; I would like to get into his ship with as few traces as possible."

"An entry specialist will be with you in ten minutes. Is there anything else?"

"Not at the moment. Owajima out." So his pursuer's true name was Nevan, Owajima thought, troubled. And the ship's largest contingent was from Leras. Knowing both Sandemans and the unconditional nature of the personal fealty oath, he found it hard to believe his pursuer's identity. What had gone wrong, to turn a Sandeman warrior from thakur-na to renegade assassin?

Or . . . had anything? If Nevan had either deserted or harmed his chosen lady, it would have been all over the news channels, and there had been nothing. The likelihood, then, was that he was on a mission for her -- a mission that somehow concerned him.

Owajima smiled slowly at that. Very well, he would take all possible precautions, though he no longer believed they would be necessary. Nevan DarLeras had a powerful and trained Talent, something "Vance DarLowrie" had shown no traces of -- so he was not using either that or Ranger Losinj's position to simplify his mission. An exercise of some sort, then -- security, in all probability. If true, it could be proven easily, Owajima thought, and he would have the pleasure of meeting his predecessor.

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Nevan enjoyed both the cookies and the talk, though he kept an eye on the time and didn't let himself relax too much. Owajima was alerted now, and field agents tended to have a rather violent reaction to someone stalking them for unknown purposes. Nevan couldn't blame them; he'd reacted the same way when one of his net had warned him someone was on his trail. About the best such a pursuer could expect, unless was able to ambush the agent first, was that the agent wanted information enough to use a non-lethal form of attack or defense -- until learned enough to satisfy 's curiosity, at least.

But Nevan was able to put the hazards of his mission in the back of his mind while he caught up on news from home. His first son, with the lady Dallas, was doing well in his warrior training, though both he and his half-brother -- Nevan's with the lady Morna, who looked more than a little smug, telling him -- were giving Sean and Ellen fits trying to keep up. Nevan couldn't help laughing; Sean and Ellen had fostered him, too, and he remembered how good they were -- and how frustrated Sean got -- with a child-warrior's hyperactivity. Other news was almost as interesting to him, if less personal: the warrior Leslie had broken his leg in war games with the Combat Division Marines stationed at Shangri-La Base, and the clan had been asked to train more assault-lander pilots.

The hour was all too short, but Nevan didn't let himself stretch his visit beyond that point. He left the destroyer after a final promise to Morna that he would get off the meds as soon as he could, then made his way through even thicker crowds to his rented car.

He spent the drive back to his ship going over his options. Things didn't look quite as unpromising as they had earlier, even though it still seemed that he would have to go back to Terra for a fresh start. This time, he

reminded himself, at least the start wouldn't be from zero; he had a name and a reputation to work with, and a few days to dig out some background would give him more data.

He had resigned himself to starting over by the time he got back to the spaceport. Not even the sight of half a decade secret police making no secret of their surveillance of his ship disturbed him; he grinned at them as he palmed open the outer hatch of his ship, giving Owajima points for letting the locals handle the presumed assassin. He'd just have to take more precautions the next time around -- Oh, gods, the inner hatch was ajar, and he hadn't left it that way!

He barely had time to spot a stunner muzzle in the opening and start reaching for his needler before his ambusher fired and he slumped to the airlock deck.

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Owajima was a little surprised at the ease of his success, though there was no way even one as skilled as DarLeras was reputed to be could have detected any sign of his entry. He went to the outer lock and signaled his success to the watchers, then carried the Sandeman to his cabin and secured him to the bunk. Then he went into the 'fresher, found synthiskin release in the medikit, and used it on the Sandeman's face, smiling as it peeled free to reveal the tattoo so familiar from news shows. That was conclusive enough for Owajima; if, contrary to all other evidence, DarLeras had gone renegade, he would have removed the tattoo rather than simply covering it.

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When Nevan woke, he was spread-eagled, tied to his bunk with a grim-faced Oriental man holding a gun on him. That should have been frightening, but Nevan couldn't help grinning; the feel of air on his cheek instead of synthiskin agreed with the tiny indications he could read from his captor. Owajima was disciplined, beautifully so, but not well enough to hide everything. "I'm honored to meet you, Colonel Owajima. Either I'm losing my edge, or you're about to take over the top-ever rating; I should've seen some sign of your entry on the outer lock."

"If you had, it would be I who was losing my edge. However, I will take that as a compliment from one who still holds that ranking. Drop your mind- shield."

"What? Ohhh." Nevan did so, surprised for an instant though he knew he shouldn't be. Since his chosen lady had discovered psionic Talent in humans nine years ago, it had been found that strong Talent was generally linked to strong abilities in one or more other fields. That wasn't a direct correlation, since there were multi-field geniuses with none at all, and people with no conventional talents and powerful Talent -- but well over ninety percent of the time, conventional and psionic abilities went together. Owajima wouldn't be the top-rated field agent without exceptional ability -- of both types.

Also, unlike most Sandemans, came Owajima's amused thought, *I was eager for Talent training. We both know it is impossible to lie, mind-to-mind, so: you are still thakur-na to Ranger Losinj and on a mission for her?*

I am, though the mission is partly for her, partly for myself, Nevan confirmed. *Stay linked while I report; she'll want to commend you personally.* He sensed Owajima's agreement, and reached for his chosen lady. *Thakur?*

Here, thakur-na, was the immediate response -- then Nevan shared her amusement as she `felt' his bonds. *You are satisfied with security, then.*

It's tight, Nevan confirmed. *And I'm really impressed by Major Owajima's skill. He got past my ship defenses without leaving a trace. It was a beautiful ambush.*

It is he I sense linked with you?

Yes, Thakur.

Nevan felt her attention center on the other. *I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Major,* she sent. *I apologize for any difficulties you experienced as a result of Nevan's pursuit; his purpose, at my request, was to test the security protecting field agents, including his target's self- protection. As you heard, he is satisfied. So am I, and since you proved able to stop him, I will place a commendation in your records.*

Thank you, sir. Owajima smiled. *It is good to know our protections are adequate against one of the warrior Nevan's ability; any other, then, could penetrate them only by chance.*

True. Corina projected amusement. *Are you on assignment?*

No, sir. I have just finished a post-mission leave, and have been ordered to Terra for a tour with OSI.

You won't like it, Nevan predicted. *Assignments think they're doing us a favor when they give us a planetside tour -- a rest break, I heard one call it -- but those always bored me.*

If it gets too bad, Major, the Ranger sent sympathetically, *see me, and I will have you given a field assignment. It is the least I can do after setting Nevan on your trail.*

I will, sir, and thank you.

Before I break contact, thakur-na, is there anything further you need?

Not really, Thakur -- if you don't have anything else for me, I'll offer Major Owajima a ride back to Terra.

That will be fine. Enjoy the trip -- I must endure this reception for Duke Shirley. Until your return, thakur-na.

Until then, Thakur. The contact ended, and Nevan grinned up at his captor. "Satisfied, Major?"

"Perfectly, warrior. And I will accept your offer of a ride." Owajima holstered his gun, then undid Nevan's bonds. "I have wished to meet you for some time; I regret only the circumstances."

Nevan sat up, rubbing his wrists. "Same here, maybe more so. I was after you in particular because my bio-father left you his personal weapons when he died last month."

"Oh? Knowing Sandemans, I assume there was a reason."

"Uh-huh. He was the one you gave need-release to on Piper's World."

"Ah." Owajima smiled. "I should not have broken cover to do so, but I had seen one warrior die that way when we were prisoners of the Traiti, and I could not let another go through such agony unaided."

"That's what he told me, not long after I finished my agent's training. Do you need to get anything before we go?"

"No. Had you been the enemy I originally thought, by now you would have been dead and your ship confiscated for my trip, to be turned in to the Navy at the Antarctica base. My things are already aboard."

Nevan chuckled. "Good thinking. Unnecessary, since this baby already belongs to the Navy, but I like the plan." He led the way to his ship's control room, got clearance for takeoff, and set course for Terra. Then he escorted his guest to the ship's small lounge. "I've followed your career for a long time, Major," he said, getting coffee for each of them. "It's been brilliant -- at times incredible. Like getting into this ship without leaving traces."

Owajima smiled. "I left traces, warrior. Not many, and not significant to one without the training we share, but enough that you would have observed them. My particular Talent specialty, however, is singularly appropriate for one in this field." His smile grew. "I can, when I desire, make myself and my handiwork unnoticeable. It takes a particularly strong mind-shield to block that ability even partially; you saw nothing because I wished you not to."

Nevan nodded, returning the smile. "That makes me feel better. I got blown when I visited the base -- didn't know about the open house, and ran into some clan-mates. I was afraid I'd let that distract me -- but if you were using Talent, that wasn't my problem. Mind showing me how it works?"

"Not at all, though since you are already aware of me, the effect will not be complete."

If that was incomplete, Nevan thought seconds later, Kiyoshi Owajima must be capable of practically turning invisible. He knew the other was there, could see him perfectly well -- but it was almost impossible to pay any attention to him. "Nice! I could've used that quite a few times."

Owajima became noticeable again. "It is less effective against a number of people, particularly when -- as you did -- they know I am present. But against few, or those who have not already seen me when I begin using it, you are quite correct; it is most effective."

"Too bad you can't teach it to all the agents." But that, Nevan knew, wasn't possible; while mind-screen, or the stronger mind-shield, and telepathy were common to everyone with Talent, the specialized aspects varied widely from person to person. "Would you like to see your inheritance?"

"Very much. The needler and blades in the clothing storage?"

Nevan chuckled. "That's them. Do you want to get them, or shall I?"

"There is no further need to invade your privacy, warrior."

"Nevan is fine -- I'll go get them, then." He did so, grinning to himself. He'd been favorably impressed by the reports of Owajima's accomplishments; he was even more favorably impressed by the man himself. Not too many standard humans could take out a Sandeman warrior, even using Talent!

Returning to the lounge, he gave Owajima the box holding the weapons. "Here you are, Major. Use them in good health."

"I shall, whenever my cover does not prohibit the use of Sandeman weapons. And call me Kiyoshi, please." Owajima smiled. "I think this will be an enjoyable trip, and that by its end we will be friends."

"I think so, too. Do you have a family?"

"I am married, but we do not yet have children. You?"

"Two sons, both warriors -- one with the lady Dallas, one with the lady Morna. My foster-parents are fostering both of them, as well. I've got a holo, if you'd like to see."

"Very much." Owajima accepted the small folder, settling in for an enjoyable discussion.

END

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