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DARK PILGRIM RISING

R. Peter Ubtrent

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To my sister Michelle.
Thanks for reading the draft for me
and for all the love and support through the years.

And Genevieve. My love will
always reside within your heart.

Books in the Dark Pilgrim Series

Dark Pilgrim Rising
Seed of Power

Dark Throne
Dark Enlightenment
Dark Redemption
Fallen Pilgrim

Other Books by R. Peter Ubtrent:

Eternity's Handmaiden

The existence of the Earth is a myth.

It has passed from history to legend; from legend to shadow; from shadow to that place beyond, which resides in the sub-conscious and is only taken out during those cold, dark nights when the spirits come out and drive humans back to the safety of the fire.

It has been over 8,000 years since the concept of such a place, a singular place from which, supposedly, humans first evolved, was even contemplated. I know of it only because of my position within the inner court of the Prime House Volans, Holder of the Imperium Seat for the last one thousand years. I vaguely remember hearing of Earth in brief snatches of furtive conversations over-heard in the Hall of Learning when the Knowledge Masters thought no one was about. In those eight thousand years since this Earth was to have existed, humanity spread throughout the known galaxy like a plague, displacing those other species who dared to challenge humanity's alleged supremacy. And then the Houses arose from the chaos that was the Great War of Religious Independence, Houses of supposed Nobility based on lineages as much a myth as the concepts of a singular planet being the origins of man. And with the Houses arose the Imperium and The Church of the Blessed Prophets, destined to forever vie with one another for the allegiance of humanity.

But I get ahead of myself.

As I look back, I would have to say that most of my problems stemmed from an assassination. And it was not just any assassination. It happened to be the assassination of he whom it was thought could never be touched: the emperor himself.

You see, my name is Bhasin Deneb Volans, scion of the Prime House Volans, at one time the direct heir-apparent to the Imperium. And this is, for what it's worth, my story.

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PROLOGUE

Planet of Pallida IV 3660 Y.I. (Year of the Imperium)

To him, assassination was akin to an art.

He detested others of his ilk who took no pride in their work, the sloppiness and inefficiency of the kill only of secondary concern to fulfilling the contract; and getting paid.

That was not his style.

He didn't think it should be anyone's style who served the Noble profession he had chosen so long ago. But then, since the majority of assassins serving the numerous Houses of the Imperium were, of late, humans, it was really no surprise to him that they acted the way they did. Humans were so... well, human. That was really the only word one could use that fit and that any non-human would readily understand in context. Just simply say the word *human* to any non-human and a cornucopia of contextual meaning would be instantly understood without further speech; crude, arrogant, ignorant, bestial, so much waste of complex encoded material. And that was the short list.

Human assassins were even worse.

They all thought themselves so superior, so righteous in the pursuit of their target that they more often than not failed to achieve any semblance of professionalism. And most -- the vast majority in fact -- were caught by the House they were targeting or by the ever prevalent and ever searching Musiv Retila Sid, the Imperium's assassin hunters. Although he hated to admit it, the Musiv were very good at rooting out and uncovering assassins and plots, despite the fact that they were also all humans. Humans could be, he had learned over the years much to his consternation, very persistent creatures in the pursuit of what they

took to be important matters. And hunting assassins ranked up their with the other matters humans took to be important.

As far as he knew, only two others had survived as long as he had. One was a Druznsi and he had not seen any sign of her work in years, leading him to believe that she had retired. If she had been caught, he would have certainly heard of it by now. Such occurrences were generally touted all over the human media circuits as something of vital importance to the every day lives of the simpler folk.

The other was a Drek. That made it almost as bad as a human.

However, neither had been active in the profession as long as he had. And neither was even close to being as skilled. It was not bragging as far as he was concerned; it was simply the truth. *Sic itur ad astra*, as humans had once said. His immortality was most certainly assured. And this job would prove it beyond a doubt. He was about to assassinate the untouchable.

This one had been in the planning stages for a long time. He clearly remembered when he had been approached, the message encrypted and jumbled and subtle enough to avoid all but the most astute and determined investigation, yet clear as a bell to an assassin of his caliber. If he could have smiled like humans do, he certainly would have. This was for what he had been waiting. This would be the assassination that would settle once and for all his status as the best of the best.

Assembling the human manufactured mini-projectile cannon with his primary arms -- even if he had not been specifically tasked to use this model, he would have chosen it anyway; humans did make the best weapons despite their numerous other faults -- and loading the three explosive nano-dart cartridges into their innocuous looking launchers with his secondary hands, he went through his plan one more time, touching on each detail purposely, conscienciously.

His target was hard.

It was as hard as they came.

One of the most difficult problems he had was simply getting into position for the kill. It had taken months to find a spot high above where the target would be appearing and he was still not happy with the location. But then it would have to do. There was nothing that even came close to the benefits of this position. The Imperium Security Service had done their job well on this particular location, as they always seemed to do. The safety of the emperor was one of those tasks never taken lightly.

He would have to use a tunneling quantum penetrator to get through the brick wall in his path without blowing a hole for all to notice. He would also need the technology for his self-built visual enhancement to be able to see clearly. Fortunately it was porous brick and not much of a challenge for the equipment he had brought along.

But it did offer direct visual protection from the prying eyes that always seemed to be around such humans as the emperor, and the Imperium Internal Security would not think to look up at the square-blocked plasma junction housing on the auxiliary power-transformer. Well, he was ninety-nine percent certain that the humans would not find it necessary to deep-penetrate scan his hiding place since it was so far away and the heat of the plasma would make it an inhospitable place for any save a Kroor.

And who would suspect a Kroor, of all species, to want to hurt someone?

That was one of the prime reasons for his longevity in his chosen profession: who would ever suspect a Kroor? Kroor were peaceful insectasoids who would rather die than hurt another. If someone ever had the gall to suspect a Kroor as being an assassin, they would be laughed out of the meeting.

Unfortunately, his chosen perch still did not allow him easy access to his target. Even a Kroor would be questioned within a hundred meters of the person protected. And so he had been forced to find this hot, magnetically charged hiding place for his work on this target. Escape afterwards was as important as success in the assassination itself, an oft times overlooked aspect to the profession that cost many an aspiring apprentice to succumb to capture or death.

Success and escape went hand in hand with each other.

As far as he was concerned, not surviving the job was as big a failure as missing the target. His high, unlikely hiding place would facilitate easy egress while the I.I.S. was frantically searching for the culprit close at hand. By the time they expanded their search to include the plasma juncture, he would be long gone.

And now he was left with the technical part, with which he spent the majority of time these last few years researching, planning, revising, practicing. This would be the culmination of his career, a masterpiece spoken of for centuries to come as the most brilliant piece of work ever seen. His target, he discovered to his great dismay -- and utter delight in a perverse way -- was triple protected, a rare find in this galaxy of trusting souls. First there was the expanded general protection field -- alternating magnetic and graviton fields that would deflect any projectile or energy beam fired into the area. Second was a personal defensive shield fluctuating around the target anywhere from one centimeter to two centimeters from his person in randomly rotating phasic-harmonic frequencies that would, basically, deflect any projectile or absorb any energy weapon that might have made it past the first barrier. And last was a medically implanted anti-toxin device that would counter-act any known toxin introduced into the body within nano-seconds. It was relatively new and he had had a very difficult time obtaining any information on it, almost tipping off the I.S.S. and the Musiv in the process of getting one for disassembling and detailed study. That

unfortunate little problem had caused a delay of several months and still angered him for his sloppiness in almost getting caught.

He could have easily solved the whole problem by setting off a large explosion, perhaps even archaic nuclear. But it was not his style to use such brutish weapons and those who hired him had insisted on a single kill with no collateral damage. That simple statement sent red flags arising, indicating that one or more of his employers would be near the target to forestall any suspicion of their involvement. And they did not want to be killed by accident in an overwhelming blast.

Not that he ever missed.

He had even been insulted by the suggestion that he might miss.

He clicked his outer mandibles unconsciously with the remembrance of that highlighted message suggesting that he might miss. He had almost refused the job when he saw that.

Almost.

The expanded general protection field was the easiest of the defensive systems to overcome. The I.I.S. had yet to figure out that the generator of the resonance field was not shielded properly and a good detector could pick up the residue of the fluctuating fields, making it possible to map the contour lines and use them to one's advantage. It wasn't, of course, an obvious problem to solve. It had taken several weeks to construct a detector sensitive enough and to figure out how to use the information it would devolve. The nano-dart packages had been the answer. They could be programmed to ride the fluctuating fields and make their way to the target with little to no resistance. And they were small enough to be more or less invisible to any defensive scanners.

The personal defensive shield was more of a challenge. That one had stumped him for a long time. He had clandestinely purchased one himself and tried everything he could think of to defeat the rotating frequencies. He had thought to use the same technique as with the general protection field but discovered that only at a distance of a few centimeters from the field itself could any residual be detected and even then, it fluctuated so rapidly that it was impossible to bore through. Facing failure before he even started, a proposition he wasn't about to entertain, he had stumbled onto the answer quite accidentally.

And stumbled was an appropriate word.

He had tripped on something in his lab -- something for which Kroor were not known and he never did figure out what had caused him to trip -- and had hit the edge of a desk and scratched his right primary leg. He had not thought much about it at the time, but that night it had occurred to him that he had felt the table through the shield. This of course meant that the shield could be pushed in, a concept that had never occurred to him. The ability of the shield to be pushed in meant, basically, that the shield could be used against itself. If hit with enough force, the shield would bend and transmit the force of the projectile to

the body or, better yet, against the anti-toxin control panel on the target's hip.

With that little fact brought to light, the entire plan came together.

One of the things he had discovered after obtaining the anti-toxin device, was that it contained a fatal flaw -- two actually. It had been designed to react to the rapid, large influx of poison into the system. Small, slowly released toxins on a miniscule scale would not be detected until the poison reached a lethal level, at which point the device would react in force, filling the body with vast quantities of anti-toxin and setting off warning alarms. Although this didn't appear at first to be much of a flaw -- only leaving the owner of the device sick for several days but not allowing him to die -- it was the anti-toxins used and the massive scale of their release that was of interest. If reggichii -- a relatively mild poison not generally used by assassins in the last few centuries -- was used as the slowly released poison, the anti-toxin used to counter it in the massive quantities that the device released, would chemically react with the reggichii in just the right combination to create majjana, one of the most lethal toxins known to humans.

The amount created in this manner would overwhelm the anti-toxin device and kill the target in a matter of seconds.

The second flaw was that the anti-toxin device was not totally compatible with the personal shield. It was a consequence of different manufacturers making the devices without consulting each other over the detailed data of their designs. Industrial piracy was such a wonderful human trait. Made for all sorts malfunctioning devises.

Either way, this second flaw could be easily over-looked and even if found would appear fairly innocuous; except in the hands of a master as he was. In a particular test-mode, the frequencies produced by the anti-toxin device interfered with the rotating harmonics of the personal shield and left rotating gaps just big enough to allow entry of the nano-dart packages with the poison.

When it all came together for him, he had immediately seen the sheer beauty of it. It was one of those classic problem-solving cases making his work so enjoyable. It would, however, take precise timing and completely accurate shooting to achieve the results he was predicting . . . and he would not get a second chance.

Fortunately for him, precise timing and precise accuracy were two of his specialties.

The attack would start with penetration of the porous brick wall of the plasma juncture in which he now sat by the nano-dart packages and the traversing of the general protection field. The first nano-dart package would have to strike the personal shield at just the right location and with just enough force to push the shield in and activate the self-test mode of the anti-toxin device. This would set up the gaps in the rotating field, allowing him to send in the rest of the nano-dart packages with

precise and rapid shots using his visual enhancement system to pick out the gaps.

When enough nano-dart packages penetrated, the anti-toxin device would activate and the deadly combination, in just the right proportions - which had taken months of experimentations to perfect -- would create majjana and kill the target, leaving no evidence behind except the mystery of how the majjana got into the target's system in the first place. It would take precision and skill, but it would be perfect.

Absolutely perfect.

He placed his vision enhancement apparatus over his bulbous eye pods and, noting the time display, found the target moving toward the speaker platform right on schedule. This location and this time were both given to him by those who wanted this particular target eliminated. He never asked why they wanted the targets eliminated and in truth he could care less. The reasons for the assassinations were immaterial. All that mattered was that the job was completed professionally and that he was paid. That was all.

When his clients tried to explain why they wanted the target eliminated, he would sign off immediately and wait. They always called back and learned quickly enough not to repeat that mistake. As was the case with all his jobs, he never met with the clients, never saw them and they never saw him. No one even knew that he was a Kroor. All the better. One of the keys to his long-term survival -- he was going on one hundred and seventy standard years now -- was that no one had a clue who or what he was.

The great and feared assassin D'Cyn was a shadow in the darkness, who struck when least expected.

The target stepped up to the auditory enhancement system, that all-too-human smile beaming brightly in the tanned and weathered face, the wrinkles like a road-map to his soul, telling D'Cyn that this man was meant to die here and now. With any other species, the barring of teeth in such a fashion as humans favored would be a sign of aggression, hostility, anger. They certainly were a strange lot. This one, surrounded by a cadre of armored Palace Guards, I.I.S. agents and kowtowing advisors, seemed to have a halo of power about him transcending what the Kroor saw with the normal humans he encountered. He had been shocked to discover that the human visual preceptors were unable to see this halo, their limited vision so restrictive to be almost useless. He often wondered how humans knew whom their leaders were without being able to see the obvious marks that other species saw. Perhaps that was why humans fought amongst themselves so much. They never picked the right leader.

He lifted the two nano-dart launchers into position, resting them on his primary leg joints and reset his visual enhancement apparatus to align with the laser sights. He could not hear anything that the target was saying, but he seemed fairly animated as he addressed the visiting

dignitaries and information specialists hanging on his every word as if they actually meant something. He had quasi-followed the life of this particular human since his enthronement. Seeing that this particular human was, in all practicality, the one individual with the most power at his fingertips -- the Imperium Navy alone enough of a threat to humble all but Dwad-Mehstiv -- he was more than interesting enough to warrant special attention even if he wasn't a target. And during that time, D'Cyn had learnt that this human was much more effective and likable than most, his policies and attitude toward non-humans much more benevolent than was normal practice for the arrogant species. He had grown to respect this human and his policies.

Not that it would do him much good now.

The multi-variant scanner he had engineered chirped as it began to pick up the field fluctuations of the expanded general protection field. He engaged the multi-harmonic space-time distorter to fix the field width, opened the Hyper-dimensional access corridor through which the quantum tunneling would take place and waited for the scanner to key into the echo of the random rotation. The dampening field kicked in to conceal any spurious emissions he might give off as the scanner keyed on. The comm-link was automatically established with the nano-probe packets and the target was bracketed in his visual apparatus, indicating all was ready.

He aimed at the pre-selected spot on the anti-toxin device. If only the target would stand still it would make things far easier. That first shot had to be perfect. There wasn't any room for error. The target was smiling again. Apparently he had made some rather cognitive point and the awaiting lap-dogs were applauding his profound wisdom. His eyes reflected the approval, the silent applause washing of his over his face like waves.

The first nano-dart package was fired.

It penetrated the brick wall with ease as the Hyper-dimension wrapped around it, enfolded it in multi-dimensions, then freed it into the expanded general protection field. The comm-link fed the package the vital data on the random fluctuations of the field and it sped through the eddies and shifting currents, striking the personal defensive shield with just the right amount of force to push the shield in and activate the self-test mode on the anti-toxin device.

No one noticed.

His vision apparatus displayed the strike. The displays indicated the interference in the shield and the miniscule gaps glowing brightly where his next aiming point lay.

Now came the tricky part. The self-test lasted all of thirty seconds, during which time he had to accurately fire the twenty nano-dart packages with the poison. That would involve six cartridge changes. It would be tight, with no time for mistakes or doubts. He had to inject just

the right amount of poison to create the combination needed for the reaction to produce majjana.

The target was speaking again. Unwanted images of the man's life passed through the assassin's mind: children, wives, loves, joys...bad times and good. He was a good human it appeared who had simply been chosen to die at the hands of a master assassin.

So was life in the galaxy.

The nano-darts began firing, accurately, the two launchers working in tandem as he held them steadily, the cartridge switches smooth as silk, each shot superbly precise, invisible to all the sophisticated scanners flooding the area, all the security ready at a moment's notice to react.

But no one noticed.

The Palace Guards stood like statues, unaware of the danger. Even the target was unaware, each strike of the nano-dart packages too small to register on primitive human nervous system. As soon as the last nano-dart package left the launcher, D'Cyn began breaking down the equipment, cleaning up his trail, leaving nothing behind. There was no need to wait around. He knew what the outcome would be. He had seen it far too many times before to have to watch with a morbid curiosity. Besides, it was the watching which generally tripped up most new assassins. Watching meant staying around and staying around meant possibly answering questions and that never lead to anything good.

The first poison reached the toxic level.

The anti-toxin device flooded the target with the anti-dote, warning alarms chiming. Reactions were instantaneous among the Palace Guards as chaos filled the once somber, peaceful assembly at the warning chime. Before the target was dragged -- confused, fearful, wide-eyed -- two meters he was dead, the death-mask on his face a study in terror and unbelievable pain, the foam dribbling out of his mouth like the corroded sediments of his departing soul.

By the time the Palace Guards had secured the area surrounding the incident and detained all found therein for intensive questioning, the assassin was long gone, already working on his next job. The assassination of the Emperor of the Imperium, Aquila Deneb Volans, was now but a fading memory to him, another successful job to record as accomplished.

*All the waste and offal of the galaxy,
all that is worthless and useless,
a stress to all hard working people, that is what
the Imperium Penal system thrives on. It's a good notion
that no ever leaves this cesspool once they have
been incarcerated.*

*Lord Marshall Bhagavan Adiol
The Greater House Beebhatsu
2541 Y.I.*

**Imperium Penal Colony of K'ar Krack'a
Level Five Gnestholium Mines
52 standard years later**

He never expected the blow striking him across the jaw, rattling his teeth and sending ringing waves pulsing through his ears like a gong sounding right next to him. He had completely forgotten that his assailant had an extra set of arms. He would not make that mistake again. Dead people rarely made mistakes.

He back-peddled quickly to get out of the immediate range of the H'chalk, who hissed and clicked and clattered in his -- or was it a her? So difficult to tell with non-humans -- attempt at speech. It was most likely a sustained monologue about the puny human's heritage. H'chalk rarely had anything good to say about anyone who was not H'chalk. A foot -- or was it another arm? -- flashed out unexpectedly and made contact to his chest. He went sprawling back into the waiting arms of his fellow humans; intense, sharp pain diffused across his torso like a fire-brand.

"Poke his eyes out!" Antlia unnecessarily shouted into his ear, his enthusiasm overwhelming his common sense, a not too uncommon event with the man.

Rough arms shoved him back upright as the clamor of the surrounding crowd broke back through his ringing ears -- as much from the hit to his head as from his friend's shout -- washing over him with the

stench of blood and sweat and excitement. Excitement over impending death was always a reason for cheering around here.

He looked toward Antlia with confused frustration at the completely senseless suggestion. But it was obvious that the small man truly believed that he had hit upon the only viable solution to the problem at hand. Antlia's five-foot-eight frame barely contained the one hundred and ten pounds stretching over his bones like a dried sack of old leather, his dark, dirty, lice infested hair falling over his face in tufts of oily parchment, masking the intensity of his hard amber eyes.

"Poke him in the *fucking eyes!*" he repeated, with emphasize on the expletive.

He looked to the others for support from the apparent insanity of Antlia, but there was little help found. The Ara brothers were busy taking bets, hastily scribbling down amounts and names in that indecipherable scrawl with which they could later claim was unreadable to even themselves -- when they lost only, mind you -- thus making all bets null and void. They were not even paying attention to the fight. He was certain that they were laying heavy odds against his survival, hoping to reap the whirlwind when the fight was finally settled.

Thaliana could barely be seen amongst the horde of eager faces. Events like this, which broke the monotony and boredom for the few, brief moments, but lingered on afterward in gossip for cycles, were better than food to most of those gathered. But Thaliana stood out from them for the simple fact that she wasn't excited or eager or thrilled at the spectacle unfolding before her. In fact, he was certain that the scowl marring her beautifully precious face was directed strictly at him, those intense blue-blue eyes hard as icicles as they latched onto him. Her arms were crossed defiantly under her firm yet ample breasts, the smear and soot of the mines on her face, the bandana all but completely covering her silken stark blonde hair yet still allowing her beauty to shine through. For some obscure reason, the image of their first meeting those many years ago flashed before his eyes, as if that were somehow important to his survival in this fight.

She had recently arrived from the hell that was Level Six, a military prisoner condemned to the humiliation of the common Penal Colony. It was a not too uncommon occurrence for enemies of the Imperium. Honor for the vanquished, especially when those vanquished were non-humans, tended to be lost somewhere in the bureaucratic shuffle. They had showered together that first day -- privacy was an unknown commodity on Level Five of K'ar Krack'a, whether it was showers or shitting or sleeping, the concept of separation of the sexes lost somewhere on Level Two -- and he could still picture that incredibly perfect body but scant meters from him. Although he had heard the age-old rumors and seen more than his fair share of naked females, Thaliana was the first Druzni he had ever seen. She had easily exceeded all his expectations. However, he had also learnt during that

first encounter what happened to anyone who dared believe that she was one for the taking, as were most human females here.

The two men who tried to make her their sex slave for the duration were literally carted away in several pieces, the ruthlessness, brutality and rapidity of her response more than enough to deter any more would-be suitors from even attempting to talk to her, much less have the death-wish to solicitate sexual favors.

And she didn't even use a weapon on them.

That was perhaps the most frightening -- and interesting -- part.

She wasn't about to help him here. As a matter of fact, the look she was giving him just now was more on the order of, *I'm hungry, stop playing around and finish this already.*

Cetus he could not see anywhere. He had not seen him since right before this fracas broke out, which was typical of the ferret-faced man with his slicked-back hair and beady little eyes. Cetus was probably *acquiring* what he considered needed supplies while all eyes were occupied. It was his way.

So that left Tethys, that bulk of a man with his jet black hair, tight mouth, stubborn chin and hard look speaking of more years than he owned. But it was the man's eyes standing out like twin pillars of power, that light gray intensity seeing all, missing nothing and seeming to be always looking everywhere at the same time. Tethys stood like a rock against an onrushing, crashing surf, holding solid as if completely unaffected by the maelstrom around him. His emotionless expression was typical in situations like this, the slight upward turn of an eyebrow telling him in uncertain terms to make an end of this now before the guards arrived or he was seriously injured.

Antlia brought his attention back to the fight at hand, which was a good thing since the H'Chalk was not aware of the time-out rules. Antlia seemed frantic to make him understand that his idea was brilliant and the only way to defeat the H'chalk. The only problem was that the H'chalk stood well over eight feet tall, with his bulbous, multi-faceted eyes sitting even higher in their thin, reed-like stalks.

The blood in his mouth tasted bitter as he answered breathlessly, not understanding why he was even bothering to deal with Antlia's inane suggestion. "And how do you suppose I reach his *fucking eyes?!*"

Antlia looked at him as if he were stupid, as if the answer was so obvious.

"Use a stick." It was said with such seriousness that the entire crowd paused in their roar of approval to look in his direction.

Then the roar resumed with increased intensity as the H'chalk gave a sucker kidney punch sending him tumbling back into the crowd to the

accompaniment agonizing spears of pain. He fell to the dirt floor -- completely devoid of anything even remotely similar to a stick -- and rolled to the side to avoid the follow-up punch he knew was coming. The H'chalk hissed its disapproval and swung its bulk around ungainly to face him. This gave Ailanthus some much needed breathing room as he scampered away to the other side of the improvised ring of bodies enclosing the fight. The only advantage he had over this creature was that it did not move with nearly the agility a human could muster. It was not turning out to be much of an advantage. Ailanthus couldn't even remember why he was in the middle of this fiasco, which really pissed him off to no end.

The H'chalk lumbered forward, intent it seemed, to crush its opponent with ease. Ailanthus kicked out at the soft -- or semi-soft since nothing on this alien seemed at all soft -- and was rewarded for his effort with a lance of pain up his leg and a foot covered in slimy goo that the H'chalk used to regulate its body temperature. The H'chalk hissed what could only be a demented chuckle and then enveloped him in its four arms tightly.

Dirt encrusted sweat poured down Ailanthus' face, its salty taste mingling with the bitter blood in his mouth. His eyes burned from the sweat in them and his body felt like it was about to be imploded.

Food.

That's what this was all about. This stupid H'chalk was new here and had tried to muscle in on the chow-line, deciding quite simply that since it was bigger and stronger than most others, it could just do as it pleased and cut to the front of the line, thus getting the warmest -- it was never hot -- gruel that didn't taste burnt. But then, in an environment like this one, food was one of those basic commodities on which people didn't compromise.

And Ailanthus, the quietest of the group, the one who always tried to avoid conflict, had the brilliant idea to speak up, to put the hulking H'chalk in its place. That stupidity had led to this moment in time, as a mutant with attitude was squeezing the life out of him. This was not part of the overall plan for survival he had laid out those many years ago. As the H'chalk squeezed harder, forever hissing, the slime coating on Ailanthus' slowly compacted body feeling hot and acidic to his exposed skin, he tried to recall anything he knew of this rare and paradoxical creature.

It amounted to a little less than nothing.

As far as he knew, no one knew anything about the H'chalk. They were a species that had never really made much inroad on the galactic military scene, their small brains and less than average intelligence forcing them more into sub-servient roles to the more aggressive species -- like humans -- and eventually bringing them to the brink of extinction. The number of known H'chalk could be counted easily, their scattered and remote outposts not worth the trouble for the slave

traders. Having been in this Penal Colony for the last twenty years did not help much either. Information concerning a rare, xenophobic, mutant species was not a priority to Ailanthus' existence.

At least it had never been before.

He felt a rib crack, followed by a disheartening hissing chuckle. He looked up in pain, only to catch the image of one of the guard droids passively hovering high above, watching. Unless it was an all-out brawl threatening the safety of the colony, small spats such as this were of little concern. As a matter of fact, if one of them died -- which certainly looked like the most likely outcome -- so much the better. That simply meant that space would become available for another prisoner of the Imperium and the Imperium had no trouble finding people to fill those spaces.

His vision began to cloud, to blacken as the intense pain overwhelmed him, more ribs cracking under the unrelenting pressure. He no longer heard the roar of the crowd or Antlia's ridiculous suggestions. A peace came over him, a full feeling of inner harmony washing over him like a soothing wave of ocean surf. His first thought was that this was what death was about, the final euphoria before the blackness that was extinction. He had never believed in any of that Church babble about heaven and hell. Death was the end and that was all there was to that. What was the point of believing in some glorious after-life? It only made this place that much more miserable.

But then his more logical sense took control and during the seconds in agonizing torture passing by like hours, he realized that this was not death at all. Images flashed across his mind's eye like remembrances of the past, like lives lived over and over. And in that moment of lucid perception he knew what to do, knew all there was to know about H'chalk. He knew the creature's strengths and weaknesses, the soft spots and most importantly the semi-protected genital area vulnerable on most species, the H'chalk being no exception. From where the knowledge came, he didn't know. It felt as if it was a part of him, as if he had just sat in on a tactical lecture on the morphology of the H'chalk species.

And then it all fled before him in a wash of white.

He involuntarily took a deep, life-giving breath, the pain of the broken ribs nothing compared to the pain experienced but moments before in the clutches of that monster. It felt good to breath.

Sound filtered back into his senses slowly, the inexplicable cheering almost deafening. There was a low, unidentified, pitiful moaning coming from somewhere close that he hoped was not coming from him. Hands were clapping him on his back, each another stab of pain to his wracked body.

The only logical explanation was that he had won.

Crocus Ara's voice was the first to assault his ears, followed closely, like a musical duo, by his brother Anolis, the two inseparable. "That was great the way you waited till the last second to get em."

"The odds in your favor shot through the roof!"

"We made a killing."

"They'll be people owing us for years."

Ailanthus felt the two brothers leave more than he saw them, his vision nothing at the moment but a kaleidoscope of blurs and blotches. Their hardy pats on his back had done wonders for his pain.

The next voice was Thaliana's; tight, clipped, detached from the world around yet hinting at a flowing sweetness. It was very similar to the lures used by the deadly pokitha plant, known to digest its victim very, very slowly after capture. It was, at the moment, a perceptively apt description of any Druzsni. "I'm impressed with your knowledge of H'chalk physiology...." She paused in mid-stream, as if considering her complement, then stopped talking altogether as if she had said too much already.

Ailanthus' vision was slowly returning and her hard yet beautiful face became more focused. Although he thought that her voice sounded sarcastic, seeing her face confirmed it beyond a doubt.

"But I'm certain that it was purely accidental that your thrashing foot happened to contact the beast's genitalia," she finally finished with a bare hint of a smile not meant to gratify.

"Thanks for the concern," he mumbled through a mouthful of blood.

Tethys knelt next to him, his face also a taunt mask of emotionless non-concern. "Get up already before the medical droids try to take you away. The last thing we need right now is to have you reassigned."

Ailanthus had no idea until Tethys mentioned it that he was laying on the hard-packed dirt floor, his sense of his surroundings still lost somewhere in the H'chalk's killing grasp. He sat up, working his jaw with one hand and holding his cracked ribs with the other. The moaning he now associated with the wounded H'chalk had turned into a low whimper. For a moment, he actually felt sorry for the creature.

But only for a moment.

With Tethys help to stand on wobbly legs, he surveyed the scene. Most everyone had scattered, not wanting to be around when the guard droids eventually made an appearance. He also noticed that the H'chalk's food bowl had been taken. It would certainly be mad when it recovered. To lose a fight to a puny human *and* lose one's food bowl meant that this particular prisoner was not meant for a long stay here in the mines. He had proven himself weak and any sign of weakness here was akin to a death sentence. There were more than enough unsavory characters hanging around just waiting for any victim on which to pounce. And it was widely known that H'chalk made for good eating.

Ailanthus spoke as Tethys and Thaliana lead him toward the chow hall -- or what served as a chow hall here on Level Five -- his voice still

husky and harsh from the near-death experience. "Next time I get a brilliant idea to complain about someone to their face," he said as he spit blood onto the floor and felt along his teeth for any looseness, "kick me in the shin or something."

"I'll be more than happy to," Thaliana stated sardonically with a sly grin.

"I was talking to Tethys," he responded dryly.

"I'm well aware of that," she answered as they presented their bowls to the server, who ladled a heaping serving into each bowl. The meal consisted -- as it always did; morning and evening -- of a sticky, lumpy, thick mush better suited for plastering the walls than ingesting.

Ailanthus smirked at her as they left the chow hall with their full bowls. It was a rare event when Ailanthus and his group ever actually sat down and ate in the make-shift chow-hall, which consisted of nothing more than the huge, rusted vats out of which the food was served and rickety benches and tables the prisoners had managed to construct on the hard-packed dirt of the open and large main assembly area. The light was diffuse yet more than sufficient for one to see that the food was not appetizing looking. If the guard droids had their way, it would be pitch black. They could see in any light conditions. What did it matter if the prisoners couldn't? That was not their concern.

Ailanthus and his group usually took their bowls and brought them back to the cut-out, rock-hewed cave they called home to work enough bugs and such into the gruel to give it a semblance of taste. And then there were the days when one of them would happen to catch a tunnel slug or rock-rat during work. Smuggling it back to the living quarters was always an adventure, but an adventure well worth the risk. Anolis had discovered a great method for cooking the slugs in their own juices that made them a delicacy. Or at least it was a delicacy here in the colony. Anywhere else it would be simply disgusting.

"What happened to Antlia?" Ailanthus queried as they threw the contents of their bowls in the large cooking pot sitting over the heaters they had managed to heist from a work site. "I'd like to find out where he thought I was going to find a stick to poke its eyes out with."

"In his fertile imagination, I'm sure," Tethys stated as he helped Ailanthus sit. "First we need to take a look at those ribs. You need to be healthy if this is going to succeed."

"I'll look after him," Thaliana offered with a straight face, her eyes flashing with the pleasure she foresaw at making his pain even worse.

Ailanthus' eyes widened as she came toward him. "No, that's quite all right, really. Tethys is more than capable of tending to my wounds."

She smirked a moment, then shrugged her shoulders as she squatted by the pot and stirred lazily. "Your loss."

"I doubt it," he replied under his breath as Tethys helped him off with his shirt to reveal deep purple bruises and welts developing around his chest. He was not the biggest man around and certainly nowhere near

to the bulk and muscle that was Tethys. But his six-foot frame was hard and lean, a result of the twenty long, grueling years of hard labor in a penal colony where the average life-expectancy was a trifle short of five years.

Atop his lean frame was a close-cut stumble of strawberry-blond hair and a pair of deep-set green eyes holding an unquenchable fire. He was variously described as stoic and quiet, intelligent and hard-working, yet explosive if provoked too far and quite capable of a biting and acerbic tongue-lashing when required. He was certainly *not* known for his fighting prowess. That description would better fit Tethys.

Tethys was, in point of fact, one of the main reasons Ailanthus had managed to survive all these years in this cesspool of discarded life. That and Ailanthus' native cunning and skillful employment of others had allowed them both to out-live the odds and become something akin to living legends. Ailanthus had always been able to make friends, good friends and that was certainly a major advantage in a place like this.

Knowing whom one could trust was paramount to survival. He and Tethys had arrived at the penal colony together. They had actually known each other for as long as they could remember and if not physically brothers, then certainly in every other possible aspect as close as brothers could be. Neither had known their parents or their origins. Memories earlier than twelve years old were simply non-existent. They had learned to live with that fact, barely even thought about it anymore and considered themselves as inseparable as the Ara brothers.

But there was one thing they did know and that was that they were not like the ordinary prisoners sent here. They both had the ability to heal quickly, almost super-humanly and they both knew that someone or something had been watching over them all these years because no one survived this long here without help from somewhere. And then there was the flash-back he had just experienced, a flash-back that had in fact saved his life. It certainly was not the first time that he had one. There had been several other incidents, each coming to him during immediate crisis, a way out that others thought brilliant, masterful if not down-right lucky. He had no idea what they were, from where they came, or why he was having them all. They just came to him unbidden, as they sometimes came to Tethys, a glimpse into a life of which they knew nothing, into memories they knew they had never experienced. He had told a few people at first to see if they had easy explanations, if perhaps others had experienced the same but all that produced were odd stares and mumblings of hallucinations.

But have them he did and it irritated him to no end. Just like his lack of any memory prior to his twelfth naming day bothered him. He and Tethys had spoken of it, of course, at length and it was one of the main reasons, they were certain, that they had ended up in an Imperium

Penal Colony. That and a few other slightly illegal enterprises that didn't seem all that risky at the time.

He winced from the pain as Tethys bandaged his ribs tightly. "Hey, easy there. They're broken, remember?"

"Serves you right for waiting so long to finish him off," Thaliana chided him from her position by the pot as she sprinkled in ground-up deep-mine bugs and water-hunters into the mash. The substance made a plopping, thick bubbling sound as it boiled that never sounded terribly appetizing.

"I didn't notice you raising a hand to help any," Ailanthus remarked as the pain from the remainder of his body finally began to catch up with him. He turned to look at Tethys. "And you. I expected a little more help from you. Were you going to step in after he squeezed me to death or before he ate me?"

Tethys said nothing for a moment as he studied his handy-work on Ailanthus' body. He didn't even bother looking at Ailanthus as he answered in his firm, heavy voice rumbling from him like a rockslide. "You won, didn't you?"

Ailanthus was about to take exception to that statement when Tethys spoke again, a twinkle in his eye and the subtlest hint of a smile on his lips. "And anyway, H'chalk don't eat humans."

"That's such a relief," Ailanthus shot back caustically. "To know that he would have just torn me apart and left the pieces for others to eat makes me all warm and tingly inside."

Antlia came sauntering into the cave, his face all smiles, and emptied two bowls into the cooking pot. Antlia was a master at forging and acquiring food. If it existed anyway in the colony, Antlia would be able to get it and bring it here. Most people would see that as a major asset to have around. It was, however, his complete senselessness at times that really bothered and turned off most people. Antlia was one of those individuals who thought he knew much more than he really did, regardless of evidence to the contrary. And he made sure that everyone knew that he knew everything with constant suggestions and opinions whether they were asked for or not. He would be the type of person to tell a dweller in the snow-capped wastelands how best to build a shelter out of snow even though he had never set foot in that part of any planet.

"What great entertainment, Ailanthus. You really had those suckers going. They thought for sure that you were as good as dead. That'll teach that H'chalk to mess with us." Another problem with Antlia was that he never stopped talking once he got started. The man was like a broken holo-vid stuck on play. "I mean, did you see the way they started to lay the big bets down when that thing had you in its arms and was squeezing? That was awesome. We need to do this every few cycles..."

Ailanthus found himself stunned that every one thought he had been playing along, that it was all a charade, that the whole grabbing and squeezing and almost dying was all part of some convoluted overall plan to make the fight more entertaining. Well, maybe it was for the better. Others would think twice about messing with his friends after this. It was good to reaffirm the obvious every once in a while. As of late there had been a lot more disturbing incidents with other groups trying to muscle in on his domain or bully his friends, something that he didn't need. Not with their plans finally coming to fruition. They were too close now and had expended too much effort to lose it all to the stupidity of others.

Crocus and Anolis lumbered into the cave, each carrying a bag full of items ranging from useless baubles to a frying pan to several good-sized slugs and rats, some still alive and fresh.

"Crank up the broiler, Anolis," Crocus said in his nasal voice sounding like it would better fit on a Drek. "We're eatin' good today."

"Yeah, thanks to Ailanthus' great ploy, we'll be eating rich for a few cycles, although you may have to make a few appearances to encourage people to pay up. Just a few, mind you, but you know how it is with some of these degenerates. Willing to play but not to pay," Anolis added in his matching nasal twang.

Ailanthus swallowed down the exquisitely bitter concoction Tethys had put together to speed his healing along. Helping the Ara brothers collect on back-debts was not one of the side-effects he had considered with his foolish encounter with the H'chalk. "That's none of my concern, Anolis. They're your bets and you'll have to deal with the collection end." He looked over at the younger brother. "You know how I feel about all that. That's not my thing." Debt collection was always a problem here and eleven times out of ten it ended up with people killed and others hurt and Ailanthus, despite his recent encounter with the H'chalk, was not one to go around killing and maiming when he could help it.

"And man-handling ten-foot non-humans is?" Thaliana remarked as she cut the head off one of the rats with a clean, single stroke of the crude, home-made knife.

"It was only eight-foot tall," he weakly responded, her point not one he was willing to conceit at the moment.

They all felt his presence long before he stuck his sleek, greasy head into the cave entrance. It was like a noxious fume had entered. Cetus was the type of human who gave the whole species a bad name. There was something about the man, apart from his over-powering stench, that always preceded him, like a cancerous miasma of the mind. Although he liked to think of himself as a part of the group, dropping off various and sundry useless supplies only he thought of importance but generally un-needed and then using that as an excuse to sit in on meals or illicit favors, he was rarely welcomed. He was nothing but a

manipulator. And lazy to boot. If he could get someone else to do his work for him, then so much the better. His frequent temper tantrums when he didn't get his way or he thought that someone had cheated him -- which was most of the time -- or his guilt-ridden sulking were an annoyance bordering on the psychotic.

And the biggest problem -- as if he didn't have enough already -- was that he could lie to you with the straightest expression and then be offended when you refused to believe him, regardless of how outlandish the lie was. It was as if you had been the one to wrong him by having the gall to disbelieve him and the one thing he hated above all else, he constantly told everyone who had the ill-fortune to listen, was liars.

In short, those who knew him didn't like him.

His oily voice gushed into the cave, the slightest hint of psychotic excitement hovering behind the words, his eyes alive with a roundness to them that was only masked by a fervent glowing of about-to-explode circuits. "Fresh arrivals coming. Young ones, too." He slinked off when certain that his words sank in, his presence sulking away like an over-worn shadow the moment he left the cave. The man seemed to relish in the misfortune of others and anything he could do to increase that misfortune or help it along he was glad to contribute.

He was, in essence, a one man plague.

Ailanthus looked at Tethys and Thaliana with that knowing gleam to his eyes. He didn't need to say the words. All three stood and made their way out of the cave, the rest staying behind to finish cooking.

*Force is the application of pressure
Pressure is the application of courage.
Courage is the application of fear.*

Excerpt from:
Memoirs of a Reluctant Hero
Field Marshall Cassiopeia Thrumbo
825 P.Y.I.

It was difficult to take anything Cetus said at face value. If he wasn't lying outright, he was twisting the truth into such a distortion that it might as well be a lie. He was a despicable human and would have made an excellent Drek; his devious, evil nature hidden under all those smiles and saccharine platitudes a perfect match for the renegade Drek who made it to this penal colony and survived more than a few months. But Ailanthus was certain that the Drek would not want to have him either.

Cetus was the type of person who no one wanted around.

As for his statement concerning the fresh meat, it was not all that rare to have new arrivals on Level Five. The number of prisoners who succumbed to the over-abundant causes of death -- including but certainly not limited to starvation and murder -- made it mandatory that new arrivals were continuous to keep the numbers high enough in the Colony to justify its existence.

But it was rare that the new arrivals were young. Even the Imperium didn't send the young ones to K'ar Krack'a. At least not very often. The last group had arrived four years ago and had included the Ara brothers, Anolis and Crocus. Ailanthus and Tethys had been in their forties when they had arrived and that had been bad enough. The vast majority of young, new arrivals rarely survived more than a few months, their used, abused, and wasted bodies more often than not found in the cooking pots of a psychotic Drek or Retaw after having been abandoned by those who had enslaved them.

If they were unlucky enough to be a female, their fate depended on their appearance, not too much different from the way it worked in the

world outside the colony. Those who were attractive and considered too fragile for work in the mines had the unfortunate distinction to become Tanudana. The Tanudana were, basically, the prostitutes of the Penal Colony, used as rewards for those prisoners who worked hard and stayed out of trouble. To be a Tanudana was to be given a life that gave a slightly higher level of comfort than the typical prisoner could expect. It came, however, at a high cost. Tanudana were forced to perform sexual acts, often numerous times during any particular cycle and their clients were not the most sensitive of individuals, prone to a roughness leaving many a female bruised and battered, both physically and mentally.

It was a system that had the potential to work well in quelling disturbances among the prison population because it gave a viable reason for the prisoners to behave. If only the option for the females had been voluntarily. The entire idea of forced prostitution had turned Ailanthus off from the first moment he learned of it and he rarely used the services, only going perhaps once a year because the prison rules forced him to in some sadistic twisting of the good behavior rules. To not use the credits earned from good behavior was to demonstrate bad behavior, as far as the administrators saw it and that opened up the prisoner to a variety of punishments which neither Ailanthus nor Tethys were willing to be subjected.

So they used their credits all at once, their pleasures at the behest of the Tanudana soft and tender, their wrath on those who would abuse the privilege severe. But what really made both Ailanthus and Tethys furious was what happened to those females who were not deemed attractive or too fragile to become Tanudana. Those unfortunate females were tossed in with the other prisoners and quickly became katakagriha -- sex slaves -- to whomever was strong enough to possess them. They rarely lasted more than a few mega-cycles, if that much and it was a life of pure hell.

Ailanthus and Tethys had tried, at first, to save as many of them as they could but had quickly discovered that taking away the only form of pleasure many of the prisoners enjoyed, especially those who refused to work or play with the others properly, lead to such a myriad of problems that their own lives quickly become endangered. Plus, what would they do with all those young women? Most of them were completely useless in terms of work and tended to be more a liability than either were willing to accept.

Taking on the Ara brothers was enough of a headache as it was and they were both males and hard workers. Ailanthus and Tethys had ultimately decided that they would not get involved anymore. Besides, far too many of those they had rescued from their first moments inside Level Five had eventually *chosen* to become katakagriha anyway, a decision neither Ailanthus nor Tethys could ever understand.

Now they only acted in rare cases and fortunately it was only rarely that young females or males were brought down here without having survived on one of the lower levels and thus knowing their way around. But it still grated on both their sense of morality, or what was left of it, to see these young things taken like wild animals and then discarded like an old gum wrapper when their usefulness was at an end.

To be a female in K'ar Krack'a was to be death.

By the time Ailanthus, Tethys, and Thaliana arrived at the so-called reception area, the new arrivals were already stumbling out of the strong grav-field surrounding the gravity-lift and triple-gated sally-port leading into Level Five. The area was not particularly large as largeness went, but for Level Five it was down right huge. There was a rough-cut entrance connecting this level with the sleek-smooth trans-titanium lined cargo gravity-lift running the length of all the levels. The lift itself was heavily guarded with automatic pulse-cannons more than enough to liquidate any unfortunate enough to be caught in their deadly path. The lighting here was bright, one of the few areas in the colony with real lighting, the better for the old hands to see who was arriving and who would make the best slaves or tastiest dinner. It was not an uncommon event to have an unlucky new arrival end up in the cooking pot of any number of alien species or even a cannibalistic human gang.

Guard droids hovered about with the practiced ease of ignorance and uncaring, waiting for an eruption of mob violence they could put down with brutal force and finding anything less than that, beneath their programming. The new arrivals who stumbled about as they adjusted to the far lesser gravity of the actual colony and to the bright lights after the virtual darkness of the shaft, all had that look on their faces of shear, abject terror: eyes wide, limbs trembling, sweat pouring from them much more than the stifling heat justified. Some were clothed in whatever they had been wearing when arrested, reduced generally to rags hanging on them in some parody of the Inner Sphere's fashion shows. Others were stark naked, the terror of their situation overwhelming any shyness or modesty that might still be left after their ordeal with the Tribunal or the Imperium's newest form of justice. Others wore the clothes they had used from the Level they had just come, standing out among their peers in the hardness of their faces and the way in which they slipped into the awaiting crowd to avoid the mess about to unfold.

There were three Drek in the group of about fifteen new arrivals, their aqua-marine tinted skin and head-crests marking them out easily. They were the first to fall under a combined assault of humans, mostly from Pitatus' group of heathens who seemed to have a harsh aversion to anything Drek. The pitiful screams coming from the aliens made the other new arrivals scatter like ants fleeing water.

It was, however, too late for them.

Several of the humans soiled themselves as the shouting and jeering started up from the crowd like distant thunder growing, rising to a crescendo drowning out the pathetic pleas from the now helpless and lost Drek. This was entertainment on par with Ailanthus' fight with the H'chalk and not many missed it if they could. A lone Kroor stood out among the group, his height and green skin, as well as his clear insectisoid heritage, marking him well. Ailanthus could use a Kroor if his plan were to succeed, their natural expertise in anything to do with physics and engineering well known throughout the galaxy. He began to move over toward the obviously frightened Kroor when it was jumped by six humans, most likely from Auriga's group. This group had the disgusting opinion that non-humans were extremely tasty and never passed up an opportunity to acquire one for dinner.

Had Ailanthus been closer to the Kroor, he probably could have saved him. Being the longest surviving human on Level Five -- in the whole Colony for that matter -- did bring with it a certain amount of respect and authority amongst the other prisoners, but it only went so far. He would certainly not be able to stop such an attack once it had started and if he tried, would most likely end up like a plugged ejection manifold: bent and twisted completely out of shape.

With the start of the attack against the Drek and Kroor, the general malaise toward the new arrivals erupted into a free-for-all, the younger males snatched up to screams and terrified shrieks. Although female katakagriha were plentiful on this Level, there were still those who had a tendency toward homosexuality and these unfortunate young men were considered fresh meat for corruption. There were also those few hardened females who had managed to survive on their own without becoming either Tanudana or katakagriha and these to-be-avoided gangs never passed up an opportunity to acquire a young male to train as their all-around beating toy and stud. The Ara brothers were about to have that unfortunate distinction befall them when Ailanthus, Tethys and Thaliana has saved them those many years ago.

Then, as if a flare had gone up to attract his attention amidst the general jumble that was the new arrivals, Ailanthus noticed her for the first time. He could never explain later what had made him look in her direction, what had made him notice her unnoticeable features, made him see her apart from all the others, but there seemed to be a burning sensation in the back of his mind screaming out to him to see her. She was huddled toward the back wall as if trying to escape through it. Yet, she also seemed to be facing her fear with hard-set features, defiant, her eyes holding onto an inner fear radiating volumes of emotions. She was young, very young. Perhaps no more than twenty-five, if that old. Her dark brown hair had been butchered to rags of unequal size making a mockery of what was probably once well-tended lockets. The tattered remnants framed a face of innocent beauty only the young can possess, the smooth, creamy texture of her well-tanned skin and the faded hint of

red on her lips making it obvious that she had been used to a life of ease and luxury. Her light brown eyes flared like lit candles, darting from left to right in jumpy, rapid bursts clearly betraying her fright. The slight wrinkles at the corner of her eyes stood out now like stains of trepidation, her petit nose sitting astride her high cheeks in perfect position. She stood perhaps five-foot five and her stocky though well-rounded body certainly didn't appear to be one that the human Administrators would have easily passed up for the Tanudana service.

So then why was she here?

Ailanthus pointed her out to Thaliana.

The Druzsni looked at Ailanthus with a mixture of curiosity and anger at the choice, wondering herself what this was all about. But she knew that once Ailanthus got an idea stuck in his head, it was impossible to get it back out and she didn't want to listen to his whining later on if he didn't get his way. She frowned, then set her face hard and immediately began pushing bodies aside to make room for Ailanthus to walk. His ribs pulsed with pain at every stride as he tried to keep up -- the parting gift of the H'chalk still lingering yet somehow starting to already heal at an elevated level like all his other wounds he had received over the years -- his eyes fixed on the young woman, hoping that Thaliana would reach her before any of the others did. Once he had physical possession of her, no one would challenge him.

At least he hoped not.

As they moved closer, he noticed that the clothes she barely wore -- torn, dirtied and thread-bare -- were civilian clothes, which meant that this was the first Penal Colony to which she had been sent. There was something about her that didn't sit right with him and warnings went up in his mind, which he tried not to ignore but which seemed to urge him to get her even faster, a contradiction he found odd. It was rare that one such as her would be sent here, of all places, first. She was more than pretty enough to have been screened out as a Tanudana, so why wasn't she? The Administrators were always very good about taking those females, of whatever species, that would serve in that capacity, for they had first crack at them and if the rumors were true, the Prime Warden had an insatiable lust for young ones like this. This one female on which he now had his eyes set was certainly not going to last in the mines alone, if she even survived this little experience.

Thaliana approached the woman with her typical aggressive stance. Their eyes met and the fear that had managed to stay muted on the young woman's features spread over her face like a contact virus. She mouthed the word *no* breathlessly, no sound making it through the screams and clamor of these around her. She held her hands out in that useless warding action humans tend to adopt whenever threatened and backed against the rough-hewed, perspiring rock. Thaliana stopped but a few scant steps from her and put her hands on her hips,

head slightly cocked to the side with a look of bemused boredom. The hatred from this woman toward Thaliana was palpable.

Ailanthus stepped into the space the Druzni had cleared by her mere presence just as another man stepped up next to the young woman and clapped a hand onto her right wrist like an iron vise.

Pitatus.

The man was scum. His mass of a head was bald and wrinkled and cut with criss-crossed scars with a bump of a nose that had been broken too many times to count. The whole effect was more like a wart on the man's hefty shoulders than an appendage. There was not a centimeter of his body not covered with tattoos, ranging from intricate Imperium designs to Druzni war marks -- which would earn the human a slow death for such effrontery were he ever stupid enough to wander into a Druzni camp -- to Drek religious symbols that were ironic in their placement.

"Hold off, Pitatus," Ailanthus firmly stated as Tethys made his bulk and presence known. Ailanthus' mind was feverishly trying to figure out why, after the recent encounter with the H'chalk, he was once again starting a confrontation. *What the hell was wrong with him this cycle?*

"Why Ailanthus," Pitatus drawled in a voice like gravel sliding down a chute. "I didn't know that you were into young, sweet humans. I'd have thought that your Druzni bitch was more than enough for any one man."

Thaliana made to move forward to crush the man where he stood, but Ailanthus' hand on her forearm stayed her advance. Ailanthus was well aware that had Thaliana truly meant the man harm, he would already be dead. Druzni could be as swift as light when they needed to be. Pitatus' followers, after their death dance on the Drek's heads, came up behind their leader like a tide of black bile to support him.

"There are others here to your liking, Pitatus," Ailanthus said with unmasked contempt. It was well known that Pitatus enjoyed his young men as much if not more than his young females. "But this one I claim, as is my right."

The woman in question, terrorized beyond compare, looked at Ailanthus with disgust. "I'm nobody's to claim," she said in a clear attempt at courage, her words faltering on her dry lips.

"Stay quiet, human," Thaliana said in her best intimidation voice.

The woman's mouth snapped shut with an audible pop.

"She has a point, Ailanthus," Pitatus said with a greasy, sly smile. "Maybe we should let *her* decide whether she wants to be a servant-slave to a *Druzni* or a co-equal in my little group." The deception literally dripped from his mouth.

Ailanthus could tell that the woman was torn between her obvious hatred of the Druzni and her revulsion at Pitatus' appearance. If it were up to her, she would probably not chose either. He was also

aware that his recent defeat of the H'chalk -- it seemed like it was mega-cycles ago, but his tender ribs and the after taste of Tethys' herbal remedy still bitter on his tongue told him otherwise -- must have been weighing heavy on Pitatus' mind, else he would have already dragged her away. The man was being wary and rightly so. It was not any human who could best an H'chalk in single hand-hand combat. It was obvious that Pitatus wanted this girl badly, though, and was willing to test the limits to acquire her. The man was almost drooling over his find and it was because of this that Ailanthus could not let Pitatus get his hands on her. Her life would be a living nightmare with these jokers and then it would end in a few mega-cycles as she was sold to Drek or Kroor.

"I already invoked my rights and you should just leave," Ailanthus said calmly, yet with an undercurrent of impending violence.

Pitatus stared at him, his dark eyes in their wrinkled and pock-marked sockets like tiny plasma bursts. Ailanthus could tell that the man was debating within himself whether to just find another before all the good ones were taken, or press his luck and challenge Ailanthus even further.

The woman decided for him. "I'm not going anywhere with that Druznsi bitch," she spat out between clenched teeth. "No way in hell."

Thaliana looked at the human female with open contempt. "You've no say in this child, so you had best keep your mouth shut before I shut it for you."

Tethys stepped forward ever so slightly as he spoke, his voice harsh and rock-steady. "Are you truly feeling lucky today, Pitatus?"

It was obvious that Pitatus was stunned by the remark from the normally quiet Tethys, the not-so-subtle implications not lost in the translation. There was a moment longer of silent tension, then Pitatus released the woman's arm roughly and with obvious disgust. She instinctively rubbed where he had grabbed, the red welts from his iron grip fading slowly. But she didn't make a move toward either group. She didn't appreciate being treated like a slab of meat at the butchers.

Pitatus smiled a tombstone grin, his missing teeth like black voids into his even blacker soul. "Looks to me like she doesn't want you, Ailanthus."

Ailanthus reached out his hand toward the woman, but she didn't make any move to acknowledge it, her arms now wrapped tightly around her chest. "It's for the best," he said softly, aware that she was still terrified. "We're not going to hurt you."

She appeared on the verge of tears.

Pitatus reached out again to take hold of what he considered his property. Tethys reacted swiftly. He had the man in a vise-like grip on the wrist before he ever came close to the woman. Pitatus' group stirred restlessly, not knowing whether to risk an open attack over such a simple act, or just hang back and wait. Ailanthus' group was not one to

mess with lightly. They had not survived as long as they had without good reason.

Pitatus looked Tethys in the eyes, the madness and hate brewing in him like a tainted pigment. It only took a fraction of a second for the blade -- a ragged looking device, homemade and brutal -- to flash in the subdued light.

Tethys' reaction was just slightly quicker.

There was a sickening snap as Pitatus' wrist was snapped in half effortlessly. Tethys' other hand intercepted the blade on its clandestine path and stopped it clean, far from his body. Letting go of Pitatus' now useless arm, his hand hanging limply as if only attached by the skin, Tethys effortlessly pried the homemade dagger out of Pitatus' other clenched fist and threw the blade away. He could tell that Pitatus was in agony but refused to acknowledge it, Pitatus' shock at Tethys' rapid movement seething behind the hatred in his eyes.

In the commotion, Ailanthus grabbed the girl and held her tightly by the wrist, her feeble struggles to free herself more bothersome than effective. Thaliana stepped forward, ready to take on Pitatus' horde of followers, all four of them, single-handedly. She needed some good exercise. But they seemed to remember the last time they tangled with the Druznsi, unconsciously fingering their scars and sore arms, and held back.

"Move along, Pitatus," Ailanthus said flatly, "before it gets serious and the guards get alerted."

Tethys released Pitatus' still intact wrist and stepped back, placidly eyeing the man, waiting for him to do something stupid so he could finish him off. It would be so easy.

Pitatus eyed them with maniacal fervor, his black eyes shining in absolute enmity, holding his broken wrist against his stomach like a wounded wing. "This isn't over, Ailanthus. Not by a long shot. H'chalk or not, you're a *dead* man, D'swa!" He spit on the dirt floor and then melted into the crowd still milling about the reception area, only a few vaguely aware of the confrontation that almost broke out.

"Let's leave here before that sing'na changes his mind," Thaliana said with utter contempt, the expletive a Druznsi term for humans, which could be loosely translated to mean *he that is foolish always*.

Ailanthus nodded in consent as he started to follow the Druznsi through the crowd. He didn't need any more confrontations this cycle. One was more than enough for him to deal with and this new acquisition would be enough of a bother without having to worry about Pitatus and a surprise attack.

But the woman on his arm had other ideas.

She stood fast and refused to budge. "I'm not going anywhere with a *Druznsi*," she said through trembling lips and limps, her teeth clenched, her voice weak.

Ailanthus could feel her fear through his grip on her. He looked down at her stoically. Although she was only a few inches shorter than he, she was crouching down against his pull and seemed much smaller, like a frightened bird. "She's a friend and perfectly safe," he said as gently as he could. "Everything's going to be fine."

"No!" Her beautiful light-brown eyes darted back and forth between Ailanthus and Thaliana as if certain that either or both were about to ravish her. "How can you say that she's a friend? She's a *Druzsni*!" The name was said as if it were a curse by itself, filled with untold horrors. "They're the *enemy*, for Morgase's sake. And you," she literally shrieked as she looked at Ailanthus, tugging even harder to free herself. "I'm not about to let you take me away to *rape* me! I'm not that stupid!"

It was fear talking, he knew, but it was becoming annoying. She must have Ailanthus confused with someone else.

"It's obvious that the Imperium is at war with the Druzsni again," Tethys stated simply, bored with the feeble attempts of the girl to free herself. "Will they ever learn?"

"Such things as war don't concern us here. Here we're all equals. It'd be best to remember that," Ailanthus lectured her in no uncertain terms.

It had, however, no effect on her whatsoever. "May Dwad-Mehstiv take the Imperium to *hell*," she said with a sneer. "It's the Imperium that's trying to destroy my father's House and it's the Imperium that put me in this hell-hole. I could care less what the Imperium does or doesn't do. And the Druzsni are no better." She stared defiantly back, not ready to give an inch. She spoke stronger now as if she sensed a danger passed, her words forced out between clenched teeth like lethal darts. "I'll kill myself before I let you touch me or feed me to that alien bitch!"

Thaliana finally had enough. Staying around here was not the wisest thing to do. As Ailanthus started to speak, curious as to something the girl had said, Thaliana reached forward and chopped the obstinate young woman on the neck. She effortlessly hefted the unconscious and limp body over her shoulder. "We've no time for this. Dinner's waiting and I'm hungry."

Although slightly miffed at the interruption, Ailanthus followed closely behind, amused with the tactics Thaliana sometimes employed. "Did you hear what she said? She's claiming to be a Noble. Since when do they send that sort straight to a Level Five?"

Tethys shrugged his shoulders. "The rules change around here every cycle, you know that. And she certainly didn't appear to be a loyal follower of the Imperium."

"Yes, I noticed that also. She must be from a non-affiliated House."

"Or perhaps the civil war has taken a turn for the worse," Tethys commented dryly as he noticed the snickers and snide remarks directed at their new female acquisition from those along their path. To see a

young human female being carried on the shoulder of a Druzni, straight from the new arrivals' area, could only mean one thing.

"Do you really think that the Imperium would stoop so low as to imprison a Noble?"

"If they're from a rebel House, why not? Have you noticed that old man following us?" Tethys added quietly, keeping his eyes set forward.

Ailanthus acknowledged a few greetings thrown at him as they neared their own cave, the aroma of the roasting slug and rats wafting along the air amidst the normal perfunctory smells of the living quarters. "Yeah, I noticed. He's one of the new arrivals, but he looks rather harmless to me. Did you see how old he looked?"

"The ones that look harmless are the ones I worry the most about," Tethys remarked off-handily as Thaliana strode into the cave and deposited her charge roughly onto a pile of rotting blankets.

Ailanthus and Tethys turned abruptly to confront the old man who had followed them. He was short and bent over, his face a complicated network of wrinkles and scars like sun-dried leather, the remaining small, random tufts of gray hair hanging on his bones like sackcloth, his bushy white eyebrows sitting atop his two hollowed-out sockets like puffs of cotton. But one look into his eyes told a completely different story; they were bright and intense, the green vivid and alive, a passion burning from out of those hollowed-out sockets and under those tufted and bushy eyebrows marking them as the eyes of a much younger man.

They were the eyes of action.

He clutched his chest as his eyes opened wide in shock. He fell to his knees -- whether intentionally or from his knees giving out -- in pleading supplication. "Please kind sirs," he said in a shaky, creaky voice holding an undercurrent of power that was subtle, smooth, almost non-detectable. "I do not mean to disrespect, but this be all new to me, it be, and I do not know where to go or whom to trust and you seemed to be the best choice so far as I could see and that way you did save that girl from those thugs who would as surely have raped her was impressive, yet it was. "

"Is there a point to this annoying flapping of your gums?" Tethys interrupted brusquely, identifying the odd, flowing accent as from the Abraham's Rest system controlled by the Greater House Prabhasa. It was very distinctive. That system was a loyal system to the Imperium, very loyal. Why would *they* be sending anyone here to this penal colony?

The old man narrowed his eyes slightly, the barest hint of anger caressing his weather-worn face. "I do believe I do be asking if I could run with you gents." He grinned, a macabre sight of rotted gum and hanging, decayed teeth.

Ailanthus and Tethys looked at each other a moment. "Run with us?" Ailanthus asked incredulously. "And what, exactly, would you be able to contribute if you *ran* with us?"

"You would be surprised, yes you would, all that old Hesiodus can contribute. Yes indeed; much surprised."

Ailanthus took a deep breath, frowned down at the old man, then looked at Tethys, who shrugged non-chalantly. "It's your call, Ailanthus."

He looked back at the old man, the clear fire in his eyes still bothering. He had known plenty of older people, albeit only shortly in the demands of this penal colony and although several of them had a spark of life still encased in their feeble bodies, none had the fire this man possessed. It was almost as if there was another man buried within the wrinkled, weather-beaten body. "Hesiodus, is it?" he said slowly, rubbing his temples rhythmically. "The moment you become a liability, we cut you loose."

Hesiodus' smile beamed even wider and his eyes shone with downright joy -- or was it something else? "Be fair by me."

They lead him into the cave where Thaliana was already tearing into a large slab of roasted slug and Crocus and Anolis were diligently working on smoking the remaining meat so that it would last at least a few cycles in the torrid heat of the mines. Hesiodus pounced on the roasted meat as he had not eaten in cycles. Ailanthus and Tethys made themselves as comfortable as possible on the hard, craggy floor - all the blankets were beneath the young woman who was still unconscious.

"Is she for us?" Anolis asked eagerly. He had already checked out the new arrival and found her to his liking. Only Thaliana's stern look had kept him from undressing her to examine the merchandise completely.

"You get more access to the Tanu than anyone on this Level," Antlia said between bits of the skewered rats, their crisped skin tough and grisly. "What the hell do you want her for?"

"My own private kataka would be awesome," he responded as he laid another slug on the smoky fire. "I'd even share her with you guys occasionally, once I had her trained."

Thaliana heaved a good size rock at Anolis' buttocks, striking him true to a startled yelp. "You humans are all so disgusting. I just can't understand how the females of your species never took over and enslaved all the males."

A small smile touched Ailanthus' mouth. He had heard Thaliana's arguments concerning human social organization many times in the past and the outcome was always the same: Thaliana was right and everyone else was wrong. So, instead of engaging her in that useless exercise, he answered Anolis' question. "No, Anolis. She isn't anyone's. Pitatus was about to commandeer her and I couldn't let that happen. We'll find her a decent job assignment and let her sleep here." He looked over at her slightly plump and soft form lying there, looking almost peaceful. "She should've never been assigned down here."

"She claims to be a Noble," Thaliana dropped in with a sneer, wiping the warm juices from the slug off her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Yeah, right," Crocus piped up with a chuckle. "And I'm the Emperor."

Hesiodus looked up long enough from stuffing his face to speak. "I saw how the Administrators do be treating her, I do."

When he said no more, Ailanthus spoke up as he grabbed another slab of slug. "And how was that?"

"Huh?" Hesiodus said with a full mouth as he looked at Ailanthus in confusion.

"How exactly did they treat her?" Ailanthus clarified.

The old man swallowed hard, than took a long swig of the tepid water. "What?"

"You just said that you saw the way the Administrators were treated her, old man," Ailanthus said with clear frustration.

"I did?"

Ailanthus shook his head at the idiocy of sending someone like this to a penal colony.

They were all quiet for a few moments as the food was ingested, then Hesiodus spoke as if he had just awoken from a coma. "She be taken into the Administrators office alone, she do, and then comes out some time later, perhaps an hour, perhaps more, all crying and carrying on yelling some nonsense about her father and her innocence and some such thing." He smiled again as his eyes sparkled. "Just like we all do be innocent, yes sir. We all do be innocent." He laughed, a harsh guttural cackle resounding in the cave like an augury from the Blessed Prophets themselves. "Yes, indeed, hee-hee."

They were all quiet as they ate and mulled over the old man's words. They were all well aware that not everyone was innocent. That was never the point. That they had been sent here to serve out a sentence usually ending in death was the worst part of the whole ordeal, regardless of whether their sentences were light or heavy. It made no difference in this place. To be assigned here was to be given a death sentence. Slow or long it made little impact. The Imperium didn't care much about innocence once they had you in the system. To say that you were innocence meant that they had made a mistake and the Imperium never made mistakes.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you talk too much, old man," Crocus shot at him as he tended the smoking meat, the thick, white, fragrant smoke wafting lazily up in the shock-still air to the ceiling and out the small hole they had drilled years ago. They were quite aware that the hole deposited the smoke onto Level Four, but they really didn't care much about that. That was Level Four's problem.

Hesiodus only laughed more.

"I suppose that it's possible she's from a Noble House, but it would have to be a Lesser one. No way does the daughter of a Greater

House get sent here," Antlia stated as he licked the last of the grease off his fingers.

"Unless it's non-affiliated or one that's in rebellion," Ailanthus commented as he grabbed another skewer of rat. "But we're just guessing here and its useless speculation until she wakes up and tells us herself."

They all nodded in agreement.

They had learned long ago that useless speculation, though sometimes a pleasant distraction from the life here, never got them anywhere and mostly ended up depressing them.

"Old man," Tethys said in his rough sandpaper voice. "What news of the Imperium?"

Hesiodus' appetite seemed insatiable. He answered between bites, his eyes scanning and probing, always alive. "News of the Imperium is it you want. And what possible use would such news of the Imperium be to you in here?" He looked about with narrowed eyes as if he had find a weakness in their placate demeanors. "But never mind that, never mind. News, news is it you want. Hee-hee. Lots of news, that be certain. No Emperor yet sits on the throne, no sir, no Emperor. But Lord Comté Jovian Aldebaren do certainly believe himself entitled, as do Lord Cardinal Cor Caroli XX of The Church. Yes indeed, he do so very much. Battles and wars and rebellion splits the Imperium and humans like in the days before, before the Imperium ever was. Death and destruction it is, hee-hee." He paused to guzzle down more water, watching closely each person in the cave for a reaction. Then he picked up as if he had never stopped. "But not so bad everywhere, not really. It do be limited to but a few Houses and systems. The Lord Marshall Bhagavan do make sure that the chaos does not rule entirely. Only a few systems to be sure, a few Houses." He stopped just as abruptly as he had started, as if he had forgotten why he had spoken in the first place.

But it was enough. Ailanthus could tell that not much had changed as of late. The old man's long-winded tale confirmed most of what he had heard before, everything but the inclusion of Lord Cardinal Cor Caroli's open declaration for the throne. But that could hardly come as a surprise to anyone. The Lesser House St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration would like nothing better than to reclaim the Imperium for itself. Even though it had been over one thousand years since they had last held the power over the Imperium, they were known to have long memories and longer vengeance.

As far as Ailanthus was concerned, the Imperium could completely collapse and never rise again. He was not the type of person to really hate anything or anyone. It was not in his nature. But the Imperium he hated with a passion. He hated everything to do with that overgrown and corrupt organization and its rules and laws. The Imperium had taken his life away and it could die a slow, agonizing death for all he

cared. He had always had this hatred of the Imperium, since he could remember and had worked all his free life to rage against the organization that ruled with such an iron hand. To see the Imperium fall would be all he needed before he died. That was all he asked for sometimes.

But the announcement that a House of The Church of the Blessed Prophets was vying for the throne was certainly news. It had always been assumed that The Church had been behind the assassination of the Emperor those fifty-odd years ago, but to have a Church-backed House declare for the throne added credence to the assumptions -- everyone not aligned with The Church or lost in its illogical doctrines called The Church of the Blessed Prophets simply The Church, a derogatory term well understood. It was a masterful power-play if it were true, especially since the Emperor's two children had never been found after the assassination, turning what should have been an easy transition into a messy civil war.

All for the better in Ailanthus' opinion. Let chaos rule and the Imperium die forever. Humanity, and the rest of the galaxy for that matter, would be better off. And he noted one more irregularity with what the old man had related. Hesiodus had not included himself when he mentioned humanity, almost as if he didn't consider himself a part of that inglorious group. It could have been nothing more than an old man's ramblings, but Ailanthus didn't think so. He wondered if anyone else had picked up on that. He would have to be sure to ask later.

The gong for shift change blared through the living quarters, the individual anklets on Antlia, Crocus, and Anolis chiming annoyingly along. They would continue to chime annoyingly until the three men passed through the security ports leading to their work assignments, a rather annoying way to get the inmates to their work assignments on time. The three men stopped what they were doing and left for work without further ceremony. To be late was to be punished. Ailanthus, Tethys and Thaliana had just gotten off of their shift and thus, as was usual in their cave, were left with the remainder of the cleaning and the smoking.

Tethys took over where Crocus and Anolis had left off while Thaliana gathered the leftover scraps of the meal and made ready to toss them into the refuse heap. The food, bad enough as it was the first time around, was generally completely inedible the second time.

Ailanthus swallowed the last of his meal with a swig of warm water and as he looked over at the young woman they had taken, he found her intense light-brown eyes staring hard at him, filled with a mixture of curiosity and anguish.

Fear, however, was the most prevalent emotion reaching out like skeletal hands grasping.

Dark pilgrim rising - 44

Sex is the great equalizer. If properly applied to the male, it can be used to manipulate him into any number of compromising situations. If applied with consummate skill, it can even be used to control the invisible strings that make any force unstoppable.

General Dyiphne Aurva
Heroine
Great War of Religious Independence.
1400 P.Y.I.

"Is there any food left for me?" the young woman asked contritely as she sat up, rubbing the sore spot on her neck where that bitch Druzni had hit her. She noticed that she still had on all her clothes and took it as a positive sign that perhaps this might turn out better than she had believed. Then again, maybe they liked their women to be awake when they raped them. She had heard of that happening also. She had heard more than she ever wanted to hear or thought was possible to hear both in the waiting center on the planet where she had been found guilty and in the transport to this forsaken place. The woman next to her, a hard-faced brute of a female with a moustache almost as prominent as any man's and a voice sounding as if she had swallowed gravel too many times as a child, had explained in great detail during the entire voyage all the nasty things awaiting them when they arrived. And rape seemed to be the hard-faced woman's favorite topic, for she elaborated on the theme without end. As such, she was awaiting the worst from these strangers regardless what they might have to say to assure her.

Ailanthus looked back at her softly, wondering what in the Dagger's Breath Nebula this young, attractive woman did to deserve placement in the armpit of the Imperium. "Yes. I saved you a plate."

He could tell that, although she was trying not to show it, she was famished. Her tongue caressed her parched lips and her eyes widened ever so slightly as he held out the cold plate of rat, slug and mash spiced with crushed crevasse beetles. She reached for it with tentative haste, but he pulled it out of her reach at the last moment. The pout on her lips encompassing her face like a flickering flame fazed him little.

He spoke. "Not till I get your name. We don't share with those whose names we don't know."

Her eyes snapped from the food to his face, narrowing until all that was left were slits of light brown intensity, the hatred there so obvious that he could have roasted the slugs with her stare. Her voice was hard yet soft around the edges, like a fine doll left in the ashes of a burnt-out house. "Christl. Titania Christl Venatici of the Lesser House Venatici of Vesta Prime. But everyone calls me Christl. Can I have the food now, *please?*"

He smiled at her as he handed her the plate. She grabbed it eagerly, made a quick scan of the selection, pushed the roasted rat aside -- it was obvious what it was, the tail sticking out erect like a stick -- and began stuffing her face as delicately as she could with the slug meat and the mash. Except for the noises she made as she ate, they were both quiet for several minutes, her whole attention fixated on the act of eating. She occasionally looked up at him, but just as quickly looked back down at the plate as if his gaze were a toxin to her.

Ailanthus' attention was firmly fixed on her. Someone like her must have really pissed off an Imperium Official to have been send here, not only to this Penal Colony but to this level, a level reserved for those that the Imperium wanted alive for at least a little while so that they would feel their punishment every cycle.

She paused as she washed the meal down with a swig of the warm water. "I don't suppose that you have any wine?" she asked with mouth-full.

He shook his head with a quizzical expression attached.

"Didn't think so. What is this anyway that I'm eating? I figured out the rat thingy. That was obvious. But this other meat," she asked as she referred to the piece of slug on which she began to chew. "It has an odd taste to it but isn't all that bad, really."

His smile remained plastered to his face as he answered calmly. "It's probably better that you don't know."

She stopped chewing a moment, looked at the piece of meat in her hand, shrugged her shoulders and resumed her eating. She didn't have much choice as to what she could eat here and she was too hungry to care. And since it tasted half-way decent, what was the difference what it was? She refrained from looking up at him anymore, aware that he was watching her intently and probably undressing her any number of ways as most men did but not wanting to give him the impression that she might be interested in any way. Let a man know that you were interested and they never stopped bothering you.

After a few minutes, she began to look around at her surroundings, to take stock of her situation. She noticed the Druzni sitting in a corner working on something, though Christl couldn't tell what. The brute of a man whom she remembered as Tethys -- the one who had so casually broken that ugly man's wrist -- was tending some smoking mass with

what appeared to be slabs of meat atop it. She also noticed an old man staring at her as he leaned up against one of the rough-cut walls. His eyes seemed to drill right through her as if he were more interested in the wall behind her than in her. She remembered him from the mass confusion that was her first taste of this hell-hole, but realized that she didn't remember him at all from the transport that had dropped them all off on the frozen surface. She found that odd. There weren't that many people on the transport and she was certain that she would have noticed such an old man. She brushed it off as an aberration of her hysteria during the flight here.

"I see," she said as she washed the last of the meat down and started in on the mash. She still wasn't about to touch the rat; anything with the head and tail still attached didn't appeal to her. "I see that you managed to get the oldest and youngest of the new arrivals. Is that standard with you? Or did we happen to be the easiest to grab?" It was said with a touch of sarcasm replacing some of the earlier fear in her voice.

"No," he said levelly. "You weren't the youngest. There was a younger boy who I was unable to save because you were so obstinate. We try to snag any of the younger ones to spare them. Because of your stubbornness, that youngster is probably, at this very moment, being indoctrinated to his duties, which he'll be performing on his knees or bend over, if you get my drift."

Ailanthus could see the gears working in her mind, saw the change come over her face as his meaning became clear. He knew that it was brutal of him to do that to her, but the sooner she learned that the prisoners in K'ar Krack'a were, for the most part, brutal and vicious, the better off she would be.

Her mouth worked but no sound came out.

"You'd be doing the same right now if we'd have let you go with Pitatus, as you seemed to prefer."

Christl took another swig of water, licked her still dry lips, then tried to speak again. "Is that what you plan for me? Your little toy?" Her voice was surprisingly strong.

Ailanthus took that as a good sign. This one might just have the moxy to survive here.

"We'd have done it already had we wanted," Thaliana stated as she threw a rough, stained towel at Christl. "You're safer with Ailanthus than with anyone else in here. He barely takes pleasures with the Tanu, much less the young virgins." She shot Ailanthus a meaningful look, then motioned for Christl to stand.

"I was unaware that you were keeping score, Thaliana," he said with a down-turned grimace.

"Don't get any ideas," the Druzni answered forcefully.

He hastily switched the subject matter. "It's time to wash. We only have certain times for access to the water and we can't miss that time."

He stood, grabbed two of the water jugs and his shower gear and motioned for her to stand.

Tethys did the same, handing Hesiodus a towel.

Cetus, whose timing could be described alternatively as terrible or perfect, strolled into the cave at that moment carrying a bag of half-rotted vegetables from the kitchen. "Is there any slug left?" he asked with badly suppressed enthusiasm.

Christl looked at the ferret-faced man, then at Ailanthus and then at the remnants of her meal. "*Slug?*"

Ailanthus didn't think that anyone could puke that much or make such pitiful sounds while doing it. Christl's response to her learning that she had ingested slug almost made them late to the showers and even then they had to drag her along.

Her reaction wasn't much better when she learnt about the showers.

By the time they reached the large area set aside for washing, Christl was able to walk without support, though her clothes were soaked through with sweat and her ragged hair clung aimlessly to her head. A stench of puke and foul body odor rose from her like a clogged garbage chute. She looked tired and spent and ready for a good, long shower.

She was in for a rude surprise.

The washing area was actually a large cavern with a naturally-forming pool about five meters across. The river feeding it -- more a trickle of a stream than a river -- had to be diverted to flow over a natural rock formation allowing it to be separated into twenty small waterfalls. These acted as the showers, spilling onto a rough rock ledge covered with a dark coating of springy moss.

And that was all.

There were already ten others busily at work either taking showers, lounging in the pool, or doing their laundry. All were naked, male and female alike, interacting as if it were the most natural thing to do.

As Ailanthus and his group rounded the corner leading to the bathing area, Christl took one long look at the scene and turned stark white. Thaliana thought for certain that the new girl was going to be sick again. Christl turned a bright crimson next, her eyes popping open wide when the full impact of the scene and her relationship to it took hold of her mind. Her mouth dropped open as her hand came up to cover her eyes. She quickly turned her back on the scene of nudity.

"They'll all *naked!*" she exclaimed through her gasps of breath. "Where's the *women's* shower?"

"There is no women's shower," Ailanthus said, trying hard to suppress a grin. "Everyone washes together here. Come on. You need to stay close to us. Don't wander," he warned.

"No, I can't," she protested as Ailanthus took hold of her arm.

"It's awkward at first, but you'll get used to it," Thaliana said in frustration. "You need to wash. You stink."

"Stop talking to me, Druzsni," Christl said forcefully. "I don't want to have anything to do with you, is that clear?"

Thaliana eyed her a moment, then snorted. She strode off to reserve some showers for them before the other prisoners arrived and took them all, leaving their group with nothing. Hesiodus was already undressed and wading into the pool, his sense of modesty apparently not as well refined as Christl's.

Ailanthus sighed audibly at Christl's obstinate behavior. "No one's going to even notice you Christl. And anyway, it's all there is so you better get used to it." *Why did he have to pick up a prissy, spoiled Noble girl? What was his problem lately? First there was the fight with the H'chalk and now this. He was going to kill himself if this continued.*

She looked at him, conspicuously keeping her eyes from wandering to the naked men behind him. "But I can't parade myself naked in front of all those *men*, or you for that matter. I don't do ...I mean I never...." Her voice trailed off as she realized that she was once again saying too much. It was a bad habit of hers that had gotten her into far too many problems in the past and threatened her survival here as well.

Tethys snorted with laughter, a rarity for the large man. "I don't think that she's ever seen a man naked before, Ailanthus. Some introduction this'll be."

That was not quite true, but she didn't see any reason to correct the big man's misconceptions regarding her virginity or lack thereof. She glared at him, her eyes like icicles, then just as quickly looked away as the bulk of a man slipped out of his clothes. She was about to speak again when Tethys grabbed her and placed her before himself. He slapped her lightly across the face and she opened her tightly shut eyes in shock and out-rage, taking in his man-hood in one full measure as he forced her head down. "I don't want to miss any shower time because *Miss Prissy Virgin Noble* here doesn't want her sensitive eyes scarred by the sight of a cock."

She feebly struggled in his grip, but a fly caught in the sap of a tree had a better chance of escaping. When he was satisfied that she had seen enough, he hefted her up over his broad expanse of a shoulder to her incoherently mumbled protests and tossed her into the pool, clothes and all. "Clean yourself, girl, and get used to looking at men," he said with a chuckle. "They will certainly be looking at you."

Ailanthus shook his head with a smile as he also undressed, watching Christl splash about in anger and outrage at her treatment. It was apparent that Tethys was now much higher on her shit-list than Ailanthus was.

She spoke to no one else after that.

Her clothes, now completely soaked, she couldn't wear until they dried and she was forced to walk back to the cave with only the rough, stained towel wrapped around her and it was not adequate for the

purpose. This made her even madder, as she had to decide between covering her breasts or covering the rest of her.

Back at the cave, she hung her clothes over the cooking heater, which now served as a dryer. It seemed to be what everyone else was doing and so she just joined in. Then she sat with her back against the wall and a blanket held tightly around her even though it made her sweat to the point that she was now just as sticky and dirty as before she had washed. She longed for the coolness of the pool, but knew that that was off-limits until another two cycles. She was beginning to learn, though stubbornly, how things worked around here and she had yet to find anything that she liked. The hard-faced woman had not mentioned anything about having to parade around naked in front of people like that or about eating slug.

Tethys, Ailanthus, and Thaliana lounged around in rags barely enough to cover their modesty -- through Christl doubted that they actually had any modesty -- and she was forced to stare at the dirt floor and listen to the old man Hesiodus drone on incoherently about a topic in which she had no interest.

And so the hours passed endlessly.

Ailanthus surprised when, after her long silence, he heard her ask him a question, her voice contrite and small, her presence behind him like a physical force. "What are Tanudana and Katakagriha? I heard you mention those names before and the people in the pool were whispering about me and I caught those words used and I think it was some kind of reference toward me."

A tight smile tugged at his mouth as he continued to work on the small spoon he was carving out of darkwood. It was a good way to pass the time and keep his hands busy. He had made about fifty of them so far, given to the odd acquaintance or scattered about the cave or confiscated in one of the infrequent raids. He had no doubt that those in the bathing area were using those words around and about her. It was to be expected. She was an anomaly. He answered her without looking up, working slowly and diligently on the wood, forming it, cutting it, molding it to satisfy his ideals. There wasn't much in terms of creative release in such a place and he took what he could to relax himself before going to sleep. Cycles like this one tended to make his sleep fitful and useless. "When young, attractive females are brought here, or those females considered too fragile or weak to be of any use in the mines, the human Administrators pull them aside and place them into a special program. They become Tanudana, which can be loosely translated as *forced prostitution*, though they aren't really paid.

"There's a reward system of sorts in place here to increase productivity and efficiency. Those who work get so many credits per cycle. Those who work hard get more and those who are highly productive get the most. When enough credits are earned, the worker is able to request a visit to a Tanudana. The visits are closely

monitored to protect the Tanudana, but then what the Administrators think of as protection leaves a lot to be desired. The system was designed to get the most out of the work force and the women involved are treated and fed better than the average prisoner." He stopped carving on his spoon for a moment.

"From the tone of your voice, I don't think that you quite agree with that last statement," she said quietly, trying to imagine what her life would be like had she been selected for that service ... And shuddered. "I take it that they have no choice."

"Choice? Everyone has a choice," he said as he turned slightly and caught her staring at his back out of the corner of his eye. "They can choose to participate in the Tanudana service or be sent to Level Ten, where the average life expectancy is two cycles."

"That's not much of a choice," she said incredulously.

They were both quiet for a few moments, Ailanthus refining some work on his spoon, Christl trying to comprehend all that she was hearing, seeing, experiencing. "And katakagriha? What are they then?"

He sighed. Although he had lived -- perhaps survived would be a better word -- with the constant degradation of this penal colony for all of twenty long years, there were few concepts still making him shudder, making his blood run cold.

Kataka were one of these concepts.

That humans could treat others of their own species in such a dehumanizing and barbaric way made him seriously wonder how humanity had ever managed to get passed the act of making fire. "Katakagriha basically means *sex-s/lave*. Those females not chosen to become Tanudana are thrown into the general mix and unless they're like Thaliana and able to protect themselves and stand on their own, they'll become someone's kataka. They generally don't survive very long. Most have their feet cut off to keep them from attempting to escape. That's what the Administrators had in mind for you, it would appear." He looked back at her a fleeting moment, saw the shock and was pleased that at least she was beginning to understand that this was not some summer camp for wayward Nobles.

She swallowed hard. Although she had emptied her stomach earlier when she had discovered, to her ultimate revulsion, that she had eaten slug -- and like it -- she could feel her stomach wanting to heave and she gagged slightly from the bile in her mouth. The thought that such a thing could be happening to her right now, that the wrinkle-faced bald-headed brute from the debarkation cavern could be having his way with her was more than enough to put a chill up her spine despite the oppressive heat in the cave. "Don't the guards stop it?" she asked through the bitter bile rising in her throat.

"Guards?" He put the spoon down and turned completely around to look at her. Her eyes were red-rimmed, as if she had been crying; her hair was plastered to her face like limp noodles. She wore her old

clothes again, now soaked through with her own exuded sweat, the shirt clinging to her firm breasts and providing little to no cover. "How many guards have you actually seen since arriving here?" He didn't wait for her to answer. She needed to be schooled now before she ended up dead. "The guards are here to insure that no riots break out that'll impair the productivity of the mines or threaten the over-all security of the Colony. The every-cycle activities that occur among the prisoners are of little to no concern to the guards or the administrators." He said it so matter-of-factly that she was appalled as much by his attitude as she was by his words.

"But doesn't the death of these poor women effect productivity?"

"Who said that they were all women?" he asked back to her question with dead-serious eyes. "There're just as many male kataka as females. And no, it doesn't affect productivity. People die in here every cycle, sometimes every hour. There are always more, like you, to take their place. The *Imperium* makes certain of that."

She felt the walls of the cave closing in on her, the heat becoming unendurable. She began to have trouble breathing and a pain began to spread through her stomach and intestines. This was insane. It was just two weeks ago that she was comfortable in her life, doing what she wanted with a secure feeling of happiness and contentment, her graduate work in the research and development section of the Talt University of Engineering on Cabala Trite exciting and worthwhile.

And now she was in hell.

Well, perhaps not truly hell, but she was certain that she could see it from here.

"Are you all right?" Ailanthus asked honestly. "You've had a long cycle. Perhaps you should get some sleep now." He reached forward to touch her shoulder and was slightly surprised when she pulled back, wrapping her arms around her chest tightly.

"I don't understand," she said as if in response to his attempt at touching her. She looked up into his eyes, her face drained of most of its color. "If they have this Tanudana system, why would people need to have kataka?"

He raised an eyebrow at her naiveté. "Some people don't want to work, or don't want to work hard. They don't get access to the Tanudana. But that doesn't mean that they don't want to have sex. Human nature, I suppose. Understand? Those who have kataka aren't the nicest people around. It takes a certain level of evil to do that to another person."

She curled her knees up to her chest, hugged them with her arms and began rocking back and forth ever so slightly. She had been the top of her class, the best at what she did with a bright and brilliant future ahead of her. And now.... She didn't want to go to sleep, afraid to wake up with that brute Tethys on her or that bitch Druzni trying to suffocate her. And she didn't trust this Ailanthus either. He was being far too

kind, too helpful. She was certain that he had an ulterior motive, that he wanted to make her his kataka and was just not very forceful about it, maybe lulling her into a false sense of security to make the final triumph that much more pleasing.

Ailanthus took a deep breath and watched her. He was, unfortunately, far too used to this. His twenty years in this bile-encrusted lower intestine had seen its fair-share of people like Christl, yanked out of their comfortable lives for little to no reason and deposited here to rot from the inside out. It was all too familiar and that simple familiarity disgusted him. "Listen, Christl. If you're going to survive this place, then you need to accept the things that you can't change and not stress over them." He was hesitant to tell her about the really bad parts of the Colony. He didn't need her tearing her hair out and running about in hysterics. At least not yet. "And one of the first things you'll need to accept is to make your peace with it and with Thaliana. I don't know what you have against her or her species, but she's very trustworthy and the kind of friend that you'll need in here. If she likes you, you don't have to worry about others bothering you. She'll make sure of that." He studied her to see if any of what he was saying was making it through that pretty head of hers. He noticed for the first time as she rocked gently back and forth, that even with her butchered hair she was still beautiful.

He shook his head and scratched his nose. Those kinds of thoughts he didn't need to have, didn't want to have. It was enough that he felt an attraction toward the Druzsni. He didn't need it also with Christl. That could be a disaster waiting to happen. Love and lust and all that those words implied, he had chiseled from his consciousness as if from a rock, leaving behind nothing but the need to survive and little else. There was no place in here for any concept based on kindness. "I say this because when the next cycle starts, you'll be going to your new job assignment with Thaliana and Tethys and it'll be important, *vital*, that you do *exactly* what they say and stay close to them always."

That produced a reaction.

She stopped rocking and looked up at him with a mixture of cold, hard hatred and little-girl pleading in her eyes. "You've got to be kidding. They'll leave me for *dead* somewhere, or worse." Her voice was stressed and piping and filled with unbridled fear.

"No, they won't."

"Why can't I go to work with *you*?" she pleaded, though to her it wasn't much of an alternative. This couldn't be happening to her. This was beyond a nightmare.

"You can't go with me because you'll be assigned to the mines, like all new arrivals, and I don't work in the mines. I'm one of the few with an office, of sorts. Tethys is the main foreman of the mines and he'll be able to find you a good, safe job, or at least as safe as possible in the mines. But you really need to make your peace with Thaliana. Down

here we're all prisoners. There are no humans or Druzsni or Drek. We're all the same."

She shook her head in disbelief. He was asking her to put aside a lifetime of hatred and prejudice, a life-time of force-fed bigotry as common and normal as breathing. Druzsni were the enemy, plain and simple. They were a species of female warriors bent on the ultimate annihilation of all humans and *she* was supposed to be the one to be friendly? Her whole world was turning upside down. She looked over at Thaliana, who sat toward the back of the cave apparently uninterested in their conversation. She didn't think she could do it. All she saw when she looked at her was hatred, a blinding fire burning in her, burning through her like hell-fire. Even The Church of the Blessed Prophets preached hatred for the Druzsni.

She changed her stare to Tethys before Thaliana caught her looking. The large man sat near the little man she thought they had called Cetus, obviously ignoring the constant ranting that was directed toward him, his face a stoic mask of imperturbability. "Is that big brute going to pull his pants down again and make me look at his ...His big thing? Cause I don't think I can take that again. It was disgusting." She wrinkled her nose at him, smirking with relish.

Ailanthus couldn't help but smile. "I don't know. I'm sure if you ask him nicely, he'll oblige."

She swung her head around to give Ailanthus a startled look with narrowed eyes. "Very funny. The last thing I want to do is give him the impression that I liked it."

"He might just think that," Ailanthus mused as he nodded his head. "Now let me ask you a question. What did you do, or who did you piss off to not only get sent in here, but stuck in the mines instead of the Tanu? You must really have pissed someone off bad."

She actually laughed at that statement, a short, soft chuckle of derision making her face lighten-up a moment and putting a spark back into her eyes. "I didn't do a *damn* thing. I was charged with espionage against the Imperium and all because I was a member of a Noble House that's non-affiliated and opposed to the ascension of the Greater House Aldebaren to the Imperium throne."

"And since the Greater House Aldebaren controls the university you were at, it was a simple matter to charge you and ship you off," he finished for her, not at all surprised that the manipulations he had witnessed among and within the Houses when he was still a free man were still alive and well. The more things changed, the more they seemed to stay the same. He had heard that once and was reminded of its validity every cycle.

"Exactly," she said with an expulsion of air that was as much a sigh as a plea. "I'm just glad that they only gave me two years in here. Even that's too much."

Cetus' voice took them both by surprise. Neither had heard him slither up to them, though now that he was here, his stench was overpowering. "Two years? Is that what they told you girl?" he said in that oily, salesman voice exuding its own distinct miasma of distrust and deception. The man's eyes worked their way over Christl slowly, purposely, undressing her and more in the span of a heart-beat. "This is Level *Five*, girl. Level Five at *K'ar Krack'a*. When you come here, you never leave. Never. Isn't that right, Ailanthus?"

Ailanthus shot Cetus an unmistakable look of disapproval, but the little man paid little to no attention to it.

Cetus' words, however, hit home hard with Christl, who stared at him, completely unaware or unconcerned with his leering. Her face had again drained of all its color and her mouth worked like a macabre puppet.

"He's telling the truth, though why he picked this particular moment to change his usual practice of lying is beyond me," Ailanthus said stiffly. "Tethys and I were given five years each. We're going on twenty now."

"No," she sobbed, unsure what to do next, what to say, to think.

"The only way people leave here is when they die and then it's only up to the surface, if not into a Drek cooking pot," Cetus added for good measure, the terror and utter desolation on her face like a balm to his darkened soul. He seemed to be one of those people who relished the discomfiture of others and thus liked to cause it.

Tethys appeared behind the little man, lifted him off the ground effortlessly and deposited him outside the cave unceremoniously. He didn't say a word to Cetus, but the little man knew that his stay was over and he moved on to find someone else to torment. It made him feel better.

"Why the hell don't you try to escape?" Christl asked in a near hysterical panic. "How can you live like this without any hope of release beyond death?"

All eyes shot to her, even Thaliana's, who had been ignoring the entire boring conversation. Christl was far too absorbed in her own self-pity to notice the looks passing between Ailanthus, Tethys and Thaliana. But Hesiodus noticed, just like he had noticed everything. He took a little more interest in the conversation.

"Escape to where?" Ailanthus asked casually. "The surface is a frozen waste-land and there's no access to any vessels to get off-world. Thoughts of escape are *useless*." His voice held a finality to it that was crushing. "Better just get that thought out of your head now and save yourself the headache it will cause later."

It was more than she could take and she finally broke down and sobbed in quiet little bursts wrenching Ailanthus' heart and making Tethys frown in disgust. She curled up again into a fetal position, moaning as if it was the end of the world.

For her it certainly seemed that way.

"I hope she doesn't make that noise for too long. It's rather annoying," Thaliana stated harshly as she went back to sewing up a pair of pants.

Ailanthus had the feeling that it was going to be a long cycle till tomorrow.

*Order comes from power;
Power comes from knowledge;
Knowledge comes from spies.
So the question must be asked, where do spies come from?
Within that answer lies ultimate power.*

From the Treatise
Through Human Eyes
Cos van der Rijj
650 P.Y.I.

The office was not very large and seemed even smaller with the huge mass of a man lounging behind the desk, indolently staring at the door as if it held an interest of grave concern. To say that Corvus Lupus was fat was like saying that the gravitational forces around an unshielded black-hole were weak. The Prime Warden had to tip the scales at four hundred pounds, if not more. His multiple double chins hung below his head like filled water-bladders ready to burst. His face had that stretched-out, chubby quality to it with blotches of red meteor impacts pocking him like a surreal artist's mistake. His small nose was almost lost in the fleshy flab, the small tuft of gray hair atop his head like so much lichen on a worn-out boulder. His body strained at the

confinement of his clothes, ready at any moment to burst forth and inundate the office with rolls of fat like cascading waterfalls of his body. His eyes were like tiny spot-lights reaching out from twin caves, piercing, penetrating, probing. They rarely missed anything and usually saw nothing.

The chair he sat on strained under the load, the waddle under his arms swinging like pendulums of fatty petulance whenever he moved. His office was spare, spartan. It was kept that way on purpose, so much the better to convince those who would come visiting that Corvus Lupus lived a life of austerity. It was in his personal quarters that all the trappings of his power manifested themselves. It was one small concession, one perk of but few that made his job in any way tolerable.

He yelled at the climate control system to adjust the heat output, his shrill high-pitched voice in stark contrast to his over-swollen body. The mines of the penal colony under him were hotter than Hell itself and yet here he was freezing in his own office. Of course, being located but a scant few meters beneath the hard frozen perma-frost of the surface of this snowball called K'ar Krack'a didn't help matters. But at least his office could be warmer than this. He felt the tiny trickle of heat sweep over his body, but it wasn't nearly enough.

He hated this place.

Corvus had a promising career ahead of him at one time; *had* being the operative word. Who would have ever thought that one small affair with the daughter of a Greater House would cause so much turmoil in his life? And she wasn't even that good in bed. That was the worst part. It hadn't even been worth it. What a waste. His little dalliance had landed him here: Prime Warden of this dead-end of a pile of scum. He was as much a prisoner of this penal colony as those who were sentenced here to die at the whim of the Imperium.

Sure he could always resign, but then what? It wasn't like he was going to get a retirement. It wasn't like the Imperium was going to pat him on the back and tell him what a great job he did and here's a few thousand credits to use for your trouble. If anything, they would find some trumped up charge against him and he'd wind up in the mines with the other walking dead. And if not that, then he would be exiled to some far off planetary system where access to the Inner Sphere was non-existent and his tales of the woes of K'ar Krack'a would fall on deaf, uncaring ears. Staying here at least gave him some semblance of order, comfort, security.

He had to laugh at that rationalization.

What a fucking joke.

Either way he was stuck here, never to advance higher, never to be reassigned to a better job. A prisoner as much as those whom he allowed to die every cycle.

But there were a few perks to the job.

At least obtaining food was never a problem. He skimmed the best off the top of the weekly transports from the House Tarij of the Imperium for himself, then let the rest of the human staff have their share, the prisoners getting whatever, if anything, was left over. And he also received some special luxury items for the simple expedient of shipping back a healthy prisoner or two for those at the other end of the pipeline; male or female, it didn't seem to matter much what he sent, so long as they were young and tender... and most important, untouched. That always seemed to be a priority that he never understood. If he was going to go to all the trouble to break Imperium law and export a prisoner from here, he'd want one that at least knew what she was doing.

And then there were the Tanudana.

That thought used to make him smile.

Used to. Now it just made him horny with little to no sense of fun inherent in the pleasure he pretended to get from their worn bodies. As Prime Warden, he had first shot at all the young females who graced this armpit of the Imperium. That in itself was almost worth being stuck here. There were even those Tanudana whom he kept as his own personal kataka, making them do unspeakable acts that made him hard just imagining them, his full and stiff member pounding against the underside of his desk with a vengeance.

Everything on Corvus' body was vastly larger than normal, much to chagrin and pain of those he impaled.

He frowned, aware that he was expecting one of his flunky assistants at any moment and so unable to call in one of his favorite girls to service him. What a life. And if that wasn't enough, he had one of the more attractive young girls to ever be deposited on this snowball denied to him. Denied him, on his own Penal Colony. The flash transmission still resided in his computer's memory, even though he had been ordered to destroy it upon acknowledgment. He had seriously considered ignoring the order, taking the girl anyway and then claiming that she had died in the mines. It would be so easy. He had done it so many times before, the frozen, desiccated bodies laying unfound on the surface where no one ever looked.

But he had learned his lesson in defying a House of the Imperium and he didn't want to think about where they would place him if he screwed up *this* assignment. Too many spies were here to leak his deception. Too many eyes within his own department.

She was so sweet and precious, though. And untouched, he was certain. A blank stale upon which to write his own personal perversion. But the order had come from the Prime House Volans itself, and even though the Imperium was still reeling from the assassination of the Emperor and the succession was still up in the air until the civil war was decided, the dispatch was still from the Prime House Volans. They had

ruled the Imperium for nye on eleven-hundred years and he wasn't ready to defy them just yet.

What really bothered him was that he hadn't even been told why. He had just been told to do it: place Titania Christl Venatici into the mines. And not just anywhere in the mines. That would have at least given him some leeway to place her in Level One and thus at his immediate disposal. No. The message had been very specific: Level Five.

It wasn't like he hadn't done it before. He remembered plenty of prisoners he had been specifically directed to place in the worst possible situations, the very pit of hell as it was dubbed. Level Ten of the mine was where all the psychotic maniacs were kept, where even the guard droids dared not venture. He remembered with a smile the one bird-like little man whom he had sent down there recently. Watching on the surveillance system installed through-out most of the colony, he had stopped counting at ten the number of creatures who had raped the man one after another. His body had never been recovered, most likely eaten alive afterward by one of the Drek gangs or H'chalk or others too numerous to mention who ruled down there more than he ruled up here.

He giggled at the memory of it, the continuous screams of pain streaming from the man. Drek anatomy was not compatible with human, making the rape that much more horrific.

It had been delicious.

But he wasn't even allowed that luxury with this girl. That *Ailanthus* had taken her under his wing -- he was betting on Pitatus, but that one fell through quickly -- had been even worse. At least Pitatus would have given a good display with the girl. That would have given him hours of holographic recordings that he could play back again and again to his sheer pleasure. Such a thing was certainly *not* going to happen with *Ailanthus*. The man was a prude.

How he hated *Ailanthus*.

Corvus' face reddened even more at the mere thought of the man and his friend Tethys. They had survived longer than anyone had a right to survive. The very fact that he hated *Ailanthus* was enough of a reason to continue to hate him with a passion that anyone else would have called manic obsession. And worst of all, what made his hatred so impudent was that he had been ordered to make certain that *Ailanthus* and Tethys continue to stay alive, to make certain that they had good jobs and plenty of food and not touched by the guard droids. That order had come anonymously, yet with enough official baggage behind it to make it a mandatory directive.

And he hated *Ailanthus* for it.

It really wasn't because *Ailanthus* was a continual thorn in his side. It was the simple fact that *Ailanthus* had so much power over the other prisoners at his fingertips and he didn't even use it. He barely took any enjoyment from the Tanudana. What kind of man lived in this hell-hole

of a snowball and held onto his morals, his integrity? Who didn't abuse the obvious power laying at his feet? What kind of inhumane monster didn't test out every new Tanudana when the opportunity presented itself?

And Corvus hated him for it.

Hate, hate, hate.

And now Ailanthus had possession of the girl Corvus had wanted. If he believed in them, he'd have said that a conspiracy was afoot among the gods.

His engorged cock pounded against the underside of his desk again, the anger and hatred coursing through his body like black poison.

The computer informed him that Denebola, his Security Warden, was here to see him.

"Get in here you piece of Kroor shit!" Corvus yelled loud enough to penetrate the inch thick blast door to his office, despite the fact that the intercom system was right by his fat, sausage-like fingers. He felt slightly better for having yelled. Not much, but just enough to make him not want to vomit.

The door opened to admit a trim, lean man. His hair was close-cropped, a black shiny goatee, sharp and dignified, attached to his prominent chin. His eyes were sharp and penetrating, his hawk-like nose leading him in. His look of contempt for the mass of a man behind the desk was only thinly masked behind the look of utter disgust. Denebola had been assigned this position a year ago with the expectation that it would be a stepping stone to more important positions and a possible back-door into the Imperium Navy. It had, instead, turned out to be the longest year of his life. Working for Corvus Lupus was little better than being a eunuch working in the inner Druzsni *Manca*. How anyone could be as disgusting and perverted as Corvus was beyond Denebola.

He was already starting to count the days till he was released and moved into another

position, any position so long as it was away from here. The further the better.

"Why the hell are you bothering me again?!" Corvus unnecessarily shouted in the small room. As far as Corvus was concerned, Denebola was just what he needed here. The man was efficient, professional and driven, and had that foolish sense of duty and honor compelling him to actually do his job properly. That meant, basically, that Corvus didn't have to do much, which suited him just fine.

Denebola spoke with a tight voice, trying hard not to look at the grotesquely fat man, or think about what he was doing to himself under the desk. He could see the motion, could hear the thumping and could only imagine what was happening under there. "The female was deposited on Level Five as per your instructions and Ailanthus now has possession of her."

Was that a smile on Denebola's lips? Was the man gloating? "Do you think me stupid?" Corvus said quietly, narrowing his beady eyes and noticing that Denebola wasn't even looking at him. Maybe Denebola had been here too long and had lived passed his usefulness. The man was oozing contempt. Well, it was of no matter. So long as he made Corvus look good during those pesky inspections. "I know all that already, you imbecile. What the *fuck* do you think I have all those damn cameras for? Are you mocking me? Is that what you're doing?" He loved to denigrate the man. It made him even hornier.

Denebola's eyes flicked to Corvus a moment -- more than enough to turn his stomach. "Of course not, sir. Just thought I'd let you know."

Corvus smiled, the expression like a cancer across his face. "What you *thought* was that I'm an idiot; a fat, disgusting idiot. Don't try to deny it." He paused a moment as he played with himself some more. Yes, baiting Denebola was quite enjoyable. He would miss the man when he finally left... or was killed. Whichever came first, it made no difference to Corvus. "What else do you have for me? That better not have been all, you slug."

Denebola wished it were, for then he could leave and be done with this obligatory torture for the cycle. But there was, unfortunately, more. There was always more. "The new guard droids arrived on the transport. I've already begun the replacement process. What do you want to do with the old ones?" He knew the answer already, but he had to ask. Such decisions could be made only by the Prime Warden.

"By all the saints of The Church, Denebola," Corvus said in utter disgust. "Why the *hell* are you asking me? Aren't *you* the Security Warden? Isn't that part of *your* job? Guard droids? Security? Sounds like they *fuckin*g go together to me. Do I have to do your job now also? Is that what you want?! For me to do your job so that you can kick-back and fuck Tanu all day long?! Oh wait, I forgot. You're too *damn* good for that simple pleasure, aren't you? AREN'T YOU?!" The last was shouted with ear-splitting volume.

"Of course not, sir," Denebola answered quietly, calmly. He wasn't about to give Corvus the pleasure of seeing him get agitated.

Corvus smiled again, that sick, leering smile he gave all the Tanu and that made most of them shit in their pants there and then. "That's right. You're one of those who doesn't like woman, aren't you?" He waited, hoped for a response, an outburst at least at the lie. But there was nothing. He waved a hand distractedly as he looked away and wondered where his food droid was. "Do whatever you want with them. I don't give a shit."

"I've been informed," Denebola said flatly, the sounds of the man's self-arousal growing louder, "that we will be having a Noble from the House Gôrecki, a member of the Sitting Council of the Imperium, visiting us in a few days. Will he be taking a tour of the facilities?"

"How the *fuck* should I know?" Corvus said, looking extremely agitated that Denebola was still in his office. "Do I look like a fucking psychic?"

A psychotic, perhaps, Denebola thought. A smile barely touched his lips, sparking in his eyes.

"If the right honorable ass-hole wants to tour the death-factory below, I'm sure he'll make that known to us when he arrives. What the *fuck* does it matter, anyway?"

Denebola could have gone into a long discourse about security issues and lock-downs and the like, but wisely choose not to. He had already been here long enough as it was. "I have one more item of interest."

"That's one too many. Are you still here? I've got more important things to do today than share photons with you."

"There is a slight discrepancy with the new arrivals. There was a certain young man aboard when the transport docked, but he was no where to be found when the arrivals were processed. Instead, there was an old, frail man."

Corvus stared at him for a long, drawn-out moment and Denebola wasn't sure if it was because he actually thought this was serious or whether he was trying to figure out what his Security Warden was talking about. When he finally did speak, it was quietly at first, calmly as he leaned slightly forward, his rolls of fat spilling on the desk top. "How many prisoners were on the transport?"

"Fifty altogether, sir."

"And how many did you process through all the Levels?"

Denebola saw what was coming, but couldn't back out now. He should have just checked his sense of duty at the door and not said a word. "Fifty, sir."

"Then what the *fuck* are you bothering me for?!" Corvus exploded. "What the *fucking hell* does it matter if the numbers are all the same?! Are you truly that stupid?! Get the hell out of my office before I really get mad and relieve my throbbing dick inside of you!"

Denebola left quickly, slamming the door hard behind him.

Corvus stared at the door for a long time as if expecting the man to return. Then he requested the latest transmission about the Noble girl and what was expected of him in the future, and listened to it again. It hadn't changed any. He made two copies, placed one in his private archive, the other in the main records archive and then requested the presence of a Tanu. Although the transmission had demanded that it be destroyed after reading, Corvus was not about to let some prissy Noble screw him over. What was demanded of him in the near future was the type of action that could get Corvus thrown into the very penal colony he controlled. He wasn't about to be the fall guy for this.

And something would have to be done about Denebola. The man was too sharp for his own good. He would have to be dealt with ... and soon.

* * *

Denebola vacated the area around Corvus' office quickly. He wasn't too worried about that fat bastard actually sexually assaulting him. What Denebola was worried about was that he would kill the moron and that would not be the best thing for his career. The powers that be weren't very impressed with the killing of one's supervisor.

The old man suddenly appearing among the new arrivals still bothered him, even though Lupus didn't see any problem. But then Lupus wouldn't see a problem until it crawled into his folds of fat and took up residence. Denebola only knew of one explanation for how it could have happened and it was an explanation he didn't want to consider. Having one of *them* in his penal colony wasn't good. Having one of them *anywhere* was bad news.

His cycle, thus, was not turning out very good and seeing the prisoner Cetus sitting outside his office under escort of two of the new escort droids didn't make it any better. "You better have something damn good for me, Cetus, else I'm going to send you down to the Prime Warden, who is in a particularly festive mood. You'll be one sore, hurting prisoner if that happens, believe me."

The threat didn't seem to faze Cetus in the least. Perhaps the man actually enjoyed being Lupus' bitch. He wouldn't put it passed the little weasel. Although he found most of the information the man brought him useful, he actually hated the little shit and what he did. To sell out your own kind for a few extra privileges was pathetic. And as far as Denebola was aware, Cetus didn't even do it for the privileges. He just did it because he could.

Plus, the man smelled like a mega-cycle-old dead Drek.

Cetus started speaking before they had even entered the office. "There's going to be trouble between Ailanthus and Pitatus. Lots of trouble." He seemed to be happy to report this.

Denebola sat down heavily, rubbing his forehead to ward off the headache he felt coming. "Come on in, Cetus. The guards already told me that much. It's not like it's not new or anything. Do you want me to tell Lupus that you're on your way?"

Cetus frowned. He stood there fidgeting. "Of course I have more, boss. You know that I always come through."

"Then stop stalling and just spit it out," he snapped, looking out from under his hands as they continued to rub his throbbing temples.

"I think that Ailanthus and his lap-dogs are planning something big. Something real big."

Dark pilgrim rising - 64

*When one begins to become too lucky, that's when one should worry,
for much good luck is a sure sign that all hell is about to break loose.*

Excerpt from:
Memoirs from the Throne
Emperor Cor Caroli I,
5 Y.I.

They sat huddled in the far back of the cave, their heads bent together whispering quietly yet intently in the dim light. Christl had finally fallen into a fitful sleep, her sobs having ended about an hour ago. The old man Hesiodus sat with his back against a rough wall, his eyes closed, light snores coming from between his dried, chapped lips.

"Not to press the matter, Ailanthus," Tethys was saying with a hint of frustration in his voice, "but why her? We could catch a break any cycle now and you know full well that leaving her behind will be worse now than if we had let Pitatus have her to begin with."

Ailanthus frowned slightly as he ran his hand through his sweaty hair, the question one which he had been asking himself a lot the past few hours. "I know. I know. But what was I supposed to do? And anyway, if she really is from a Noble House, she might yet prove to be of some value to us."

"You should know after all this time, Tethys," Thaliana said in as sweet a voice that she could manage at the moment, which sounded more like sandpaper grating on rocks, "that Ailanthus here has a soft spot in his heart for anything female."

Ailanthus smirked at that remark. That wasn't true at all.... Well, maybe it was a little bit true, but he wasn't about to admit that to anyone. "At least I didn't drop my pants as soon as saw a pretty face."

Tethys' made to respond, sputtered a few unrecognizable words and finally fell silent with a blush on his cheeks that didn't fit well with his size.

"Yes," Thaliana agreed all too readily for Tethys' liking. "I didn't get that kind of greeting when I first rolled up here. Maybe had I, things between us could have been different." She smiled sweetly, her whole face lighting up and highlighting the beauty beneath the grime.

"Had he done that to you, you probably would've ripped it right off of him," Ailanthus remarked with a smile.

Her smile brightened even more as she answered. "And *that* would have certainly changed our relationship, would it not have?"

Tethys reached involuntarily for his testicles as if she might just reach over and remove them anyway and there was a general snicker among the group.

They were quiet after that for a few moments before Ailanthus spoke up again. "She's not the one I'm worried about at the moment. Although she seems to have an intense, unbridled hatred for our resident Druzni, I think she'll do as you ask when you take her to work next cycle." He looked over at Hesiodus. "But the old man, he's a different story."

"I'm glad someone else noticed it," Thaliana said as she picked up a small pebble and started to turn it around in her hand.

"There's something not right about him, something odd that I can't place my finger on at the moment," Ailanthus clarified further.

"We need to keep an eye on him. A close eye," she asserted a little too forcefully. She grabbed a cold, dark piece of smoked slug and chewed on it absently, staring at her two companions. She had been in this penal colony going on eight years now and although it was difficult for her to admit it, she owed her life to these two unlikely humans. Had they not offered her a helping hand at the beginning, she would have certainly ended up dead within the first cycle, taking several others with her, of course, as was the Druzni way, but dead nonetheless. The fact that both Tethys and Ailanthus had even acknowledged her, had seen through the hatred and prejudice that seemed to cloud all human experience when it came to non-humans, shocked her at first. But as she learned to trust these two odd humans, she realized that they didn't see her as a Druzni. All they saw her as was a female, a co-equal in their little group. It was, though she hated to admit it, refreshing and started their friendship off on the right foot. Now she would do most anything for them, including killing as needed, a feat in which she had been all too glad to partake over the last eight years.

The new girl's arrival -- and girl was exactly what she was, a spoiled child used to a life of luxury thrown into a pit of Mornak grass snakes -- had brought home to her with no uncertain terms that what Ailanthus and Tethys had done for her was completely out of the ordinary. She had almost forgotten the hatred shadowing her in this all-too-human galaxy. Well, almost forgotten. It was sometimes hard to forget when the other humans with whom she worked made it clear every cycle.

But of course her own hatreds had not really dimmed that much. She considered Ailanthus and Tethys as friends, not as humans and as such she still looked upon all other humans as uncivilized, immature annoyances, their temporary hegemony of the galaxy nothing more than a passing phase. She'd just as soon break one in half across her knee then speak to one. The little girl was lucky that Ailanthus and Tethys liked her, else she would have been severely beaten several times by now, if not killed outright. Not many people could speak to a Druznsi as Christl had and live to tell about it. She was already planning on what to do to the child when they went to work tomorrow to teach her some humility and respect toward her betters. The thought brought a small smile to her lips.

Ailanthus spoke up, his voice even lower than before. "I had that same odd recall again, or remembrance if you will, while I was fighting that H'Chalk. For a moment there, I knew exactly how to fight the thing, its weaknesses and strengths. Everything."

"And this is odd because...?" Thaliana asked around a mouth full of tough, smoked slug.

"As far as I know, I've never met a H'Chalk, ever. And I certainly never knew anything about them before. I barely even knew what a H'Chalk was until I got here." He looked at his two friends with skepticism, his face barely containing the confusion leaching out of his flesh like the sweat to which he had grown so accustomed. "How is it that I suddenly know exactly what to do to disable that thing? And it's not the first time this has happened."

"Yes," Tethys said somberly, staring at his hands as if they were new to him. "I've had the same basic experience also though mine seem to be more or less limited to more practical matters. But nevertheless, it is odd, that's for certain."

Thaliana stared at her two friends intently. "I thought it rather brazen at the time that a human would allow a creature such as a H'Chalk to maneuver you into such a vulnerable and deadly situation for the soul purpose of exposing its genital areas. I had thought that it was a brilliant tactic and was mildly impressed. And now you're saying that it was purely by accident that you allowed the H'Chalk to embrace you and open itself to attack?" A sly smile touched her lips and her eyes, their intense blue sparkling at him like beacons of mirth. "I'm glad that my opinion of human nature has not been shattered as much as I thought it had been. This makes me feel much better." She leaned forward then and her face became hard as a rock, her eyes like leaden icicles as she spoke directly to Ailanthus. "I have not cultivated you as much as I have to allow you get yourself killed over food that isn't even worth eating. In the future, Ailanthus, you will leave the combat to those who know what they are doing *before* they begin. Do I make myself understood?"

Although Ailanthus considered her one of his best friends and trusted her implicitly, she was still a Druzni and he still human. He nodded his head to indicate that he understood quite clearly. One could match almost any Druzni and two humans together and the Druzni would out-match the humans every time. Their superior physical and physiological conditioning -- two hearts and three lungs just some of the advantages they enjoyed -- more than a match for any human's skills or mental agility one-on-one. It was just fortunate for humans that Druzni had such a hard time working together as a cohesive unit and seeing beyond the next battle, their warrior skills subdued to their tactical clumsiness and strategic ineptness. Otherwise, humans would not be where they were today, would not be such a powerful force within the known galaxy.

And on top of all that, it was obvious to him that she liked him a little more than he wanted and was the type of female who would actually hurt him to keep him from getting killed in that odd love sort of way. It was not a situation in which he ever wanted to find himself.

He tried to change the subject, to get the terrible thoughts of her and him in compromising, sexual situations making his cheeks redden with embarrassment, out of his mind. "And now on to the important parts," he muttered as he re-adjusted his seating position. "What did we learn today?"

"I'm going to get the schematics of the new additions to the upper main track and the corridors leading to the landing pads next cycle. They should be coming from level one via level four," Tethys whispered quietly, a smile coming to his rock-hard face. "Those stupid guards haven't even caught on that we drilled in the completely wrong way once inside the auxiliary shaft."

"Any major changes?" Thaliana asked.

"No, not really. There're a few changes in the path we would have to take, but pad 2C is still the closest and best option."

They had discovered after years of inquiry and bribes of other prisoners from the other levels that the penal colony had two main landing pads for the transports dropping off all the new arrivals and other essential supplies. Unfortunately, both pads were heavily guarded and also fixed with gravitational dampeners to prevent any unauthorized launches. But it was the auxiliary landing pads that held the most promise. Each was rarely used and lightly guarded. And best of all, neither auxiliary pad had the gravitational dampeners to thwart an illegal take-off attempt. They had been removed by the Prime Warden, it was said, to pay for contraband that came with each transport, worth their weight in credit out here in the lost portions of the Imperium. The only problem was that the two auxiliary pads were rarely used and of the two, pad 2C was the least used and yet was the closest and easiest to access from the route they planned on taking, the route that would offer the best chance of success. So far, in the many years during which

Tethys and Ailanthus had been planning to escape, not a single ship had landed on either of the two auxiliary pads. Not a single ship. It was slightly discouraging to say the least.

"I've been able to procure that emitter you wanted," Thaliana said with a slight hint of anger in her voice, like a little bee buzzing, "but it cost me more than I really wanted to pay for it. If I ever meet that Grouft in the caverns, he's going to have a big hole in the back of his fat head for the price he charged me."

Ailanthus didn't need to ask to know that Thaliana had been forced to trade sex for the item. Sex with a Druzsni was one of the highlights of any human male's life and for those who had not yet had the pleasure to engage in it, no amount of explanation could describe it. Grouft, a fat, rather grotesque human from level three with a voice like silk and flesh like wet rags, had been in the right place at the right time, that was certain if Thaliana had allowed him to have her, even if for a brief moment.

"Does it work?" Ailanthus asked with the touch of a smile on his face at the price she had been willing to pay to escape. He was certain that if the situation were reversed, any of them gathered would have done the same thing. Anything was better than staying in K'ar Krack'a any longer.

"It *better* work, or else they'll be another dead prisoner for the med-droids to pick up."

There was a noise outside the entrance to the cave, a shuffling of feet and kicking of rocks. As all three turned to see what the commotion was all about, Crocus and Anolis came into the cave, the smiles on their faces large and joyful. They noticed the small huddle and quickly made their way over.

"We've got great news, great news!" Crocus said slightly louder than he intended, all three of them urging him to lower his voice else they wake up the other two. The fewer people who knew about this, the better for all concerned.

The two brothers seated themselves as Crocus started to speak. "There's a ship due in a few days, a Makara. Some representative from a Greater House is coming to visit."

Ailanthus, Tethys, and Thaliana all looked at Crocus as if what he had said was not all that interesting. They had heard it all before. Such visits were not all that uncommon.

Then Anolis spoke up, as if tag-teaming the group with the information they were presenting. "It's going to be landing on pad 2B."

There was silence for a time before Ailanthus finally whispered what the group was thinking. "Are you certain?" It was almost said as if the man had been lying to him, as if the truth would quickly reasserted itself if he spoke any louder.

"Yes," Crocus said with a wide grin. "Pad IA just lost its primary computer link-up and it'll be down for at least a full ten cycles while the

new parts are shipped in. I heard it myself and saw the work order go out. That leaves pad 2A. But two cycles ago when that large supply transport came in, the hot-shot wannabe fighter pilot left his anti-grav boosters on too long and completely warped the pad. They can't use it until the whole thing is replaced, main stander plates and supports."

Anolis finished up for him, breathless with the excitement, grinning from ear to ear. "That leaves 2B and we can easily disable that one leaving 2C as the only viable landing pad available. This is our chance. This is really it."

"A Makara is a fast transport, isn't it?" Ailanthus said matter-of-factly, realizing too late that he had just had another moment of lucid comprehension. Even though he had never heard the name Makara before -- or at least didn't remember having heard it before -- he now had a head full of information on the ship and seemed to know all there was about the class of diplomatic shuttle. He found it hard to believe that his new found wealth of knowledge included any of the ships built in the last twenty years, but that concern was far down the list of important problems at the moment.

"Yes, it is," Thaliana answered mechanically before she looked askew at Ailanthus, wondering how he had known even that much. Makara's were not widely known outside of the Kroor community. "It's one of the fastest out there. How do you know about a Kroor diplomatic transport? Especially that type. It isn't like it's a common vehicle." She smiled slightly at him, the corners of her mouth curling just enough to give her an impish quality. "You never cease to amaze me, Ailanthus. That human mind of yours must be full to bursting with all the crap that you spit out at us every cycle. Very impression for a human." She looked back at Crocus and spoke to him. "But isn't it rather small for all of us?"

Antlia shrugged his shoulders as if this were a minor problem. "We'll all fit. I'll make certain of that. I'm going to try to get a hold of the schematics next cycle. But I think this is the one." His eyes held a sparkle to them that they others had never seen before.

Ailanthus could have told her exactly how many people would fit inside the Makara and exactly what the layout of the control systems would be. He could probably even fly the damn thing if pressed, but he didn't feel like sharing all that with his companions. He was still a little freaked that he knew all the information in the first place. It was starting to worry him and he had more than enough to worry about without adding anymore to his load.

"Not so fast, folks."

Had they not recognized the voice as that of Antlia, the man would have been dead in a heartbeat. Thaliana was already on her feet, balanced on her toes, ready to spring into action and kill. Druznsni, by nature, were a warrior species, bred and raised for combat. But they were also intelligent, knowledgeable in a multitude of subjects, experts in numerous disciplines. And that was what made the Druznsni so

dangerous and formidable. Couple that with the fact that all Druzni warriors were females -- the male of the species relegated to the menial labor positions or the stud farms, or so it was told since no one had ever successfully made it to the inner sanctum of planets that made up the Legion of Druzni -- added to their hatred for all things male and one had the consummate warrior individual.

Only problem was that Druzni were just that: individuals. They didn't work well together and lacked any strategic foresight, a flaw propagated somewhere along the genetic line that was never corrected -- either by accident or on purpose, the arguments were numerous -- and lead to their eventual defeat at the hands of humans during the Trade Wars between 798 and 500 P.Y.I., as well as continued defeats down through the years since. Although the Druzni would win a majority of the battles -- vicious, deadly affairs leaving few to no survivors and receiving and giving no mercy -- they would end up losing the wars due to lack of long-range planning, the battle at the moment all for which they seemed to care. Although lethal on an individual level, the Legion had seen its better days and was on a long, downward spiral, the end of which most intelligence agencies could see coming.

"Don't do that, Antlia," Ailanthus said as he let out the breath he didn't even know he was holding at the sudden adrenaline rush.

Thaliana glared at Antlia as if she was going to kill him. "The quickest way to get yourself dead is sneak up on a Druzni. The *second* quickest way is to attempt to sneak up on a Druzni. Be warned, human."

Antlia, as was his way, completely ignored the veiled threats thrown at him and walked up to the others with a look of dejection on his face, as if his favorite pet snail had been stepped on. "The guards have been changed," he said as he looked at each person in turn to make certain that they understand his words. "Brand new models just came in off the transport and they've already replaced all the escort guards."

If he meant to shock them, he succeeded admirably.

No one had heard anything about new model guard droids. The guards had certainly been rotated out for maintenance on a regular basis, but never had they been replaced wholesale by a completely new model. It was unheard of.

"Are you sure?" Thaliana asked, as if asking him such a question would force him to

reveal the lie. They were so close. A ship was finally going to land on the pad that they could get to and now, to have such an unexpected and unheard of event blow it all was beyond belief. It was asking too much to believe and it showed on their faces.

Antlia looked at her with sarcastic disapproval. "No, I'm not sure. I just made the whole damn thing up to fuck with you, Thaliana.... Of course it's true. I saw the new droids with my own fucking eyes."

She shook her head in utter disbelief and at the man's effrontery at believing that it was okay to speak to her that way. She would make him aware of his needed attitude adjustment later... when he was least expecting it.

Tethys rubbed a hand across his mouth, a sudden dryness having set up shop there. That they could be so close and have it all yanked out at the last second was rather disappointing. But then, he was used to it, to the disappointment and discouragement that was his life here in K'ar Krack'a. What else should he have expected?

Ailanthus ran his hand through his hair and unconsciously bit his lower lip. There had to be a way around this. There had to be. They were just too close this time. "What did these new droids look like, Antlia? Are they much different?"

"They're built along the same lines, but the differences and improvements are obvious. Much better armed and armored, too. And slightly taller."

"Do you think that the frequencies we have will work on these droids? Would that make a difference?" Crocus asked, squatting down next to Thaliana, the disappointment on his face obvious.

"I doubt it," Tethys replied stoically. "It would only make sense that they'd change all the security procedures and protocols."

"This can't be happening," Anolis said too loudly. "They replaced *all* the escort guards?"

Antlia nodded his head as he took a piece of the smoked slug and began to chew it methodically.

"I think that maybe I can help." Christl's voice startled them as much as Antlia's had a moment earlier. She had not moved from where she had fallen asleep crying, but now sat up in her sweat-soaked clothes, her eyes red-rimmed and raw, her voice rough with sleep.

"How long have you been listening?" Ailanthus asked, slightly perturbed that she had been eaves-dropping on them and that he hadn't noticed. First Antlia sneaking up on them and now this. They must be losing their touch ...or getting too comfortable with their surroundings.

That was a deadly sin in this penal colony.

He had seen too many people killed in here for the simple fact that they forgot where they were, became too complaisant and never saw the end coming. He would have to talk to Thaliana and Tethys about this privately. He couldn't afford to lose either of them now. Especially when they were so close. Such lapses of security when they might actually have a chance at escaping he would not tolerate.

"I heard most of what you were talking about. I didn't mean to eavesdrop. How anyone can actually sleep in all this heat is beyond me. I'm soaked through and through and it never seems to stop. Is it always this hot here?" Her voice held a hint of tears, a slight wavering telling them all that she was still not dealing well with the idea that this would be her home for the rest of her life. It was nothing new to any of

them. They had all felt the same way at one time or another and had seen too many new people come in who never learned to cope and soon just disappeared, either to suicide or stupidity.

"What did you mean when you said that you could help us, child?" Thaliana said menacingly, staring at the human girl hard enough to make a Drek tremble.

She lifted her chin up slightly and stared right back at the Druzni, defying her to do something to her, defying her to change her opinion of Druzni and their worthiness to live. "I'm not a child, Druzni, and I wasn't talking to you. I was speaking with the humans."

If nothing else had tipped off Ailanthus that Christl was from a Noble House, her haughty attitude and firm resolution as she stared face-to-face with Thaliana would have been more than enough to convince him. However, she seemed to have completely forgotten about how she could help as she matched stares with the Druzni.

"For Morgase's sake, girl," Crocus nearly shouted, bringing harsh stares down on him from all. "What is it that you know?"

She held her stare off with Thaliana a moment longer, then shifted her gaze to Ailanthus, not Crocus, and spoke. "The new guard droids. I worked on them."

Eyebrows rose in disbelief.

"How is that possible, girl?" Antlia asked with a smile. "The research, development and production of those droids are one of the most closely guarded secrets of the Imperium. Stop wasting our time and go back to your crying."

Christl shifted her eyes, crystal clear hard orbs of light-brown, and stared hard at Antlia a moment. Then she looked back at Ailanthus. It was apparent to all that she was speaking exclusively to Ailanthus and Ailanthus alone, the rest more or less meaningless annoyances. "The scientist who I worked for, that I was doing my graduate work for before the Imperium decided that I was a spy, was the man who did all the testing for the Imperium's combat droid suppliers. All the *independent* testing, that is looking for flaws and software problems that the production plant and manufacturers perhaps didn't want the Imperium to know about."

"And what the hell was your part in all this, child?" Thaliana asked caustically.

She didn't even bother to look at the Druzni this time as she continued her explanation, ignoring anything that was said that didn't come from Ailanthus' mouth. "Dr. Gron, the scientist who was my mentor, knew that I was the best at that sort of trouble-shooting and allowed me to work on the prototypes."

"*The prototypes?*" Anolis hissed at her. "What good does that do for us? These aren't the *fucking proto-types*."

She remained calm, as if addressing simple commoners who didn't understand the complexities of engineering. "As it turned out, the proto-

types and the production models were the same. It seems that the manufacturers had already produced the majority of the production run, apparently not much concerned with anything that might be found wrong with them."

"Girl, I know moss that moves faster than you do," Crocus snorted as he grabbed the water skin and drank down a mouth full.

"Shut up already, all of you," Ailanthus ordered in a rush of air. "Let her finish and then you can ask all the damn-fool questions you want."

Crocus smirked at the dressing-down, but kept his mouth closed. He knew better than to cross Ailanthus.

Christl continued. "As it turned out, the guard droids have a flaw in them. A minor one to be sure, but a flaw nonetheless that can be used against them. If the proper harmonic phase-induced frequency can be set up, the internal security intelligence reads it as an internal problem and sets up fire-walls within the main intelligence program. With the firewalls up, communication between the motorized sections of the intelligence and the command centers are severed." She paused a moment to see if any of them understood, if any of them had any idea what she was talking about. She was mildly surprised with the answer.

"Which means that the guards will stop functioning until the problem is corrected," Thaliana said flatly, watching Christl carefully, intently.

"Yes, that's correct," Christl said cautiously. She didn't expect the Druzni to know the answer.

"But what about the internal security systems and the alarm circuits? Won't they engage?" Antlia asked, now poignantly aware that the girl might actually be on to something, yet still doubtful.

"No. *That's* the major flaw. Since the internal security intelligence only *thinks* that it has a minor internal problem and since the fire walls are up blocking the other areas of the intelligence from reporting, the security intelligence doesn't think that anything is wrong and thus doesn't set off the alarms."

They sat staring at her a moment, as if what she had said undeniably wrong.

"And are you telling me that the production center still build the droids even though they knew there was this major problem?" Ailanthus inquired calmly.

"The production center and the main engineering contractors had no idea that there was a problem until we pointed it out to them. And by that time, as I already said, the vast majority of the line had already been finished. They figured, I suppose, that it would be far too costly to have to completely strip out all of the line to correct the problem. And anyway, it would have to be an extreme coincident for prisoners to first of all *know* about the flaw and secondly to stumble onto the exact frequency needed."

Ailanthus rubbed his chin as he watched the reactions of the others, wondering if he was the only one who noticed the coincidence of Christl

showing up right at the same time as the new guard droids. Was this a set-up? If it was, then she was a consummate actor.

"And I suppose that you just happen to have the proper frequency," Crocus said. It wasn't a question.

She smiled faintly at Ailanthus. "Yes, I do. As well as the primary codes and entry-level codes to get into the intelligence order-slash-command center."

Ailanthus' eyes narrowed. "And why would we need that?"

An eyebrow rose on that smooth skin of hers, the shadows of the cave making her face look translucent. "Do you think I'm stupid? You'll need those codes. Perhaps even the master-level codes for the main security protocol that comes with the new droids. You did realize that a entirely new security protocol would have already been down-loaded into the system, didn't you?" The self-satisfaction in her eyes was obvious as she now looked at all the others with what appeared to be triumph.

Ailanthus looked at Antlia. He didn't need to ask the question that was hanging in the air.

Antlia looked at him, then at the others. "Well, of course I knew that. New protocol... sure ...right."

Thaliana shook her head in disgust as she head him across the back of the head. "You didn't know drib'la feces, Antlia. Crap, we might have set the whole fucking security system off with you in charge."

Antlia made to protest, but saw the look on her face and thought better of it.

She changed her stare now to Christl, who ignored her completely.

Anolis spoke up, the grin on his face contagious. "Then it looks like we're back in action again, doesn't it?"

Ailanthus looked at him out of the corner of his eyes, then back at Christl, who seemed to have forgotten, for the moment, that this was going to be her home for the rest of her life. "Yes," he said slowly, rubbing his chin nervously. "Your arrival here, Christl, certainly seems fortuitous." *Yes, far to coincidental for comfort.*

To understand the Tandi is to understand life itself; for it is only in the attainment of self-discipline and self-sacrifice that one can see that which is clear to the warrior: death is just a transition to the next plane of combat.

The Lord Marshall Bhagavan
Rohini Nahsirk XXI
Keeper of the Imperium Tuebor
Ward of the Imperium Family
Lord of the Greater House Beebhatsu

**Planet of Elysian's Promise
Seat of the Imperium
The Prime House Volans**

To look at Lord Marshall Bhagavan Rohini Nahsirk XXIII was to look at war itself. The man oozed it out of his pores, breathed it from his nostrils like a thick, cloying vapor. If one were to think of just one person who held the power of the Imperium Military in his hands, Rohini Nahsirk XXIII would be that person, as his father before him had been and his father before him down the line till one encountered the first Rohini Nahsirk. The family line held a virtual monopoly on the position of Lord Marshall Bhagavan of the Imperium Military for eight generations and counting; even longer serving the Prime House Volans. And each generation had served faithfully and honorably with never a hint of infidelity. Each generation had given to the Imperium and the Prime House Volans the security that was heralded as the indestructible might of the Imperium Navy and the solid foundation of the protectors of humanity

It was just pure dumb luck that this Rohini had to live during the time that the Imperium, under the Prime House Volans, was coming apart at the seams.

He was a bulk of a man, all muscle and sinew and brawn dwarfing other humans with his barrel chest and towering height. His face was a mishmash of criss-crossed scars and wrinkles, the leathery tanned skin tight on his bones as if stretched to breaking, the bones underneath

stark and outlined. He could have easily had the scars removed, genetically taken away, even regenerated to leave his face as smooth and clean as when he was younger. But that would defeat the entire purpose of the scars. To him, they were badges of honor, reminders of lessons learned over the years, failures studied to incorporate into the *Tandi*, the manual of the fighting arts that was holy to all human warriors.

But best of all, the visage he presented with the imperfect menagerie of scars and cuts scared the piss out of every delegate he met, every alien general who thought he could bully the Imperium into deals or put humans in their place

And that was the way it should be.

Intimidation was as much a part of combat as the actual fighting, sometimes even more important. If he could scare an opponent into signing a treaty, backing off a system or standing down an armed force without resorting to violence and the use of arms, then so much the better. Not engaging in actual combat saved his troops and ships for later use and made his life less worrisome. Combat was great once he was knee-deep in it, but he preferred to pick and choose his own battles and his own time and place to fight and that was much easier to achieve if the other guy was scared shit-less of you.

His eyes were also a great source of fear, those cold, gray, brooding orbs glowering out from beneath the white mounts of scraggly eyebrows like haunted spirits of hell. They were enough to give any recruit second thoughts about enlisting, or any diplomat pause to make any demands of him or the Imperium. His nose was crooked and large, broken so many times that it wasn't worth counting any more, his lips full and bitter, his teeth -- barely seen except for that devilish smile which would put the fear of the Creator Himself in anyone who was unfortunate enough to be exposed -- brilliant white. His hair was pulled back tightly, held in a pony-tail -- as was the custom of all those who called themselves members of the *Tandi* -- giving the effect that his forehead was taut and stretched. The hair itself was long and shiny, its salt and pepper color hinting at the age of the man who spoke with all the explosive subtlety of a thunderstorm. No hair adorned his chin or cheeks, having been seared off forever in an incident on Baek X, yet a full and expansive mustache of faded gray sat under his nose like a ragged brush. His gnarled hands were large, powerful and had held such weapons of destruction in them to make those of The Church of the Blessed Prophets blanch with fear. And yet, they could caress the most fragile woman with a touch of sheer gossamer tranquility.

He now sat in a simple chair in a simple office, the walls of which were studded with holographic maps and schematics and plans that his eyes looked right through, seeing nothing of the various battle plans and fleet dispositions telling him where the Imperium stood. Various messenger droids hovered around, patiently waiting for commands,

waiting for the tirade of orders that would suddenly flow from the human like a torrential flash-flood.

But he didn't notice them either.

His mind was elsewhere.

It had been like this frequently as of late, his mind wandering to far off times and places with no relation to the current problems he faced. He had been reminiscing far too often these last few days, reminiscences of his life appearing to him at times as if he were but a mere spectator, watching a drama unfold over which he had no control. He realized with a flash-back of cognizant clarity that he didn't really remember much before his eighth naming day, that fateful day when his father had placed him in the competent hands of the Masters at the Arjuna Warrior Academy on Daitya Prime, although he was certain that he had played at children's games before that at one time in his life. He just couldn't remember anything that wasn't part of the military, his first real cognizant memory consisting of the long hallway with all the holographic photos of the legends of the Academy staring down at him, brooding at him as if he wasn't good enough to grace the sacred classrooms. That had been one hundred and fifty years ago, and yet it seemed as if it were just yesterday. One hundred and fifty years, three months, one week, and two days ago to be precise, Imperium Standard Time; but who was counting?

He didn't have many opportunities to reflect like this as of late, the demands of his position a constant, thirty hours a day, every day hassle. And it had been this way ever since the Emperor, his friend, had been assassinated.

There had been no rest since that fateful day when the Imperium had been thrown into civil war and chaos was still spinning around him like a whirlpool gone mad. All that stood between utter destruction and ultimate salvation was the Imperium Military. And the success of the Imperium Military, with the vaunted Imperium Navy at its core, came down to the decisions Rohini made on an hourly basis. He was sick and tired of it. Sick to his stomach and weary with a fatigue that seeped into his bones, into his very soul and sat there like a malignant growth of decay, eating away ever so slowly at the moral fiber of his humanity. He had had to make decisions since this nightmarish hell had descended upon humans that would have, prior to the Rebellion, made his stomach turn to even contemplate

But then that was war.

And war was Rohini.

The annoyingly quiet buzzer announced that someone wished to speak with him, the face appearing unbidden on the small holographic display set in his desk. It was a face that was sleek and efficient, smooth and eager, its youth like a drainage to his energy resources. The woman's blue, blue eyes perfectly complemented her short-cut blonde hair -- reminding him far too much of a Druznsni, a comparison he

thought rather humorous but one which he didn't want to think of at the moment -- her handsome, ageless face making him realize with a start that they were becoming younger every day.

Or perhaps the simple truth was that he was just becoming older.

It was his aide-de-camp, Commander Amalthea Bottae of the House Vanija.

"Come in," he intoned monotonously.

She cruised in all business, the smile planted on her face a more or less permanent fixture, her perky attitude like lemon juice into an open wound for Rohini. It wasn't that she was bad at what she did. In fact, she was one of the best aide-de-camps he remembered ever having, which included all the aide-de-camps that had served his ancestors.

That was another of the little quirks of the family Nahsirki; each member, be it male or female, who rose to the position of supreme responsibility within the Imperium, was given the genetic memories of all those who had preceded them. This was done for the most part to allow all the lessons learnt over the centuries to not be forgotten. Relearning military mistakes always lead to death and disaster and those who held the monopoly on the Lord Marshall Bhagavan position within the Imperium had no time or room to re-learn tactics. It was one of the main advantages the Imperium held over the Drek and Druznsi, even Dwad-Mehstiv. And humans needed every advantage that they could get concerning those species. So every memory, ever battle, every meeting with a non-human or Noble was burned into his consciousness, ready at a moment's notice to be utilized to the fullest, to be recalled at will and then vomited out in a hail of perfect decisions that lent an air of invincibility to his station and his name.

Amalthea bothered him for the simple fact that she was so young and eager and intelligent. She was just shy of thirty-five, still a babe out of diapers as far as Rohini was concerned and already a Commander in the most elite organization in the Imperium. And on top of all that, she had impressed someone well enough to allow her to work her way into the Command School and the fast-track to Admiral. He had no doubt that she would be directing one of his fleets sooner than later and directing it well. But did she have to be so young and perky? On so many different levels?

She waited patiently for him to acknowledge her, standing rigid at attention, her ample chest pressing against the double-breasted uniform he was certain she had tailor-made to fit so well.

"What do you have for me today, Commander?" he asked with a sigh, finally focusing on something besides the door.

She began with no preamble, no niceties to start the day off. There was no fun in this one. "Fleet Admiral Kroeguet has asked for the second time for a replacement for the admiral who got himself killed during that visit to the recreation colony. The Greater House Toyodago is requesting the new specifications on the transports you wanted built."

She ran through the list calmly, easily, with that slight lilt to her voice and touch of brogue accent marking her from the Tinu System with little to no doubt. But most impressively, she held no palm recorder or notes of any kind, the information of his daily schedule flowing out of her ample memory like water over a ledge.

He half-listened to her drone on, most of the material on which she was expounding of only passing interest to him. She always did this -- boring him to tears with the mundane tasks better delegated to others, saving the best and most interesting till last. He noticed that she had stopped and realized he had drifted off again, the voices in the back of his head from his ancestors chiding him for not paying attention. He hoped that she hadn't asked him a question. He focused back in on her and saw that she was staring down at him with that amused look on her face, as if he were her father and had fallen asleep again at the theatre.

"I suppose you want the important information now," she said with a mischievous grin. It wasn't a question.

"Sorry, Commander. I've had a lot on my mind lately. Please continue."

She studied him a moment longer, as if trying to figure out if she should continue or get him some tea. "There've been more sightings and a brief 'encounter', the admiral's word not mine, along the Drek border quadrants. I've forwarded the reports to your files for your perusal later. Scouts from Fleet Encke report that the fleet that the House Anga is rebuilding is nearing completion, with several modern and powerful heavy cruisers and battle-dreads. They have no information on any officers assigned yet." She paused a moment, as if to let him catch up.

He had warned her when she first began as his aide not to treat him like a absent-minded old man during these briefings but that warning seemed to have lost most of its effectiveness over time and now she treated him, though respectfully to be certain, like her elderly father. It grated on his nerves and he meant to tell her several times to stop, but she always managed to avert or side-track his outbursts at her. There was something of a daughter quality to her, the daughter he had lost those many years ago now -- was it already eight? -- and he found it difficult to berate her for such minor and trivial offenses. He was more than secure in his position and authority to not let a relatively junior officer offend him. And anyway, she was going to make a formidable fleet admiral one day and the last thing he needed to do was stifle that aggressive spirit.

"Is there more?" he asked casually. The information she had given him wasn't anything that he hadn't expected to hear. The movement of the Drek had been occurring for the past ten years and yet they never seemed committed enough to make an open aggressive act, even against a split Imperium. They remembered far too well what happened the last time they tried to take advantage of a weakened Imperium.

The fleet from the rebellious House Anga was nothing much to worry about either. Without the experienced officers to run it, it was just so much heavy metal and spare parts to Rohini. When they found a competent officer to run the whole affair, maybe then he would start to worry. But he could see that there was more to the briefing. As was usual, she was saving the best for last.

"Oh, and one more thing, Sir. Lord Duke Ganymede from the Greater House Gôrecki is here with an ensemble of other Nobles and they would like a moment of your time." It was said as if it had been an afterthought, as if no importance were attached to the event in the least.

Rohini sat up more, his ears perking at the mention of the name Ganymede. "The Lord Duke is here himself, in person? No representative or ambassador?" he asked calmly, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly.

"Yes, Sir. Something about an heir to the throne or some such thing like that. It didn't really seem like a military matter, so I told them that they would have to wait until your schedule cleared."

He smiled at the audacity of his young aide. "Good job, girl. Tell them that I'll see them when I have a moment." He knew full well that she hated it when he called her girl, but it was the one way that he could get back at her, get under her skin just a little and keep her sharp.

Her eyes narrowed and her mouth tightened to a prim little smile, but the most obvious effect was in her eyes, turning cold as deep blue icicles. She gave a curt nod of her head, then waited for him to dismiss her.

But Rohini was already beyond her, was already thinking about what the all-mighty Lord Duke wanted this time. He was sometimes -- and more lately than ever before -- certain that the Houses remaining loyal to the Imperium, the Houses that basically constituted the Imperium, were worse than all the hostile rebel houses and non-humans put together. For the last fifty years they had been hounding him for a replacement for the Emperor, giving him their unsolicited advice and opinions freely as if he really wanted to hear what they had to say. He of course agreed that the Imperium could not continue without an emperor. Although the Ruling Council, composed of representatives from all the Greater Houses in the Imperium, was plodding along just fine despite the constant arguments, the Imperium needed a leader with the complete backing of the Houses. But as the Keeper of the Imperium Tuebor it was his responsibility to make certain that the right person sat on the throne and from what he could see so far, there wasn't a proper applicant available from any of the Houses. And so long as he held the leash of the Imperium Navy, who were fanatically loyal to Rohini and Rohini alone, he held the reins of the Imperium Throne in his hands. And the Noble Houses knew it all too well.

It had been that very fact, that for all intents and purposes Rohini was the temporary Emperor until an heir could be found -- a legitimate heir

mind you -- that kept the Noble Houses in check. But unfortunately, the power Rohini wielded like a sharpened cutlass had not stopped the catastrophic split within the Imperium when the Greater House Aldebaren decided that it had the rightful claim to the throne and would prove it through force, taking with them three of the Imperium's Greater Houses and two of the Lesser non-affiliated Houses, a total of thirty-four planetary systems Rohini could hardly afford to lose. The Greater House Aldebaren, however, had run into a rude awakening when they had tried to match power with Rohini and the Imperium Navy. The resulting civil war and present stalemate was the outcome.

And in the last two years, the House of Saint Peter of the Sacred Consecration had declared itself as a rival to the throne in a misguided attempt to regain the power they had lost over a thousand years ago to their own stupidity and greed. That the Church of the Blessed Prophets was tentatively backing the Lesser House St. Peter had come as a mild surprise to most, but what had really thrown Rohini for a loop was that two Imperium Greater Houses had completely jumped ship and sided with a Church-backed House, two Houses that had been two of the most vocal in their condemnation of The Church of the Blessed Prophets and all that it stood for. Any more such surprises or one more Greater House leaving the Imperium to join any of the rival factions and the Imperium would fall apart completely. And that was something Rohini was not about to tolerate.

He wasn't about to hand a fractured and incomplete Imperium to a potential heir to sort out on his own. The other Houses and their attendant Nobles would eat the poor fellow alive and gain concessions to which they had no right. It was Rohini's job to keep the Imperium together for the new emperor, whomever it may prove to be, and he had vowed to himself that he would reunite the warring Houses before he ever handed the reins of the Imperium over to a Volans.

And he would only hand it over to a Volans.

He might be the Keeper of the Imperium Tuebor but he was loyal to the Prime House Volans first, a little fact that not many knew.

As such, this meeting with the Lord Duke was certainly of importance, as was any meeting with the Greater Houses. The Lesser Houses he really didn't worry much about. They changed sides as often as they changed pants, switching to the side or faction that appeared to be winning at the moment and just as quickly switching back when that advantage seemed to have disappeared. But the Greater Houses he needed and they knew it, just as much as they knew that he held all the cards with the military.

It as a first class stalemate.

He could easily enough understand their tension and uneasiness. Rohini had ruled as de facto emperor for over fifty years and he was certain that they were beginning to wonder whether he would ever choose a successor. He certainly didn't want the job of emperor for

himself and made that perfectly clear at every meeting he had to attend, to every Noble who decided that his petition for who should or should not be emperor was more important than keeping the Drek or the Druzsni in check, or Dwad-Mehstiv from flooding the outer systems. Regardless of what they thought, however, Rohini was not about to let any of these opulent, arrogant, better-than-thou Nobles who thought their shit didn't stink tell him who or who not to put on the throne of the Imperium.

Rohini had his own ideas and plans and they were just starting to bear fruit.

Amalthea's throat clearing brought his attention back to her abruptly. He was certain that she had already cleared her throat several times and he had completely missed it. "I'm sorry, Commander. Was there anything else?"

"No, Sir," she said sweetly with that ever present smile.

She turned to leave and he spoke to her back as the door slid open. "And make certain that you don't insult our Noble guests any more than you have to."

She shut the door behind her without replying.

The sound of a light cough from behind him made an eyebrow raise ever so slightly. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes as he tripped the switch that would activate the anti-eavesdropping shield about his office. "Did you hear about the Lord Duke coming to make his choice concerning the emperor known to me?" he asked the shadow standing against the wall behind him.

The shadow moved into the light and became a thin, tall man with light brown hair and a face that could have been anyone's, the blandness and general appearance the kind of face that melted into the crowd. His eyes were any color that one wanted, those who saw him giving completely different descriptions each and every time. He was rakish in his features to an extent, but his body was a lethal weapon that had proven itself against Drek and H'Chalk and Druzsni more than enough to convince even the most skeptical doubter.

"I knew of his arrival before he even left his home planet, Rohini," the shadow-man said casually, his voice indistinct, yet holding just a touch of a Vajra accent, the slow and easy drawn-out drawl of words like the hum of so many stinging bees.

"I would have expected nothing less, Syrtis."

Syrtis had been Rohini's friend for longer than one should be allowed, their lives intertwined with each other over the decades like a creeping ivy working its way up the trunk of an ancient oak. Rohini trusted the man implicitly, which was a good thing since Syrtis was the Imperium's Spy Master, the man responsible for all acquisition of intelligence and all counter-intelligence activities. And Syrtis was the best at what he did. He had only failed Rohini once in all the time that they had known each other and that failure was a failure in which Rohini shared: they had let

the emperor be assassinated. Even worse, they had yet to find the party responsible, much less the deeper motive behind the whole affair. Syrtis had most of his best people on the job and nothing had ever been uncovered. Nothing. If Rohini didn't know better, he'd have to say that it had been a phantom who had carried out the assassination, a will-o-wisp from the legends come to avenge some long lost wrong.

"Was the insertion successful?" Rohini asked as Syrtis absently inspected some of the small knick-knacks on the Lord Marshall Bhagavan's desk.

Syrtis had slipped in the secret back entrance to Rohini's office, as he always did. No one knew that this man was the Imperium Spy Master except for Rohini and thus it was not advisable that the man whom everyone else thought was just head of the Imperium's obscure Non-human Species Research Division came through the front door of the Lord Marshall Bhagavan's office too often. So the back door was used for the most part, the small snippets of information Syrtis supplied hidden from all prying eyes.

Syrtis didn't even bother looking up as he answered. "It has been done as you directed, though I still have my doubts concerning the whole plan."

Rohini sighed as he finally opened his eyes again to look at the man, who seemed more interested in the office fixtures than the conversation. But then that was just Syrtis' way. He was a master at putting someone completely off guard and then waiting for the mistake, the slip-up that all were bound to make. Far from ignoring Rohini, Syrtis was watching him intently, studying, assessing, evaluating. It was so second nature to the man that he didn't even realize he did it anymore, even to his best friend.

"We don't have many options left, Syrtis."

Syrtis chuckled under his breath, a disconcerting sound like vultures waiting to pounce.. "We have *no* options left." He stared at the fleet disposition holographs, the wall charts of all loyal and rebel systems and absently ran his hand along the top border of one of the projector plates. "You know that if we are ever found out, the Houses will tear us apart limb by limb." He looked sideways at Rohini, licking his lips in a feline, furtive motion.

Rohini smiled briefly, the motion dallying on his mouth for a scant few seconds before returning his face to the normal, stoic expression. "That's why I have you working on it, so that no one does find out. And if all goes well, no one will ever find out."

Syrtis' smile lasted slightly longer.

"And the second part of the plan? Have you found him?"

Rohini watched as Syrtis circled the office like a bird of prey, taking everything in, missing nothing. "I never lost him. He's more or less right where I put him."

Rohini smirked. Smart-ass. "We're going to have to move up the time schedule. The Houses are starting to become even more restless."

Syrtis pushed a small messenger droid out of the way as he chuckled again, to the irritated beeps and whistles of the machine. "Tell them to go to hell, Rohini. Do they forget that it is your Imperium Navy and Planetary Forces that keep their precious shipping lanes open and their planets from pirates and utter devastation? And what about the Drek and the Druzsni? Or even Dwad-Mehstiv for that matter. Who are they to question your decisions?"

"It's not that simple, Syrtis, and you know it. I can't just bully these people around. They would flee to the other factions without a second thought. The only reason I keep them together at all is the promise that I'll find the proper person to put on the throne and as far as each of them is concerned, they're the person I'm thinking of."

"It is a dangerous game you play, you know that? Men have been killed for far less."

"It's the only game in town, Syrtis. And no one said that I couldn't cheat."

Orion Morgase returned to the Creator and said, "Creator, why have you brought trouble upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Dwad-Mehstiv to speak in Your name, they have brought trouble upon Your people and You have not rescued Your people at all." And then the Creator said onto Orion Morgase, "Behold, for now you will see what it is I will do onto Dwad-Mehstiv to deliver my people from bondage."

The Tome of the Blessed Prophets
Exodus 10: 1-4

Planet of Job's Rest
City of Sitsiv Eav
The Seat of the Church of the Blessed Prophets
The Church Prime House St. Paul of the Redeemed Spirit

The windows were large, reaching up a good ten meters to the vaulted, cathedral-type ceiling, ending in three arches adorned with the trappings of gothicesque grandeur. The windows looked out over the illustrious city of Sitsiv Eav, spread out below like a sacrifice to the power of The Church of the Blessed Prophets. The tall, gleaming towers -- none even came close to the height of The Church of the Blessed Prophet's minaret-like assemblage of towers -- were like reflecting spires of the Creator's own hand, catching the first rays of the morning double-sun's brilliance, rising above the green and blue melange of the parks and ponds like reeds on a river bed. The city was a well-laid out melange of grid-line perfection, meant to stand as a testament to the glory that was the Creator, to impress those who came here as supplicates as much as it was designed to appease those who lived under the not so benevolent rule of the Dei Glorium. Home to over twenty million inhabitants, Sitsiv Eav was the seat of The Church of the Blessed Prophet's power, the base -- for the moment at least -- from which the Dei Glorium reached out with benevolent hands to embrace humanity in the doctrines of love and glory that were the foundation of The Church's teachings.

At least that was the party line.

Dei Glorium Vulpecula Hya stood stoically by the tall windows, looking out over her domain as the double-sun rose higher and higher in the clear, deep blue sky. Her hands were clasped loosely behind her back, the long, flowing white robe dragging on the floor behind her hiding any curves hinting at the body beneath. Nine narrow, golden, elaborately-worked stripes encircled each large-mouthed sleeve opening, signifying the nine prophets who made up the ensemble that was the foundation

of The Church of the Blessed Prophets: Moses of Judaism, Mohammed of Islam, Jesus of Christianity, Buddha of Buddhism, Vishnu of Hinduism, St. Orion Morgase of the Blessed Insurrection, St. Aurum Gossamer of the Founding, St. Rishi Rahu of the Independence and St. Cor Caroli of the Imperium. It was a varied and eclectic grouping that was the core of the teachings of The Church of the Blessed Prophets, the teachings of which the Dei Glorium was the spiritual head.

Not many people noticed that it had been over three-thousand-six hundred years since the last prophet had appeared to humanity. And it was good that they didn't notice. Such heretical thoughts concerning why no new prophets had appeared would lead to the type of questions better left unasked. Organizations like The Church of the Blessed Prophets rested on tenuous pillars of half-truths buried in the quicksand that was the past and any questions raised that invalidated those half-truths were held to be heretical and subject to the full might of the confessios. Questions were best left to those who walked the inner corridors of power, not to the common urchin who lived his life of bare-existence on the grid-like streets of Sitciv Eav. Those who held faith in the doctrines and tenets of The Tome of the Blessed Prophets and the holy revelations of St. Aurum Gossamer were best left with incomplete answers. They were supposed to have faith, weren't they?

But then Vulpecula knew that it was far past time for a new prophet to appear, to lead The Church of the Blessed Prophets, and of course humanity, from the troubled times harrowing it; lead it to the glorious future humanity deserved. But she didn't see any such event happening any time soon. That her faith in the Creator was rock solid was beyond doubt. That the Creator would preserve humanity as it had done so many times in the past was also beyond doubt. What the Dei Glorium doubted was that the Creator thought humanity worth saving this time.

She smirked at the errant thought, her prim little mouth that had never known the caresses of a man, small, the narrow almost non-existent lips un-adorned with any cosmetics. Her face was not much better. To say that it was gaunt would be a complement. Her sunken cheeks and hollow caves of eye-sockets reflected the esoteric and austere life-style to which she subjected herself. Her thin and stringy gray hair hung on her head in carefully combed strands. Combing it every night was one of the few luxuries she allowed herself. Her pointy nose stuck out of her face like a beacon, its curved bump of a bridge making it appear twice as large as it actually was. And she was skinny under her robe, her thin, thin body like a walking skeleton. But those who mistook her for weak learned their lesson quickly, the strength she somehow managed to possess far out of proportion to her fragile appearance.

But it was usually her eyes that held in check those who sought an audience. They were the eyes of a much, much younger woman, dark brown eyes sparkling and shining as if possessed by the Creator Herself. They were eyes that brought most people up short when they

saw them, the incongruous mixture of old-age frailty in the body and youth in the eyes the subject of many a quiet discussion outside the towers of The Church of the Blessed Prophet's power. Most people, including the majority of her aides and attendants, found it hard to believe that she was still alive, that her body could still support the life-functions demanding such active use. There were but a few who knew her true age and even those were uncertain, some placing it at two-hundred and fifty while others placed it well over three-hundred. One thing was certain: Vulpecula Hya had held the seat of the Dei Glorium for two-hundred and twenty years, guiding it through a resurrection and resurgence that had brought millions back into the fold. She had done more for The Church of the Blessed Prophets than all the Dei Glorium in the last two-thousand years and talk of her saint-hood was gaining support.

But there was still so much to do.

And the time was drawing near. She could feel it in her old and brittle bones. The time of the reckoning would descend on humanity faster than anyone in The Church of the Blessed Prophets could possibly foresee. Her eyes flashed for a moment, that odd, almost feral glint forcing a smile to tug at the corners of her mouth. She could most definitely feel it coming.

She was not alone in the spacious room containing her office, its walls covered with ancient tapestries -- some said from before the Consolidation, over four thousand years ago -- the floor covered in simple yet effective furniture giving the room a simplicity appealing to the eye. The other person in the room with the Dei Glorium sat in one of those simple chairs, his right leg splayed over an arm-rest, the arrogance on his face and the insolent manner in which he lounged in the presence of the Dei Glorium marking him as but one man: the High Confessio Coronalis. He was one of those people who didn't need but one name to strike fear and terror into the hearts and minds of millions.

Coronalis was everything that the Dei Glorium was not.

He was robust and hardy, his face strong and hard, like chiseled rock. His amber eyes held a mirth to them sparkling with malevolence. He was well-fed though far from fat, his well-toned body under the double-breasted black vest and loose black trousers ending stuffed into high riding boots, a recent fashion he had helped to initiate. His long blonde hair hung down in running curls, several strands braided and hanging down to either side of his high forehead, a cleanly cut and refined goatee adorning his chin. His mouth was large and his manner gregarious when it suited him. Otherwise he was sullen and silent. The brilliant flash of his white, white teeth made his smile dazzle men and women alike, the seductive quality to his manner like an intoxicant. It was a smile sitting upon his face often, the too-many teeth like an inviting trap to the unwary, lulling them in only to destroy them in

seconds with his acerbic and biting tongue that could rip a hole in the most powerful Noble without second-thought.

But then that was his job.

As High Confessio of The Church of the Blessed Prophets, it was his job to root out heresy wherever he found it, to protect the body of The Church of the Blessed Prophets from those who would destroy it with their evil and heathen values. And at the moment, that meant anyone who called themselves a citizen of the Imperium. It was one of the oddities of civilization that one's enemy was generally one's prior friend, perhaps even benefactor. The Church of the Blessed Prophets had been the driving force behind the Imperium back during the reign of the Cor Caroli's and the Imperium had become the protector of The Church of the Blessed Prophets in turn. Now the Imperium was the very foundation of all that was evil, the cauldron that churned out heresy as easily as it created warships. If there was one idea Coronalis held higher than any other, it was the destruction of the Imperium under the House Volans and the incorporation of all those heathens to the bosom of The Church of the Blessed Prophets... and salvation. And if that meant torture and death, then so be it. Better that the un-saved die with the name of the Creator on their lips and their minds, to be risen to His glory -- Coronalis was thoroughly convinced that the Creator was a male regardless what the Dei Glorium professed -- and saved in death than to life live apart from the Creator's shining light and glory.

He looked up from his musings to notice that the Dei Glorium had turned from her early morning perusal out the windows and was staring at him, an object in her hands he did not recognize.

"Do you find the morning amusing, High Confessio?" she asked in that dry, rusted cackle that somehow still managed to flow like the sweet honey off the comb.

He cocked his head to the side slightly as the smile came to his lips unconsciously. He knew better than to match wits with the Dei Glorium. He might push the envelope to breaking, walking a tight-rope of insolence and insubordination, but he never, ever crossed that line. He recognized her power as absolute within The Church of the Blessed Prophets and was not about to endanger his position, or his life, by offending she which was difficult to offend. He had seen her wrath descend like a mighty hammer upon the unsuspecting and he didn't ever want to be on the wrong end of that hammer.

His voice was as smooth as his teeth, a high-handed basso of trembling harmonics that could seduce the innocent and blast the heretics all in the same breath. "I was but basking in the glory that is the Creator, Dei Glorium, and enjoying another beautiful day in His presence."

She snorted slightly and raised an eyebrow at the over-blown answer to her simple question. Coronalis was always trying to sound more intelligent than he was, trying to sound as if he truly believed and

respected her power and position. She saw through his little charade the first time they met. But the man was extremely zealous in the persecution of those who would tear The Church of the Blessed Prophets down and that was more than enough for her to over-look his other short-comings, even if he grated on her nerves with every spoken word.

"Our dear Lord Cardinal Cor Caroli XV is late, as usual," Coronalis intoned with that saccharine sweet voice. "It would appear that he's becoming far too comfortable with his recently elevated position. This could cause a problem."

She smiled at him a moment. "I find that hard to believe. But be that as it may, his current state of mind concerning his placement in the hierarchy of The Church of the Blessed Prophets is of little concern to me. He is but a pawn in a greater game that the Creator has directed me to play. Let him have his moment of glory. It will be but fleeting. A Cor Caroli I he is not."

Coronalis nodded once in acquiescence. Cor Caroli XV, Lord Cardinal of the House of St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration, would learn his place in the greater scheme of things soon enough. Coronalis just hoped that he was the one who was given the chance to explain it to the Lord Cardinal in person. "What is that in your hand, Dei Glorium?"

She eyed him a moment longer, her eyes stone-cold set on his face as if she meant to replace him there and then. It lasted but a moment, a brief second in time, but it was enough to make him remove his leg from over the arm of the chair and sit up straighter. He had never seen that look before in her, almost as if she had been someone else entirely. The edge of the envelope gapped open beneath him. He felt the breeze of his destruction howling below and decided that he had better pull back for a space of time, allow her to become used to him again before pushing too hard. He didn't intend to fall off.

She looked at the object in her hand as if she had never seen it before, a flat shiny disc no more than five centimeters across with a hole in the center. Then recognition flashed in her eyes like a cloud being removed. "Why High Confessio, I would have thought that you of all people would've recognized this storage device." Her voice held a hint of danger to it that he had seldom heard before.

He sat up even straighter as he concentrated on the object.

Yes. He did recognize it, but he could not believe that she held such a thing in her hands. It was sacred. "How did you come by one of those?" he asked in a dry voice, aware that she might be testing him, offering him the forbidden fruit to see if he would bite.

She laughed. She actually laughed. Not a rollicking laugh or a jolly chuckle to be sure, but a laugh nonetheless, chilling in its context. "I am the Dei Glorium, my dear man. There is *nothing* that I can not gain access to. Even this." And she waved the storage disc before him like

an enticement. It caught the rays of the sun working their way into the high windows, flashing like the very hand of the Creator Himself.

What she held, or at least what he thought she held, appeared to be one of the sacred yet heretical storage devices that the supposedly Mythical Monks had used to preserve the heritage of humanity during the Dark Ages of Human Bondage, when Dwad-Mehstiv had enslaved all of humanity. Not much else survived that dark, dark time in man's history, the monks, fleeing and hiding the best they could from the constant searches that Dwad-Mehstiv conducted, having little time to record much else besides the works of the early Prophets. And in either case, it was all that survived the twelve-hundred years of slavery and torture that was Dwad-Mehstiv. Most of those who lived now, if they even knew of the monks and the storage discs, believed that the stories of such devices were as mythical as the idea of a single planet on which all humans evolved. In other words, it was all pure rubbish.

Had that been all, it would have been enough. But somewhere along the line during the last few thousand years, the information saved on the storage discs had become heretical to the extreme. This full fledged paradigm that the information that the monks had saved was now heretical had only come into full existence approximately six hundred years ago. There had been a comprehensive effort to eradicate any opposing opinion toward this new paradigm shift as The Church of the Blessed Prophets struggled with its own existence after the fall of the House of St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration and the rise of the heathen Prime House Volans. Yes, the works that the monks preserved, at the peril of their own lives, had been the basis for the foundation of The Church of the Blessed Prophets that the blessed and most beloved Saint Aurum Gossamer established in 1127 P.Y.I., but few knew of that connection and none save perhaps the Dei Glorium herself knew of the actual contents of the storage discs. And that was the way that The Church of the Blessed Prophets wanted it, though why was beyond Coronalis' immediate comprehension. To most people, anything to do with the Dark Ages of Human Bondage and the supposed civilization humans had established prior to that catastrophe was tainted and thus evil, a product of Dwad-Mehstiv and thus untouchable, if it was even the truth, and the truth was one thing that those in power seldom wanted to share.

So it was that he could not understand why she choose now, of all times, to present this unholy piece of knowledge to him. This was not like her at all. "But by your own decree, possession of such an object, if it's truly what I think it is, is punishable by death, unconsecrated death and denial of burial in hallowed ground."

She seemed disappointed for a moment, pursing her lips at the man as if he had just spoiled all her fun. She tossed the disc at him unexpectedly. It flew through the air like a heretical flame, straight for his heart. Touching it was tantamount to a death-sentence. He stared

at it for a moment, uncertain whether to ignore it and offend the Dei Glorium or touch it and bring heresy upon his head. The opening of the far, tall, double doors made up his mind, but even then it was as if he were in a dream, reaching down as if watching his body from a distance picking up the small disc, sliding it into an inner pocket. He could swear that he could feel it burn through to his skin.

Cor Caroli XV, direct descendant of the Prophet St. Cor Caroli I, founder of the First Imperium, most Blessed of The Church of the Blessed Prophets, was a short, fat little man with a fat little face and a fat little mind. He was nothing compared to the power-house that his distant ancestor had been. In fact, if Cor Caroli I were to see this man and know that he was a direct descendent, he would probably kill the man and all his offspring to stop the line from further denigration. If Cor Caroli I found out that his glorious House had become a small, Lesser House, he would probably turn over in his grave.

Cor Caroli XV waddled in with a contrite look plastered to his face, the obvious fear and loathing mixed together leaking out like pressed sweat. Because of the extensive genetic engineering occurring with all newborns to ensure healthy reproductions, anyone who grew this fat did it with great effort. It was something that had to be worked on constantly. It was a mark, as of late, of the opulence and decadence of the Houses, whether Greater or Lesser, more and more of the Nobles flaunting their wealth by becoming large, flatulent walking corpses to let every one know that they were a Noble. It was disgusting to say the least and frowned upon greatly by The Church of the Blessed Prophets. But such restrictions were largely ignored by those Houses that didn't seem to feel themselves especially tied to The Church of the Blessed Prophets, or to those who thought themselves above The Church of the Blessed Prophet's prerogative

It disgusted the Dei Glorium personally and she showed it in her face, her stance, the very tone in her voice. Unfortunately, she needed this fat, little man at the moment, needed his House and its name and reputation and thus she would have to live with the sight of his flab for a while longer.

"I must apologize for my tardiness, Dei Glorium," he drawled in that sickly sweet voice that should have come from a female. He tried to bow, to kiss the ring that she reluctantly extended to him and had it not been completely revolting, it would have been comical.

"And what brings the House of St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration to Sirciv Eav?" she spoke softly, using her voice like a sledge-hammer, a talent she had learned long ago to intimidate those of lesser stature.

Cor Caroli straightened up, his eyes darting from the Dei Glorium to the High Confessio like little, black arrows. "I was most humbly wondering when The Church of the Blessed Prophets would be extending its military forces of the House of St. Paul of the Redeemed Spirit to my bid for the Throne of the Imperium. I fear that --- "

"Your fears are of no concern to me," she said as she cut him off cleanly. He looked up at her like a lost puppy. "You know full well why I withheld my full support and I grow weary of having to explain it to you every time the Imperium glances in your direction and you pee in your pants"

The shocked expression on his face was matched by the mirth washing over Coronalis' face.

She stared down at him for several long, intolerably silent moments before speaking again. "But it's obvious that you need another explanation to ease your ground-less fears." She took a deep breath of exasperation, then continued, her eyes like fireballs of redemption. "The Church of the Blessed Prophets cannot be seen to be militarily supporting your bid for the throne of the Imperium, else those in the Imperium see it as a threat and rally the people against what they perceive as The Church of the Blessed Prophets' attempt to regain the power that is rightfully theirs to wield. The last time The Church of the Blessed Prophets tried to move too quickly was a disaster on an apocalyptical scale, as I'm sure you are well aware. We can't afford to offend the Imperium again, for this time I fear that they will surely dismantle us completely. You know full well that we must make the move back to the power behind the Imperium slowly, gradually. The same applies to the Church Prime House St. Paul of the Redeemed Spirit. They are far too close to The Church of the Blessed Prophets at the moment to lend you open support. Your bid for the throne is easily explained by the fact that your House once held the throne to the Imperium and simply wants it back. It's already assumed that The Church of the Blessed Prophet is responsible for the assassination of the emperor. Open support, especially militarily, will only make the situation worse. Why is this not clear to you? It is really quite simple."

His eyes held the faintest hint of contempt in them as he stared back at her without saying a word. That was good. She needed the man to have *some* back-bone so that he wouldn't fold completely the first time the Imperium put pressure on him, which they had yet to do. Her plans hinged on the fact that Cor Caroli XV and the House of St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration stay viable long enough to allow her own forces to mobilize. It was imperative.

She moderated her tone, smiled at him slightly -- though not too much lest he think her weakening -- and spoke again. She had to be careful around this one. He was liable to bolt at any minute and seek asylum with the Lord Marshall Bhagavan and that would be tantamount to a full fledged disaster. "Soon the entire might of The Church of the Blessed Prophets will be concentrated against the Imperium. But the moment must be right. And that moment has yet arrived. Was there anything else you wanted?"

Cor Caroli smiled weakly back at her, bowing again ever so slightly. "I trust your judgment in these matters, Dei Glorium, and will defer to you as such. As for anything else I may wish to ask, it can wait."

She could almost smell the hatred radiating from him. That was good. It would all be needed. He would need all the hate he could muster for the times ahead. The times ahead would demand nothing less. "Then you may go. There is much on my schedule today." She turned her back to the man and walked over to the large windows again, his dismissal complete.

Cor Caroli waited a moment, then looked at the High Confessio. Coronalis made a disgusted face and turned away from the fat, little man. The Creator certainly was free in his disposition of salvation. But Coronalis was certain that if he were just allowed to push Cor Caroli a little, he would find the underlying evil lurking in the man's heart. And then he would squeeze that fat, little body until all the evil was taken out and all that was left was what the Creator had given him to begin with. Of course, the man would be dead long before that occurred, but there was always a price to pay for salvation.

Cor Caroli, as if he could read the High Confessio's mind, blanched a moment, his face as pasty pale as death, then left meekly yet quickly, seething with anger and hatred. His had once been the mightiest House in the Imperium, in all humanity for that matter and had ruled with an iron fist for over a thousand years. To be reduced to this was pathetic. When he sat on the Throne of the Imperium again and had the power of the Imperium Navy at his finger-tips, then he would make The Church of the Blessed Prophets pay for their arrogance. He would make them all pay.

When the door finally closed behind the fat, little man, Coronalis was able to think once more on the disc burning against his skin. He was about to speak, to ask the Dei Glorium why he should read the sacrilegious drivel the disc was sure to contain, but she spoke first, her voice curt, sharp, dismissive. "You may also go, High Confessio. I wish to be alone with the glory of the morning.

It was not often that Coronalis was dismissed so out-of-hand and he fumbled over himself to get out, to get the disc away from his skin and stop the burning sensation. He walked as casually as he could to his office, passing far too many people with far too little to do, all, he was certain, staring right through his coat to the disc he carried. He almost tumbled into his office, slamming the door behind him and trying to catch his breath. His chest was heaving as if he had just run a marathon, his heart pounding for escape from the disc. Sitting down and trying to relax, he realized that he probably didn't even have a device to read the ancient thing. The technology that had produced this un-holy relic had been outdated for nye on eight thousand years, from before the time of the Dark Ages of Human Bondage. He fumbled around in his office for several minutes looking for he knew not what,

then finally called in a translation droid. He would have to destroy the droid after using it, to make certain that little miscreant didn't go spreading the word about what it had translated -- giving the little machines sentient intelligence had been a huge mistake as far as Coronalis was concerned. It wasn't until a good hour later that the little translator arrived and figured out how to read the disc, an hour in which he sweated more than he had ever sweated before. The disc sat on his desk as if it carried a Drek plague. This was ludicrous. If anyone came in on him with this disc in his possession, he would have a difficult if not impossible time explaining it away, whether or not the Dei Glorium gave it to him. Heresy was heresy, regardless who told you to commit it.

The little translator droid beeped, signaling that it was ready to display the translated disc. He locked the door, making certain that no one bothered him. The words were holographically projected into the air and as he read, his sweating stopped and his mouth became dry.

The simple question of *why?* continued to pound at the back of his head. Why had the Dei Glorium given him this disc at this time? Why did she want him to read it? But most importantly, the one thought persistently pounding at the back of his head was that what he was reading was no different than what was contained in the Holy Tome of the Blessed Prophets. To be certain, many of the words were changed and some concepts rearranged, but to his utter astonishment, the words he was reading, supposedly the most heretical and sacrilegious words ever written, were the same as the most holy words written by St. Aurum Gossomer. How was that possible?

In the beginning was the word, and the word was God...

Hope is the worst type of punishment that can be given to a prisoner, for hope can be taken away at a moment's notice to more effectively crush the soul than any other form of torture.

Reflections of an anonymous prisoner

**Imperium Penal Colony of K'ar Krack'a
Level 5
Gnestholum Mines**

Christl found herself in that half-dream state, on the border of sleep where illusion and reality merged to form a state of unease and restlessness. She heard voices, yet was unsure whether they were in her dreams or not. Images flashed before her mind's eye as real as anything she had ever seen, sensations making her feel like she was walking, talking, bathing. She felt like she was melting, as if her skin were oozing off her bones in a torrid of heat choking the life out with every breath. She couldn't tell anymore what time it was, what day it was -- or was it cycle, that odd terminology they used here in these dark, sun-less caves where life was worth less than a bowl of gray, putrid mush -- or even if she were still in the transport, still at work in her labs with Dr. Groh. And then she was being raped, attacked by Ailanthus and Tethys, by that Druzsni bitch with whom Ailanthus wanted her to get along, as if that were ever going to happen.

And worse of all was the attack by Pitatus about which she dreamt, his ugly, pock-ridden face leering over hers with that fetid swamp-breath reeking of death and decay. She screamed, or at least tried to scream, but nothing came out of her mouth. And then her mouth was filled with a putrescence that had to be the most disgusting thing she had ever tasted in her life, as it was jammed in and out forcefully. She struggled to escape, part of her mind warning her that it was not real, that it was all illusion.

A face appeared before her out of the mist, a feminine face. She thought it the most beautiful she had ever beheld, a face of angelic splendor come to save her from the ravages of a mad man. But at the

last moment it turned into a demonic visage of death and destruction, a Druzsni face of killing and maiming.

She awoke fully with a start, realizing that the face was not part of the dream but was real, as real as the sweetish, malodorous body-odors swirling about the cave like a fog. She jumped up and thrashed out at the figure she was certain was trying to attack her, to hold her down so that the evil that was Pitatus could rape her further -- or had she dreamt all that? She finally found her voice and screamed at the top of her lungs, only to find a hand clamped tightly over her mouth, filthy with the inlaid grime of years in the mines. She struggled to free herself, hysteria beginning to overwhelm any senses she might have left. She began to cry, pitiful moans of abandonment as she prayed fervently -- she had never been all that religious but now was as good a time as any to start -- that this nightmare would end, that she would find herself back in her own room, in her own soft bed with her own possessions around her in a protective halo of familiarity.

She was slapped hard across the face, the cold sting of the hand forcing her eyes open and her senses to re-assert themselves. The pain spread over her face like liquid-fire. Why did people always know exactly where to slap someone so that the pain was at maximum? Was there a special school that taught that?

Thaliana held her, a look of contempt on her face barely leaching through the death lurking in those cold, cold eyes. Christl instantly stopped struggling, staring back at the Druzsni with wide-eyed shock. Thaliana let her go, speaking to her in a fierce whisper grating on Christl's ears like sandpaper. "It's time to go to work, child." She looked Christl over as if she were at a slave auction on Frag're Prime, then looked back up with those hard eyes belonging in the head of a killer and the beauty that was her face, her words hissing like a disturbed snake. "And if you try to attack me like that again, I'll not be so lenient." She eyed Christl a moment longer, then let go completely and backed away into the murkiness that was the cave.

Christl tried to relax, to slow the too rapid beating of her heart. Her clothes were once again soaked with her own sweat, the smell beginning to tickle her nose in an unattractive way. Her shirt had not been made for such prolonged wetness and as she sat down to gather herself, she realized that it was more or less see-through now. That would not do. They would think that she was promiscuous were she to go to work like this. She longed for the bathing pool, to just take a dip and wash the grime of the night away, even though she still had an aversion to the place due to Tethys and his antics. She ran her hand through her tattered, butchered hair and almost started to cry again. She had been so proud of her hair, its length and sheen always commented on by the males with whom she had worked. Now it was nothing short of a catastrophe.

She noticed another body moving about the darkness of the cave that wasn't Thaliana and quickly ascertained that it was that brute Tethys, the man she was certain would take her into a side cave and rape her the first chance he had. Regardless of what Ailanthus had told her, had assured her, she was certain that either Tethys was going to ravish her or that Thaliana was going to torture her once they made it to this supposed work site. But she really had no choice, did she? This was her life now and she would have to learn to adapt to it. *Little chance of that happening any time soon*, she thought to herself.

She took a deep breath to try to calm herself further, to make her mind work the problem out. She had always relied on her mind to help her, to get her through all the difficult times in her life. She laughed at herself for that thought. Compared to this, her life had been easy and comfortable, her problems trivial and unimportant. She shook her head as she ran her hand through her hair again and looked around for something she could use as a shirt to cover herself.

A looming shape approached out of the darkness to stand over her like a vulture. The voice was rich and deep, yet hinted at softness like a contradiction. "I'm glad to see that you're in better spirits this morning. Laughing is always a good sign."

She looked up at Tethys. Although she could barely make out his face, she was certain that the man was leering at her chest, the images of him raping her from her dreams slamming home with an intensity she found frightening. She visibly shrank back from him, clutching one of the blankets to her. She tried to put on her best indifferent look and spoke to him, aware that her voice quivered, but proud of the fact that at least it didn't squeak or break up. "I need a new shirt. This one is no good when wet."

Thaliana stepped up next to Tethys. She wasn't certain, but she could swear that both had smiles on their faces, that even a light chuckle had escaped one of their mouths.

"I wouldn't worry about that at the moment, child," Thaliana said in that infuriating sweet voice of hers.

Christi straightened up slightly. She hated it when that bitch called her child. "I'm not a child, Druzsni."

"Then stop acting like a child," Tethys spit at her as he turned to walk away. He spoke again with his back to her, his voice like acid. "Stay close to either me or Thaliana at all times once we leave this cave. We can't be responsible for what happens to you if you decide to wander off or ignore our orders." He didn't wait for any reply from her as he walked out. She didn't think that he was expecting any.

Thaliana stood before Christi with her hands planted firmly on her hips, waiting, she supposed, for Christi to stand up. Frowning and sighing at the same time, Christi made her way to her feet, her legs protesting the sudden movement. Thaliana didn't even wait for Christi to say that she was ready. She just turned on her heel and walked out

after Tethys, leaving Christl to follow hurriedly behind, wrapping the smallest blanket she could find around her chest despite the suffocating heat.

She quickly caught up to Tethys and Thaliana as they merged with the rest of the occupants of the others caves, all making their way to the chow-hall like a living stream of people, all sweaty and dirty and dejected. She didn't want to saddle up too closely to either Tethys or Thaliana, but she also didn't want to be too far away, the looks she was receiving from men and women alike making her skin go cold despite the heat. Only one thought kept any hope burning in her heart. The information she contained in her mind, the information concerning the new guard droids was her one key. That was her golden ticket out of this place and she meant to use it to the fullest. She looked up at Tethys and spoke, trying to keep her voice low. "When do you think that Ailanthus will want me to tell him about the guard codes for the escape plan?"

She found herself on the ground, the ringing in her head like a large church bell, the taste of blood in her mouth hot and bitter. Her stomach revolted against her but there was nothing left to expel and so she dry-heaved with painful, retching gasps.

She felt a presence close to her right ear, the harsh, low hiss of a voice like a buzz-saw drilling into her head identifying it as the Druznsni. "The next time you so much as *hint* at any escape plan, I'll make certain that you *never* speak again."

Rough hands grabbed her under the arms, fingers digging into breasts as she was rudely lifted up onto her feet. Her hand went to her mouth and came away bloody, the stinging of the cut lip starting to make its presence felt. Tethys hustled her along abruptly, not even asking if she was injured and most likely not caring in the least. Christl stared at the Druznsni with open hatred and contempt, clouded with a layer of fear starting to boil inside her. There was no reason to hit her like that. It wasn't like anyone else could have heard her.

She wasn't looking forward to work this cycle at all.

Neither said anything else to her until they reached the front of the food line, ahead of everyone else -- as was their prerogative. No one was about to argue with Ailanthus' people after the affair with the H'chalk.

It wasn't until she reached the front of the line that Christl realized that everyone else had a small metal bowl in their hands. Tethys and Thaliana held two each. She was almost afraid to mention it to either of her two companions, but she didn't have a bowl. At least not anymore. One of the others with whom she had arrived had asked her if he could borrow it for a moment and she had completed forgotten about it when Pitatus and Ailanthus had fought over her. From where was she supposed to have gotten a new bowl? Was there a store or something?

But when she was shoved by Tethys to the table where the ludicrously large cauldron sat with the dirty and unkempt human behind it, the ladle in his hands encrusted with the last few years worth of food, she had no choice. She looked up at Tethys, the fear in her eyes and stomach that he would strike her again making her knees tremble. "I don't have a bowl," she squeaked out in a voice she didn't recognize as her own. It was much calmer than she could have ever thought she could speak.

Tethys and Thaliana looked at her with such looks of hopelessness of her ever surviving here that even the humans standing behind the group in line shied back.

The human behind the cauldron spoke in a sandpaper grating voice rumbling out of his chest like an arc-welder. "Either 'old your bowls out or step out o' line. I've a schedule to keep 'ere, burn your 'ides for the sins of The Church, and I can't wait for you prissy little thing to decided whether or not you want to eat."

Tethys switched his gaze from Christl to the cook and she was certain that she heard the man growl, his eyes narrowing until all that was left was left were slits of pure passion.

The cook took one look, his eyebrows raising a good full two inches, then attempted a weak smile. "I mean, take your time, please. No rush 'ere."

Tethys and Thaliana held their bowls out and they were filled with more than the usual amount of mush -- and the usual amount of weevils and other bugs -- and then they dragged Christl away from the line toward the exit. Thaliana was the first to speak, her voice no less angry and frustrated than before. "What by the nine moons of Dnath'Car did you *do* with your bowl, you useless human? Is there nothing that you can do correctly? How difficult is it to keep track of a little bowl?" Thaliana awkwardly took her two bowls in her left hand and grabbed Christl by the collar with the right hand. The already wet and worn shirt ripped in the Druzni's grasp, coming apart completely and leaving her topless. "Where are we supposed to get another bowl for you?! Huh? What Ailanthus sees in you besides a good fuck I don't understand at all!"

Christl couldn't understand the tantrum the Druzni was having at her expenses. It wasn't like Thaliana didn't get her food or that it was a burden to the Druzni that Christl didn't have a bowl. She didn't understand what the drama was all about. And that remark about her and Ailanthus was un-called for. Who did she think she was?

She pulled the blanket close to her body, trying to cover herself as she responded to the Druzni, her temper flaring. "What the hell do you care? It's not like I'm hungry or that I'd even want to eat that crap. And that remark about me fucking Ailanthus was unnecessary, bitch. I wouldn't want to touch him if you paid me."

She was certain that had Thaliana not needed to drop her food to slug her, she would be on the ground again with blood pouring out of more than her mouth. Why she had said all that, had stood up to the Druzni, she didn't know. She was fully aware that Thaliana didn't like her and was looking for the slightest opportunity to show it, so why Christl continued to antagonize her was a mystery. She had always had a sharp tongue, and a tongue that was too fast for its own good. Her mother had warned her that she was going to get into trouble with it one day, and she now saw that that day had arrived.

Tethys grabbed Christl's other arm and pulled her away from Thaliana, nearly dragging her to the dark tunnel where others were slowly migrating. "I suggest that you keep your mouth shut for the rest of the cycle. Your standing with us is very shaky at the moment, regardless of what you might think regarding your value and it would be best if you just kept quiet. Your mouth is far too powerful for your body to back up." He looked at her a moment, the utter contempt and anger in his eyes flaring at her like a flash-burn. "And it's a good thing that you're not hungry, because you won't be getting anything until dinner at the end of the cycle. Perhaps *then* you'll understand why you need to keep better track of your bowl." It was said with caustic indifference cutting into her like a knife.

She had no response for him, his grip on her arm digging in and starting to cut off the circulation to her fingers. Thaliana followed close behind, eating her mush as she walked, growling under her breath and uttering unpronounceable Druzni expletives Christl was certain were directed her way. They walked for what seemed like forever and finally Christl had to ask about what she was supposed to wear for a shirt when they reached the work site, because she certainly wasn't going to just go top-less. Thaliana ignored her completely and anger and humiliation flared inside her. She had not been raised in a Noble House and educated at the best universities to be reduced to this, slaving half-naked in a penal colony.

Tethys actually smiled at the question, but it was far from a smile of mirth or friendliness. It sent shivers down her spine despite the heat that seemed to have grown exponentially the further down the tunnel they trudged. She felt like a drenched sponge by the time Tethys stopped dragging her and she realized with a start that they were finally at the work-site, the incessant sounds of the equipment like someone hammering away at her head.

It was then that she saw why he had smiled at her in that manner when she asked about a new shirt. And it wasn't what she was expecting to see at all, though once she thought about it for a second, she should have seen it coming.

Below the ragged, rough-hewed ledge on which they stood was a large roundish chamber within which stood at least fifty assorted prisoners, human and non-human, male and female alike. As her eyes

adjusted to the brighter work lights, her heart skipped a beat as she realized that all the prisoners worked shirtless, including the females, the grime and sweat mixing together to create a sheen of despair and hard work gripping her stomach and squeezing ruthlessly. Her jaw dropped at the sight as she took in not only the shirtlessness of the workers but also the conditions in which they toiled. Numerous auxiliary tunnels spread off the main chamber like threads of a giant spider web. People continually walked in and out of several with large, bulky pieces of equipment looking as ancient as the Noble Houses themselves. Noises drifted from the tunnels like distant thunder, the constant clank-clank of some unseen machinery setting up a demonic cacophony in the distance.

There was no way she was expected to work down there, much less to work top-less like some Amor Recreation Colony sexual entertainment employee. That was just asking too much.

But when Thaliana pulled off her own shirt and then roughly pulled the blanket from Christl's hands and tossed it aside, Christl knew that they certainly did mean for her to work top-less, right alongside all the other prisoners in all the dirt and tunnels and heat rising from the ground like waves of shimmering mirages. And as Christl watched the workers, transfixed by the way they just trudged along as if in a trance, Tethys pulled her along after him down to the floor of the chamber. She realized with uncomfortable clarity that she, Christl, was by far the youngest and most attractive of the women -- apart from Thaliana of course who seemed to exude sensuality and grace like a perfume despite the depressive atmosphere. In fact, it appeared that Christl was also by far also the *weakest* of the women. The others looked hardened by a life of hell, not much different in muscular development than most of the men, whereas Christl was all soft curves and weakness.

None of this was lost on those who watched her descend, the leering eyes and cat-calls from both the men and the women telling her in no uncertain terms that she had indeed been dropped straight into hell. Even the Drek scattered amongst the workers seemed interested in her, though she didn't quite think that it had anything to do with her as a worker. They probably saw her as a tender, juicy thing to eat compared to the stringy, hardened humans they worked around. She would not have been surprised at all if a demon stepped out from one of the tunnels and began to snap a whip at the pathetic humans. She saw her fate as one that didn't have much of a future, regardless of the information she had safety stored in her mind.

Tethys roughly pulled her to a halt. When he let go of her arm, she rubbed it, the double dose of Thaliana's death grip and Tethys' brutish charm leaving an indelible mark on both her forearms, as if she had been branded.

"you needn't be so rough," she tried to say calmly, though it came out more as a whimper.

"Which part of *shut your mouth* don't you understand?" he asked with that thunderous whisper, not even glaring at her anymore but rather looking toward one of the far rough-hewed tunnels. It was then that she noticed several guard droids milling about, mostly high above the chamber hovering to the quiet thump-thump of their anti-grav boosters. They didn't seem very interested in anything the prisoners were doing and when she watched with horror one of the larger humans slam a crude shovel over the head of a neighboring Drek to the splatter of blood and brain-matter, she was certain that were she to get into any trouble, the guards would be the last ones to notice her, much less help her.

Thaliana stood behind Christl almost protectively, ignoring the few and occasional calls for her to join this or that team.

Tethys frowned at whatever it was that he saw, grumbling something under his breath that she didn't catch -- she noticed that he grumbled like that a lot -- then turned to look at her, his eyes consciously coming to rest on breasts. They lingered there but a moment, despite her crossed arms covering all the vital areas, then snapped up to her eyes, burning at her like smoldering embers, the ever slightest hint of red touching his cheeks. But as she looked at him, her chin set high with a diffidence that didn't feel like her at all, she noticed that his eyes also held something else, something softer and more comforting; perhaps even protectively. But it was gone as quickly as it appeared and she was certain that she had imagined the entire thing.

"I suppose that you don't know how to handle a Grehlint borer?" he asked with slightly less gravel in his voice.

"I don't even know what that is," she answered quietly, not wanting to incur his wrath again.

Thaliana snorted behind her, a disgusting sound Christl was certain was one of disdain. "What *do* you know, child?"

She turned to look at the Druzni. There was a fire in Christl's eyes for the briefest of moments, the frustration and anger and fear building up like an avalanche. She didn't have to take this. This was all a mistake. People had always treated her so nicely before, had always wanted to do everything for her. Now she was being forced to work topless in a slave mine with a Druzni towering over her and insulting her at every turn. She started to shake slightly, through whether it was from fear or anger she knew not. She spoke with a coldness she didn't know she possessed, the constant admonishments by both Thaliana and Tethys to keep quiet lost in the never-ending noise of the chamber. "Stop calling me child, bitch, before I "

"Before you what?" Thaliana answered with a slight smile tugging at her mouth. She stepped closer to Christl, crowding her. "You're far too scared and fragile and pampered to threaten anyone here, child, so be careful of the words you use."

Christl narrowed her eyes and snarled. She was sick and tired of being treated like this and decided then and there, despite the fear gripping her stomach like a vise and holding her bladder hostage, that she was going to do something about it. If that something ended up getting her hurt or even killed, she didn't care. What difference did it make? She couldn't live her life like this, not one more moment and regardless what Ailanthus asked of her, she wasn't about to let a disgusting and heathen Druznsni order her around. "Listen *bitch*, I've had about enough of you and your attitude." She turned to give an eye-full to Tethys. "And you too, you over-grown freg worm. If you want something of me, just ask or show me but stop treating me like a piece of meat that's here for your own amusement!"

Several nearby workers stopped to watch the confrontation, the possibility of conflict always a reason to stop working and watch. And the fiery young human was cute when she was angry.

Thaliana raised an eyebrow ever so slightly. "Just do as you're told, child, and all will be well."

Christl struck out at the Druznsni. As soon as her arm began moving, she realized the terrible mistake she was about to make, but it was too late to pull back. She intended to slap the bitch across the face as hard as she could, but her hand barely made it half-way there before, with lightning reflexes, Thaliana reached out and grabbed Christl's arm in mid-stroke. Their eyes met for a moment that lasted an eternity to Christl, her life flashing before her mind and her finding it quite lacking. Christl waited for the inevitable. Druznsni had killed and maimed millions of humans, including several ancestors of Christl's and she was certain that now she would be added to that list of the dead. Druznsni were known to kill for less. All she could do was hold her head up and take whatever was coming. She wasn't about to let this Druznsni see her fright, or fall to her knees and beg for mercy. That wasn't Christl and she would see herself burn in hell -- which she wasn't so sure she wasn't in at the moment anyway -- before she let any Druznsni see her beg. She had had enough.

But to Christl's utter surprise -- and relief -- Thaliana smiled. It was a tight smile to be sure, but it was a smile, reflected in those deep blue eyes with a twinkle of what Christl was positive was satisfaction. She watched with bare fascination and confusion as Thaliana slowly lowered her arm and then let go. Those watching gave a collective sigh of disappointment and went back to their drudgery.

"I'm glad to see that the spark of life is still within you, *human*," Thaliana stated in emotionless tones. But her voice was not the harsh, sharp bite it had been before. In fact, it was almost done right amiable.

"What was that all about?" Christl asked softly, still wary of another sudden change of attitude from the Druznsni. "Were you trying to provoke me?"

"You don't need much extra effort on our part to provoke you, girl," Tethys stated dryly as he frowned again.

"We needed to see if you were willing to fight for yourself. This is no place for anyone weak. The weak end up dead and I don't want to be the one to have to tell Ailanthus that his pet was killed while I was watching her," Thaliana voiced with that imperturbable tone of hers. "You do just exactly as Tethys and I say and you keep that large mouth shut and you'll do fine. You humans certainly are prone to babble."

Christl was as much shocked by Thaliana's candid confirmation of her fitness as she was at being referred to as *Ailanthus' pet*. Completely ignoring the third admonishment to keep her mouth shut, she voiced her displeasure. "I'm *not* anyone's pet, Druzsni, and I don't intend to be either. And your concern for my welfare is touching."

Thaliana rolled her eyes and shook her head as Tethys grabbed Christl's arm again and escorted her to one of the tunnels where men and women were busily digging with hand tools, moving the rock loosened by the power equipment.

"This one makes me remember why my species tends to steer clear of humans," Thaliana said under her breath, though more than loud enough to make sure that Christl heard her.

Christl ignored the remark, more concerned with where Tethys was leading her and the game that they had played with her just now to see if she was willing to defend herself. That had taken her completely by surprise. She had never before been purposely pushed to the breaking point. It didn't bode well for the rest if her stay here.

When Tethys handed her a large, unwieldy shovel and pointed at the other workers, she realized that he expected her to actually do manual labor with this crude instrument. She stood staring at him and the shovel, hoping that the man would change his mind.

He didn't.

What he did do was physically place her hands on the shovel -- they were so large and powerful compared to hers that she doubted that the man could ever handle anything delicate or touch someone without that inherent roughness making up his character. When it was obvious that he wasn't going to change his mind concerning the work that he expected her to accomplish, she sighed, her shoulders sagging visibly as she moved the heavy shovel and attempted to scoop up some of the loose rock sparkling and shining with the minute deposits of Gnesthiolium. She struggled with the weight and managed to pick up less than a half-kilo. Lifting the shovel high enough to dump it into the hover-bucket was even more of a strain and she lost half her load by the time it got to the bucket, leaving perhaps two or three pieces of small rock to fall hollowly into the empty container. She caught Tethys watching the entire procedure with a grim look on his face, his stoicism barely touched. He shook his head at her and turned to leave.

A dirty, grimy hand cold as ice and scarred with a multitude of old and new cuts, touched her forearm and she looked up into a disgusting leering face that seemed to be fastened tightly on her uncovered breasts as if he was ready to attack them with his tongue. He licked his lips several times as he spoke, his voice oily and filled with a menace impacting her nose like a miasma. "I kno' a place I can ta'e y' w'ere we can..." he snickered as he smiled, most of his teeth missing or decayed to rough-cut stumps of black putrescence, "...w'ere we can 'ave a goo' time toget'er, eh? W'at do y' dink? Me and y'?" She tried to pull her arm free but his grasp was lethally strong. "Resisting 'ill only 'ake me wanna 'urt y'," he intoned with an evil undercurrent of perversion.

She had thought that nothing could be worse than standing in this hell-pit half-naked shoveling rocks with a shovel that she couldn't even lift. She was obviously wrong.

The man's other hand moved toward a breast, his mouth actually drooling.

His hand never made it.

She didn't see the shovel until it impacted on the side of the man's head, bursting it open like a rip melon, blood and brains and skull fragments spraying Christl and coating her completely. She couldn't even scream she was so shocked. The body slumped to the ground like a dead weight, blood pouring out of the smashed-out skull like water from a spilled skin. She had never seen a man killed before and certainly not right before her eyes. She looked at the man responsible for the murder -- which was all that she could think of it as even though it had saved her from what she was sure would have been a terrible ordeal -- and found Tethys dropping the bloody shovel with disgust.

His face held no emotion, no hint at what he had just done. It was if his attack on the man was nothing out of the ordinary and she was beginning to understand that it probably was nothing out the ordinary here. He looked at her a moment as if studying her, his eyes never wandering from hers. She had long since given up on trying to cover herself and stood staring back at him without a thought concerning her exposure.

Then he spoke as he turned to leave, his voice smooth and easy. "He was never worth much anyway. Always shirking his duties. Not much of a loss." He stopped and lifted his head up, as if sniffing the air around him, then spoke again, not bothering to turn around to look at her. "If anyone else bothers you, make sure you tell me." He said it more than loud enough that those working around her were certain to hear and by the way they all moved away from her, she was sure that they had.

Although glad Tethys had dispatched the man, she was appalled at the casual attitude with which he did it. Was life worth so little here?

But no one bothered her for the rest of the cycle.

In fact, no one even spoke to her.

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They barely even looked at her.

*In business, gambling is a factor that must be considered as necessary.
The only problem is that deciding how much to gamble and on what to gamble
can sometimes be as much of a gamble as the decision itself.*

Excerpt from the Treatise:
Through Human Eyes
Cos van der Rijj
Founder of the Human Trade Cart
705 P.Y.I.

Anolis connected the last plasma relay to the shunt, sliding in the bio-metric circuit with a soft click. "Okay. Try it now," he yelled down to his brother Crocus who stood by the main power de-coupler a good forty meters below. Anolis was wedged into a small opening never meant for a human, a crude safety line of his own invention securing him with more peace of mind than strength.

The cramped main-power shaft ran the length of the junctors between levels three, four and five and supplied all the necessary power for the lights and machinery the prisoners used. Specialty droids units repaired all the important power connections and plasma relays supplying the security implementations or protocols for the colony so that no prisoners ever gained access. The circuits and relays on which Anolis and Crocus were working posed a minor to non-existent security risk and the administration could care less if the circuits completely failed. Whether the prisoners worked and lived and ate in the dark or if they had to dig the tunnels with their bare hands made little difference. All that mattered was that the work was done and the production levels didn't drop.

And thus, it was up to the prisoners themselves to repair and tend any of these minor systems if they wanted them to continue to function in anything close to a normal way. Anolis and Crocus had volunteered for the job several years ago -- or at least it felt like several years; time around here had its own special way of screwing with ones mind -- figuring that it would be a far cry from the heat and intensive labor of the mines. They were not the type to lug rocks around or do any type of

digging. Unfortunately, the decrepit system K'ar Krack'a possessed needed constant attention and rather than the cushy and easy job the brothers had expected, it had turned into a struggle against the administration and the other prisoners, both wanting more from them than they could produce.

But they weren't about to let the job go.

That would be foolish to the extreme.

First of all, their job did get them out of the mines and the heavy labor and that in itself was a good thing regardless of the difficulty of the job. Second, this job allowed Crocus and Anolis access to areas of the colony where no other prisoners were allowed and thus they were able to gain valuable information as well as needed supplies, using their job as cover. And finally, the last and most important reason they continued was that the areas to which they were able to gain access were not as security risk-free as the administration believed. In fact, Anolis had figured out that the backup quantum bio-metric computer access lines ran right along the auxiliary plasma power relay backup system for levels three, four and five. And the auxiliary plasma power relays ran right through the main power shaft in which they happened to be working at the very moment and had been working in for several months. It wasn't their fault that the circuitry was so ancient and shot-out that it needed constant, almost cyclic attention.

It was a perfect set-up.

From this shaft, they had access to all of the main computer core dumps and to all the main security power actuators. From here, Anolis could gain access to any number of security systems and even better, he could gain access to the maintenance cycles and know exactly when power was cut off to the backup security system that kept prisoners moving from level to level.

Sparks flared out of the conduits and relays by Anolis' hands. A spout of fire erupted and scorched the inner shielding black. Anolis pushed himself back away from the mal-functioning relays, shielding his face with his arms. "TURN IT OFF! TURN IT OFF!" he yelled as sparks and spent plasma showered the area.

Crocus ran his hand along the wall grid and shut the power to the offending circuits off. "You all right?"

Anolis pushed a few errant sparks off his clothes as he looked back at the scorched relay and shook his head ruefully. He was afraid that was going to happen. Now it was going to take twice as long to fix the problem and that meant less time to hack into the back-up computer. He had hoped that the bio-metric circuit would hold, but wasn't holding his breath. This equipment was ancient; some of it probably from the reign of the Cor Caroli's when The Church controlled the Imperium. "Yeah, just great," he answered back with a frustration making him frown. He wiped the sweat from his brow and reached into the opening to pull out the fired and burned bio-metric circuit, its gel-pack broken

and leaking. "The primary bypass fuse blew the gel-pack out." He pulled a tool from his belt and began pulling out all the ruined circuits.

The frustration in Crocus' voice easily made it to Anolis. "Where the *hell* are we supposed to get a new biogel-pack?"

Anolis smiled as he pulled a new biogel-pack out of the bag haphazardly slung over his shoulder and began to replace the necessary parts to get the power relay back in working order. He hadn't wanted to use this new biogel-pack that he had stolen -- no, acquired would be a better word -- from the power relays of level three the other cycle, its value price-less for trading. But this working power relay was needed here, especially since it supplied the power for the section of the colony in which he lived, and regardless of worth, his own comfort always came first. He spoke as he worked, quickly and efficiently. "I'll bet you a week's rations that I can get a new one within the hour."

Crocus, who couldn't see Anolis and thus had no idea that he had a new biogel-pack and was already working on installing it, grinned wide, his eyes sparkling with the expectation of winning. Sometimes his brother was so easy. "I'll take that one, Anolis. You certainly are going to be hungry next week. There isn't a new gel-pack to be had anywhere around here."

Anolis dropped the broken gel-pack into his bag as he finished up with the installation. His brother was so easy to fool sometimes that he wondered if they actually came from the same mother. They might look alike -- their brown hair, brown eyes, and ragged looks giving them that rugged out-doors appearance that seemed to attract the women without effort, their firm chins and slightly sunken cheeks covered with grisly stubble -- but that could be accounted to numerous factor available in the open market in the age of genetic manipulations and such.

"Okay, try it again," he yelled down, wishing he could see the expression on Crocus' face at the moment.

Crocus' face screwed up in confusion, not understanding why his brother would want him to turn the power source back on. Without the gel-pack for the computer to regulate the flow, it would be a waste of time. But if he wanted it...

The flow indicators jumped when the power flow was begun, then fluctuated a moment before settling down to the nominal levels normal for the operation of this circuit. He blinked as he looked at the display, uncertain as to what was going on. "What did you do? What did you put in to bypass the operation of the gel-pack?"

Anolis monitored the readings from the gel-pack for several minutes before answering. He wanted to be positive that the device would work before he started gloating. "I put a new gel-pack in. How else would I fix it, you gutt worm?"

Crocus shook his head in dejection as he pulled the homemade alarm monitor out of the inner lining of his tool bag and started to scan the display for the proper frequencies alerting him that a guard was coming

or that they had tripped an alarm. "That's not fair, Anolis. You had that gel-pack in your possession when you made the bet. What's up with that? And where did you get a brand new gel-pack anyway?"

Anolis began connecting his own splicer tool into the backup computer hardware systems, which actually consisted of nano-optic guide-waves. It was apparently assumed that microwave relay stations or light-transport receptors would be liable to interception and so the builders of this colony had opted for the hardware approach, never thinking that any unauthorized people would be accessing this particular area.

They had thought wrong.

"You don't want to know where I got it from, Crocus. Let's just say that the place I took it from won't be needing it anytime soon. And you really need to pay more attention to the terms of our bets. I never said that I didn't have a gel-pack with me."

"Yeah, that's still cheating as far as I'm concerned." His alarm board showed clear and he sat back to wait for his brother to extract the needed information from the colony's main computer. The guards rarely if ever came into this area.

Anolis found it was one of those odd engineering paradoxes that the backup line ran right through an area considered hazardous because of the radiation from the plasma relays, yet no additional shielding had been installed to protect the circuits. And because it had no shielding, the spikes from the plasma relays tended to set off the anti-tampering detectors within the computers main security program and thus this section of the line was not connected to the security system to avoid constant alerts and down-time while the supposed security-breach was investigated. It was extremely convenient for Crocus and Anolis. It made their job so much easier. Getting passed the initial shielding and security systems was always the hardest part. With that out of the way before they even started was quite convenient.

"You're one to talk," Anolis called down as he watched his hand-held scanner, used for diagnostics of the systems on which he was supposed to be working but tweaked slightly for Anolis' specific needs, begin to show him the streams of information passing through the backup lines and the core-dump synchros. He softly pressed the keypad a few times to align his insertion code correctly. "What about that bet you made with that young Kroor? You knew exactly that Tethys had already assigned him to the equipment maintenance section before you even spoke to him. That certainly doesn't seem all that fair to me. He went hungry for two cycles and almost died. Never saw a Kroor that skinny." He typed in a few more commands, working his way casually yet carefully around the internal security blocks build up around the core memory units. Since he had entered the system without triggering the alarms, all he needed to do was not trip any internal security sensors

and he could cruise around the core memory with immunity. Just so long as he didn't make a mistake, which was always possible.

"That was completely different," Crocus yelled back up, the memories of that sweet deal making a smile caress his face. "That was a Kroor, not family. I'd never do that to family."

"Yeah, right." Anolis knew full well that when it came to gambling, Crocus would hesitate perhaps a nano-second before cheating Anolis. To the Ara brothers, all was fair in gambling.

They had picked up that particular trait from their father on Nonac Prime, at least during the small windows of opportunity in which they were able to see him during his infrequent visits. He had been a trader - - the polite term their mother used to refer to her husband's piratical activities -- and thus was gone most of the time during the brother's youth. They had grown up yearning for the openness and vastness of space and the challenges of avoiding the Imperium while they sped about the expanse. They had also grown up with a hatred for anything to do with the Imperium after the disastrous raids on the supposed pirate bases on Nonac Prime. All those who had lived on that planet were families -- women and children mostly with a scattering of elderly and infirm. It was true that they were families of pirates who infested the lucrative trade-routes since the assassination, but they were only that: families. The destruction, rape, and pillage that the Imperium Planetary Forces had perpetrated on the families were completely uncalled for.

And Anolis and Crocus remembered it all, the images still fresh in their minds from the horrific spectacle that no child should ever have to witness. And that included the gang-rape and murder of their older sister and their mother as the two brothers sat huddled in the corner of the house, watching. It had been a pivotal moment in their lives. Until then, neither brother had seriously considered becoming a 'trader.' Afterward, it was all that they could see themselves as, the revenge in their hearts burning like the fires of a red giant, to never be quenched regardless of how many Imperium transports they captured or Imperium soldiers they killed.

And that was how they had ended up here, in one of the Imperium's toughest penal colonies. It was an inglorious end to their brief revenge-driven rampage, which never really amounted to much anyway.

"So what do you think Ailanthus is going to do with that new girl?" Crocus asked as he leaned his head into the narrow shaft.

Anolis weaved his way through the inner memory core like a pro, driving for the section that would give him the schematics on the Makara vessel visiting in the next few cycles. "He's going to use her and then leave her behind, of course. There isn't any room for her and he already has a Druzni fawning all over him. What the hell does he need a snotty, pushy Noble-born for? At least she isn't Imperium. I'd have raped her already were she, regardless what Ailanthus thought."

"Yeah, sure you would," Crocus replied with a chuckle. "You and what army?" He rubbed his chin absently. "As for leaving her here, are we talking about the same Ailanthus?"

"You don't really believe that he'll take her with us, do you? What would be the purpose?"

"I don't think that he'll leave her behind. He's taken a liking to her."

Anolis laughed at that remark. The Ailanthus he knew wasn't stupid enough to fall for someone like Christl. "You mean that *you've* developed an attraction for her."

Crocus chuckled, realizing that his brother might be right. "And why not? She's quite a woman."

Anolis' eyes widened a moment when he almost tripped a major security block. "You wanna bet that he leaves her tight, little ass behind?"

A smile wrapped around Crocus' face. That sounded like a bet he couldn't lose. "What are you offering, brother?"

Anolis watched his display as the information suddenly poured out, a complete set of schematics for the Makara. "I'll bet you that he leaves her behind for all the earnings off our first transport capture together. That sounds fair enough."

Crocus nodded his head at the idea. That sounded more than fair, especially since he knew without a doubt that Ailanthus would take the new girl with him. He was about to respond in the affirmative when a guard droid appeared out of security corridor on one of its random searches.

It was one of the small hover-type guards with its bee-like bulbous vision system, loaded and armed weapon systems ready for anything. Crocus stood up quickly, barely tripping the warning system alerting his brother to the threat. But that was about all that he could do. He felt his hands begin to shake as he dropped the homemade scanner into his bag; it's warning chime dangerously late. He began to sweat buckets, his stomach contracting and forcing his bladder to want to empty.

Crocus was scared to death of the guards.

When he first arrived at the penal colony he had had a near deadly encounter with a guard droid and it had terrified him badly. There had been weeks of nightmares and sick-time and it had only been the support and friendship of Ailanthus and Tethys, two men who didn't know him but a few minutes at the time, that had saved him from being thrown into the infirmary, a fate worse than death. The guard droids had almost killed Crocus, a random event that came about from a simple misunderstanding. He had been young and foolish and ready to take on the world. Now he could barely function in the presence of the guards and when they surprised him like this one had, coming up on him out of nowhere ready to liquidate him for just breathing, he would become almost comatose, unable to function at all, his mind paralyzed with an irrational fear freezing him in place.

He backed up against the wall and stared, placing his arms out as if to shield himself from harm.

The droid spoke, its voice rough, metallic, corrosive. Crocus had been told that the speech modulators had been purposely made that way to scare and intimidate the prisoners, but since the droids rarely spoke, most prisoners didn't believe that rumor. It wasn't like the guard droids warned you when they decided it was time to start firing or sat down and chatted with the prisoners.

But Crocus could care less. All he knew was the cloud of complete terror that overcame him whenever a guard came this close. It speaking to him made it that much worse.

"Prisoner Crocus Ara, support system worker #205673-05, you were assigned to area delta-five on Level five," it droned as it scanned him and picked up the identification chip implanted in him by the colony. "Why are you here in this area? This has not been authorized." The weapon systems locked in on him with deadly precision, the soft sounds of the actuators sounding like death itself to Crocus.

"P-Please don't k-k-kill me," Crocus pleaded as his bladder let loose and the warm, wet fluid began to spread down his leg.

Anolis heard the warning alarm go off and knew that it meant trouble. There shouldn't have been any guards working this area, even for a random search. He had hacked into the secondary guard command processor and seeded the random generator so that this area never came up. Whatever guard droid was down there was working autonomously, which was never a good sign. The maverick guards were always the worst, ready at a moment's notice to plasma burn a prisoner for no reason at all.

And Crocus was down there with it.

Crocus, who was deadly afraid of guards when they passed by overhead, much less came at him directly.

Anolis put his tools away as quickly as possible, the download of the schematics of the Makara only half complete and began to descend the shaft to the opening where Crocus was. He could hear the muffled rumble of the guard's voice. It was talking. The guards never talked. Anolis worked like a mad-man. The shaft was not made for climbing and thus had no convenient handholds. One slip and he could plunge the eighty or so meters to the bottom, ending up in the large, slowing rotating fan that would effectively end his life. He started to sweat even more, the wetness making his grip uncertain. He literally fell through the opening, his grip giving out at the last moment and only a herculean effort keeping him from plummeting down. He needed to get to his brother. He could feel Crocus' utter terror as if it were his own, could feel his brother's anguish pounding in his head urging him on faster and faster.

His sudden appearance effectively took the guard droid's attention off of Crocus as it hovered over him waiting for an answer to its question. It was not prepared to wait much longer.

"Don't shoot!" Anolis yelled as he tumbled onto the floor and slammed into the far wall, spilling the contents of his bag in a spread of tools and bio-metric gel. "We're here under order EMS-057, working for Administrator Groitous. Plasma relay replacement. Check your orders." He spilled the words out as effectively as his tools had fallen out onto the floor.

The guard eyed Anolis, or at least as much as a multiple-eyed device could eye anyone, its weapons now trained on both brothers. Anolis tried to see around the guard to his brother, who stood shock-still against the wall, the dark stain on his pant leg indicative of the terror the man felt, his face drawn and white, his lip trembling.

Several tense, long moments passed as the guard checked its orders for the cycle and found the order to which Anolis had referred. Then it cross-checked it against the second set that was always produced from the secondary core memory to root out false reports. When it was satisfied that the order was legitimate, the guard powered down its weapon systems but didn't move from its position between the two humans. "Are you finished with your work, humans? You have had more than enough time to repair the systems affected," the droid asserted with what Anolis was certain was sarcasm, an emotional response of which the machine was not capable, though it was acting rather odd even for a guard droid.

It was then that Anolis realized that this was one of the new droids of which Antlia had spoken and saw the differences immediately, the most obvious one being its attitude and autonomous behavior.

This was not a good sign.

"We had to replace more than was required on the original orders, including a plasma relay. We were just finishing up," Anolis hastily explained as he noted that his illegal connection to his scanner was laying out in the open for the guard to easily spot.

The guard didn't answer. It just hovered in the thick and tense air laying between Anolis and Crocus. Anolis could see that his brother was starting to go crazy, the terror coursing through his body like a toxin, poisoning him as surely as the most lethal drug. Anolis needed to get this guard out of here before Crocus was pushed over the edge and did something stupid.

"May we go about our business?" Anolis asked the guard as humbly as he could, swallowing the bitter gall building up at having to act like this to a machine. "We have other assignments waiting for us."

The guard waited a moment longer, as if wanting to inflict the most possible psychological harm to the humans as possible, as if it were aware of the fear and tension in the air. But then that was impossible. It was just a machine, and even though it might be a highly intelligent

machine, it was still just a machine. It was a guard droid, not a translator droid or service droid which had sentient intelligent built into them.

Without warning, the droid moved over to the wall display and analyzed the readings. When it found all the key read-outs for the plasma conduits and gel-pack system nominal it spoke. "Move along, humans. Your work here is done." And then it waited for Anolis and Crocus to leave.

Anolis quickly gathered up the spilled tools, moved over to Crocus and gathered his tools up. "It's okay, Crocus. It's not going to hurt you. Let's get going."

Crocus mumbled something incoherent but seemed unable to move. Anolis took hold of his arm and pulled him along down the corridor, out of sight of the watching guard. As if a switch had been thrown, Crocus snapped out of his trance and his whole body sagged as if all the pressure had been released. He stopped and leaned against the wall, wiping the dripping sweat from his forehead that had thoroughly soaked his hair. "I'm sorry, Anolis." He looked up at his brother, whose grim face held the slightest hint of a sympathetic smile. "I blew it."

"Don't worry about it. You'll get over it eventually. And just think, if this all works out, you'll never have to worry about guard droids ever again."

Crocus' smile was not one of mirth. "Were you able to get the schematics?"

Anolis indicated for Crocus to move along and they both walked slowly down the corridor leading to the main working areas of level five. "No, not all of it. But I'm sure that the information we need is in here. It'll be just fine."

"Shit, Anolis. I'm sorry."

"Not your fault, Crocus. Don't worry about it." But Anolis knew exactly what he had *not* been able to download and it happened to be the most important information, the information Ailanthus had specifically requested. This was not a good start to their escape plan.

*Humans take themselves far too seriously.
I don't understand why.
No one else in the galaxy does.*

Tor Cracked-Limb
Kroor Master Scientist

Ailanthus was in a foul mood.

His thoughts had been ruined all cycle long with images of Christl, appearing before him unheeded and unwanted. He would see her face at the most inopportune times, his mind drifting to her as if she held some sort of attractive power. The unbidden image of a crevice spider and its aromatic web drawing in dark bugs for the kill made his face screw up in a most unpleasant way. And what was most bothersome was that he wasn't even attracted toward her. Sure, she was pretty and all, but she was also a Noble and the last thing he needed was to get entangled with a Noble.

But that was all so many electrons for the plasma injectors. It wasn't like he would be around her much longer. He had no intention of taking her with him when -- if; this was by no accounts a sure thing he reminded himself sternly -- they acquired that Makara transport and fled this hell-hole. He intended to use her, to drain as much knowledge as he could from her and then leave her dissected hulk behind for Pitatus or whomever to ravage as they saw fit. It served her right for being of Noble descent.

At least that was what he told himself, tried to convince himself whenever the unwanted thoughts of her intruded on his mind. From the flashes of memory he had been graced with lately -- or was it cursed with? -- of the interior plans of the Makara, he knew full well that there wouldn't be enough room for the people he wanted to take. An extra body, especially one that would be not only useless but liable to be confused as a hostage by the Imperium was not what he needed in the least bit.

And yet ... she just continued to bother him, to appear before him like some type of unheeded spirit come to haunt the living. It was decidedly bothersome.

He leaned back in the old wooden chair that creaked and groaned as if ready to snap its last fiber, the hard surface pressing against his buttock with the same force as a bulkhead under tension. He had tried to bring a cushion -- one that Thaliana had actually *made* for him for some odd reason; he was still working that one out -- but the guards had promptly taken it away as contraband. And so he had just gotten used to the hard surface on his butt, like he had gotten used to much that was hard in this place. Of course, at the moment it was not doing him any favors with his sore ribs. Medicinal nanobots were not available to prisoners and so he had to just endure the pain until he healed naturally, though he was a much faster healer than the others he knew. He wasn't sure why he and Tethys both seemed to heal at an exponential rate, but he usually dismissed it as good genes and left it at that.

He had actually heard that Nobles had the medicinal nanobots permanently implanted in them so that any time they were injured, the nanobots would begin working immediately without the need to go to a med-center. That would certainly be nice to have, though having to become a Noble wasn't worth the benefits of the nanobots. He would just have to suffer like he had always done. Such was life for a prisoner of the Imperium. Such was the life of a commoner.

His office, if one could call the middle of the main power junctor center an office, consisted of his hard, wooden chair, a computer interface shielded to allow only access to certain non-critical areas of the core memory -- he had taken care of that little block early on and now had access to all the core memory -- a small desk that was as fragile and rickety as the chair and lots and lots of little pieces of paper. Since he was allocated virtually zero memory within the computer system he had to keep track of all his workers with little notes, only placing the corrected and updated data into the system at the end of the cycle for the administrators to peruse at their leisure. It wasn't the best set-up he could have imagined, but it was the one with which he had been working the past ten years. And it was his own, which seemed to hold a sort of mystical connectiveness for him.

A connection to what he didn't know, but the connection was there and that was good enough for him. He had never really been connected to anything before, his life a hodge-podge of jumbled memories and large blank spaces starting at the age of eight. Before that he remembered nothing. It had bothered him for many years, the loss of all the time, but he had grown used to it and now rarely ever thought about it. But this here, this job and this work space, this he could call his own. There had been a continuity here that was

comforting in its own odd way. He had worked his way up to the trust of the humans -- the guards never trusted anyone, if they could even trust at all -- and their semi-good graces and had managed to get this key position on Level Five. From here he knew everything transpiring within the level, from the number of laborers working in the mines to the amount of ore dug up and shipped. And he also had limited access to the other levels and their specifics.

Of far more importance than the mundane running of the colony, he was in the position to affect which prisoners worked in which jobs and thus had those he trusted in key areas, such as Tethys and Thaliana in the mines, Anolis and Crocus working maintenance and Antlia supervising the use of the heavy machinery.

And he had access to the core memory.

Most important, he had access to the core processor.

Although what he could do was limited to a vast extent -- most vital functions requiring that fat ass Corvus Lupus to sign off on -- he did have access and had gained access to areas that would be of key importance in the coming cycles if this escape plan was to work.

He just had to be very careful.

Prime Warden Corvus was religious about checking the core systems every cycle, if not more often, to make certain that nothing was out of the ordinary. He also had the annoying habit of showing up unexpected and unannounced, his fat little waddle much like a duck out of water. He would affect that scurrilous smile and sanctimonious air and pretend to be in charge, act like he knew for what he was looking. After a few pretentiously snide remarks and his normal litany of how much he hated Ailanthus, the Prime Warden would then leave, none the wiser to the breaches of security Ailanthus propagated every cycle but somehow making him paranoid to the extreme anyway.

Ailanthus had thought that it could be that he was just afraid that Corvus would try to have sex with him. The man's exploits in that area were legendary among the prison population. Any male dropped off at K'ar Krack'a who was cursed with being both young and handsome was in for an eye- and anal-opening experience with the Prime Warden. Ailanthus assumed that the rapes were more about power than sex, Corvus' unlimited access to the Tanu more than enough for any man, but one just never knew. The very thought of that man trying something like that made Ailanthus shiver uncontrollably for a moment. He would rather kill himself than be subjected to that torture.

But it was the Second Warden in charge of security whom Ailanthus really worried about. Denebola was a shrewd, cunning man. He was far too clever to have been stuck here by mistake, which meant only one thing: he had requested this assignment. And anyone who was eager enough to accept such an assignment on such a far off shit-hole of a post for the mere chance of early promotion was far too intelligent and

athirst to suit Ailanthus. Some cycles the man would come in and just watch. He would stand by the door and not say a word, not acknowledge Ailanthus in any way. All he would do was watch, with that clever little smile plastered on his hard face and those ever-ready eyes watching.... always watching like tiny implanted scanners.

Ailanthus had been certain more than once that Denebola had found him out, had caught on to the manipulations Ailanthus was attempting with the computer systems. But Denebola never said anything. He would just tilt his head ever so slightly, his smile would widen just barely and his eyes would narrow and then he would just disappear, leaving as silently as he came. Ailanthus sometimes believed that since he wasn't doing anything to breach the real critical security of the Colony -- at least not yet -- that Denebola had decided to wait and see, to wait for Ailanthus to go for the big breach and then snag him before Ailanthus even knew what had hit him.

That was the main reason Ailanthus had decided that the attempt to reach the landing pad had to be made during Ailanthus' sleep cycle, the only time that it appeared Denebola was not wandering around. But then that wasn't even true as of late. The Security Warden had recently taken to inspecting the levels at odd hours during all the cycles. Why he had begun this new routine no one could figure. Crocus was convinced it meant that the man knew of their little plan and the stakes for his bet with his brother had risen steadily because of it. Ailanthus wasn't so sure of whether Denebola knew anything or whether he was just restless. He imagined that it couldn't be easy working with that fat shit of a man Corvus and perhaps Denebola just wanted some free time away from the putrescence that was the Prime Warden.

But either way, Ailanthus knew that he had to be careful, especially now. A chance like they had staring them in the face didn't come along all that often -- once in twenty years to be precise -- and he couldn't afford to be sloppy now.

Which of course brought his mind right back to Christl. Her appearance at the same time that the Makara showed up just didn't sit right with him. And of course, that was one of the main reasons that he wasn't about to take her with him, regardless of how pretty she was. He had more than enough Tanu wanting him to please them to keep him satisfied, if he so desired. He had more credits racked up for use with the girls than anyone, with the possible exception of Antlia. Just because he didn't choose to use them every other cycle didn't mean that he couldn't. He had his fair share of sex over the years in the arms of a faceless, nameless Tanu, so wanting Christl in that way, regardless of what she thought, was not a concern. What was of concern was her Noble birth and her appearance now, at this time. That combination was a disaster waiting to happen. Nothing good ever came out of the

Noble Houses despite all the wonderful advancements they liked to credit themselves with. And Christl was no exception, he was certain.

But then he wasn't really expecting her to come back from her time in the mines anyway, at least not in one piece. Not with Tethys and Thaliana driving her. He smiled at the thought, then looked up at the hovering little guard assigned to him at his work space starting this cycle, to watch him for illegal activities he supposed. Another little gift from Denebola.

It just hovered there and watched.

It had given him the shivers at first, the ever-present presence over his shoulder like a confessor of The Church, just waiting for Ailanthus to gush forth with all the sins he had committed in his whole life, and any past lives that he might remember. The Church wasn't all that picky when you sinned, just that you sinned.

But he had gotten used to it now. He turned to it as he chuckled under his breath. "So what do you think? Funny, isn't it?"

The guard, as he expected, had no response.

He felt the presence of Anolis and Crocus long before they entered the room, something about them exuding a bow-wave of an indescribable nature. They luxuriated in the relative coolness of the room as they entered, but Ailanthus could tell from their faces -- especially Crocus' paleness -- that something was definitely wrong. As they came nearer, eyeing the hovering guard suspiciously, Ailanthus also noticed the unmistakable stain on Crocus' pant leg and crotch area and the unmistakable stench of sweat and urine. Something had frightened the man badly and there was only one thing Ailanthus knew that could cause that.

"You two all right?" he asked with genuine concern. He had grown to like both brothers, despite their annoying and persistent petty unpleasantness every other cycle. They were good workers and experts at obtaining needed information and he knew that he could trust them in a pinch. "Don't mind the pet," he said in reference to the placidly hovering guard. "I think Denebola attached it to me because he thought I was lonely in here."

Crocus' white face and sweat-soaked shirt told Ailanthus that Anolis would probably be answering most of the questions this cycle. Normally it was difficult to get either of them to shut-up, but this time it would probably be different.

"We had a little run in with a guard where a guard shouldn't have been," Anolis said in flat tones carrying an under-current of warning not lost on Ailanthus. "But we were able to fix the plasma relay," he finished with a little more enthusiasm, though it was hard to detect. "But it isn't working as well as we'd like it to be." He handed his palm recorder over to Ailanthus, who caught the meaning Anolis had thrown at him with his last statement: they had been unable to get all the information.

"I can assign you back there next cycle to finish up if need be," Ailanthus said as he scanned the recorded information for the one piece of data about which he cared. He found it quickly enough and read it carefully. He saw that it was even more incomplete than he had suspected. He looked up at the pair with a set frown on his face, his eyes betraying his determination and disappointment. "Have you read this?" he asked casually, aware that the guard was recording everything.

"I scanned the basics," Anolis said carefully, flashing the hand signal indicating that they would talk about it later. "I think we might have a problem."

"You can say that again, Anolis." He moved his eyes to take in Crocus. "Will you live?"

Crocus cracked a feeble smile. "I'll be just fine," he said quietly, meekly. He had backed up away from the hovering droid, aware, apparently for the first time, that it was even there. "It was one of the new guard droids. It took me by surprise, that's all."

Ailanthus eyed him a moment longer, watching Crocus' eyes for any signs that the man was reaching his breaking point. If he had to, he would leave Crocus behind also. He couldn't afford to have a weak link in this escape. Everything would depend on timing and control. He couldn't have Crocus break down and become a liability at a critical moment. It wasn't fair to the others. He flashed back in their crude hand signs that he would be back in the cave early so that they could talk. "We've a broken electron cascader on one of Antlia's bigger machines in section three-two. Why don't you two go see what you can do with it while I try to reschedule a return trip to the plasma relay. Okay?"

Anolis nodded, then grabbed Crocus by the arm and led him away without further comment.

Ailanthus watched them leave, then stared at the door for several moments, absorbed in his own thoughts. The guard assigned to him he could almost explain, but the appearance of a guard where Anolis and Crocus were working was wrong. He was well aware of the safe-guards Anolis took to prevent just such an occurrence. It was a bad omen. He looked back at the recorder and read the information again, memorizing what he needed, then scrambling the memory out. No need having someone -- and someone meaning Denebola -- picking the recorder up later and reading it. That would certainly let them know that something was up.

He absently tapped his chin with the recorder as thoughts began to flow through him, thoughts of memories he didn't remember ever having, memories of a time long ago it seemed. He shook his head and looked back at the guard, who seemed to be scrutinizing him more intently. "So, what are you thoughts on the whole matter?"

* * *

Denebola scratched his nose as he watched the liquid plasma display attached to his forearm. When he had assigned the sentinel droid to Ailanthus on the word of Cetus, he had made certain that the data stream ran directly to the processor on his arm. Although he took most of Cetus' drivel as so much drib'la feces, this time there had been the sound of truth to the man's incessant pleas. He could almost *smell* something about to happen, despite that idiot Corvus' assurances to the contrary. He had even suggested that Corvus postpone the upcoming visit of the Noble from the Greater House due to the problems they were having with the landing pads. That had gone over well. Corvus had almost turned blue shouting at him about how such a breach of protocol would certainly bring unwanted attention down on the colony. Of course, if something were to go wrong, Corvus wouldn't be the one blamed.

Denebola would take the heat as surely as stars burned hydrogen.

And that was something he didn't need.

And thus he was going to take this threat seriously and produce such a wealth of information concerning Ailanthus and his crew that Corvus had to accept it and let the Hidimbi dance as they may. With it all documented, Denebola wouldn't be the one facing the questions at the inquiry that was sure to follow.

As he watched the interaction between Ailanthus and the Ara brothers, he narrowed in on Crocus, watching him carefully, purposefully. The man was deathly afraid of something and perhaps, if Denebola could figure out what it was, it could be used against him to gain valuable information. Cetus was all well and good but he wasn't a member of the inner circle of Ailanthus and his crew and thus was not privy to the real dealings that went on. All Cetus could provide was overheard bits and pieces and conjectures, most of which were as useless as the man was. When Denebola had taken care of Ailanthus, Cetus would be next. He had already had the idea of feeding him to Corvus, allowing the fat petulant waste of human flesh to have his way with Cetus until he was nothing but a bored out shell of himself. Maybe that would teach him to spy on his own people, the little ferret-faced shit.

He stopped in the staff canteen and ordered a drink of emulsified Turok roots and sat down with a sigh. At this time of the cycle, not many people would congregate here -- actually not many people ever congregated here since there really weren't that many humans on staff - - and the solitude and quiet was nice. He sipped his drink, its bitter after-taste clinging to his tongue like root-leaf left out too long. He grimaced, wondering why he always ordered this frightful drink when he came here. Habit he supposed, and perhaps the nutritional value of the liquid.

He watched Ailanthus for several long minutes, but the man did nothing that wasn't part of his job. He actually seemed to be a good worker and he certainly kept his subordinates in line. Denebola had read Ailanthus' file when he had been first assigned here, looking for why the man had been condemned and for a brief moment, felt sorry for him. The charges specified were not all that severe and yet the man was the longest living resident of the colony -- of any colony for that matter he found to his utter amazement. Tethys was the second longest by mere seconds. The two of them had been imprisoned with that famous catch-all phrase the prosecutors for the Imperium loved to use against those who, most likely, had done nothing wrong besides perhaps speak out against the Imperium: treason. If one bothered to look, one could find the same exact charges for over fifty percent of those condemned to die here because they pissed off some Noble or other or were a threat to a House or, in someone's fertile imagination, where a threat to the Imperium. How any single person could ever be a threat to an organization as large and powerful as the Imperium was simply beyond Denebola's comprehension.

Ailanthus and Tethys must have really gotten on some Noble's bad side or just been in the wrong place at the wrong time, for Denebola had never heard of anyone staying in a colony for this length of time. It was rare to find prisoners with anything more than seven years under their belts. He set his glass down hard, his eyes glazing over a moment as a thought occurred to him that was so clear he wondered why he had never thought of it before. No one had ever lived this long in the penal colonies.

No one.

And yet here were two rather innocuous humans with unspecified crimes who had survived one of the worst colonies in the Imperium for nye on twenty years. There was only one way that that could have happened, for death here was as sure as breathing, if not right within the first few cycles then definitely within the first five years. The only other way it could be different would be if someone was helping, someone high up in the administration.

He turned off the viewer attached to his forearm -- Ailanthus wasn't doing anything anyway and the sentinel droid was still watching and would alert him to anything improper -- and left the canteen quickly. There was only one man who had been here long enough and had the power to affect the survival of two prisoners as well as Ailanthus and Tethys had been protected, and Denebola was determined to find out why.

* * *

Cetus flattened himself against the inset bulkhead by the auxiliary life support access system, merging into the shadows, as was his habit. Anolis and Crocus passed by unaware. They looked nervous, perhaps even frightened and Cetus wanted to know why. He hadn't been able to get close enough to the door to Ailanthus' office to overhear anything, but he was determined to find out exactly what the man was up to. There was something huge brewing; he could smell it in the air. He could almost taste it, the tension between Ailanthus' little clique raising in the last few cycles almost exponentially. After waiting a sufficient time, he melted back out of the shadows and worked his way toward Ailanthus' office, wary of the sentinel droid hovering protectively in the room like a Drek guard grolth. He hadn't seen that device there before and worried about it for several moments, wondering if perhaps the man had realized that he was being spied on. But that thought just as quickly was replaced with the realization that Denebola probably assigned the droid after hearing what Cetus had to tell him.

He smiled, a wicked, evil little grin showing his decayed teeth in all their black bile. Cetus had that idiot Denebola in the palm of his hand. He had managed to bring him just enough good information intertwined with the garbage to convince the Security Warden to employ him on a constant basis. That was the foundation of his whole strategy. Cetus was not about to die here on this lousy excuse for civilization. He was destined for greater glory. But in order to achieve that glory, Cetus needed to get off this rock. Now if he were a trusting man, he could wait for the Imperium to decide that he had done his time and release him. Most newcomers believed that little fable also, right along with the fable of the Mythical Monks and human civilization before Dwad-Mehstiv. Cetus had figured out early on that if he wanted to ever leave, it would have to be with someone else, someone else who had the resources and the brains to figure out an escape plan.

That someone else was Ailanthus.

And this was the time, he could just feel it. All Cetus needed to do was gather enough information to convince Denebola that something was amiss, then make certain that Ailanthus was spooked enough to believe that Denebola had discovered them and then Cetus would spring his brilliant idea. He would blackmail Ailanthus into allowing Cetus to come along, threatening to tell Denebola everything unless he, Cetus, was included in any escape plan. If he were included, he would throw Denebola completely off the track, thus allowing Ailanthus and his cronies the freedom to pull off their plan.

He smiled again at his own brilliance as he pulled out the scanner Denebola had provided him -- reluctantly to be sure -- and began to eavesdrop on the completely unaware Ailanthus. Yes, this plan was fool-proof and was cruising along right on schedule.

That Ailanthus might decide Cetus was a threat easily dealt with by a shovel to the back of the head, never occurred to the man. Cetus had never been very intelligent. What he had been was street-smart to an extent and he firmly believed himself to be far more intelligent than he really was. As such, Cetus was the type of person to never fully develop a plan before engaging it and he believed that he knew far more than he did at any given moment. He was one of those people who knew just enough to be dangerous, to sound as if he really knew what he was talking about but who had in reality made most of the information up to fill in the vast crevices of missing data riddling his mind like Samyed cheese. He could charm the hardest person into believing Cetus to be his best-friend and then just as quickly use that person for his own gains without ever thinking of the consequences of the actions or the effect on the friendship, not understanding later why the person was avoiding him. It was because of this that Cetus never had any friends. He always drove them off with his perverse sense of humor and constant need to use people. His internal inferiority complex was huge, possibly even supernova huge and yet Cetus had no sense of his own short-comings. As such, he always believed that anything he did was right and bound to succeed, for the simple fact that he was the one who came up with the plan.

He giggled to himself quietly, wondering what he was going to do when he actually got off this rock. They would all remember Cetus. They would all remember his greatness. And they would be sorry that they hadn't been friendlier to the man when he was still humble.

*Wisdom comes in two parts:
having a lot to say, and not saying it.*

Excerpt from:
Echoes of Victory
Mishi Toyodago I
Daughter of the Lord Commander
General Dyphne Aurva

Planet of Abraham's Rest
City of Amicus
Home Planet of the Greater House Prabhasa

The city of Amicus was the jewel in the crown of the Greater House Prabhasa. It stood on the confluence of the rivers Ishmeal and Isaac, straddling the many mighty riparian cascades emptying the two waterways into the much larger River Jordan. The constant roar of the falls -- five in fact scattered throughout the city dropping the two rivers a good hundred meters through the craggy and green-carpeted granite prominence composing the foundations -- was hardly noticed within the city itself. The auditory dampening field all but nullified the pounding cacophony of the rushing water. The vaporous spray, however, could not be contained and covered all with a fine mist glistening in the bright noonday sun, freezing sometimes in the winter to exquisite crystalline ice-lattice structures decorating the city with shimmering brilliance. Numerous canals cut through the rock on which the city sat, criss-crossing the expanses, separating buildings and sections of the city in a natural barrier serving to give Amicus a fragmented appearance. Various sized bridges looking like graceful trees bending over the serene water crossed all these canals, the exquisite detail work of the luminescent metal making the spans look fragile and delicate.

The majority of the buildings within the city were tall stone-built cylinders topped with domes, the reddish and gray-worked stones

weathered and worn yet still conveying the image of strength and resiliency. Atop most domes soared the spiral cornice of the Greater House Prabhasa -- two angels wrapped around a tree with an open tome just out of their reach -- the buildings themselves towering above the rushing waters to dizzying heights, all growing taller and taller until the main administrative building was reached where the family of the Greater House Prabhasa dwelt incased in a luxury of denial.

The city had stood on this site for well over three thousand years, dominating the planet and the system with its sheer presence. Most of those who came here for the first time were overawed by the city and its location and that was before they even had a chance to step into the intimate bazaars thriving with the sights and sounds of the aromas of life; the mixture of curry and cinnamon and cloves settling within the senses like a fine bouquet of flowers. The hawkers wore bright, billowing clothes clashing and contrasting with a cynical disregard for fashion, the flamboyant assemblage of species like a well stirred mixture of the galactic gene pool. Everything that could be found within the confines of the Imperium was available here, the heavy presence of the Imperium Navy and the closeness to Dwad-Mehstiv border like a magnet for wares of all kinds. It was the type of city where one could find anything one wanted.

Amicus was indeed a sight to behold.

The Greater House Prabhasa had been a Greater House before the Prime House Volans, the current seat of the emperor and the Imperium, was even a thought in someone's eye. In fact, this House had been one of the first to claim descent from Saint Aurum Gossomer of the Founding, may the Creator bless her forever, back when that statement had actually meant something. It was recorded that Saint Gossomer's second son had actually founded the Greater House Prabhasa during the Formation, over four thousand years ago in 1003 P.Y.I., during the heady days of the religious independence from the Drek and the consolidation and founding of The Church of the Blessed Prophets. This made the Greater House Prabhasa one of the oldest surviving Houses in the human community.

As such, the House had been one of the staunchest supporters of the Lesser House St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration and by default, The Church of the Blessed Prophets. They had also, ironically, been one of the first Houses to turn against the Lesser House St. Peter and The Church of the Blessed Prophets during the Schism of the Imperium, to turn against the brutal and random violence done in the name of religion, the purges against those who would be thought of as Dwad-Mehstiv and who did not walk the True Path. It was ironic that the True Path changed constantly, depending on whether the confessions wanted you to be a heretic or not. The fear generated during those days was enough to destroy most other Houses or reduce them to the status of a

Lesser House, a fate sometimes worse than death for the Nobles involved.

And then the Greater House Prabhasa had been the first Greater House to back the Prime House Volans after the pivotal battle of Vitirna in 2520 Y.I., raged against the Druznsni, the Drek, and Dwad-Mehstiv and thus had been present at the inauguration of the second Imperium, hand in hand with the Prime House Volans and subsequently with a new lease on life.

This of course caused many to believe that the Greater House Prabhasa had forsaken The Church of the Blessed Prophets and religion. It had been to no avail to attempt to convince those who had stuck by The Church of the Blessed Prophet's bosom like a Nasg fly to the Morl spider's web, but the Greater House Prabhasa was still firmly committed to the tenets of The Church of the Blessed Prophets that Saint Gossomer had founded, despite her alliance with the anti-Church Volans. It was a small distinction that most other Houses failed to notice, but it was a distinction nonetheless. As far as the Greater House Prabhasa was concerned, The Church of the Blessed Prophets had somehow lost its way during the Golden Age of the First Imperium; perhaps it was the over-whelming power and ease of conquest the Imperium had insured back then that was too much for the mere mortals who held the reins of power to resist. The ideals that were the basic foundations of the faith sustaining humanity during their darkest hours had been somehow corrupted over the centuries to become something that wasn't right, that was not what the Founders had intended. And the Greater House Prabhasa was not about to cling to a concept that was past its prime. They had not survived three thousand years by not being flexible.

But none of that seemed to matter at the moment.

Without an emperor on the throne, and the Lord Marshall Bhagavan Nahsirk holding the Imperium together with only his force of will, the Prime House Volans was more or less done, which was a source of much distress for the Lord Cardinal Dubois Prabhasa XX, the last in a long line of rulers who controlled the Greater House Prabhasa with a loving hand. The Greater House Prabhasa controlled many if not most of the systems bordering Dwad-Mehstiv space and thus held some of the most important Naval bases of the Imperium, entrusted to the House for well over a thousand years, the only House in fact with any control over any Imperium military assets. With an emperor on the throne and a viable Imperium, controlling the Naval bases was a boon for the economy and status of the House. With the Imperium in a state of flux and civil war threatening to erupt beyond the few small systems to which it had been so far confined, the naval bases along Dwad-Mehstiv border were prime targets for any House vying for control of the throne.

The Lord Cardinal was not worried about a House attempting to gain control militarily. That would be a foolish proposition at best, what with the presence of five fully loaded fleets cruising around and the support of the armaments centers so nearby. Such a military option would be not worth the loss of life, regardless of the possible benefits.

But that didn't mean that the Houses wouldn't try to gain control in other ways, especially any Houses connected to The Church of the Blessed Prophets, or even the Dei Glorium herself. And it was these other methods that worried the Lord Cardinal the most. The games the Houses played amongst themselves over trading rights and routes were as old as the Houses themselves. Most Houses, especially prior to the Imperium and the institution of the Samicaná Decree -- which gave each Greater House aligned with the Imperium the same number of systems to control regardless of size or prestige -- were more than eager to destroy their rival Houses over the lucrative trade concessions or the control of entire systems. The establishment of the Imperium took some of that antagonism away, but there were more than enough trade routes and concessions to cause heated arguments and internal struggles for the Houses to get into trouble. The Samicaná Decree had made certain that the wealth of the systems within the Imperium, as well as the manufacturing and production centers, were evenly distributed among the Houses, thus eliminating much of the dissension. Unfortunately, that didn't mean that the Houses still didn't attempt to regain the systems they lost with the institution of the Decree, systems they thought were theirs by inheritance if not by millennia-old establishment. There had been much internal and quiet grumbling when the Decree had been announced and then immediately implemented. The Imperium was not a democracy, to be certain, and the Houses had the option of following the rules and decrees passed down by the emperor or rebelling. Since rebelling was not good for business, it was a very last resort. Plus, the obvious protection the Imperium Navy provided for the trade routes and against the ever-present Drek and Dwad-Mehstiv was well worth a little inconvenience.

But the grumbling had never fully subsided.

Though rare, assassinations had been known to occur over particularly well-established trade routes or systems. Generally, though, the conflicts stayed within the time-honored bounds of non-violence, or at least non-violence against another House. The Trade Wars and the death toll racked up over that disaster was enough to cause most Houses and their attendant Nobles to re-consider any blatant aggressive act toward each other.

But sometimes *accidents* did occur.

And the political pressure and maneuverings were only slightly less aggressive than actual open conflict. In fact, there were some Houses that would rather have a clean, knockout fight than have to play the

game of whose diplomats were shrewder and more cunning than the next. Involuntary inter-marriages for a share of a trade route or concession or system were very common, encompassing the forcing of both male and female to consummate a marriage and seal an agreement that would be dissolved ten years later, leaving the unwanted marriage to languish from rot. Alliances, though strictly forbidden by the Samicaná Decree, were secretly agreed to, with the usual intended result being the cheating of another House out of a legally viable route or concession.

Threats flew freely.

Brief yet bitter clashes against unprotected convoys in the depths of space, where the Imperium Navy could not witness them and thus not interfere, were more common than anyone wanted to admit.

Lord Cardinal Dubois Prabhasa XX, fortunately, had been spared most of the intrigue on which humans seemed to thrive. Control of the border with Dwad-Mehstiv was more than enough to keep her busy and it was not one of the lucrative trade routes over which the other Houses fought. At least not very often. That didn't mean that she wasn't up to the challenge of sparing with the other Nobles. She sometimes even enjoyed it.

But not lately.

In the last two months she had received, perhaps been assaulted by would be a more accurate term as much as the diplomats threatened and cajoled, the representative diplomats from both the Lesser House St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration and the Greater House Aldebaren. They had both wanted the same thing: join forces with them and help overthrow the Imperium. She had told them both, politely, that she wasn't interested. Her loyalty was with the Imperium and the Prime House Volans through the Treaty of Praxos Prime and the Greater House Prabhasa didn't intend to breach that treaty any time soon.

But the visitor waiting now in the anteroom was one she would not have expected. At least not yet. Lord Cardinal Nerodia of the Church Prime House St. Paul of the Redeemed Spirit was a formidable opponent. His House controlled twenty systems, five more than the Prime House Volans controlled as an individual House -- as the seat of the Imperium, the Prime House Volans indirectly controlled well over one hundred systems -- and the Church Prime House St. Paul was also the Seat of The Church of the Blessed Prophets, a power-house of its own with billions upon billions of souls ready and willing to die for their faith.

Lord Cardinal Prabhasa was certain she knew why the Lord Cardinal Nerodia was here. And it bothered her. If the Church Prime House St. Paul was about to ask her what she thought they were about to ask her, it would begin an entirely new level to the rebellion against the Imperium. It was a level into which she was not yet ready to step. To

include The Church of the Blessed Prophets in any discussion was to bargain with a powerhouse ready to use any means at its disposal to achieve its end and Nerodia was well known for making certain that the deals he was asked to negotiate turned into reality.

Thus, she was not looking forward to this meeting at all.

Her receiving room was not large, but it was comfortable. Several high-backed cushioned chairs lay scattered about in apparent disorder, but each had been precisely placed to allow Prabhasa to exert maximum control on any discussions that might arise. Large windows framed the far wall, but the heavy velvet curtains effectively blocked out any sun-light, the only light in the room supplied from widely placed hover-bulbs casting subdued, easy shadows into the corners and giving the room a feeling of relaxation; peace. The walls, the wooden panels glowing with the natural oils of the tree most prevalent on this planet, were adorned with holo-photos of the glory that was the Greater House Prabhasa, retelling the tale of the House's rise to glory. Guard droids hovered innocuously in the shadowed corners, quiet, watching, waiting. Most visitors never noticed the loaded weapons on the droids, which was fine with the Lord Cardinal. Those who failed to notice were generally those about whom she didn't need to worry.

Lord Cardinal Prabhasa stood in the receiving room -- she rarely liked to sit when receiving -- her exquisite silk dress of glistening off-white ivory with pleats and touches of blue and lavender flowers tapering along the hemline, fit her tall, lean body snugly, the bodice with its red lace highlights tight against her too small bosom. A floral of leaves and wild-flowers, picked this morning for maximum freshness, ringed her jet-black hair hanging down to her shoulders in cascades of perfectly arranged curls, just the slightest grace of gray at the temples. Her bright almond-shaped amber eyes could change from luxuriant sophistication to burning anger in a heart-beat, yet always held the tiniest hint of humor, as if life itself were just at the edge of being funny. At the moment, her eyes were expectant, curious, wary. Most would call her face handsome, the small wrinkles that had set in around her eyes and prim mouth -- thin lips elegantly trimmed in the barest touch of mauve -- spoke of her age more than her smooth, tan-tinted, taunt skin.

Her nose was the only part marring her looks.

It was too large for her long face, the slight bump at the bridge distinguishing her as one born on Abraham's Rest, her high cheekbones giving her a look of grandeur one could only attain through heredity. She was known for her stern hauteur and calm demeanor, known for her humor and sudden mood swings. But mostly she was known for her refusal to be harassed or intimidated into doing anything she didn't want to do. Many a representative diplomat had left her receiving room perplexed and angry. Even after thousands of years, human males still

felt somehow threatened by dominate women who beat them at their own game.

She spoke quietly yet regally to the servant droid, her voice a melodious mixture of raindrops on a needle-carpeted forest floor, and bubbling creek. "You may show the honored ambassador in."

It took but a few minutes for the man waiting to see her to step through the tall, gold-gilded wooden doors, the smile on his face like a mask of deception. He was tall and muscular, his broad shoulders at least twice hers, his stride purposeful and confident. His face looked as if it had been hand-chiseled out of hard granite, its features like those from the legends; strong, firm, hard. Most women would call the Lord Cardinal Nerodia beautiful, his sparkling green eyes like a beam of a powerful laser; when they honed in on a woman, they knew without a doubt that he was the one they would marry. His sandy-blond hair was perfect, every hair in place, none daring to move for fear of his reaction. His hands were large and strong, his fingernails manicured to near perfection.

Dubois Prabhasa was quite astonished to see the Lord Cardinal himself striding toward her, unescorted by the usual minions settling around him like flies to the mitten heap, but she kept her face stoic and passive, raising but an eyebrow at his arrival. She was not one of those who swooned whenever they saw the man. She knew better. The Lord Cardinal was *not* the man that his features suggested. He was by far one of the slipperiest and conniving men she had ever had the displeasure to know. He had no scruples when it came to getting what he wanted, what he thought was his right and the right of The Church of the Blessed Prophets. She sometimes believed that Nerodia thought he should be the Dei Glorium and was upset that no one else agreed with him.

She suspected that were the man not to wear that cloak, with its nine bands and presumptuous hand and starburst that was the symbol of The Church of the Blessed Prophets, he might be more likable. The cloak was meant to represent peace through the Creator, but she better understood it as peace through the use of violence, a legacy denied vehemently, of course by those who served the violence that was The Church.

As it was, she truly hated the man and for what he stood.

That he had been sent by the Dei Glorium -- the Church Prime House St. Paul didn't go to the bathroom without permission and detailed instructions from The Church of the Blessed Prophets -- she had no doubt. Whatever it was they wanted, they must want it very badly. The Lord Cardinal himself didn't make state calls of this nature unless it was of primary importance. That changed the entire tact she was expecting to take with this meeting. Now she would have to be careful, very careful about how she approached this and what she said. The

Church of the Blessed Prophets could twist one's words around to the point that rather than condemning them openly, one was supporting them with open-arms. They had a strangle hold on the news-media hanging on every move made and it was a simple matter of leaking information to their followers to insert The Church of the Blessed Prophet's version of the truth into the hearts and minds of billions.

She frowned at him a moment, then planted a small, false smile on her face. "My Lord Cardinal. This is indeed a surprise. To what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from such a distinguished dignity?" The words burned on her tongue as they came out. But she had to start off nice. She was certain that anger and threats would shortly follow. They always did when she and he got together.

He stopped several feet from her and bowed in solemnity of a parody, a sweeping gesture making her smirk. "I understand that you've been recently visited by diplomats from the Lesser House St. Peter and the Greater House Aldebaren." He voice was smooth and sleek, like rain running off leaves, oil draining from a pen. He spoke the words *Lesser House St. Peter* and *Greater House Aldebaren* as if they were plagues, heresies of The Church of the Blessed Prophets of the worst kind without hope for redemption. "I certainly hope that you've not entered into any alliances that The Church of the Blessed Prophets or the Imperium would not look too kindly upon." It was not a question.

The man was always one for not cleaning out the injector coils before firing up the engines. She had grown to expect it, though, and merely let her face stay placid as she pursed her lips ever so slightly. She decried that now was a good time to sit, straightening her dress casually without offering him a seat. She could play just as cold and direct as he could. "I don't see what possible concern or business it would be of The Church what alliances I make and with whom I make them." She looked up at him, her eyes burning with suppressed rage for his impudence.

Her statement had little impact on him.

"What the Greater House Prabhasa does is not The Church's concern," she finished with a smirk as her eyes moved off his and found a spot of interest on the wall.

He smiled sleekly, his perfect teeth flashing in the subdued light. "All creation is The Church of the Blessed Prophet's business, my dear Lady." Her eyes snapped back to his easily, watching as he wandered around the room in a seemingly random pattern, not paying much attention to her. "I see that you still feel it necessary to have protection in your own receiving room," he eased out as he noticed the placid guard droids hovering in the corners. He ran his hand along the tops of the chairs, absolutely secure in his position.

"One can never be too safe.... especially nowadays," she answered calmly, forcing herself not to follow the man with her eyes as he moved behind her. "Is there more to what you wanted to say to me besides the

normal litany of how superior The Church is?" Although she couldn't see him, she could sense a change in the air, sense the tension building in him. He was a true believer and thus did not take kindly to any criticism of his beloved Church.

"You would be wise to hold your criticism of The Church of the Blessed Prophets to a minimum, Lady."

She looked at her nails, a fleck of paint having somehow come off one and spoke in a tight voice filled with the under-currents of her animosity. "I've the same title as you do, *dear sir*, and I expect you to acknowledge such. I am a Lord Cardinal also, by decree of The Church and the Dei Glorium, to be held in perpetuity by my descendants."

His voice was biting now as he came up behind her and whispered in her ear, the heat of his breath like the hell-fire with which the confessors continually pelted the unwary. She could almost feel his eyes bulging in their sockets, his neck veins straining. "You hold the title of Lord Cardinal only because the Dei Glorium sees fit to keep you around." His voice was like a swarm of angry bees. "If it were up to *me*, you would be *stripped* of all titles and land, set adrift in the void that is the unsaved, your salvation and redemption lost to your treachery against The Church of the Blessed Prophets."

She stiffened ever so slightly, the whine of the guard droids moving out of the shadows not as reassuring as she would have liked. They stopped several feet away from her in a protective halo, weapon systems aimed at the Lord Cardinal Nerodia. They had already scanned him for weapons and since he possessed none, would only act further if he physically threatened their charge.

"And you would be wise to stop using that derogatory term for the beloved Church of the Blessed Prophets. Word of such Heresies May reach the Confessios and that would be...." He ran a gentle hand along the back of her hair, barely touching it yet sending shivers of pure heat and hatred through her spine. "...most unfortunate for you."

She swallowed as he moved off, resuming his examination of her receiving room in that arrogant and casual style that so irritated her. "I didn't know that The Church was now threatening potential allies."

He stopped a moment, just a moment, as if his servos froze at the words spoken, then moved around so that she could see him, his eyes narrow and penetrating. "I don't speak for The Church of the Blessed Prophets."

She snorted in derision.

He turned toward her with a twirl, a flourish that was as unintentional as it was unconscious. "The times are changing, my Lady Prabhasa, and you must decide which side you wish to support. The Prime House Volans is going down. Regardless how effective the Lord Marshall Bhagavan is, he cannot maintain the Imperium without an emperor. Already the Houses supporting the Imperium are rebelling, falling off like

so many dead leaves." He tilted his head to the side as he picked up a small carving of one of the many indigenous animals found on Abraham's Rest, the rich, deep color of the wood from which it was carved reflecting his hands as if he held a mirror. He absently studied it as he continued. "The Church of the Blessed Prophets will once again control the Imperium and those Houses who help her achieve that goal will be remembered." He looked at her over the carving, his eyes piercing, intent, a smile just touching his devious mouth. "A House such as yours, which once held the favor of the Dei Glorium and walked the True Path could gain much by backing the Church Prime House St. Paul."

Her mouth opened slightly as her eyes widened. Was the man declaring for the throne? *But what of the Lesser House St. Peter? What was The Church playing at here?* "Are you telling me that you're about to declare for the throne of the Imperium? That The Church will back *two* contenders?" She was not about to use the full name of The Church as he had advised her to do, regardless what threats he spoke. The confessios held no power here. And besides, she could tell that it irritated the man and that made her happy on some level.

His smiled widened to that devilish grin, his eyes sparkling in a mirth misplaced. The shrug of his shoulders was imperceptible. "All I'm saying is that times are changing and it would be a shame not to have a House as powerful as yours on the *correct* side."

"You mean to say that the naval bases I control for the Imperium would be of great interest to you," she said evenly. She couldn't believe that the man was actually speaking rebellion to her, openly. And the implications for the Lesser House St. Peter were enormous. There was no way that The Church would back both Houses.

He raised an eyebrow, then moved to the heavy curtains blocking the windows. Moving them aside slightly with his hand, he looked out over the city spread below like the glimmering jewel it was. The beam of sunlight slanting in engulfed him in its radiance and made it appear that he glowed, his blonde hair like a halo of righteousness. "This is a beautiful city you have here. What is it, three thousand years old?"

She nodded, cautious of where he was going now.

Still looking out over the landscape and the cascading waterfalls, he spoke, his voice like ice-cold winter. "It would be a shame to see such a magnificent city succumb to the destruction of a planetary assault." The open threat hung in the air like the dust motes glittering in the sunlight.

She rose regally, holding her chin up and setting her eyes firm. "This meeting is at an end, Lord Cardinal Nerodia. You may leave."

He looked over his shoulder at her, his eyes cold, hard death for a moment. The guard droids hummed louder, moving out of his way as the large doors swung open.

The message was quite clear.

The Lord Cardinal Nerodia made a mock imitation of a bow, then began to walk out. As he reached the door, he stopped and spoke again, his voice barely reaching her. "We'll be awaiting your decision eagerly, Lord Cardinal Prabhasa. Very eagerly."

The door closed and she sank back into her chair, amazed she had been able to stand as long as she had. Out of all the visitors with whom she had been graced these last two months, out of the three Nobles who had requested her House leave the Imperium, this had been the most obvious and most threatening. She still was having trouble believing that he had openly threatened Amicus. Was he mad? No one had threatened another Noble House's Prime Planet since the end of the Wars of Suppression had ravaged humanity.

Times certainly were changing and changing fast.

This would have to be reported.

Control is an illusion. Any leader who has the audacity to believe that she's in control of anything deserves whatever disaster befalls her.

Excerpt from:
Memoirs of a Reluctant Hero
Cassiopeia Thrumbo
Field-Marshal
The Wars of Conquest
950 - 800 P.Y.I.

Deep Space near the Drek Continuum Exclusion Zone

Arcturus Ural sat in his command chair idly watching the blank computer screens before him. Well, they weren't exactly blank. The normal gaseous nebulae, x-ray emissions from black-holes, gravity shock-waves and phase-variant time clusters occasionally dotted his scanners, causing desultory beeps and blips he ignored as well as he ignored his three wives when they were nagging him.

That was a great deal he had there.

None of the three women had any idea that the others even existed and his constant need to transverse the trade routes to rack up credits allowed him to visit all three on a regular basis without the slightest hint of impropriety. He smiled loosely as his thoughts wandered to the wife he was heading toward now, her long flaming red hair and tight buttocks calling to him across the emptiness of space. He could imagine her hands on him, stroking and caressing while he held her large, jiggly breasts on either side of his face.

This was the life.

He had just exited from Hyper-Gate Echo-237 and was cruising at seventy percent the speed of light toward the Onets system, where he would sell his cargo for a good profit and have several nights of great sex with the red-head. He was, however, still a good three days from entering the system, even at the speed he was maintaining. The Hyper-Gates had been the most incredible and cost-effective invention the Kroor had ever given humans. The time they saved and the space they allowed to be explored was the single largest reason humans had

spread through the galaxy as prodigiously as they had over the last few eons. Only problem was that the Hyper-gates couldn't be located closer than five light-days from any inhabited system. He didn't understand all the technical details of the reasons why, but he was fairly certain that it had to do with gravitational flux waves and radiative resonance diffraction that was not conducive to life, or some such thing. That was something for a Kroor to know, not a simple human trader.

Whatever the reason, the restrictions on placement of the Hyper-gates made space travel by so-called "conventional" methods still necessary, adding several days to both ends of a trip through a Hyper-gate. But when one could jump from one side of the Imperium to the other in a matter of seconds, a few days on either side mattered little. And anyway, Arcturus didn't mind it all that much. The extra time allowed him to think and he had been doing a lot of thinking lately. He needed to look after his own best interests, that was certain, and with the mess that was the Imperium and the chances of finding a new emperor from the Prime House Volans becoming slimmer and slimmer, Arcturus knew that the new order would change all the existing trade concessions, especially if The Church took over control.

He dreaded that possibility.

It wasn't like he wasn't a member of The Church of the Blessed Prophets and it wasn't that The Church had been bad to him or anything like that. It was just that The Church was not the best organization under which business could thrive. They had some rather particular ideas concerning free trade and morals and integrity and the like, concepts very much at odds with profitable business practices as professed by the adherents of Cos van der Rijj. With The Church of the Blessed Prophets in charge, it would be far more difficult, if not impossible, to turn a profit.

With that in mind, he needed to make certain that his small local trade routes were not taken over by a more powerful competitor during the years of chaos that were certain to come. Under a strong Imperium, any attempt to illegally snatch his certified and registered trade routes would be effectively dealt with in an Imperium court. With the Imperium getting weaker and weaker each day, such corrective actions were no longer an option and to lose his trade routes would be an unmitigated tragedy. How would he explain his need to travel to his three wives if he didn't have a trade route to ply? And where would he get the credits to lavish on his women if he didn't have trade routes? There was far too much at stake to let any of that happen. Church control or Volans control or pirate control made little difference during times of change. It was invariably always the middleman who lost out. Such problems had consumed him of late and now was no different. What was he going to do? This could really cramp his style.

The incessant beeping of his proximity alarm finally caught his attention. He snapped out of his lethargy and flipped down his virtual-reality eye-piece to see if he could ascertain what was causing his sensors to react like the entire Druzni fleet was ready to pounce on him. There should be nothing out here in this part of space. The Drek never came near this area even though their official space was but a week's travel from his position. And even if they did, it wasn't like humans and Drek were at war or that he was a combatant. It could possibly be a deep-scout for the Imperium Navy, but his antiquated systems would never pick up one of the navy's darkships. They were more or less invisible to any but the most sophisticated systems. It could be a roaming destroyer or raider-catcher, but even that was unlikely. Piratical activity had been stopped on these trade routes over five hundred years ago and he had never seen as much as a hint of pirates here.

He sat up in his chair a little more as he scanned the space around his ship for any signs of the intruder. Nothing. Maybe it was just a sensor glitch. He'd been having problems ever since that last stop-over in the Okyot system, when he had let those butchers work on his ship. It wasn't like he had any other choice. One just didn't go very far with a mal-functioning plasma phase injector. He frowned as he ran a diagnostic on his systems, the internal maintenance droid replying quickly enough that all was operating within nominal parameters. Then what was causing this annoying proximity alarm?

The appearance of the sleek ship just over his bow startled him so much that he started to cough, swallowing his spittle down the wrong pipe. He had never seen its like before. It certainly wasn't of human-construct. Humans tended to build stocky, box-like structures more efficient in construction than aesthetically pleasing. Without the need for aerodynamics in the near-vacuum of space, human ships were bulks of mismatched parts creating a jumble of incongruous shapes. Military vessels were only slightly better, but then that was a totally different story. They were *supposed* to look menacing.

This vessel, however, looked as sleek as some of the atmospheric fighter-craft he had once seen on maneuvers on Btel Prime. It was well-defined and sharp, its lines graceful and perfectly proportioned. Acturus' first thought was of a Darl shark from the water planet Varnatharasi and that thought made him swallow hard. Without even knowing who belonged to this vessel or from where it came, he knew that it might mean trouble.

He spoke to his main interface, ordering his weak and ineffectual shields up. His computer politely informed him that a continuous phase co-variant pulse emanating from the other vessel had disabled the shield generator. He cursed under his breath and began to send out

greetings, telling the unknown vessel in no uncertain terms that he was a simple trader with nothing of value aboard.

He watched the vessel circle his ship twice, then park itself abeam of his starboard side, matching his speed easily. Arcturus began to breathe heavily and sweat streaked his face despite the climate-controlled conditions. He knew he had to break away from this vessel. If he knew nothing else, he knew that.

He ordered the emergency breaking maneuver threatening to rip his ship apart at the seams whenever he used it but before the words had barely left his mouth, the other vessel opened a blaze of weapons fire vaporizing Arcturus Ural's ship, leaving nothing behind but scattered atoms; and three widows.

The sleek vessel didn't stay around to watch the destruction for very long.

The Drek inside had better things to do with their limited time.

* * *

Planet of Elysian's Promise Seat of the Imperium

The encrypted holographic message was dropped off at Rohini's office within five minutes of its arrival through the nearest Hyper-gate. It was decrypted within another five minutes. It had been sent from Abraham's Rest ten hours ago: not bad for communications halfway across the galaxy. The regally handsome face of the Lord Cardinal Prabhasa appeared over his desk and relayed in succinct, crisp words the gist of her meeting with the Church Prime House St. Paul. Rohini had played it back three times so far, making certain there weren't any hidden messages or play on words he had missed. The core of the message was bad enough without any hidden meanings, but one could never be too sure with these things. The Lord Cardinal was known for her deceptive innocence.

He leaned back in his chair and stared at his desk. It was not the type of news he had really wanted to hear, especially not after his rather somber meeting with Lord Duke Ganymede. Expecting the Lord Duke to dribble on about how he should be the next emperor and so on -- the man was so full of himself that it was a wonder he didn't choke whenever he defecated -- Rohini had been completely surprised when the man had instead issued a deeply-veiled threat toward the Prime House Volans and the Imperium as a whole, a threat Rohini saw as a more than real possibility considering the current situation.

His mouth screwed up into a parody of a smile, but his rock-hard eyes held no mirth. He had told the Lord Duke that he would meet with him

again in a day, where they would talk of the issues raised. It was all Rohini could do to keep from jumping up from behind his desk and throttling the breath out of the man. Not many Nobles had the balls to threaten the Lord Marshall Bhagavan and certainly not to his face. Not like that. This changed matters considerably.

He could feel the gates closing on him as surely as he could feel the chill of the air from the storm brewing outside. Had he waited too long? Could all of his maneuverings over these last fifty years be for naught? Not if he could help it, that was for certain. He was not the type of man to let a little pressure un-nerve him. Of course, it was a tad bit more than a little pressure: perhaps a full anti-matter core breach would be more like it. But then it wasn't anything all that unusual. He lived for the pressure of battle, the headed rush of adrenaline and decisions coursing around him like swirling fog. But all this political maneuvering was something new and he wasn't all that certain he had learned it well enough to jump right into the big league with the Houses themselves.

Lord Duke Ganymede had demonstrated that much this morning, his surprise announcement and attitude more than Rohini had expected of the man at this time. If he had truly miscalculated his position and that of the other players, then the disaster about to befall the Imperium would make the Schism of the Imperium and the resultant civil war that followed look like so much Kroor waste in the bilges. Timing was crucial and unfortunately, time was not a commodity of which he had excess.

He played the message from Prabhasa again.

The Church Prime House St. Paul was going to throw in for the throne....

He had expected it eventually, only a fool believing that The Church would back a Lesser House like that of the Lesser House St. Peter. But he certainly didn't expect it this soon and not in this form. If the Church Prime House St. Paul had approached the Greater House Prabhasa in this fashion, one of the most powerful Houses in the Imperium, it didn't take a genius to realize that they had already won over, or were soon to win over, enough of the other Houses to build a support base against the Prime House Volans. It had been over one thousand years since The Church had openly attempted to abrogate the rights of Imperium Houses in such an open way -- shortly after the Prime House Volans had brought the Lesser House St. Peter to its knees after the Battle of Vitirna and taken over the Imperium -- and attempted to bully them into an alliance. It had certainly been tried a few times since then in secret, the last time not more than one hundred years ago, but this action against the Greater House Prabhasa was not meant to be a secret. It was meant to excite the plasma to the critical point ...and it had done a good job so far.

It wasn't that Rohini had anything against The Church per se.

But The Church has lost the faith with which St. Gossomer had instilled it, lost it somewhere shortly after it had won over the then Greater House St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration and joined forces to create the First Imperium. That the Dei Glorium had been also the ruling lord of the House St. Peter all through the First Imperium had somehow diluted the power of the true faith St. Gossomer had wanted to propagate through the eons. And then, when the power and control of commerce became more important than the souls of those looking toward The Church for protection, The Church transformed into just another trade cartel, one of which Cos van der Rijn would be very proud. The core teachings of St. Gossomer, as Rohini saw it at least, had been subjugated to the core teachings of greed and power. He actually believed in much of what Saint Gossomer had preached: love, fellowship, a strong sense of the importance of the human community sticking together and acquiescence to the Creator.

It wasn't exactly the tenets of the warrior, but then that was what the Tandi was for, *the manual of the art of dancing* as those called it invested with the highest degree of proficiency. The Tandi was the warrior's handbook, only slightly less important than the Tome of the Blessed Prophets. It was the most comprehensive manual of the art of war that had ever been put to words and Rohini swore by it. Legend had it that Saint Gossomer herself had begun the Tandi as an adjunct to the Tome of the Blessed Prophets.

Or so The Church preached.

Of course, legend also had it that Saint Orion Morgase of the Insurrection, may the Creator bless and protect his soul, wrote the first draft of the Tandi shortly after the Drek helped him free his followers from the clutches of Dwad-Meshtiv and the slavery of the Dark Ages.

But then legend also had it that a single planet existed from where all humans had come prior to the Dark Ages of Human Bondage.

Legends were odd creatures in that way. The grain of truth they originally contained had usually nothing to do with the story eventually circulated and imprinted into the human psyche. There were those who chased legends and generally ended up finding a completely different truth than they had been searching, which then promulgated the original legend and started a brand new one. Legends were best left for those who had fertile imaginations and nothing else to do with their time.

Rohini was not one to go in for legends. He dealt in facts.

His secretary droid announced the arrival of Syrtis, who today was coming to the Lord Marshall Bhagavan's office in his monthly official role as Head of the Non-Human Species Research Division. Rohini looked up as the man slid through the open door and began a recital of unimportant and most likely fictional operations as the door closed behind him.

Rohini activated the anti-eaves-dropping shield and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eyes with his fingers. "You can stop that babble, Syrtis. No one can hear us."

Syrtis didn't smile as he would normally. His face was set hard, his eyes still continually scanning the room as if he expected someone to jump out of the shadows. "Did you ever think that maybe there was something important in the things I say in connection with my *supposed* real job?"

Rohini eyed him from under his hand with little interest. "At the moment, there's but one important matter for you and I've yet to discuss it with you, so no, I don't really bother listening to anything you have to say about your *real* job."

Syrtis tilted his head slightly, a brief smile dallying on his lips as if playing there, then disappearing back to the storeroom in which he kept them hidden. "Then I suppose that you do not want to hear about that other matter you have had me working on these last fifty years." It was said dismissively.

Rohini sat up and removed his hand from over his eyes. Syrtis now had his full attention. "You've found something on the assassination."

"Not much, but a beginning." Syrtis sat down slowly, as if relishing the motion, luxuriating in the process.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Syrtis looked at his fingernails as he answered casually. "Do you want the long version or the abbreviated version?"

"You're killing me here, Syrtis," Rohini erupted at the man, lowering his eyebrows and glaring at him. He knew that it wouldn't intimidate the man in the least, but it was a natural reaction. Nothing ever intimidated Syrtis. The man was like dura-aluminum plating hardened over years of exposure to space. Nothing penetrated, nothing dented it, nothing could scratch the surface.

"I'll give you the shorter version then, seeing that you are being so impatient and all," he said as he smiled again, looking up now from the meticulous examination of his fingernails.

"Well?"

"Oh, you wanted it now, then?"

Rohini didn't smile.

Syrtis did, even if for a brief moment. "It would appear that our old friends the Drek are deeply involved in this, much more than just a passing interest. From what I have gathered, the Drek ordered the hit, using, from what I have managed to deduce, the ever-popular assassin D'Cyn. However, it would appear that the Drek were not satisfied with just killing the emperor. They also wanted to set up The Church to take the blame, for everything points to The Church's culpability as well."

Rohini's face screwed up with that revelation. "I didn't even know that D'Cyn was still alive," It was said absently. "And the Drek did it *because...?*"

"I know that you are smarter than that, Rohini," Syrtis said as he began to examine the fingernails on his other hand.

Rohini frowned. "I can understand the obvious reasons, Syrtis, but this is just a little too easy."

"I am glad that you noticed. I thought the same thing. The trail I followed was rather convoluted, but everything certainly points to the Drek." He looked up again at Rohini. "The Drek are not that sloppy."

No, the Drek certainly weren't sloppy. They were far from it. The Drek had helped humanity during the Dark Ages of Human Bondage when no one else wanted to even acknowledge Dwad-Mehstiv's treatment of humanity. Saint Orion Morgase would never have been able to lead humans out of the bondage of Dwad-Mehstiv and fight them off without the assistance of the Drek. As compensation, St. Orion Morgase agreed to allow the Drek to preach their odd religious practices upon humans. It seemed a simple and innocuous favor at the time for all the help given freely. Unfortunately, Saint Morgase had never been exposed to religion before -- Dwad-Mehstiv had made certain to purge that particular brand of cohesion from humanity early on during the Dark Ages -- and thus knew nothing of its insidious ability to corrupt all it touched.

By the time humans realized what the Drek were trying to do, they were already bonded to the Drek in what The Church labels the Great Religious Subjugation. So as was typical for humans, after all the help the Drek had given, all the dangers and perils to which they had exposed themselves in helping humans against their Dwad-Mehstiv masters, humans turned their backs on the Drek and labeled them as the enemy, fighting a costly and bitter war that finally freed humans from the Drek religion and inaugurated the Wars of Conquest. If that wasn't enough to embitter the Drek toward humans, the Imperium made certain that the animosity remained strong from that point in history till now with constant wars and the antagonism of The Church staring them in the face.

But for the Drek to assassinate a human leader, *the* human leader, was not something that sat well with either Rohini or Syrtis. It just didn't make sense. Rohini would say that The Church was behind all of it, but then the evidence seemed to point to The Church as well as it did to the Drek. There was no one in The Church hierarchy who was so devious as to purposely have the evidence point toward The Church as a ploy to throw off suspicion from The Church. That would be more than Rohini would expect from that organization.

But then perhaps that was exactly what The Church was doing.

"What possible benefit would the Drek gain from this?" Rohini asked as he leaned back again and closed his eyes, trying to see beyond the obvious. "I mean, I'd understand it if the Drek had attacked right afterward, or even ten years afterward, but they've done nothing out of the ordinary since the assassination, no move to take advantage of the chaos and instability of the Imperium. Well, until now that is.... A bit long of a wait if you ask me."

"My thoughts precisely. But I made certain to check all my sources, all my facts. I have known about this for quite some time, but I wanted to be certain before I presented it to you, for this very reason." The look Syrtis gave Rohini was one of cautious certainty.

Rohini was well aware that the man would not make a statement without twenty sources backing it up. Not a statement with the impact that this one would have. It just made no sense. "Is it possible that The Church is behind this completely?" Rohini asked evenly.

Syrtis shrugged in response. "I've thought of that possibility more than once, but I cannot believe they would accuse themselves in the process. The Dei Glorium would never authorize something like that. Not on such a massive scale. And anyway, your argument against the Drek not having done anything since the assassination works just as well with The Church as it did for the Drek. They also have been rather quiescent."

"Not anymore. The Church Prime House St. Paul just approached the Greater House Prabhasa and not so gently threatened her to join him in a bid for the throne."

"Yes, I'm well aware of that little incident," Syrtis said abstractly, waving his hand dismissively.

Rohini raised an eyebrow. "Little incident? I would hardly qualify that as a little incident, Syrtis. The Church Prime House St. Paul is declaring."

"It is not like we didn't expect this, Rohini, and it is hardly like The Church itself has gone to all the Houses and announced that it will now take control of the Imperium." He looked at Rohini intently, yet with that casual air he affected so well.

Rohini wasn't even about to ask the man how he knew about the contents of the encrypted message just arrived from Dubois Prabhasa concerning the Church Prime House St. Paul's offer. He had gone round and round with Syrtis over how he knew so much so easily far too often to re-hash the whole discussion now. He was the Imperium's Spy Master, after-all. He was expected to know these things. "And you don't think that the Church Prime House St. Paul declaring isn't the same as The Church declaring?"

"The Church has already declared for the Lesser House St. Peter. It would be ludicrous for them to back two Houses. Even for The Church it would be ludicrous. What would be the point? The Lesser House St.

Peter's claim for the throne is a bluff if I ever saw one. That House has been a loose micro-wrench in the Hyper-vents of The Church ever since they lost the hold on the Imperium and caused The Church to fall from grace, so to speak."

"The Church Prime House St. Paul might as well have sent a message droid through every Hyper-gate with what they did with the Greater House Prabhasa," Rohini said dryly. "They're declaring, on that I'm certain."

"Which raises the question of what they intend to do with the Lesser House St. Peter. Once St. Paul declares openly, and this was not openly, believe me.... This was a test of the nebula's gas content, a trial run so to speak, to see what the reaction will be, from you as much as from the other Houses. So once the Church Prime House St. Paul does openly declare, even the *biggest* moron will be able to see that the Lesser House St. Peter's days will be numbered. No way does The Church back two Houses. It just is not going to happen. It would be just as bad as shielding one's ship before launching the torpedoes."

Rohini took a deep breath. This was becoming rather complicated. A battle plan he could understand. House politics? That was another matter. The Emperor had always handled these things, or one of his numerous specialty aides. There was no logic or reason to anything the Houses did as far as Rohini was concerned. At least with an enemy during a battle he could understand the reason behind maneuvers and predict reactions.... but with the Houses? Especially The Church Houses.... that was like reading your future in a cup of Daem yellow tea. "So what do you think is the first problem we need to tackle?"

"What I think is that we need to find out who is trying to set up The Church and the Drek with the assassination, because I do not believe either of them did it, just like I do not believe you think they did. When we find the true power behind this, *then* the answers will start flowing in." He paused a moment as if to let Rohini speak, then leaned forward and spoke with narrowed eyes, his voice rough and steady. "What did the Lord Duke want?"

Rohini chuckled slightly. He had almost forgotten all about the repugnant man. "The Lord Duke seems to feel that I need to find a claimant for the throne, any claimant, before, and these are his words, 'certain Houses decide the next emperor without you.'"

Syrtis was silent for a moment, apparently mulling over the ramifications of that statement. Rohini was well aware that Syrtis had one of the quickest minds he had ever known and one of the most cunning, if not devious. An emergency power decoupler for an anti-matter core had nothing on Syrtis. There was not much the Spy Master wouldn't do to achieve his goals, regardless of who ended up getting hurt. That the Imperium had lasted this long without an emperor was largely in part due to Syrtis' advice.

"That man could cause a problem," Syrtis said slowly, as if already thinking of how he was going to torture the Noble to death, squeezing out every last answer to every last question like juice from a payu fruit.

Rohini waited for the man to say anything further, but apparently that statement was enough. Syrtis did, however, prop his booted feet up on Rohini's desk, easing in his chair like it was his office. Rohini took a long look at the boots, then shifted his eyes to Syrtis' eyes, which were staring blankly at the wall behind Rohini's head.

Several long minutes passed as neither man spoke, Rohini watching Syrtis and Syrtis staring off into nothing. When the Spy Master did finally did speak, his voice was soft, subdued, as if he were speaking from a far distance. "I will try to find out what the Lord Duke Ganymede has planned. I cannot believe that he can be up to any good. As for the Church Prime House St. Paul, I would say wait and see if they approach any other Houses. Dubois is not about to turn on you, not yet at least." He paused, his eyes focusing suddenly, shifting from the wall behind Rohini to Rohini's eyes as if seeing the man for the first time and wondering what he was doing in the office. "My contact in The Church has been uncomfortably quiet for too long. I may have to make a personal appearance. As for the Drek, I think it might be wise to send a delegate to them, quietly of course, to see where they stand."

"I've already starting to set that up for other reasons," Rohini admitted, glad that he had been thinking along the same lines. "What about our special project? All going as planned?"

Syrtis was distance again, his voice and his expression telling Rohini that his long time friend was deep in thought, already beyond this conversation and planning the next ten steps. His voice was hollow. "I expect launch in four to five days, if all goes as planned." His eyes focused for a moment sharply back on Rohini. "What of our surrogate?"

"I think it's time for that plan to come to fruition."

"Yes," Syrtis replied, his eyes glazing back over. "I think it might even be past time."

Rohini nodded. He had anticipated that one also.

After a thorough study of the human species, we have come to the rather interesting conclusion that humans have the unique ability to betray their own kind in numerous, imaginative ways. Isn't it odd that the most uncivilized cultures are the ones who dictate the terms of civilization to the most civilized cultures? Perhaps that is part of Chaos Theory. Humans certainly tend to be rather chaotic.

Tor Cracked Limb
Kroor Master Scientist

Imperium Penal Colony of K'ar Krack'a

Security Warden Denebola's face was a study in disgust as he watched the last of the information he had demanded from the main memory core slowly scroll before his eyes through the holo-reader. It had been a difficult and wandering route, but he had finally managed to track down the missing reports, the echoes of the deleted dispatches, shadows of illegal transactions permeating the memory core like algae in a pond. They all led to one place, one man. And it was the man whom he had thought all along was the cause, the root of Ailanthus and Tethys' survival all these long years.

Corvus Lupus.

The Prime Warden had orchestrated a wealth of intrigue and cover-up weaving like a Torl snake through high grass, leaving a trail behind that was barely distinguishable yet which lead inexorably to the snake's lair. But what was more disturbing, more perplexing to Denebola than the machinations of the Prime Warden and his unknown purpose -- especially in regards to the part of the puzzle involving Ailanthus and Tethys -- were the barely recognizable coded transmissions from outside the penal colony. They had begun shortly before Ailanthus and Tethys had arrived and continued up to this last cycle. Why anyone would want to send coded messages to a penal colony, he didn't know. He had not had a chance to decipher the data-bursts. But the fact that they were from a source *external* to the colony and related to the two prisoners was enough of an oddity that it jumped out at Denebola like non-magnetized plasma in a vent tube.

Why would anyone be so interested in these two prisoners? It wasn't like they were from Noble Houses or were ex-military and thus deserving of extra attention. No one was deserving of extra attention in this place unless it was extra cruel attention. Denebola firmly believed

that once someone was assigned to the colony, their past should count for nothing. A prisoner was a prisoner and it didn't matter whether he had been a Lord Duke or a Hyper-drive technician. To Denebola, this place was the great equalizer. Any crime committed that landed one here was more than enough to strip away any title. It was true that Denebola realized that sometimes mistakes were made, but that was just part of the system. That Ailanthus and Tethys had received special consideration made Denebola's blood boil. He had complained when he discovered that the prisoners had bowls out of which to eat. They were prisoners. What the hell did they need bowls? Didn't they have hands?

But Ailanthus and Tethys.... they continued to burn his mind. Why them? They were nobodies from nowhere systems.... not that it would matter, but it might make it easier to understand what Corvus was up to if they were important somehow.

He cursed under his breath harshly.

Corvus' part in all this disgusted Denebola.

The excess goods and smuggled contraband the fat little shit had brought in on a regular basis was bad enough -- a perk of the job Denebola found demeaning and unnecessary; one should love this job for the satisfaction it gave and not the extra, illegal perks -- but to actively help two prisoners was beyond criminal. What was the man thinking? However, never one to pass up a golden opportunity, Denebola saw this as the perfect opportunity to get off this rock-heap, to get a real security job, maybe even an appointment to the Imperium Navy. He was going to blow the cover off this scheme Corvus was running, just as soon as he figured out what the encrypted messages were and from where they came.

Maybe he could even expose a higher official in the Imperium.

But as was his want, he would have to be very careful with his investigation. Tipping off Corvus to what was about to happen to him was tantamount to committing suicide. He would have to see where the data lead him, to whom it lead him. Making an enemy of the wrong person at this time could be as destruction to his career as it could be beneficial. He would have to tread lightly at first, but he would find the end and then that pervert Corvus would pay for his indiscretions and misconduct and perversion with which Denebola hated even being associated.

Ailanthus and Tethys were Denebola's ticket out of K'ar Krack'a and he was going to use them as best he could.

And then he would have to kill them.

* * *

She watched the fine play of muscles ripple along his back as he stretched, his thin yet toned body not really to her liking but better than the fat, flatulence she usually was forced to endure. Antlia wasn't all that bad, really. Not when she took into consideration the way he treated her, visited her so often so she didn't have to endure the others nearly so much. She assumed that the man actually believed that he loved her, his constant affectionate remonstrations and sweet-nothings whispered into her ear before, after and during their sex-sessions more than enough to convince even the most hardened soul that the man was infected.

She, of course, responded positively to his endearments. She'd be stupid not to. It was much better to lay with Antlia, his sweet and ignorant view of the way things should be a far cry from the forced, brutish, and violent sex the others seemed determined to promulgate on the Tanudana. She had known more than one Tanu who had been killed by an over-zealous courtesan. The man lost his privileges permanently when that occurred, but that didn't help the dead girl much, did it?

And then there were the Administrators.

They seemed to have taken their own privileges and prerogatives with the Tanu in the last few years, using them as they pleased regardless of the restrictions excluding the colony staff from using the prisoners in such a way. But then K'ar Krack'a was far from the Imperium Seat and such trivial rules were the first to fall to the way-side. And for some odd reason that she couldn't really fathom, the Administrators choose her over the other Tanu with an uneasy frequency.

Xylella couldn't for the life of her see why.

She didn't consider herself particularly attractive, regardless of what others constantly told her. She had grown up a tom-boy, playing and competing with the other hard-core boys and usually beating them with whatever they choose to challenge her. Her family life had been normal, she supposed, if any family life now-a-days could be considered normal. Both her father and mother had been officers in the Imperium Navy -- well, that was simplifying it just a little.... her family was a part of the Imperium military as much if not more than any other family in the Imperium -- and they had both been gone as much if not more than they had been home. They had finally separated when she was fifteen and she had been sent away to the Academy to learn the family trade. It was there at the Academy that her true tom-boy traits had come in handy, allowing her to compete with all the others to the point that no one ever considered her a girl anymore, just an equal.

But even then there had been the adults who had commented on what a beautiful girl she was and how she was going to blossom into a beautiful lady; as if she would ever allow *that* to happen. She didn't want to be a *lady*. And she certainly didn't want to be anything that one

might consider beautiful. What good was being a lady when you were the commander of a warship? Xylella had always wanted to be in the military, where there was no room for a lady. There were only officers and enlisted workers and gender had nothing to do with it whatsoever. But then, seeing where she had ended up, perhaps becoming a lady wouldn't have been all that bad a plan. Her other ideas concerning her life certainly hadn't worked out that well.

She eased herself further back into the satin cushions her rank allowed her, stretched her arms above her head and purred wistfully as Antlia turned to look at her with that dreamy look that usually left her nauseous. He smiled at her, his dark hair and hard, amber eyes softening with every passing second as he snuggled onto her stomach, his hand absently running along her inner thigh. His time with her would be up shortly, this cycle's exercises lasting longer and achieving more organisms than was normal for the wiry man. At least she didn't have to fake all that often with him. He was actually fairly proficient when it came to this aspect of his life. She smiled in spite of herself, her hand unconsciously finding the top of his head and playing with his hair.

Antlia wasn't all that bad.

She looked into the small mirror they allowed her to have -- one of the few and infrequent perks she was allowed due to her high standing among the other Tanu -- and looked at her reflection, a reflection she had stopped believing was herself a long, long time ago. The problem with mirrors was that they showed you a reflection that was unbiased, that gave no quarter and spared no feelings. It was the reflection of a person she no longer knew, a person who had been forced into a virtual existence of sex the moment she stepped off the transport. She was fifty-seven this year -- or at least she believed that she was, the passage of time here in this hell-hole like that around an event-horizon, it's uncertainty as fickle as its lengthening -- which was still a relatively young age in these days of genetic manipulations and life expectancies near the two-hundred year mark.

She had been told more than once that she looked much younger than her age, but she didn't see it. Her strawberry-blonde hair was long now, reaching down passed her shoulders in straight strands shining with the conditioners with which she was also supplied. She had always worn it short, just below the ears, the small curls by her temples framing her small face like twin fangs. Long hair was nothing but a nuisance. All that washing and drying and preening was far too much to go through every day -- cycle: she still, after four years, couldn't get used to saying cycle rather than day. But long hair was required here, where the men wanted their women to look like women. There were more than enough male Tanudana if one wanted to have sex with someone who had hair like a man's. Women were required to have long hair here.

She stood slightly over five-foot and weighed not much more than one hundred pounds, if that much. Her small breasts -- which had made it that much easier to be one of the boys when she was younger -- seemed to be rather popular among the Administrators for some reason only the Creator knew and Antlia had even commented more than once that he thought they were cute, as was her small butt. Cute was never a word she would have used for what she always considered her undersized female equipment. She usually frowned at him when he told her such things, receiving and giving complements not one of her better social skills. She was a rather fragile looking thing to her own eyes, but she certainly knew better. The illusion of her fragility was sometimes for the best; and sometimes not, depending on whether she was trying to intimidate or condescend, although condescending was not one of her more favorite attitudes to take.

Men commented the most on her green-green eyes shimmering from her small, round face like glittering icicles, intense in their stare, soft and inviting in their perception. Her face showed the years of too many bad and hard decisions, the two small wrinkles at the corners of her mouth hinting that she was not averse to bouts of wit and irony. But wit and irony were not of much use here, in this world of sex and brutality and death. To be sure, her selection as a Tanu had most likely saved her life, though at the time it seemed to be the end of her life as she knew it. For someone who had perhaps, if she counted the quick and ignorant attempts of her teenage years, been intimate with a man no more than five times before being sentenced here, jumping into the life of a sex-slave was a rather difficult proposition. Sex had never been at the top of Xylella's list of things to do and so it had taken a very low priority in her life. Plus, she never really enjoyed it all that much, a product, she was now well aware, of the proficiency of the male partners and not her own skill level.

Her smile widened slightly as a hint of red suffused her cheeks. She had certainly learned what good sex was all about during her time here. Antlia had been the one to show her, she supposed, what it was like to have sex with a man who actually loved you rather than just lusted after you. And she had been amazed at the difference.

She realized she had been staring hard into the mirror for longer than she had intended and Antlia was looking at her from her stomach, his face relaxed and calm, his eyes drinking her up as if she were the only person on the planet.

"You seem rather serious this cycle, Xyl," he said with a quirk of a smile, using the pet nickname he had tagged her with when it was apparent that pronouncing her full name proved to be too difficult for him.

She went back to playing with his hair, having stopped as she watched her soul reflected back to her in stark and harsh reality. "Not

really," she said, her voice smooth as silk, flowing like a breath of fresh air on a clear spring day. "I was just reliving our time together this cycle, that's all." She had become very proficient at lying to someone's face without blinking an eyelid, a trait of which she really wasn't all that proud but which had gotten her out of many a tight situation.

He sat up and took hold of her upper arms lightly, looking into her face with wide eyes and wider expressiveness. "I've some great news for you, great news." He looked around quickly, checking to see if anyone was standing nearby.

The Tanu quarters were not really made for privacy. Xylella, because of her status, had a compartment all to herself, the three-walled enclosure more of a little closet than a room. It was open to the corridor running the length of the twenty or so compartments in this section, allowing for the guards to wander by randomly and make certain that all was as it should be. As if they truly cared one way or the other. There was no roof, the rough top of the cavern and the many stalactites hanging down high above supplying a roof for all the compartments in the area. Most of the Tanu shared a compartment with another Tanu, both usually entertaining at the same time, the grunts and groans of the activities co-mingling and leaking into the corridor so that the entire area was one murmur of false ecstasy. Xylella had grown used to the noise, shutting it out as effectively as she shut out the faces and the disgusting noises that her *customers* made as they relieved themselves within her.

Whatever Antlia had to tell her, no one was likely to hear or even want to hear. Most people here -- make that *all* the people here -- were interested in one thing and one thing only and Antlia's secrets were not it. She actually found it rather endearing that he always thought that he had important news to tell her. Most if not all of what he related with the solid conviction of being the first to break the news to her, she had already heard from the compartments around her or from the men who came to her for sex. She would nod and act shocked or surprised at the information he would dispense, acting as if she had never heard it before, while trying to arrange her cyclic schedule in her mind, or figure out what she was going to do in the next hour. *Cycle, cycle... damn it, why couldn't she remember that?*

But this time he seemed more agitated than normal, perhaps even more excited. She had already made a pact with herself that she would go as far as agreeing to marry the man if he ever found a way off this rock and she smiled with the assurance that that scenario would, thankfully, never come to pass. Having sex with them was all well and good, especially when she had no other choice, but having to spend all her life with him was not one of the goals she had set for herself. She shivered involuntarily at the thought of such a thing.

Having made certain that no guards were cruising the corridor and that no un-needed ears were listening, he turned toward her, his grin

infectious to the point of annoying. She smiled back, unable to help herself, his eyes bright and filled with a hope she rarely if ever saw in this place. His voice dropped to a bare whisper of wind, forcing her to lean in close to him, the scent of their recent sexual encounter strong, mingling with sweat and that noxiously odd odor the men in here seemed to acquire. "Ailanthus has a plan, a plan to get us out of here in the next few cycles and I want to take you with us."

She couldn't tell if she was shocked more at the fact that Ailanthus had a plan, that Antlia was telling her about it, or that the man wanted her to come along. She just stared back at him as if he had a Grun bug attached to his forehead and it was sucking his brain dry. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I heard you correctly," she said just as quietly, a bare whisper of a voice to anyone watching would appear as if she were just blowing into his ear.

"There's a shuttle coming down for something or other in about two cycles and Ailanthus has a plan to get us all aboard." He ran his finger ever so gently along her jaw-line, her cheek. "And I want to take you along."

She sat back and tried to control her breathing, to keep her heart from escaping out of her chest. She licked her lips, the sudden dryness in her mouth uncomfortable. "Are you being serious?" This was far too much to believe. The possibility that she might be able to leave this hell-hole and escape back to a world she knew, back to the opportunity to prove her innocence and regain her lost life was too much to be toyed with. If the man was fooling with her, it would be the last time that he ever got this close to her. Ever.

"Yes. Ailanthus and Tethys have it all worked out. The final details are being planned as we speak." The glee and anticipation in his eyes was far too concentrated for him to be faking it.

She looked at him with widening eyes, aware for the first time that the man was telling her something that she didn't already know, was in fact handing her life back to her. But she needed to be careful how she went about this. Inviting her along didn't sound at all like the Ailanthus she knew. Ailanthus had been one of the first men she had serviced when she arrived. He was tender and kind and very gentle, yet he had a hardness about him that made itself very manifest from the first moment she laid eyes on him. He had never visited her again since, but she heard more than enough of the man -- his reputation among the other prisoners on Level Five rather impression -- to allow her to understand the hardness and distant stare he had to him. He was not a man to be messed or toyed with and he certainly wasn't the type of man to just invite people along on his escape plan.

She licked her lips again, watching Antlia for any signs of insincerity. She found none. She leaned into him again and whispered into his ear. "Please don't take this the wrong way, but did Ailanthus approve of this?"

It's not that I'm not grateful for your offer. In fact, I'm more than willing to pack up right now and go with you. It's just that..." she paused a moment, trying to say what was on her mind as delicately as possible. "It's just that Ailanthus isn't the type of man to just allow you to take along *guests*, if you know what I mean."

Antlia's eyebrows raised slightly, his mouth twisted as if trying to force a smile and he rubbed his hands together absently. He didn't need to say a thing. She knew the answer already. It was obvious.

"Well, yeah, you're right.... but I'm going to tell him in a mini-cycle or so and I know that he'll say yes. In fact," he said as he twirled his finger through her hair. "I've got the inside track with him. He needs me and I wouldn't go without you." He smiled at her with that pure innocence she found so misplaced. "I love you, Xyl, and I'm not about to leave you here to get pawed over by all these sickos. I want to marry you, girl."

The smile came to her face unheeded. *Girl?* She looked down at her hands a moment to collect her thoughts. The man really didn't love her, she was sure of that. He might lust after her, but she was fairly certain that love was not the emotion he truly felt toward her at the moment. He might believe it was, but there was no way he loved her. And because of that, she couldn't let the man screw up his opportunity to leave this hell-hole because of her. Ailanthus was just as likely to tell Antlia that he could stay behind if he wanted to try to blackmail him. And despite the confused feelings she had toward the man, she couldn't be the cause of his continued imprisonment. Not for the slim chance of getting free.

"I can't let you -- " she began, but he put his finger on her lips and shushed her ever so gently.

"I'll come back next cycle and tell you the exact details. No arguments." He started to get up, searching around for his clothes.

"But Antlia..."

"*No buts.* This is going to work and you're going to come along with me. I can't let you stay here." He leaned down and kissed her lightly on the lips, running his fingers gently through her hair. "Wait for me, love. Next cycle."

She looked up at him, smiling despite the mixed feelings of dread churning in her stomach. "Thank you. I'll wait." *What else was she going to do?* She actually didn't expect to ever see the man again. Not if Ailanthus had anything to say about it.

And anyway, no one escaped from K'ar Krack'a.

Even if they were Ailanthus.

* * *

Ailanthus took a deep breath as he once again reviewed in his mind the data Anolis had managed to gather. Even after looking at it a

hundred times, the end-result never changed. A successful outcome to this escape plan was quickly becoming a faint possibility. He shook his head, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his fingers. He had tried to access the memories flooding his mind as of late, memories of events and data of which he knew nothing, but it was apparent that the phenomena was but a one-way contrivance. Accessing it when he wanted was not something he was privy to at the moment. And he never knew when it was going to suddenly descend on him and inundate his mind with memories he never had. It seemed to be one of those mixed blessing with which he had been cursed all his life.

The subdued cackle of a repressed laugh made him frown. He looked up from beneath his hand and peered at the source of the irritant. It was the old man Hesiodus, his tomb-stone smile of rotting decay beaming at him, the uncommonly youthful and twinkling eyes like a Kroor body-scanner, ripping into his soul with little to no resistance. They needed to get rid of him. He was just too odd.

"What's so funny, old man?" Ailanthus grumbled, reaching for another slice of dried slug as he sat in his cave and waited for Anolis and Crocus to return. He wasn't really hungry, but he was upset, disturbed even at the implications of what Anolis had found and food was always a good answer. Absently chewing on the hard, smoked meat somehow soothed him, the repetitive motion of his jaw like a sedative to his over-worked mind.

"You worry too much, me thinks, hee-hee," Hesiodus cackled at him, pointing with a bony, wrinkled finger making Ailanthus think of the Creator, a thought making him extremely uncomfortable. "Life tends to work out for the best, usually, it does, does it."

Ailanthus chuckled as he gnawed on his lower lip. "You obviously have no idea what you're talking about, old man."

"Oh, but I do, I do, do I," Hesiodus intoned in hammer-hard punctuation.

"Do you honestly believe that my being locked up here in this slave camp for twenty years is life working out for the best? Why don't you just keep quiet.?"

"Twenty years?" Hesiodus echoed as if in a parody of temptation. He tilted his head a moment, as if evaluating. "Twenty years do be nothing short of nothing, dear friend. Hee hee. Yes, twenty years to reflect and grow and become strong, that be a short sentence to be complaining about, it do. Perhaps it even be for the best, yes?"

"Well it wasn't very short for me, so if you don't mind, I've grown sick of your voice and don't want to hear it anymore." Ailanthus, however, looked at the old man with narrowed eyes, aware that there was much more to this conversation than the surface words. It was almost as if the old man was trying to tell him something, subtly.

"You will see, of that I am certain, be I. Be certain."

The arrival of Anolis and Crocus saved Ailanthus from having to beat the old man to a pulp just to get him to shut up.

They sat down next to him with an over-exuberance leaking from their pores like grease.

"So what's the verdict?" Anolis asked in a rush of words. "Do we sabotage the other landing pad now?"

Ailanthus hated to be the one to bring bad news down on the brothers, but he had done it so many times in the past that he'd become jaded. It was just another part of life here on Level Five. Anolis and Crocus sensed the change in their friend and could see in his eyes that the news wasn't good.

"What's wrong? Have we been found out?" Crocus sputtered out as he spoke around a large piece of smoked rat.

Anolis jabbed him in the shoulder, looking at his brother as if the man wasn't even related to him. "Now that's a rather stupid question, isn't it? If they had found us out, do you really think that we'd be sitting here right now discussing the whole affair? Think before you talk, would you? You embarrass me."

Ailanthus had to smile despite the way he felt inside. At least these two were back in form. Their love-hate relationship was a constant on which he could always count. And it also appeared that Crocus had gotten over his close encounter with the guard droid. He motioned the two brothers away from the old man and back into the corner of the cave where they could talk without the danger of being inadvertently overheard by a passer-by.

"So what's the problem, Ailanthus?" Anolis asked solemnly, remembering that there had been a problem with the data collected.

Ailanthus stood, leaning against the wall, a half-eaten piece of dried slug hanging out of his mouth. "The problem, my fine friends, is that the Makara transport is useless to us. It might as well be a Drek monolith for all that we can use it."

Crocus' jawed dropped slightly. "But I thought you said that you could fly the ship without a problem." The man was actually whining.

"I can fly it, of that I'm certain," Ailanthus replied as he pulled the slug out of his mouth. "Flying it isn't the problem. The problem is *navigating* the damn thing, especially if we want to use the Hyper-gates."

"If we don't use the Hyper-gates, then what's the point? The Imperium Navy'll track us down and vaporize us within a week, if not earlier," Anolis barked out.

"Precisely. And that's where the problem lies. It would appear that the Kroor have added a little bonus to their Makara's, or at least this one in particular. This Makara can only be navigated by a Morype Slug, of all things."

The brothers were aghast. "A *slug*? Who comes up with these things?" Crocus wailed as if struck across the face.

The sound of Tethys and Thaliana returning came into the back of the cave made Ailanthus go quiet as he looked up to see what was happening. When he did, he got an eyeful of Christl's bared breasts, though the dirt and grime made it difficult to tell. She looked as if Tethys had dragged her by the hair from the mines after using her to clean out the injector cores on the heavy borers. She could barely stand and her face looked as haggard as one can get without actually dying. He had a sudden urge to go to her and wrap a blanket around her. It passed quickly, fortunately, like a denka fever bug. He smiled at Tethys, who, remarkably enough, smiled back.

"Did somewhere mention a Morype Slug?" Thaliana asked as she dropped a small sack by the make-shift kitchen area.

Christl collapsed onto the floor of the cave in a heap, a whoosh of air sounding almost comical. Ailanthus noted that she still didn't seem very concerned about her exposed chest, a sure sign that she was completely exhausted and beyond any mere modesty concerns.

"Yes, I did mention a slug. The Makara requires one for navigation and we're fresh out of them," Ailanthus responded as he moved over to Tethys and shook his hand. "I see that you showed our little princess the ropes of mine work."

Tethys didn't even bother to look over at her as he answered back. "She actually did much better than I expected."

"Yes, she survived," Thaliana injected with thinly veiled sarcasm. She was looking askew at Ailanthus and he wasn't certain what that was all about.

"We're not talking about the same slugs that we eat, are we?" Crocus asked as he looked at the dried and smoked piece in his hand as if it were somehow poisoned.

His brother batted him across the back of the head. "Did you forget to turn your brain on after we left that last job? Of course it isn't the same slugs, you addled h'ach root."

"But why would they need a Morype Slug to navigate a ship?" Thaliana asked as she gathered her shower kit together.

"That I don't know, but this Makara needs a slug to navigate it anywhere beyond high orbit, it would appear," Ailanthus said as he found himself staring at Christl. He pulled his eyes away harshly, wondering what it was about her that made him want to look at her. He looked up and noticed Thaliana was again staring hard at him, her hands firmly planted on her hips. *What was her problem now?*

"That's a rather rare species to be requiring aboard all the Kroor ships," Thaliana stated matter-of-factly as she now stared down at the collapsed Christl and dropped a towel on her head, inadvertently covering up her breasts. Or was it accidental? Ailanthus raised an eyebrow at the odd behavior.

Christl's voice from under the towel startled them all, as much for the strength that it appeared to contain as for the content of her words. "Morype Slugs have been used the last few years to navigate through Hyper-gates, especially if one doesn't want to use the codes. They're brilliant navigators who can somehow see beyond the Hyper-folds and the gravity-waves. They never make mistakes."

They all looked at her as she pushed the towel away from her face and pulled it down to cover herself up fully, her eyes riveting on Ailanthus like Freg light-bugs. "I've never, however, heard of them aboard a ship used by a House of the Imperium. They *have* the codes for the Hyper-gates. You mostly find Morype Slugs on raiders, or maybe even pirate ships."

"Or on a ship that doesn't want anyone to be able to track its journey," Anolis said while he nodded his head in understanding. It was becoming a little clearer.

"Of course," Thaliana agreed as she made her way to the cave entrance, eyeing Ailanthus with razor precision. "By not using the codes, it would be impossible to track through which Hyper-gates the ship went. Very interesting."

"What's interesting?" Antlia inquired with a wide smile and that look in his eyes they had all come to realize meant that he had spent time with his Tanu.

Ailanthus grabbed his shower kit and walked right by Christl as she reached out a hand expecting him to help her up. Tethys snorted at her as he also walked passed her without offering any assistance. Thaliana now smiled at Ailanthus, the sudden and distinct change in mood making him very nervous.

"The use of a Morype Slug on the Makara," Ailanthus voiced with disgust as he stopped before Antlia. "Which means that our little escape plan is more or less at an end."

The smile plastering itself to Antlia's face threw them all off. They expected cursing, or perhaps jumping up and down or, at the least, mopping and head-hanging. But a joyous smile and bright, shiny eyes weren't the reaction any of them thought the man would display.

"What the hell are you smiling at?" Thaliana shot at him with acidic acerbity. "We just lost our one chance to get off this rock."

Antlia didn't say anything, which infuriated the others even more. He just stood there grinning from ear to ear as if he had a great secret.

Tethys finally spoke, edging passed Antlia as he decided that a shower was much more important than standing around. "If I didn't know better, I'd say that the little man knows something that we don't. Or he has gas. I'll go with the gas explanation."

Ailanthus stopped in mid-stride at Tethys' words, looking at Antlia sharply. "What is it that you know, Antlia? Spill it out."

"Not before I get an assurance from you about something that's very important to me, Ailanthus. Not before. I know how this all works around here and I want your word first."

*Every human plan has one fatal flaw:
a human thought of it.*

Common Druzni saying

"What type of bargain are we talking about here, Antlia?" Ailanthus asked cautiously, aware of the hidden cunning the man possessed and his proclivity to attract trouble like honey to the Lorg.

They all gathered around the wiry man, waiting for him to speak. His gaze remained on Ailanthus, his eyes strong and hard.

"I want to take Xyl with us."

The reactions among the group were very varied.

Thaliana laughed, a short bark sounding more wild than joyous. Tethys simply sighed, clicking his tongue. Crocus made to protest, knowing full well that there wasn't enough room in the Makara for themselves, much less someone extra, but Anolis cut him off, aware that Ailanthus was the proper one to speak on this matter. Christl, halfway up from the floor, fell back down, assuming that going to the showers was not about to happen any time soon and sleeping was the thing to do at the moment. The old man cackled some more, giggling like a little child as he slipped passed them all and started toward the bath area.

Ailanthus just stared at Antlia for several moments, keeping eye-contact with the man as if trying to telepath his emotions. When he spoke, his voice was cold and distant, like mountain ice. "You told her about our plans?"

"Well, I...uh..." Antlia realized his mistake instantly and tried his best to back-track. It wasn't a good attempt.

"How much does she know, Antlia? What did you tell her?" Ailanthus cut in before the man even had a chance to explain his actions.

Antlia's eyes began to move quickly, darting back and forth between Ailanthus and Tethys, who seemed to be closing in on him like two ends of a vise. "I...I just told her that we might be getting off this rock by acquiring a transport in the next few cycles and that I wanted her to go with us." His eyes couldn't figure out where to settle. "I want to *marry* her."

"I could care less what you want to do with her, Antlia," Ailanthus said, his words coming out short and sharp, like quick-fire particle bursts. "You've jeopardized the entire plan and put us all in danger."

Antlia's eyes widened as the consequences of his actions started to become apparent. "But she won't tell anyone. She loves me."

Ailanthus grabbed him by the shirt-front, wanting to wring him dry with his bare hands until he was a limp rag-doll. His voice was a fierce hiss of suppressed rage. "She doesn't love you! She's a Tanudana, for Morgase's sake! It's her job to *fuck you* and make you *think* that it's all about love! And how the *hell* do you know that she isn't speaking with Denebola *right now*? You are aware that he fucks her on a regular basis, aren't you? You are aware that others have their way with her besides you, that she isn't your private little Kata?!"

Antlia's mouth worked like a fish out of water, the color draining from his face at the implications Ailanthus was throwing at him, at the implications for his own dark future. "No, you're wrong. She wants to go," he sputtered out in a parody of indignation.

"No, you fool," Ailanthus said as he pushed him away, releasing his grip on the man's shirt in disgust. "I can't believe that you'd fall for that. I always thought that you were smarter."

"Do you want me to take care of her?" Thaliana asked in a voice more suited to asking for seconds at dinner. "She's a risk."

Antlia's eyes widened even more, a feat that didn't seem possible. "No! Please no! I swear that she won't tell anyone! I stake my life on it."

"No, Antlia. You've staked *our* lives on it." Ailanthus made certain that the man understood what he had done, shaking his head at him in utter shock at his stupidity. "You not only betrayed me, but you betrayed all of us. We made a blood-pledge -- a *blood-pledge!* -- not to tell *anyone!*"

"Which part of don't tell anyone about this at all, for any reason, didn't you understand?" Tethys asked through clenched teeth.

Antlia started to rub his hands together nervously, even more sweat than usual pouring off his forehead like rain.

"I'll take care of her right now, before she has a chance to talk," Thaliana said with little to no emotion, the thought of killing a human not very disturbing to her at the moment, regardless which human it was.

Ailanthus held up his hand. "No. Wait a moment." He stepped back in front of Antlia, looking down at him with a hard, cold look. "Let's at least hear what he has to say about our problem with the Morype Slug. The viability of our plan might just hinge on it."

Antlia licked his lips and ran the back of his hand across his forehead, though it did little good to stem the constant river of sweat pouring out. "Yes, yes," he said in quick, agitated bursts. "There's a Morype Slug on Level Two, just arrived maybe five cycles ago. Its name is Mos Yps. We can use it, we just have to arrange for it to be moved along with the rest of us."

"You are aware," Tethys snapped in testy terms, "that Morype Slugs breath a nitrogen based atmosphere incompatible with ours, aren't you? How were you planning on getting it moved with us and have it perform in an oxygen-based environment?"

"They have movement containers for it," Antlia spit out, aware that the darkness descending on him was lifting, just ever so slightly. He still might have a chance here to salvage this from the disaster into which it had turned. "And if the Makara requires a Morype Slug to operate, then wouldn't it make sense that the ship would be equipped to handle its atmospheric needs?"

"The K'vor seems to have a point," Thaliana said with a slightly dejected tone, as if she were disappointed that she might not have to kill the Tanu after all. "It might just work."

Ailanthus turned his head slightly to be able to see Thaliana, eying her with less than happy glares. "And how are we supposed to *speak* to it? I know for a fact that none of us speaks Slug. How are we supposed to tell it where to take us if we can't *talk* to it?"

No one had an answer for that question until Christl's voice broke in as she stepped passed Ailanthus on wobbly legs, brushing his shoulder with her breasts accidentally due to the tight confines of the cave. "I can speak Morype," she said so quietly that it sounded more like a sigh than a statement. She continued to walk out of the cave, her mind set on refreshing, cool water pouring over her body and not much else.

Thaliana gave Christl such a glare that Ailanthus was surprised the girl didn't just fall over dead from its lethality. He indicated for her to follow Christl before she got into any trouble. They still needed her for the programming codes of the droids. Losing her now to Pitatus or any of the numerous other idiots was not good tactics.

Thaliana switched her glare to Ailanthus for a brief moment, then flashed him a quick smile as she strolled off behind Christl in no particular hurry.

Antlia started after Christl and Thaliana, hoping to maybe escape his punishment before any one noticed but Ailanthus put his hand on the man's shoulder and stopped him. "Not so fast, Antlia."

Thinking that the worst was over, Antlia was unprepared for the icy hardness pulsating from Ailanthus' eyes. Antlia knew quite well that this was not a good sign to have Ailanthus look at you in that way. Many a man had been found dead the next cycle after seeing that gaze from him.

Ailanthus turned toward Crocus. "Can you get the information on this slug and get it to me within the next few hours?" It was the voice he used when he wanted no opposition, which basically told Crocus that he would do as he was told with no room for error despite having been framed in the form of a question.

Crocus nodded his head and slipped off reluctantly with Anolis in tow, both giving Antlia a sympathetic smile. Normally they would have protested, but Ailanthus didn't appear to be in a protesting mood. They knew what would come next and didn't envy Antlia in the least. But he had screwed up; screwed up big.

Ailanthus rubbed his forehead, aware of the headache building in the back of his skull like a three bit drill plug. He looked up at the cave ceiling, sighing and shaking his head at the utter stupidity women seemed to elicit out of men. It was the worse possible thing to do to put women and men together in this penal colony. Men just had no control when it came to anything related to the female sex. All they needed to do was wink and bend over and the male was enslaved for life.

The only ones left in the cave were Ailanthus, Antlia and Tethys, a combination with which Antlia didn't feel very comfortable. The long pregnant pause was lethal to him. His shirt was soaked through with sweat and he actually felt himself trembling.

When Ailanthus finally spoke, after a long internal struggle with his own conscience, his voice was strong yet distant, as if handing out a punishment he didn't want to give. He had know Antlia for too many years and considered him a good friend. But every one in the group had all sworn that they would never reveal their plan to anyone, on penalty of being left behind, if not killed outright. Killing Antlia was not something Ailanthus could do. It was not an option. The man's mistake had been one of the heart and not the mind and he could almost forgive him for that. Ailanthus had loved once also and knew all too well what the powerful emotion could do. He knew Xylella well enough and could easily see how the man could have such strong feelings for her. But that made little to no difference now. Antlia had broken the blood-pledge. There was only one result.

Ailanthus finally brought his gaze to bear on Antlia. "You were well aware of the price for your transgression, Antlia," he began, but Antlia broke in, his voice pleading in its whining.

"But she won't tell anyone, I tell you. *She won't.*"

"That really doesn't matter anymore, does it? You broke your word to the group and because of that you can't be trusted anymore."

"How many others have you told?" Tethys asked sharply.

Antlia looked at them both like a trapped cat, wet and shivering. "No one. I swear!"

"What good is your word to us now?" Ailanthus inquired caustically.

"But you told that new bitch," Antlia spit out, his fright over-riding his commonsense. "You broke your word also, damn you. Why are you coming down so hard on me?"

Tethys grabbed Antlia's upper arm in an iron grip and dragged him to the back of the cave, where he tossed him unceremoniously into the corner. "Why don't you just make a sign and wear it around your damn neck, your fucking moron!" Tethys snapped in ice-cold tones, the words spoken like an indictment of death.

Antlia absently rubbed his arm where Tethys had grabbed him. Tethys never raised his voice. Never. And for him to do it now, like this, made Antlia tremble even more. This could not be good. He was well aware that if the man wanted, he could snap Antlia in half without even breaking a sweat. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking," he sniveled, unable to meet either of the men's eyes.

"Damn right you weren't thinking," Ailanthus said through clenched teeth, wiping the sweat off his forehead again in an agitated motion. "Just like you didn't *think* when you told Xylella. And for your information, Christl has data that is critical to our plans and thus had to be told about the escape. *What, besides fucking real good, can Xylella offer us?!*" His voice rose incrementally as he spoke until it was a barely contained roar.

Antlia looked up at the two towering figures, aware for the first time that this was even more serious than he had at first thought. This was deadly serious. He fell to his knees. "Oh please, by the hand of the Creator, don't kill me! *Don't kill me!*"

Tethys and Ailanthus stared down at the man as he quickly turned into a whimpering, pathetic fool. He was actually starting to cry, an act not too uncommon in this place, but it was not like Antlia. Ailanthus let him carry on for several minutes, pleading for his life when his life wasn't even in danger. It was a good lesson for him.

"Stand up, damn it," Ailanthus finally ordered as he licked his dry lips and rubbed his sore ribs. "We're not going to kill you, Antlia, even though he should. But we are going to leave you behind."

"What?!" Antlia snapped out in garish tones of disbelief.

"You were well aware of the agreement we all made, that we all swore a blood-pledge to.

We all agreed that there would be no exceptions."

Antlia sank onto his butt in stupefaction. This couldn't be happening. "But you can't They'll kill me." His voice was quiet and eerily calm now, as if all his anger had been swept out of him in an instant.

"You brought this on yourself, Antlia. I honestly thought you knew better. You've no one to blame but yourself. You knew the consequences of your actions and made a choice. It might have been a bad one, but it was your choice nonetheless."

Both Ailanthus and Tethys sensed the approach of some one at the cave entrance. They turned to find a guard droid come hovering into view. It spoke, its voice harsh and metallic, like nails being filed. "Prisoner Ailanthus, #12333. You will come with me."

Ailanthus looked at Tethys, then down at Antlia as if it was the man's fault that the guard was here. "Take care of Thaliana for me," was all he said as he shook Tethys hand firmly, then walked out of the cave and followed the droid.

Tethys reached down and grabbed Antlia by the throat, lifting him up to the gurgled sounds of strangulation, his feet dangling a good foot above the floor. Antlia frantically flayed at Tethys' death grip, but to no avail. Tethys pulled the struggling man so that they were face-to-face, nose-to-nose. "If Ailanthus gets hurt or screwed over in any way because of what you did, I'll slowly and methodically tear your skin off your body and feed it to you, piece by *fucking bloody dripping piece*." He held him a moment longer as Antlia's lips began to turn bluish and his struggling subsided to feeble attempts. Then he threw him to the floor in a rushed intake of breath.

Ailanthus walked out of the cave and was struck by an odd smell he knew but just couldn't identify. It was a smell of deceit and distrust and yet it was faint and lingering, hanging in the air as if suspended there as a fine mist. He dismissed it quickly enough as his mind began to figure out his cover story, what he was going to say to Denebola to explain all this away and not destroy his chances of escape. Antlia had really screwed up this time.

* * *

Cetus flattened himself against the rough stone wall, disappearing into the shadows like a specter. Fortunately, Thaliana and the others walked the other way and did not directly pass by him. That would have been bad. He had become sloppy, had become too involved listening to the heated discussion Ailanthus was having with Antlia. But it had been worth it. This was what he wanted to hear. If they would just come out and say what it was that they were going to do. The exact details would be nice. But this was certainly more than enough of a start. He knew this Xylella well and knew her close Tanu friend Aonius even better.

Knew her very well indeed, inside and out. That would be his next step to unraveling the details of this planned escape.

Yes, that would be the best way and he could have some fun while he was at it. He giggled uncontrollably. This was all coming along just great.

* * *

Thaliana followed behind Christl as she made her way toward the bathing area, walking as if she were totally exhausted, yet still managing to swing her but and roll her hips as if dancing for Ailanthus' pleasure. Thaliana had been watching closely from the time they all returned to the cave till now and caught all the little tell-tale signs of flirtation the human whore was using to catch Ailanthus' eye and steal him away.

That was not about to happen.

No tiny, fragile, Noble-born, snotty human female was going to beat her out of the man with whom she intended to mate. Thaliana had no problem killing this human bitch to protect her territory.

But first things first.

This human seemed to possess some rather valuable information they would be needing and Thaliana would have to get it out of her first before tearing her apart limb from bloody limb and leaving her disemboweled, rotting corpse for the Drek to consume. That would be fun.

An unconscious smile covered her face as she imagined torturing this stupid, weak human in a myriad of sadistic and wicked ways, each more gruesome than the last. Thaliana had not worked and planned all this time to bed Ailanthus only to have it all taken away by a female from the man's own species. That others already believed that Ailanthus and Thaliana were lovers was fine with Thaliana. In fact, she even encouraged the rumors, but only when Ailanthus wasn't around. No use blowing everything that way. The man would come around eventually. He had to. He was a human male and thus weak when it came to the sexual games Druzni had developed to an art-form. Of course, that didn't explain why the man hadn't already succumbed to her charms. That was something she'd been wondering about for some time, but patience was the key to a successful seduction and Thaliana had seduced her fair share of males

She had thought about attempting Tethys once, but the man was just *too* human. Ailanthus would be a good start. That she actually liked the man more than she wanted to admit never seemed to factor into her equations, at least she never admitted that it did. Druzni didn't mate for ideological or emotional reasons. They mated for the sheer pleasure of it and to produce offspring for the glory of the greater Legion of Druzni Collective. Doing it because you *liked* someone was never an

option. What did that have to do with it? Besides, she had her orders. She was well aware what was expected of her and wasn't about to fail.

She didn't even notice that she had reached the bathing area until she heard the faint cry for help she registered as Christl. She looked about to find out what the little human had gotten into now and found her being dragged off through the shallow part of the pool by some of Pitatus' henchmen, kicking and screaming like a banshee, all to no avail. It was obvious that the three men had no clue Thaliana was standing there, else they would have never attempted such a blatant act.

She sighed as she watched for a few moments, making certain that there were no more of the foul men hiding somewhere to ensnare her. That would be just the thing: to get killed while trying to protect Ailanthus' little pet. Quite ironic, she thought. After analyzing the situation carefully, taking all of twenty seconds or so, she carefully and methodically placed her shower kit down on the rocks and made her way along the side of the pool to cut off the three men, who seemed more than interested in the struggling, now naked Christl to be oblivious to Thaliana's advance.

By the time they reached the other end of the pool, she was standing there with her arms crossed, looking down at them with derision. "Didn't anyone ever tell you not to steal other people's property?" she asked sweetly.

They stopped as one man and looked up at her. Two of them, she was positive, soiled their pants upon recognizing her. The third, though, she didn't recognize as one of Pitatus' select few. He sneered at her, of all things, his eyes hard and uneasy, as if he wasn't all right in the head. He might be a problem.

"Out of the way, Druznsi bitch. This doesn't concern you," he drawled nasally with a distinctive Yati Bheda accent.

This one must be new to the colony.

She raised an eyebrow, as if cocking a gun. "It does now that you choose to insult me, Siug'na."

The man actually growled at her, which she found rather odd. He pulled a short knife out from behind his back and brandished it before her menacingly, as if such a crude display of bravado would be enough to drive her off. Humans.

"Take her to Pitatus while I take care of this little annoyance," he drawled with a glint in his eyes. "I always wanted to do a Druznsi."

Where was this one from? *Do a Druznsi?* What human still had the notion that they could take on a Druznsi single-handedly? Maybe he was from some Outer Sphere system where Druznsi weren't well known. Maybe he was just an idiot.

The other two men hesitated but a moment before realizing that they would be spared the wrath of Thaliana and quickly dragged Christl

between them. Thaliana frowned further. This was becoming bothersome. Now she would have to follow those two after she dealt with this z'cav.

He advanced on her a few steps, then indicated with his free hand for her to join him in the water. She smirked as she watched from the corner of her eyes the other two drag Christl off. She would have to be quick about this. Before he could even react, she jumped off the ledge and somersaulted over him, landing with a splash behind him. His face screwed up in confusion as he turned to face her, but didn't even get half-way around before several vicious jams turned his kidneys into liquid. A foot sweep came next, landing him hard on his back in the water, his useless knife flying through the air and landing a good two meters away, where another prisoner pocketed it quickly and deftly, moving away from the area with casual strides as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

Before the man could gain his bearings and lift himself up, a strong, determined hand found its way clamped tightly around his neck and forced his head under the water. It was all over in a matter of minutes and his dead body floated away from the showers like a life-sized buoy.

That was one more stupid human she wouldn't have to bother with anymore. Take on a Druzni by himself.... must have been on drugs.

By the time she reached the two men who were dragging Christl away, they had almost left the bathing area, one of them pawing her thoroughly despite her weak and pitiful protests.

"Excuse me," Thaliana said in a casual voice bringing both of them to a sudden halt. "But I believe you have something that belongs to Ailanthus."

Before Christl could raise a protest that she was nobody's property, the two men had let her go and were running as fast as they could to get away.

Thaliana frowned. She was looking forward to thrashing those two. Now it would have to wait until she ran into them during work. Then she could teach them some respect. She reached down to offer her hand to Christl, but the ungrateful bitch merely shrugged it off and stood on her own.

She glared at Thaliana before speaking, standing there with her hands on her hips as if she had saved Thaliana and not the other way around, her body shaking from the adrenaline and the fright. "You call that watching over me? That one guy almost had his whole damn hand inside me."

Thaliana reached forward with lightning reflexes and grabbed Christl by the hair. Within a second the girl's head was under the water and she was struggling to get out, her hands wrapped around Thaliana's hand in a death grip. After a few moments, Thaliana pulled Christl's head up to a loud intake of breath and gasps and sputters, Christl's

wide-eyed stare of utter shock and horror just what Thaliana was looking to find. "Listen closely, *child*," Thaliana whispered into her ear as she tightened the grip on the girl's hair to the sound of a feeble squeak. "Ailanthus is mine. Anymore flirtations with him and I will *slit your throat*, or worse yet, give you over to Pitatus and his men and a hand up inside you will be the least of your troubles."

Christl began to protest and Thaliana pushed her head back under the water to more splashing as Christl vainly kicked her feet and flayed about with her hands. She pulled her out again, water pouring down the girl's face and her mouth sucking in the precious air in loud, short gasps. "The correct response is, 'yes, Thaliana.'"

"But I don't know -- " was all Christl was able to get out before she was dunked under again.

When Thaliana pulled her up this time, she answered correctly after several long moments of trying to catch her breath and expelling the water she had inadvertently swallowed.

"I'm glad that we've reached an understanding," Thaliana said in a cheery voice as she let Christl's hair go. "Now hurry up and wash yourself off. I don't want you here all naked and playing around when Ailanthus gets here. Move along now."

Thaliana couldn't quite make out what it was Christl was mumbling under her breath, but she was certain that it was not flattering. She smiled. At least the human had spunk. Maybe there was hope for her after all.

*I learnt long ago that when one is positive that they
know what's going on, that's when one knows nothing at all.*

Excerpt from:
Politics of Business
Cos van der Rijj
850 P.Y.I.

Ailanthus expected to find himself escorted to Denebola's office, where several other guards would be waiting to take him down to Level Ten and feed him to the renegade Kroor, Retaw and Drek. He was slowly resigning himself to the event, trying to figure out how exactly he was going to explain all this to Denebola in such a way that the others would still be able to escape. He could at least do that much before Denebola tortured him excessively. He didn't think that he was having much luck as of late. It seemed to him that the Creator Himself was setting him up to fail, filling him with false hope at the prospect of so many pieces falling into place, then smashing that hope with malicious foresight and grinding him back into the dust from which he had come. It was enough to drive a mad crazy, if not atheistic. He had never really been one to agree with much The Church had to offer, its odd and persistent brand of down-your-throat religion a little more than he could chew, but that didn't mean that he didn't believe in a Creator.

He realized with an ironic laugh that such a simple statement alone was enough, if heard in the wrong ears, to bring the Confessios down on him with their so-called humane methods of persuasion to correct his ignorance and bring him back to the fold, as they liked to called it. A Confessio had never personally accosted him, but he knew many who had, several of them in here, most likely sentenced to this dead-end on life's Hyper-Gate as a reward for telling the truth. The truth seemed to be one of those maladies yet to inflict The Church's hierarchy.

Maybe they had an anti-viral against it.

Either way, he figure that he'd be finding out exactly how wrong or right he had been regarding the Creator and his oddly benevolent brand

of love much sooner than he had anticipated. A trip down to Level Ten lasted, for humans, a maximum of ten minutes. Maybe he could be the exception down there like he had been on this level. He doubted it. Without Tethys to watch his back -- and protect him in totality from his own stupidity if the truth were known -- he doubted he would even last the required ten minutes. Ending up on a spit roasted alive for a Drek appetizer wasn't the way he ever imagined himself going out.

Thus it was that he was completely taken aback when the guard droid escorted him to the Tanudana section and specifically to Xylella's compartment. After making certain that the prisoner had arrived safely, the droid wandered off to antagonize someone else, not saying a word to Ailanthus; as if they ever did.

Xylella lay on her bed, propped upon her elbow casually filing the nails on her left hand. She didn't bother looking up. Ailanthus eyed her a moment, the see-through lingerie she wore like a fine mist of water flowing over her body, her smooth skin beneath like fine porcelain. A warm feeling began to pulsate through his loins at the sight of her, a feeling he had sworn off for the last few years. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy women. Far from it. But he knew that one could easily become too complasiate in here by taking advantage of the services offered by the Tanu, which was part of the reason for their existence. Plus, it was even easier to become emotionally involved with one of them -- as Antlia had clearly demonstrated -- and thus lose whatever perspective one had.

Anyway, Ailanthus wasn't the type of person to go for casual sex. Perhaps he was old-fashioned in that sense, but he just always felt extremely uncomfortable having sex with a woman he knew he might never see again. Seeing Xylella in this exposed fashion gave him an uncomfortable yet familiar feeling and he hoped that his so-called excitement didn't show too easily. Right now, Xylella was not the person with which he wanted to deal. In fact, she was the last person he wanted to see for the very reason that he might have to kill her to keep her quiet and that was a prospect he didn't want to face just yet, if ever.

After seeing her again this way, however, he could easily see why Antlia wanted to take her along.

Her face wasn't all that attractive to Ailanthus, though she was far from being just homely. Her body was a study in perfection, though, its well toned and shaped curves like those he remembered seeing on the holovision stations when he was still a free man, wondering where in the galaxy such women actually lived, because he never seemed to see them in any of the places he frequented.

He rose an eyebrow, still not at all certain what he was doing here or how she had managed to summon him so easily. "I didn't realize that you had sex with the guards also. I was unaware that they were

equipped for that useless function." It was said flatly, with little emotion apart from the sharp sarcasm that had become part of his normal repertoire.

She smiled, the twinkle reaching her eyes and causing her laugh lines to blaze in all their glory. "I've certain *privileges* that come with being a high ranking Tanudana and summoning any prisoner to my beck and call happens to one of the more practical," she said in lacy tones floating over the air like ribbons of seduction.

"What do you want, Xylella?" he said through a frown, not having the time for the games her kind were want to play.

She indicated for him to have a seat, but he didn't budge from his position leaning against the wall at the entrance to her compartment. She studied him a moment, her smile never leaving her face, or her eyes. "You always were a stubborn son-of-a-bitch, Ailanthus."

"And you were always a slut." He couldn't figure out from where those words had erupted, but they seemed to fit at the moment. He was certain she had been the one to corrupt Antlia and force him to reveal the escape plans. He wouldn't at all be surprised if she did work for Denebola. He found it hard to believe that Xylella was that good at sex to have risen to her rank in such a short time without offering some form of alternative incentive. Ailanthus could easily see how Tanu could hear all sorts of gossip leaked out during the throes of ecstasy with the same force as one's bodily fluids came pouring out.

Her smile vanished as she put her file down and covered herself up with a robe that didn't provide much more cover than the lingerie, re-shifting her position so that she was sitting up more. "Very well, then," she said, the smoothness in her voice replaced by a tough, command-level tone Ailanthus found intriguing. *Where did she pick that tone up? This was more like listening to one of those stuffy and overbearing Fleet Admirals.* "If that's the way you want to play it, that's fine with me."

She studied him a moment longer and Ailanthus felt almost like a cave bug ready to be crushed under foot. He could tell that she was trying to figure out how to rearrange her thoughts. It was obvious she had not expected this tact from him and that the approach she was going to take would have to be scrapped. She didn't seem very happy about that.

"Have you killed Antlia yet?"

A small smile escaped from his mouth. "I see that your opinion of me hasn't changed much since the last time I saw you."

"Your reputation proceeds you, my dear man. So, have you killed him yet?"

"No"

He could see the visible relief flood her body, even though she made a valiant effort to hide it. Perhaps Antlia had been right all along and

she did love him. But then that would be a foolish thing for a Tanu to do and if Xylella was one thing, foolish wasn't it.

"That's good. I would have been ... *upset* had that occurred and an upset woman can be dangerous prey."

"Any woman is dangerous prey."

Her smile returned, though not nearly as strong as before, a cautiousness to her emotions now present. "Yes, we are, aren't we.?" She looked up at him, those green-green eyes stabbing at him like deadly icicles. "I should probably warn you that if any harm should befall the man, a certain plan would find its way into the hands of the Security Warden, accidentally of course."

Ailanthus tilted his head to the side, his smile lingering in his eyes as he evaluated this newest hitch in his plans. Perhaps an asteroid would impact the planet next. That would certainly fit right in to this megacycles' activities. "Do you love him?" he asked straight forward, though why that seemed to matter at the moment he wasn't really sure.

"Who, Antlia?" she said in mock surprise, as if the question had never occurred to her before. She paused rather than answer right away, which was more of an answer to Ailanthus than the words coming of her mouth next. "Let's just say that I'm very *fond* of the little man and leave it at that."

"Whatever you want. Is that all?"

"Hardly. Please, have a seat, won't you? I made up some nice herbal tea for us to sip. It's from the Goin-bar root. I don't think that tea is something you get all that often."

Ailanthus looked at the small tray holding the two cups and the battered tea-kettle. He had noticed it upon entering but had hardly registered it as a worthwhile object. She wasn't about to get him to drop his guard that easily. "No, thank you. I don't think I like tea."

She sighed as she poured herself a cup. "Why do you have to be such a K'vor?"

"Servicing Drek as well, are we now?" The Drek expletive was not a common one.

She laughed, a short attractive sound almost making him smile again. "No, my dear man. I don't service Drek, but it's amazing what one can pick up in a place like this."

He crossed his arms over his chest and shifted his weight to one leg. "You spend twenty years in here and then ask me that question again, Xylella. You haven't heard the half of it."

She nodded several times, sipping her tea delicately and then placing more sweetener in it. "You know, if you stand there by the entrance like that, with half your ass hanging out, the guards are going to come by and wonder why you aren't enjoying yourself."

"Then they can take me back."

She sighed again, placing the cup gracefully down on the tray. "Do you have to be so difficult?"

He shifted his weight as he stepped in a little further, something about her making it difficult for him to get any closer. What it was he didn't know, but it was there as if it were a physical force. The warm feeling he had in his groin had been replaced now by heart-burn, a common reaction he seemed to have around women lately. "Why should I be cooperative? You haven't asked me to sleep with you. Isn't that the way it's supposed to work, Tanu?"

Her eyes widen slightly and her smile grew incrementally larger, making her face more attractive and also more dangerous. "Is that the problem? If I had known that bedding you would've made you more malleable to what I wanted to talk to you about, I would've offered. Please," she said back in her silky soft voice, patting the bed next to her with her hand. It was amazing how quickly she could switch tacts like that, like a thoroughbred racing yacht. "It would be a pleasure, I'm sure."

He chuckled slightly at the offer. She certainly worked it well. It was no wonder she was one of the top Tanu. She seemed to have been born to it. If he didn't know better, he'd think that she had been trained by the Imperium itself. "No, thank you, though it is a tempting offer."

She picked up her cup again and delicately sipped from it as she tilted her head slightly. "You know, most of the girls here think that you're a homosexual, seeing that you rarely, if ever, visit us."

He knew she was fishing for a reaction and wasn't about to give her one. He was secure in his identity and such transparent ploys didn't faze him in the least. "It's not like it's illegal, so what's the difference?"

She sipped more tea, then threw her head back in laughter, causing her hair to fly back in cascades of strawberry-blonde, causing a lump to begin in his throat. That was an odd feeling. "I suppose not much," she said merrily, "But then I forgot.... you're doing that *Druzsní* girl, aren't you? Human females aren't good enough for you, is that it?"

Girl? Thaliana was hardly a girl. It was interesting that she would refer to the *Druzsní* like that. He smiled inwardly, quite aware that most people believed in the rumor that he and Thaliana were intimate. There was no chance of that ever happening. The *Druzsní* certainly didn't see him as anything worth mating, else she would have already tried. She was just a good friend and to think otherwise always brought a chuckle to his heart.

But Xylella was again fishing for a reaction and this time he almost gave her one. She was trying to work him like an Imperium cruiser toying with a pirate raider, a reference striking him as very odd. Why would he think of that specific analogy in reference to her? In fact, whenever he saw her, the most prevalent thought was always of the Imperium. And what was it that she wanted? It was certainly more than the hollow threat to tell Denebola about their plans should Antlia end up

hurt. That was just a smoke screen, an opening salvo. "Thaliana and I are not, nor do we ever plan on becoming, intimate with each other. And human females, thank you, are more than good enough for me."

She opened her robe just enough for him to be able to see right through, the wisp of lingerie revealing her firm yet small breasts in that seductive almost-naked aspect. "I've no problem with you preferring males over females, Ailanthus. But you do disappoint the girls so much by not coming around more often."

He frowned, growing weary of the game. "Just tell me what it is that you want from me, Xylella, so that I can say no and go. I've already missed my shower time and I don't want to miss chow also."

She sat up, indicating with a distracted motion of her arm. "You're more than welcome to use our bathing area. Seeing that females don't seem to attract you, I don't believe that the other girls will really mind much. It might even give some of them a thrill to actually see you naked."

"Very kind, but no, thanks you."

"Very well then. I think we've had enough small-talk." She placed her cup back and straightened her robe so that it covered her body up again, even though the heat was unbearable. "I don't want you to punish Antlia for this idea of his to take me along. The poor boy believes that he's in love with me and you know how men can be when they get that foolish notion in their head." Her words were light, but the under-current beneath them was as strong as a full broadside from a battle-dread.

Now they were getting somewhere.

"And I suppose that you'll promise me not to tell anyone about it."

She shrugged her shoulders. "If that'll ease your mind."

"It wouldn't. Anyone who sleeps with the enemy is not very trust-worthy." His face was set hard, aware that she was leading him somewhere, yet not sure where that place might be. He hated being in this situation. She was treating him like a child, even though he was a good twenty years older than her. Damn but she was good at this.

"Is that how you see it? It's not like I have a choice in the matter. Denebola seems to find me attractive for some reason and enjoys my company."

Ailanthus shifted his weight to his other leg as he answered. "Denebola enjoys fucking you, Tanu, and I'm sure that's the extend of his relationship with you. To him, you're just a warm hole that he can relieve himself in. At least the man has good taste, I suppose." *Now why had he added that last part?* He frowned inside, not wanting to let her know that he had slipped up.

Her face lost that happy look and screwed up in a mask of disdain, her voice changing back to that command voice he found so interesting coming from her. It actually seemed to fit. "Your vulgar language is not appreciated, despite the subtle compliment."

Now he did react, laughing slightly and scratching his chin. "You've heard far worse, I'm sure, in the throes of fake ecstasy and orgasm."

"Let me get straight to the point," she said with an edge to her voice telling him he had hit a nerve. "I'm willing to make a deal with you."

"Really. How fascinating. I can hardly wait to hear it."

She studied him a moment, as if trying to read his mind, or figure out how best to phrase her request. Then she spoke, her voice losing some of the edge but not reverting to its former silky smooth form. She seemed to be passed that now since it hadn't worked. "I can keep Denebola busy while you make your move, thus making sure that he doesn't stumble upon you by mistake. He becomes rather ...how shall I say this?... Occupied when he uses me."

"I would think so," he said with a smile to his voice.

She frowned at him, changing it to a smile ever so slowly.

"In exchange for...?" he asked cautiously, knowing full well what she wanted from him.

"You know, I was willing to let you lay with me for this favor, but I can see that that prospect holds little incentive for you."

She was either stalling or even better at this game than he had estimated. "Not as little as you would imagine."

Her smile warmed up more, the twinkle in her eyes inviting. "Yes. Perhaps ... Anyway, I'll keep Denebola busy if you change your mind and take Antlia with you again."

He looked at her hard. She certainly was attractive, but that mind held a sinister trap that was lethal. He had almost become too complaisant. "What makes you think that I choose to make him remain here?"

"Oh please, Ailanthus. I know your kind. What was it, some sort of oath? A pledge perhaps?"

He had underestimated her completely. Either that, or she had a well-placed spy within his group. Or perhaps Antlia had told her much more than he let on, which was even more reason to leave the man behind. Either way, her esteem in his eyes had just risen. "He knew what the consequences would be. I can't risk the rest of the group for his impulsive decisions."

"Impulsive?" she barked with widened eyes. "The man was struggling with this for months, whether to tell me if a chance ever presented itself for you to escape. He never said anything, but I could tell. You spend as much time as I have with Antlia and you can read him like a book. The last thing it was, was impulsive. As I said before, the man truly thinks that he's *in love* with me. Men in love do strange things."

If that truly was the case, he wondered how many others in the group could be read that easily. Were there more prisoners out there who had an inkling of his plan? His voice remained calm, almost detached. "Either way, I can't change my decision. It wouldn't be fair to the others."

Antlia can't be trusted anymore." He straightened up and unfolded his arms slowly, making ready to go.

"Just like you don't trust me."

"It would be beyond foolish to trust you at this moment," he said with a slight guffaw.

She re-positioned herself on her bed, laying back down with her head propped up by her hand, the robe opening up again to reveal her many assets. "You don't trust anyone, do you?"

"I hardly trust myself, thank you very much. Trust is a rare commodity in this place. And it can get you killed quicker than anything else."

"I feel sorry for you. It must be a lonely life."

"Don't bother. I do just fine," he snapped back, hating it when people pitied him. He didn't need other people's pity.

"I can see that," she drawled out seductively.

Ailanthus took a deep breath, exhaled it slowly, trying not to get caught up in her game. With her robe laying open again exposing her nearly naked body, he was having enough trouble just staying on track. "Let me ask you something."

"Please feel free."

"Don't you want to leave this place? Why aren't you making a deal to come along with us?"

"Like threaten to tell Denebola about you?" It was said with a razor's edge.

"You're willing to do it if I hurt Antlia." Yes, now that was interesting, wasn't it. She was willing to sacrifice her chance to escape for Antlia, but not for herself. Why would that be?

Although she tried to hide it, Ailanthus could tell that the question had hit home, had resonated in some deep nerve and shook her. She re-adjusted herself, revealing more in the process, though this time he was certain that it was unconscious. "Do we have a deal, then?"

A small smile creased his face as he crossed his arms again. "I can't make any exceptions, I already told you that. We all made an agreement and Antlia knew the consequences."

"Yes, yes. Consequences I'm certain. Must always follow the rules, mustn't we. Just like the Imperium."

"I hardly think that the comparison is valid." He was intrigued even more now. Her words said one thing, but her body-language and what she wasn't saying told a completely different story. "Anyway, you'd know better about that than I would," he eased out slowly, quietly.

She sprang up as if ready to strike him, then settled herself with what Ailanthus was certain was a supreme effort. She straightened her hair and rearranged her robe so that it covered her up once again. She took a deep breath and then snapped her eyes up to his, the flash of green-green icicles like trans-phasic weapons fire. "It's obvious that Antlia wasn't much of a friend. Friends don't treat friends like this." Her voice

was hot, perhaps even tremulous. He almost expected her to fall to her knees at any moment and beg him. But then no, that wasn't like her at all. That would be very out of character.

"Then I guess our little meeting is at an end?"

"Get the hell out of my face, damn you," she spit at him, planting her hands firmly on her hips in that act of defiance with which all women seemed to be born.

He smiled much bigger, his eyes twinkling with the mirth of figuring out what was driving her. But he didn't move.

She stared at him, her mouth narrowing into a prim slit boding no good for whomever got in her way. "Don't make me call the guard, Ailanthus. Just go."

"You love him, don't you?" he said simply.

"I do no such thing and whomever tells you that is a liar. I'm just *fond* of him as a friend. He's a nice man who treats me well." Her false indignation was very forced.

He watched her fume internally, her foot now tapping rhythmically. "Well? Are you going to leave or what?"

He uncrossed his arms and tilted his head to the side as he reached out to take hold of her chin in his hand, soft and delicate-like. He expected her to react violently, to strike out at him. But then she was a trained Tanu and used to such moves. She simply held her chin up in unmasked hauteur bordering on fright, as if daring him to hit her.

Instead, he whispered like a refreshing breeze to the side of her face. "When a guard comes to get you in the next few cycles claiming that you're being transferred to the Level One complex, go with it, as if it's totally unexpected." He pulled his head back and looked into her eyes to make certain she understood.

The expression of her face, falling from the hard-line disdain to open shock, was enough for him to be satisfied that she understood. He leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the forehead, then turned and left. He walked quickly away from her compartment, not waiting for the guard droid to re-appear. He knew the way back and could always claim that he was performing some errands for his work if stopped and questioned.

After passing ten compartments and the accompanying sounds gestating from them like animalistic combat, he stopped, staring off down the rest of the corridor blankly.

What had he just done?

That wasn't like him at all. He should have just killed her. Thaliana would have not hesitated at all. Neither would Tethys. They would have slit her throat and left her to bleed to death like the slut she was and not thought twice about it.

But he had just included her in the escape, included a totally useless member who could contribute less to the success of the mission than

could Christl. And Christl he well intended to leave behind. What had just come over him? This was ludicrous. Twenty years of waiting for this one chance to escape this hell-hole, most likely his only chance to escape and here he was compromising the entire plan. First with Antlia and now Xylella. He had thought that so many years in this meat-grinder would've hardened him into a killing machine, like Tethys and Thaliana. And in most respects he was. He had no compunction in stabbing Pitatus till he stopped moving or snapping the neck of a Drek who threatened his well being. But there was something here, something about either Antlia or Xylella, just like there had been when he had first set eyes on Christl and known that she would be useful, that was preventing him from marching back to Xylella's compartment and dealing with her as he should.

He frowned hard. His face must have presented a terrible visage, for the man who stepped out of the compartment by which Ailanthus now stood took one look at him, turned pale as urine ran down his leg and died without so much as a by-your-leave.

That settled the matter.

He turned on his heel with every intention of going back to Xylella and strangling the life out of her. He could take no chances Not now. Not when they were this close.

His eyes blurred and his vision skewed as his balance fled as swiftly as the man from his terrible visage. Memories flooded his mind like an avalanche, burying him with faces and events and places he had never known, could never know. And he remembered....

The reddish tint of the dark, brooding sky was as familiar to him as the roof of the cave in the penal colony. He knew it as if he had lived under it for decades. The open steam vents randomly spewing forth their highly caustic mixture of radiogenic mist roared like thunder, then abruptly cut off as suddenly as they had sprung forth. The heat was as unbearable as it was in K'ar Krack'a, the swirling waves a haze of misjudgment and miscomprehension. The large planet sitting above him like a misplaced party favor blocked out half of the sky like an evil omen. The gravity here was oppressive, pulling down on the body and the mind like blocks of dread, making every step a nightmare of exertion. The super-hot air burned as it went down, making every breath a struggle for life.

He knew this place, though somewhere in the far reaches of his consciousness he was aware that there was no way he could know of it; there was no way he could be remembering this.

A man stood by him, tall and strong and built like a rock, the protective cloth and face shield normally making life on the surface bearable, pulled down to reveal his face. It was a face filled with determination and hope, though the hope was but a small reflection in

his one good eye glittering like a lost jewel. He knew this man, his face burned into every child's heart and soul from the very first day of school.

The man turned to talk to Ailanthus, or to the man whose memories Ailanthus was accessing, for it certainly wasn't his memory. He spoke to Ailanthus as if they were old friends, comrades in a struggle that was legendary, belonging to the electronic reproductions that were the books of the day and not to every day conversation.

The voice was rich and deep, scarred by years in the mines, years exposed to the corrosive atmosphere in which humans were so easily consumed. "We must leave her behind. There's not enough room." It was simple and straight-forward and Ailanthus knew all the ramifications of that statement as if it were all happening to him then and there.

He answered, his voice just as eaten away, his face just as hard. "But Orion, she's your mate. Leave me and take her. No one will begrudge you this. No one. She is to you as one is to one's own heart."

No smile came to his face, no change in his eye, the other but a hollowed out socket of mis-healed scars and constant puss.

It was odd to Ailanthus. Of all the pictures he had ever seen of Saint Orion Morgase, the man always had both eyes. Strange how legend breeds deception.

He simply stared at Ailanthus a moment, then flicked his eye back to the transport awaiting them, the Drek beckoning forlornly to them to hurry. Other humans stood around, some moving toward the transport but a few meters away, others fighting a rear-guard action against the enslavers pouring out of the access port to the mines below. Dead and dying bodies lay about in poises of agonizing death, the lethal and barbarous weapons used more likely to maim than to kill outright.

"She will be dead weight, of no use to the others, or to the future. She is expendable." His voice was flat and emotionless, as if he were talking of leaving behind a pack, a weapon, perhaps a piece of food that could be easily replaced. How could the man be so uncaring? He turned to look at Ailanthus again, that hope in his eye fading with each word, with each human falling to the many legged enemy. "You, on the other hand, are of use to me. You will go."

"But you love her," Ailanthus stammered in disbelief.

The pain of this memory was as real as it had been when it had all occurred and yet to Ailanthus it felt as if it were occurring, as if this was reality and the life he had left behind in the penal colony was the dream.

"Orion, you can't just leave her."

For just a moment, a brief, transitory moment passing through his eye like a cancer, Orion Morgase was human. Then the veil that was his immortal persona closed back in and he spoke, his voice like a death-knell. "She stays, regardless of any feelings I might have toward her. It's a choice between the survival of all of us and her and the greater

community wins out." He started toward the transport, the attack by the advancing enemy increasing to a crescendo. "There is no other choice."

Ailanthus felt the knot in his stomach, the pain coursing through him at the thought that this man, who loved his mate more than life itself, was forced to leave her behind due to simple math, to simple logistics. How could he do it? How could the man make such a momentous decision in such a calm and straight-forward way? Perhaps that was why he had been chosen to lead the Insurrection, chosen to be the one to make the tough decisions. Ailanthus knew that the decision had been wrong, that his mate had not survived the weeks of sustained torture to which the enemy had subjected her in order to glean every last drop of information as to where her mate had gone, how he had managed to escape. It would have been better to kill her outright, to spare her the horror the last few weeks of her existence became.

And it was a decision that wracked Orion Morgase until the day he died, forcing him to take on the most dangerous missions, the most suicidal attacks, sealing his legend and immortality as much as his brilliant tactics had. But the Orion Morgase that left Krii'don that day was a hollowed out remnant of his former self. He had never been the same.

And Ailanthus knew that he didn't want to leave K'ar Krack'a in the same way. He didn't want to become another Orion Morgase.

Blackness swept over him, covering up the scene he had re-lived in inky darkness, the sense of falling and spinning setting his mind into a confused medley of voices and feelings and emotions ending in a total collapse. The window that had opened onto the memories of the distant past closed, gone as if it had never happened.

Do we really wish to help humans break free from the confines of their enslavers? Is it truly in our best interest to allow this species the responsibilities of freedom? Have we really investigated this phenomena of humans enough to say that we are certain that they will not destroy all that we have built up upon their release? Do we truly want to unleash such a possible pathogen upon the galaxy?

Discussions as recorded during the debates of the Ancient Council on assisting Humans in their struggle to escape bondage.

**Adhi-Shatru
Home-planet of the Drek Continuum**

"You are either the most foolish human...," the first Drek intoned in fluid, easy Human-speak.

"Or the most courageous we have yet met, to come to our home-system so unprotected," the second Drek finished, with tilted head and indolent eyes of orange-hue.

There were three Drek standing before him. There were always three Drek. Two would speak, finishing each others sentences as if thinking with but one mind while the other Drek just stood behind the two and watched, never uttering a word, never showing any emotion or reaction to the proceedings. It was simply understood that he was the one in charge. Chances of it being male or female were about even. The Drek had no separation based on gender, one of those advancements of which humans had never quite gotten right.

They all stood well over two meters and appeared to tower over the lone human. Their aquamarine-colored skin was taunt, almost rubbery in appearance, the ridges and bumps and raised veins running the length of their exposed skin like a renegade, undulating country-side, the occasional dark spots of swirling washed-out red like slow healing sores. They were possessed of no hair. The ridge extending from where a human nose would be over their bald heads ended half-way down their muscular backs and was serrated and flexible, the tips sometimes dipped in white, sometimes black, sometimes a brilliant blue marking those select few as the ruling caste. No ears were apparent, though their hearing was legendary. Ribbed gill-like slits lined either side of their massive necks, taking the place of a nasal passage. Their olfactory sense seemed to come from their tongues. This made their faces appear blank and devoid of any typical human features giving that species its character. The wide, round eyes of predominately bright orange or brighter cinnabar stared out like twin orbs of utmost curiosity, the inner liner rhythmically covering the pupil like an eyelash in a blink-blink of movement unsettling to those not familiar.

Bright lights caused them pain, thus the subdued lighting shadowing the room wherein the human found himself, the lowered blue tint cool and refreshing, yet somehow foreboding all the same, the cool and dampness of the air pressing like a weight. Their dual opposable thumbs on each of their webbed hands made them extremely adept at engineering and construction, especially the finer details of life-support systems and instrumentation. If the Kroor built the best ships, then it was the Drek who supplied them with the most proficient and effective life-support systems.

They were widely known for their superior technical skill level in these areas, but they were even better known for their intolerant religious practices, bringing the galaxy to war more than once. The Drek believed in the tenets of their faith to the point of fanaticism and were very skilled at evangelizing to all they encountered, spreading their onerous and particular brand of theology like a valetudinary traveler.

That was until they decided to tempt fate and help humans.

They had unshielded a black hole with that decision and it more than once threatened to completely pull them in to their own destruction and crush their way of life regardless how much they protested and fought. Pushed to the brink of the area that had once been totally controlled by the Continuum with easy confidence, the Drek were now in danger of utter submission to the human host and its monotheistic ideals clashing so forcibly with J'tan, as the Drek religion was called.

Despite their long history together, this was more or less all that humans knew of the Drek. Despite a relationship lasting for well past six thousand years, humans knew less about their once saviors than they did about Dwad-Mehstiv, their old masters. And that bothered the Lord Duke Ganymede, who now stood before these three Drek on their own turf, a long way from his home planet and a longer way from any protection, should that be needed.

He was short compared to his Drek companions and his bald-head was the closest he came to any similarity. The Lord Duke's tanned head was like a plump raisin, wrinkled and dried and yet it still managed to look larger than normal, a feat many commented on behind his back. His face was a network of wrinkles and deep, entrenched lines holding decades of lies and deceit. His nose was a corrugated mass of bumps culminating in a blunt end so out of proportion to his face that the casual onlooker had to wonder if it was even a part of his body, or a misplaced addition. His mouth was large, his lips full and puckered like twin prunes; the laugh lines, radiating like spokes of a wheel over his high-cheek bones, had not been used in years and were turning into perpetual creases of estrangement. He wasn't heavy per se, though the baggy clothes he tended to wear gave that appearance. He was strong, or to be more precise, he *had been* strong in his youth that was as fleeting as his hair. He had inherited one of the weakest Houses in the Imperium and turned it into one of the most powerful during the one hundred and thirty years of his reign.

And all to end up here, turning to the Drek for help in a situation that should never have come to pass; should never have been tolerated and would never have been tolerated had he been the one making the decisions. That was all about to change. His meeting today was not by chance. It had been carefully contrived through secretive channels and clandestine operations that ended here, at this place and this time. Learning that Morype Slugs could navigate the Hyper-gates without the codes, thus allowing un-recorded travel anywhere within the galaxy, was a wonderful discovery. It made this meeting that much more possible. The last thing he needed was any interference from the Imperium Navy or that fool Rohini, who thought he was so damn special and entailed.

He had come without guards, without even an entourage. Although this would have been the way he would operate when he was younger,

he had grown maudlin over the past few decades and acquired a large retinue of those who wanted some favor from him or simply wanted to be around power. He had resented it at first, then quickly grew tired of the constant fights with his staff over who should be heard and who shouldn't and thus had simply allowed them to collect like so much carbon dust in the evaporators, to be cleaned out once a year with corrosive intensity. But on this trip he had left them all behind in the interest of arcane secrecy. He was even thinking that he would leave them all behind more often. If anyone found out that he was here, talking to the Drek, then all his work to built up the Greater House Gôrecki would be for naught. And that he couldn't have.

He spoke, his voice rough and raspy, bellowing in its depth, cunning in its evasive under-currents. "I come ready to hand you The Church of the Blessed Prophets, if that is amenable to you."

The Drek didn't bother looking at each other. They barely seemed to be looking at the Lord Duke. His presence here was tolerated more than it was allowed.

"We are interested."

"We will listen to your entreaties."

Ganymede bowed at the waist slightly, acknowledging that he had to play by their rules here, by their codes. "I ask but one small favor, a favor that, if played correctly, will give you much of your lost planetary systems back."

"And why would you make such a deal..."

"Against your own species?"

"This we do not understand."

"It is completely foreign to us."

The way they both spoke like that was always so discomfoting for him. Why couldn't they just speak like humans? This whole concept of aliens being more advanced than humans set his teeth on edge. They would soon learn what it was to be subject to humanity and he eagerly looked forward to the day when J'tan was no more. They would all soon find out, when he was at the head of the Imperium. "I do it to save my species," he said in explanation, hoping that the Drek would not be able to catch his more subtle plan just hidden beneath the surface. "With your help, human and Drek will learn to live together in peace and harmony. It is far passed time to end all the bickering in which we two species engage."

Their voices remained emotionless, though he could almost sense a hint, a tiny trace perhaps, of sarcasm, or rudeness leaching out of their expressionless faces. Their small chins rose ever so slightly. "Humans will never learn to live in harmony with any species..."

"That does not submit to their rules, law, and supposed superiority."

This might be a harder sell than he had at first thought. But he knew that any bait with The Church of the Blessed Prophets as the prize, the

Drek could never pass up. They spoke before he could get in another false explanation.

"What is it..."

"That you what with us?"

He found it not only annoying that they spoke that way, but also fascinating. Humans had yet to figure it out, the leading theories vacillating between a form of mental telepathy and a mental connectiveness that went beyond the physical. But without a Drek to experiment on, it was difficult to ascertain the root of the ability to any reasonable extent. Kidnapping Drek to operate on was not very popular with most, though he was certain that the Imperium, especially the First Imperium under the Cor Caroli's, had done just that and that the information was secreted somewhere inaccessible, as seemed to be the case with most vital information.

"What I want is for you to attack the Imperium at a very specific time and place. Then, when I have secured possession of the throne, I will hand The Church of the Blessed Prophets over to you to do as you see fit."

There was a slight shift in their demeanor, a shift an ordinary human would have never noticed but which Ganymede picked up on instantly

"This is indeed...."

"Intriguing."

"But what makes you think..."

"That you will be in a position to hand The Church over to us? The Imperium..."

"No longer controls The Church."

The Lord Duke smiled.

He had them now. They were biting and soon he would be able to reel in his catch. "The Church of the Blessed Prophets will weaken itself opposing me, weaken itself to the point that the Imperium will be able to eviscerate it and leave it exposed for you." He realized just then that he never really thought about what would happen to The Church if his plan were successful. He certainly didn't plan on actually handing it over to the Drek. That would be rather foolish. But it certainly did make superb bait.

"And how do we know...."

"That you will honor your part of the agreement? Your species is not..."

"Known for its trustworthiness."

The Lord Duke smiled and bowed again. "What assurances would you like to have?"

They were silent for a moment, perhaps thinking of a suitable guarantee to assure human honesty -- if such a thing existed, Ganymede know nothing of it -- or perhaps just to let him sweat a little more, so to speak. It was actually quite cool in the room, seeing that it

was situated several hundred meters underneath the water of the largest ocean, straddling the planet like a glistening blue bangle. Who knew for certain with Drek what they were thinking.

The Lord Duke waited patiently.

One thing he had learned when dealing with the Drek was patience. They were a slow species, prone to taking their time when making even the most innocuous decisions.

"You have an offspring, yes?"

"We will take him as an assurance of your intentions."

He stared at them for several minutes, aware that they were studying him for his reaction. The Drek knew more of humans than humans did of themselves and he would have to make certain that anything he agreed to he actually agreed to in his mind. They had a distracting and unnerving way of spotting lies. Their time subjugating humans was not wasted time.

A son. That was an unexpected yet interesting assurance. It had been done before, that was certain. Back when the Houses had first been formed, the leaders had swapped offspring as guarantees of numerous agreements, both sons and daughters. Most of the time the children were returned unharmed and perhaps even better educated, but sometimes the deal fell through and the children would end up as examples. It was usually worse for the daughters, forced into ritual prostitution until they were worn out and then sent to the Drek or the Druzni for their pleasure or experimentation. The Houses back then had not been very forgiving when it came to treachery by their own kind. With a galaxy of hostile aliens closing in, no one liked to be betrayed by another human and such lessons were not very common but were very effective to drive home the point that such behavior would not be tolerated in the future.

But such crude forms of assurances had not been seen in centuries, an oddity of the past better left there. He smiled internally, then affected a look of pain mixed with hopeful expectations as he spoke. He had several offspring and could always make more, his many wives more than willing to bear another child for him and thus not have to endure his forced attentions. "I will send you my oldest son as soon as I return. Will that be sufficient?"

They seemed to ponder that answer a moment, as if perhaps he had spoken too soon, too eagerly.

"When he arrives, then the bargain will be sealed."

"But be warned that any failure on your part will mean your son's agonizingly long death."

"Of this be assured."

He breathed a sign of relief. It had worked. "I have no doubt of that but I'll not fail you. I have exact details ready to give to you. May the goddess Si's favor our communion with success." *Oh, but that was a*

nice touch. He forced himself not to smile, his own cunning and scheming almost too much for him to contain.

The Drek all tilted their heads to look at him in what he considered to be surprise. Had they possessed eyebrows, they would be raised at this moment. But then again, perhaps that was anger that they were displaying at his effrontery at using one of their goddesses like that. He wished that they had some way to convey their emotional state like humans. It would make these negotiations that much more practical.

"Then by the god Doni..."

"We have an agreement. We will attack..."

"The Imperium as you so desire."

Now all he needed to do was convince the rest of the Imperium for the second part of his plan to come to fruition. He bowed again at the waist, then backed out of the chamber, activating his deep-space shuttle with a touch on his arm control. This had gone very well indeed.

The Drek remained quiet for some time after the human left. Humans gave off such a strong odor, as if they leaked speciousness. It was very peculiar to them and was rather noxious. Water flooded into the room in an effort to waste the smell away.

The third Drek spoke, her voice a lilt of melodious raindrops. "He's deceiving us. He will not fulfill his end of the bargain to which we have agreed."

The other two Drek turned to look at her.

"Then we will not honor the agreement."

"It's better to not involve ourselves in human affairs anyhow."

The female Drek turned to leave, speaking as she did. "No. We'll honor the agreement. But we'll not stop when he wants us to. The time of human ascendancy is now at an end."

The other two Drek followed her out of the room quiescently.

* * *

Cabala Trite
Home Planet of the Greater House Aldebaren
Currently in rebellion against the Imperium

The palace sat atop the Farseer Hill, brooding like a marble-encrusted rock-pile that had seen far too many days. It was well over a thousand years since the first stone had been laid and not much had been improved since then. It had been hastily constructed when the Prime House Volans had assumed the Imperium Seat and raised the Lesser House Aldebaren to the exalted status of a Greater House for services rendered during the bloody Battle of Vitirna when the then Greater House Volans had broken the back of the Drek and Druzni offensive and given to humanity the beginnings of the Second Imperium. The then

Lord Comté of the House had felt that his small palace set down within the city was far too trivial to be the seat of a Greater House and thus had selected this site and built his monstrous construct in record time.

It had languished here ever since.

When the next Lord Comté had taken over thirty years later, he moved out of the sprawling palace within the year and built himself a more conventional and modern abode in the dead center of the city, where he thought the Lord of a Greater House should reside. All the Lord Comté's from then on had used the more modern palace in the city, ignoring the stone monolith ruminating on the hill like a long lost stepchild. The old palace had remained unoccupied, except for the occasional guest or jilted first wife who had been banished to the hill and the drafty palace. They had mostly found the building to their liking once they managed to get over the insult of being banished to it and the palace had always treated them well. The temperatures here on this part of the planet didn't vary to extremes and thus the palace never had to compete with very cold or hot conditions. Most of those who lived here left with a feeling of comfort for the old rock walls that one couldn't get out of the modern transparent-aluminum and mega-alloyed structure that was the working palace. It tended to be far too sterile.

The trees lining the haphazardly tended garden were soaring and gnarled, having seen more passage of time than any other living body in the area. They offered a mixed blessing of shade and fallen leaves in which quiet and secretive talks had occurred for centuries. The dark green ivies clung to the worked stone with its gray and black water marks and lichen, establishing a fractal pattern of chaos all along the outer walls. It was a lonely place, the few who came nowadays coming for the solitude or the privacy that the palace afforded.

And so it was that the Lord Comté Jovian Aldebaren VII now stood by the tall, iron-wrought windows arching high above in a double envelopment looking out over the sloping green weed-infested lawn running down to the edge of the first craggy cliff surrounding the palace on the east and south sides. This was one of the few vistas that the soaring trees didn't block and he liked to stand here and look out over the countryside un-infested by the presence of humans. The dappled and subdued rays from the binary sun created intricate, double muted shadows on the floor and across his body, following the contours of the iron-work on the windows with precision.

He stood with hands clasped lightly behind his back. His gray hair was thin and scraggly, not combed since last night. His full and bushy eyebrows covered his almond-colored eyes sitting deep in their sockets like lost hover-orbs glowering in the dark. He had once been considered handsome, perhaps even very handsome in his younger days, but that capricious mistress age had seen to it that his youth had gone along the same lines as his hair. The scar that he had won during

one of the many brief yet heated secretive border clashes with the Druznsi almost one hundred years ago didn't help much either. It ran from above his left eye down across his fat cheek to end in a vicious hook just outside his thin, narrow lips. He had to have his eye replaced, but he kept the scar as remembrance.

It had been that scar that had shattered his image of the Imperium and the greater glory that it affected. It had been from that moment on that he had vowed to bring down the Prime House Volans and set the Imperium on the proper course, the course he choose to give it. The Druznsi who had given him the deep cut had not only taken away his looks, but had scarred his soul, leading him to this day, standing here in this long, disused palace considering events about which he would never have even thought prior to that fateful day.

The rest of his body, which had once been hard and brawny was, like his face, wracked by time and misuse, his rotund pouch thrusting out as if wanting to make a statement all its own. Jovian enjoyed his food and enjoyed eating even more and to hell with those who would curtail his habits for the sake of health and conformity. He was a Lord Comté of a Greater House of the Imperium and was going to do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. It was rather like his decision to break from the Imperium and go into rebellion, not satisfied with the course that the Lord Marshall Bhagavan Rohini Nahsirk was taking. Jovian was certain that he could do a much better job. But when he had approached the Lord Marshall Bhagavan about his sentiments, the man had laughed at him. Actually physically laughed at him and that was more than enough to convince Jovian that leaving the Imperium was his only course.

That had been almost forty years ago and although three Greater Houses had joined his rebellion, along with two non-affiliated Lesser Houses, the rebellion had not turned out as he had envisioned. He had managed to pull the resources of thirty-four systems from the Imperium, including the ship-building yards of Oxicem and the spice planets of the Sasnakra system, which brought with it the sole trading rights for the spice with the Drek. That was a major source of income for the rebellion -- in fact the only real source of income if he was honest with himself -- and Jovian was in danger of losing that source to the fickleness of that she-wolf Lord Rishi Nishada Andromada of the Greater House Yati.

She was as bad as a mal-functioning anti-matter core, operating just fine one day and the next threatening to turn the entire ship into metal splinters. He would have to deal with her sooner rather than later. It was enough that he had to deal with the Imperium Navy and its insistent need to blockade his systems. He didn't need the Lord Nishada deciding that his was not the House to back in the race for the throne. An assassination was not out of the question. As a matter of fact, that

might just work well, blaming it on the Imperium and perhaps bringing even more Houses to his banner. He would just have to make certain that he had a ready replacement, someone whom the minor lords within the Greater House Yati would support and whom, of course, wholeheartedly supported him.

He sighed as he watched a wood deer slowly wander onto the lawn, foraging along the clipped grass. Yes, he would have to do something to move his little rebellion along. Any military move would be sheer idiocy, especially with the Imperium Navy strongly ensconced in Rohini's hands. But there were other ways. Someone had successfully ordered the assassination of the Emperor those many years ago and he had to believe that that assassin was still around and willing to earn credits. Everyone was willing to earn credits, be they Imperium or Church. It seemed to drive the very foundation of the human community. Perhaps he could find this lone assassin and hire him. A nice little round of assassinations might just do the trick, provided that Jovian was ready to move into the vacuum quickly and proficiently. He smiled, making his face swell and rekindling that long lost youth he once possessed. This was why he enjoyed coming to this palace on the hill. The solitude and peace effusing it was so conducive to thinking.

Maybe he should move back up here....

Those whom we mendaciously call the Monks strove to copy and save as much knowledge as they could before Dwad-Mehstiv fully enveloped humanity. But it is a fallacy to believe that they only purposely saved the religious books of pre-Dark Age Human civilization. It was simply a matter of chance that the only volumes that made it through the Dark Ages were religious in nature. Any other interpretation is utterly devoid of logic.

Sessions on the Dark Ages of Human Bondage
Hosted by the Anti-Church League of the Imperium.
2560 Y. I.

**City of Sitciv Eav
Planet of Job's Rest
Seat of The Church of the Blessed Prophets**

The broken and disassembled pieces of the translator droid lay scattered about the office, the still acridly smoking remnants of the main memory core a heap of slag on the floor. Only a single light remained on in the room, casting the solitary figure at the desk in a glow of subdued sanctimony that was as false as Dwad-Mehstiv contract. High Confessio Coronalis looked as haggard as he felt, his three-day growth of beard like a smudged veneer of infidelity. He stank, of sweat and confusion and dirt. He had a hollowness to his blankly staring eyes fastened on the smoldering remains of the droid. The pungent haze of the plasma blaster still hung in the air, rising ever so slowly like the soul of the destroyed droid still trapped in the world of humans.

The only word that would replay itself in Coronalis' mind was *why*?

Why had the Dei Glorium wanted him to see the information on the disc? And why had this information been marked as heretical if it was the fundamentals of what St. Aurum Gossomer wrote?

He had read straight through, from the moment the first words were projected before him by the translator droid to just a few moments ago, when he had pulled his plasma blaster from its secret location under his desk and tore into the hapless droid as if in revenge for what he had read.

It was all there.

The texts were not complete to be certain, but more than enough of the individual codices were all there. The names were familiar to him, of course, the titles of the lesser codices secretly circulated among the higher pundits of The Church of the Blessed Prophets like forbidden candy: the Bible, Torah, Koran, Rig Veda, Upanishads. But he had no idea that they were as intact as this, as profound and enlightening: perhaps worst of all, so similar to the Tome of the Blessed Prophets.

All his life had been forsaken for the opportunity to serve The Church of the Blessed Prophets as best he could, a life of sacrifice and self-immolation leading to the final and ultimate position of High Confessio. He had felt such satisfaction, such self-contentment when he was able to convert a heathen to the True Path, or break a strong-willed heretic and hear him beg for the ultimate release, death: it was such sweet music to his ears when that ultimate power flowed through him. It had made his life complete, his mission for the Dei Glorium all that he lived for.

But now . . . now he was unsure of everything he had ever learnt. If these codices were correct, true -- and he still clung to a tiny scrap of hope that it was all a test, a falsehood -- then The Church of the Blessed Prophets was all a lie, a deception on par with Dwad-Mehstiv and the Dark-Ages of Human Bondage. He had never felt this torn inside. It was a good thing that he hadn't eaten during the hours he had been absorbing all the words pouring out of the droid like hydraulic fluid. There was no way he could have kept anything down anyway. His stomach was tied in twenty different knots of doubt and disorder.

This disc now sitting on his desk like the proverbial evil incarnate itself, held the death of all he held sacred in its electronic grasp and with it, the death of all humanity. For without The Church of the Blessed Prophets, what was humanity but a collection of lost souls drifting among idolatrous aliens determined to crush them? Without the guidance of The Church of the Blessed Prophets, humans were nothing, denied salvation and ultimate glory that the promotion to the next level of existence afforded those worthy. Without the intimate knowledge of the Creator, and the caretakers who were the domini, what possible chance would a human have of redemption from the karma passed from life to life?

And with all that in mind, with all that was at stake, were this information ever to become public, why would the Dei Glorium want him to see it first?

And why now, of all times? What was she trying to do to him?

He was not a paranoid man by trait, but this set his mind spinning with possibilities that all seemed to end with his disgrace and death. With all that was happening with the Imperium and the struggle for the throne and the Lesser House St. Peter, why would the Dei Glorium want her High Confessio to see this heresy?

No ... To hear this *truth*.

There was no way that this could be faked, not like this. The mythical monks, whom he had known existed since before he had taken the position of High Confessio, were known to have been meticulously faithful in their guardianship of the discs, making it impossible to think that it could be wrong and untrue. This had that vomit-like smell of honesty to it that one could not counterfeit.

He took a deep intake of breath, then rubbed his rough and scratchy pseudo-beard. The tone of an incoming call made him jump in his chair, his heart leaping out of his chest and flopping on the ground for several seconds before he managed to calm himself. It was the Dei Glorium, summoning him to her study. He had figured that she would be calling him any time now. But he still wasn't ready to confront her. Not yet. Not with so many doubts flowing through his mind like plasma. He stood and tried to straighten his clothes, the wrinkles that had set in apparently permanent. He couldn't go to her like this. He stripped his clothes off and jumped into the sonic shower built into the back of his office, shaved and changed into clean clothes. But there was nothing that he could do about his eyes and his lean, drawn face. Maybe that was for the best. Maybe it would be good if the Dei Glorium saw the pain and anguish that he had been through. Maybe.

When he arrived at her study, he was surprised to see that it was dark outside, the large windows dominating the far wall looking out over the blinking, flickering lights of the city below, the logical and straight rows of streets and houses like a grid-map, surreal in its perfection. She stood as she always did, in front of the windows, her fragile statue so imposing in its single-minded passion. He stepped in and the door closed behind him with an uncomfortable thud. He had always felt easy when coming to see the Dei Glorium, but now he felt like a school-boy before the head-mistress, accused of some serious charge of which he knew nothing. He decided that it might be best to just act as he always did and walked over casually to the chair he always sat in, plopping himself down, the disc uncomfortable in his inner pocket. That burning sensation he had experienced when first touching it still as strong as ever. Was this what evil was?

She said nothing, just stood there with her back turned toward him for a good ten minutes before he decided that perhaps he should make some sort of noise to let her know that he was here. It wasn't like her to ignore him like this.

She beat him to the punch. "So, Coronalis," she said firmly, a trace of humor in her words. "What have you learned in your seclusion? I almost sent someone to find out if you had perhaps committed suicide."

He swallowed hard. *Is that what she thought?* "It took me longer to read all the text than I had at first anticipated," he responded laconically, aware that he didn't want her to see his discomfiture. He was the High

Confessio, after all, and in the process of rooting out heresy it had always been assumed that he knew all of The Church of the Blessed Prophet's doctrine. This had been a rather large missing piece of that doctrine.

She turned now to examine him with those penetrating eyes boring right down to his soul and scorching it with indiscriminate dogmatism. She just stood like that for several minutes, her eyes narrowed, her mouth prim and screwed up like a desiccated prune. She took two steps toward him, then stopped, reaching her hand out with open palm. "Did you bring the disc back?"

He interpreted that question as her wanting him to give it back, so he reached into his vest and pulled out the all-consuming disc. She made no effort to come closer and he was forced to get up and place the disc into her hand.

The old, gnarled fingers closed over it slowly like the lid closing on a tomb.

She never looked down at it, but kept her eyes fastened hard on Coronalis. She pursed her lips tight, standing there like a statue. "I'm surprised, Coronalis," she intoned quietly yet strongly, blinking once, then turning away from him and walking ever so slowly back to her desk. "I expected a little more reaction from you; disdain, excitement, at least disgust if nothing else. This is rather volatile." She dropped the disc onto her desk as if it were nothing of importance.

He sat back down again, though somehow it felt wrong now to be seated in her presence. *What was she up to?* "Is it for real?" he asked, his voice betraying him by breaking as he spoke. He rubbed his throat and swallowed hard. Couldn't have that happen again.

An old eyebrow rose as she answered, her voice cutting through the drifting dust motes like a sun-ray. "That is *not* a question worthy of you, High Confessio. You can do better."

He shifted his position several times, then finally gave up and stood, wandering away from her and into the shadowed corners. "Why?"

"Rather open-ended, wouldn't you say?" she answered back with a brief smile holding no levity. "Try again."

She was playing a game here of which he didn't know the rules. What was it that she wanted him to ask? Surely not the most obvious question. Such talk in the very presence of the Dei Glorium was beyond heresy. Is that what she was striving for? Paranoia was not a fun malady from which to suffer. "Why did you have me read this now?"

She moved her chin slightly to the side, then turned her back on him and walked over to the windows again, hands clasped before her. "Close, but still not correct."

He stopped in mid-stride and looked at her, wanting nothing more at this moment than to force her to sit down and tell him what he wanted. This was insane. But one didn't just tell the Dei Glorium that she was

insane. Heads rolled for lesser offenses. He screwed up his face, trying to think for what it was that she was reaching. He took a deep breath and exhaled it as he spoke, hoping that perhaps the words would come easier if forced out with the bad air. "Why did Saint Aurum Gossomer, may the Creator bless her forever, simply copy what had already been written and then claim to have written it all herself?" He had the odd sensation of burning in his throat, on his tongue as the words came out in a rush of torment. He felt somehow one step closer to hell. Was that brimstone he smelled?

He couldn't see her face, but he somehow knew she was smiling. Perhaps he could hear it in her voice. "*That* is the question, my old friend. *That* is the question."

For some insane reason, he had expected her to answer the question, but it appeared that she was as stumped as he was. He leaned on the back of a chair, made to speak again, to voice another concern. It seemed that now that he had spoken the forbidden, heretical words, more wanted to follow, to flow out as if he had opened some room inside his mind containing volumes of such unorthodox thoughts.

But she spoke first, her voice soft, so soft he had to lean forward and strain to hear what it was that she was saying. "To be fair, when Saint Gossomer wrote her great Tome of the Blessed Prophets, it was a chaotic time. The Drek had humanity by the throat, their heathen religion draining our strength and damning our souls to everlasting damnation. We needed a leader who could unite humans and forge them into an irresistible weapon for good. That she did, brilliantly I must add. But then, she was only fifteen at the most, some say even younger so the underlying question that needs to be truly asked is whether she wrote it at all, yes?"

He knew that she was about to say more, but he couldn't help the burst of words spraying from his mouth. "But she *lied*. She took the best of what was in those lesser codices and fabricated a lie." *Were they truly lesser if they were the originals? If they were the basis for the Tome, then wouldn't that make them even greater?*

She turned on him, the anger in her eyes only eclipsed by the temper of her words. Had she shouted, it would have been better. "*She did no such thing*. She took from what the Creator had already written and incorporated it into a consistent foundation that has survived these four thousand years intact and strong. What did you think, Coronalis? What did you think those names of the early prophets meant? Where did you think they came from? Moses, Jesus, Mohammad, Buddha? Are they just *names* to you and nothing more? Dead prophets that mean *nothing*, whose origins mean *nothing*?"

His eyes widened with the implications. She was saying what he had feared. His legs felt weak and he sat, not wanting to collapse in her

presence. "But if they truly existed, if their words actually came from a time before the Dark Ages, then that means..." He couldn't make himself say the words. It would kill him, he was certain. The Creator would strike him down then and there.

"That all those codices were written on a single planet? That we all came from *one planet*, evolved on *one planet* and aren't the proverbial inheritors of the galaxy as we want to believe? Which part do you have the problem saying? Which part is it that holds your tongue and bites into your soul so terribly? Do you honestly believe that we as a species could have been so advanced before Dwad-Mehstiv enslaved us that we could have spread to so many other planets as we are now? I find it hard to believe, *my dear friend*, that you're so gullible and naive to think that we didn't start out so humble." She stared at him with those hard, amber orbs burning with what he could only say was supernal fervor.

He had never seen her like this before, her passion and furor so strong that he expected her to start shaking. How could someone who was so fragile looking be so forceful?

She turned away from him as if in disgust, the clicking of her tongue like a host of locust descending. She strode back toward her desk, picked up the disc and turned toward him, brandishing it like a weapon meant to strike at his heart. "What it *means* is that our venerable Saint Aurum Gossomer is no more a true prophet than Cor Caroli or Rishi Rahu. And *this* I expected you to know, seeing that you're the one man who's supposed to know the truth of The Church of the Blessed Prophets better than anyone else." She walked over to him, quickly and purposefully, the agility of her decrepit body surprising, the disc waving in her hand menacingly. She placed both hands on either side of his chair and leaned in close, her breath hot and tempered with an infused demonic spirit. "What it *means*, my little man, is that *ours* is the master religion, the perfected opus of the Creator's own hand brought to us through the hand of Aurum Gossomer or whomever wrote it for her, it doesn't really matter much now, and strengthened by the *billions upon billions* who worship it as the ultimate truth." She almost spit on him, her words and heated breath like hell-fire itself. He had not expected that reaction at all. Maybe she was insane. "What it means is that we're based on a falsehood, a lie, High Confessio, which our most revered benefactor perpetrated in order to ensure humanity's survival." These last words were said with such self-denunciatory intoxication that Coronalis almost lost control of his bowels.

This was indeed insane.

He tortured people for lesser words, hunted down those who would spread such filth and heresy. And here, right before him, speaking so close that he could see the age of her skin in her hundreds of tiny wrinkles like deep-pit canyons of vivacity, was the Dei Glorium herself letting loose with an arsenal of deception. She was supposed to be the

moral pillar of The Church of the Blessed Prophets, not the torpedo that destroys it.

She stared at him a moment longer, then stood back up, straightened her robe and walked away from him with a calm look about her features, so in contrast to her earlier demeanor. "Saint Aurum Gossomer and her accomplices were a master creators, playwrights of the most high and they created for us, for humanity's future, a work of unprecedented grandeur that has survived unaltered for over four millennia. That it had all been written before by the true saints and that they simply assimilated the best parts to create a synthesis of true inspiration is but known by two people." She turned to look at him, her eyes still glowering like an anti-matter core. "And in case you've completely lost all your faculties, those two people are you and me." She threw the disc at him. It landed lightly in his lap. He recoiled from it as if it were a venomous snake.

Neither spoke for several minutes. Coronalis was far too stunned at what had happened just now to utter anything intelligent. His mind was reeling from the impact. To be told by the head of The Church of the Blessed Prophets that all he had believed, all he had striven to instill in others was based on a lie was like being told he had an incurable disease and was going to die tomorrow. It just didn't happen. It was a concept that never crossed his mind because it was simply an unimaginable possibility in this age of medical sophistication. And still the question of *why* hadn't been answered. *Why* was she telling him all this? What was the purpose?

He looked at her, not even bothering to touch the disc in his lap that seemed to weigh a ton. His mouth moved but nothing came out. Something had snapped the connection between mind and mouth, making intelligent speech impossible.

She frowned, a frightening apparition of annoyance. She rubbed her forehead. "Get over it already, Coronalis. I'm surprised that you never saw it to begin with."

He found his voice, but all that came out were squeaks and squawks.

"Sweet Gossomer, man," she snapped at him, walking over and snatching the disc from his lap with an assertive, crisp motion. "It'll take me far too long to train a new High Confessio. I need you now, *here!* *This* is the pivotal moment in the history of The Church of the Blessed Prophets and you can be a key player, but you'll have to be able to speak, man."

He cleared his throat, then stood and walked over to the water pitcher that always seemed to be filled with ice-chilled liquid. He reached passed it and grabbed the small bottle of harsh Tarij brandy, filling a snifter full and downing it in one, long draw. He turned toward her, wiping the excess liquor off his lips with the back of his arm, his eyes narrow and hard. "How can you -- "

"Don't even go there," she spit at him in raised voice. "Don't! It's *not* your place to dictate doctrine to the Dei Glorium. It's your simple place to carry out the doctrine that I decree is correct upon examination of the Tome of the Blessed Prophets. It would be best to remember that, High Confessio."

He looked at her, drawing in a deep breath through clenched teeth. This was a dangerous time and she was a far, far more dangerous person than he had ever believed possible. He could now easily see how she had won the position of Dei Glorium. She was masterful, a manipulator of the highest order. What she must have been like in her younger years he was afraid to contemplate. He set the snifter down. "What is it that you plan? You must have a reason behind your apparent insane behavior." He was walking on the event horizon here and one wrong move would spill him into a never-ending fall from grace. But he also wasn't about to be pushed around like a lackey. He was still the High Confessio, the second ranking functionary in The Church of the Blessed Prophet's hierarchy. And he still had his pride.

She smiled, a small vicious thing that should have been accompanied by snarl. "That's more like it," she hissed as she sat herself down regally, raised her chin ever so slightly as if in defiance of the Creator itself. "What I plan to do, dear, old friend, is grind the Lesser House St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration into oblivion, seize the throne of the Imperium and place it back into *our* hands where it should have been all along." She held up the disc again. "What I plan to do is to tear down the order now established and then rebuilt even better, stronger."

He walked back toward his chair, the burn of the brandy down his throat now settling in his stomach like a slow fusion fire. He thought; thought hard about what it was that she was saying. There was such deceit and decay here that he was afraid that he might step in it inadvertently and soil his soul. He wondered if it would have been better had she not included him in this nefarious plot of hers. Sometimes ignorance was bliss. "You plan on revealing the contents of that disc, don't you?" It was an audacious plan. Completely insane, but certainly audacious. "And this will affect the Lesser House St. Peter how?"

She lowered her chin now, eyeing him in a way that made him think that perhaps she was changing her mind about including him. Then she slapped her hand down on her desk making a loud boom. Her voice was taking on the characteristics of a cackle, of an old woman's spittle-induced dry throat titter. It grated on his nerves. "No, you fool. That would be far too obvious. Too many questions would arise. Think, man. Use the brain that the Creator blessed you with and *think*."

He frowned, not used to this type of treatment. He was usually the one yelling and tormenting and generally making the threats. Being on the other end gave him a whole new perspective. What was it that she

was after? If she didn't want to blame the Lesser House St. Peter, then how could she manage to destroy it?

She waited a few moments, watching him with an increasing frown turning her whole face into a screwed up mess. He looked up at her, straining to think of how she planned on using this highly destructive information. He was usually the one with the devious plans. This was very disconcerting.

"Very well then, I don't have all night to wait for you to figure this out," she cackled out as she suddenly rose like a spring. "We will leak this from *inside* the Lesser House St. Peter to the general public. It will become a scandal, a huge mess that will place that House right in the middle of a public outcry. And when it has sufficiently incubated, infested the minds and hearts of the billions of faithful followers, The Church of the Blessed Prophets will come to the rescue with the proof that it is ... *all... a... lie.*"

He stared at her with open mouth, his jaw dropped open, his eyes bulging.

It was totally derangement.

And it was totally brilliant.

He spoke, his voice soft, afraid that someone might hear the words of heresy he was about to speak. "It will tear The Church of the Blessed Prophets apart."

"Yes." It was more a sigh than a word, as if she were relieved that he finally grasped the concept.

He ran his hand over his mouth, his dry throat like parchment paper. "And then what?"

She walked back over to the large, ornate window and looked out over the brightly lit up city below, the whish of hover-cars like fire-flies at this distance, joyfully and unknowingly frolicking in their bliss, unaware that at any moment now they would all be killed. Her voice floated like a cloying mist over the room, settling on him like a toxin. "I learnt long ago that one of the best places to hide the truth was in plain sight. When this information makes its way into the general public's hands, when the faithful followers are exposed to the vile and corruptible effrontery of what The Church of the Blessed Prophets has perpetrated over the millennia, the belief factor will begin to fall. That is when we will strike, when we will assert unequivocally that the entire outrageous construct was but a lie propagated by the Lesser House St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration in a desperate bid to estrange the Church Prime House St. Paul from The Church of the Blessed Prophets and bring disgrace upon all humanity. We will prove that the Lesser House St. Peter is actually controlled by the Drek, who first assassinated the Emperor and now plan on assassinating The Church of the Blessed Prophets."

"And then we will gather up the pieces and re-establish The Church of the Blessed Prophets stronger than ever, with the throne of the Imperium in our back pockets," he said slowly, not believing that he was saying the words, that he was actually beginning to agree.

"Yes," she hissed again, not turning from her perch above her flock, above her city, above her world. "And then we will begin the great purge of unbelievers, of which you, of course, will be in charge."

A smile worked its way across his face, a warm feeling growing inside him with which he was very familiar. This might be insane, but it also might just work. And if it did, the power that The Church of the Blessed Prophets would wield would be beyond anything ever conceived.

Humanity was on the brink of a new era.

"When do we begin?"

And he said of them that are wicked; they are estranged from the womb upon birth, speaking lies that cast humanity into torment. They are like the snake, whose poison is just as deadly in defense as it is in offense. We must unite and forever scorch humanity of their evil.

From the Psalms of St. Cor Caroli I
Tome of the Blessed Prophets.

Ethereal's Landing

City of Urbeto

The Lesser House St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration

The sprawling city of Urbeto sat placidly between the River Biert and the towering mountains of Niias with their perpetual snow hat of glistening white from which a small, continual tendril of steam rose into the frigid air like a chronic cold. The city was old, almost as old as the mountain some said. And the mountain had tried, unsuccessfully, to evict the human inhabitants infesting its slopes with extravagant displays of lava and ash and flying rocks that killed a fair share yet never seemed to drive off the infestation. Humans seemed to be here to stay without the mountains consent and so it would continue to attempt rid itself of their toilsome presence.

Colossal statues dominated the dragon's teeth of skyscrapers ranging along the river, as well as most of the inner city like lost tombstones in a disused cemetery. They stood like forlorn guardians in grimy gray and soot two hundred meters tall, their granite-carved edifices like brooding, forgotten seraphim of days long past. The largest by far was the likeness of Cor Caroli I, his towering and imposing figure cutting a rakish facade of power and glory staring over the city in hollow-eyed abandon. Time had taken its toll on the worked stone, smoothing the once hard features into delicate yet worn remembrances. Cor Caroli I had started the trend when he thought he needed a monument to bring his glory to future generations, as if his legacy wasn't enough for twenty men. His successive descendants had felt the need to glorify themselves similarly until the city was a veritable forest of nineteen such mega-useless artifices competing with the just-as-useless buildings for dominance of the city's sky-line. The steel, trans-aluminum, and titanium asylums of

tenements and offices competed with the statues for space, rising next to and above the weather-worn rock-piles of man's vanity in dark, brooding edifices of futility. Their dark reflecting faces had once looked down on scenes of green-spread tranquility within the many parks once making the walking squares and pathways on ground level havens of retreat and relaxation. But now that grass was gone, or run wild in the un-kempt interior of the Cimmerian darkness that seemed to flow beneath the monoliths like rolling fog. Not many walked down there anymore, relaxed within the city anywhere. Those days had long since past, lost as effectively as the stone that had been worn off the statues.

The twentieth statue was currently under construction, though the figure rising ever so slowly from among the dark and deliberate lower levels was a far cry from the person it was meant to represent. It was said among the builders, who fought against the bitter cold of the winter's tempests and the stifling heat of the rainy season, that there wasn't enough granite left on the planet to make the statue actually look like Cor Caroli XX. It was a running joke that most found quite humorous.

The city itself had once been the very seat of human power, the first such center when humans were still struggling amongst themselves for a foot-hold in a galaxy of hostile and unpredictable non-humans. Construction of the ancient inner city had started in 1000 P.Y.I. shortly after the Lesser House St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration had been founded. It had been the very center of humanity, the hub of all that was the early human community and the First Imperium, its power and reach legendary even within the non-human lairs.

But with the fall from grace and power of the Lesser House St. Peter, the city had begun to fall also, though its descend was not as mercilessly fast as that of the House it represented. Where once it had held a bustling and prosperous fifty million inhabitants, it now sheltered fewer than two million struggling souls determined not to abandon that which was their legacy. The Church of the Blessed Prophets had abandoned the Lesser House St. Peter as surely as it had abandoned the old religious codices and left the city to wither away to a mere shadow of its former self, to be held together by the sheer will-power of the Cor Caroli's and their vanquished court. Being reduced from the glory of a Greater House and the Seat of The Church of the Blessed Prophets to a minor Lesser House was more than enough to break most Noble families. But the Lesser House St. Peter had managed to survive, to live through the terror that was the civil wars and the rise of the Prime House Volans. It had survived on the sole thread of revenge; revenge for the fall from grace that had come at the hands of The Church of the Blessed Prophets and the Prime House Volans. And that revenge had eaten away at the core that once was pure and innocent

and turned it into a black encrusted travesty of morality, as much as the black soot had encrusted the once gloriously white granite statues.

A heavy snow was falling, covering the city in a blanket of dirty off-white iciness of frostbitten winter, the winds roaring off the obscured mountain driving between the high-topped buildings with demonic force. It was a typical winter-night's storm, thrashing the nearby coast with hurricane winds battering mightily against the constructs of man as if to destroy human's intrusions upon nature.

Cor Caroli XX had just returned from Job's Rest with the non-answer he had expected from that bitch now running The Church of the Blessed Prophets like her own personal ministry.

She was setting him up.

He had known it since the first moment she mentioned the idea of the Lesser House St. Peter competing for the throne. It was so obvious. They all thought that he was so stupid, so slow witted and because of that, they thought that they could run roughshod over him. His had been the predominate House in the Imperium, the seat of more power than humans had ever held. His gene line was strong and viable and despite the fact that he was obese and sloven looking, it didn't mean that his mind was as wasted as his body. He had not always looked like this. There had been a time, though it was becoming harder and harder to remember, when he had been fit, strong. He had been all that was the Cor Caroli line, looking more like his great ancestor everyday, acting more like the Noble of a Great House with every meeting.

But that was then.

He now sat behind the large table, his flabby stomach hanging down between his legs, the waddle on his arms like wet noodles, his multiple chins like hanging gardens. There was an expanse spread before him of various foods like a spilled cornucopia that he would normally have found irresistible. A young lamb roasting over an open fire was the main entree, surrounded by a melange of side dishes whose colors and textures ranged from the slimy and still alive varna snake salad to the tart and crisp double-enfolded chocolate marble cake. The mixed aroma permeated the large fire consuming the fat and thick Jarka tree logs giving off abundant heat and smoke, the sweet woody smell mingling with the sounds of Zephyria and her all female orchestra piped in through the holographic music system. Sweet candied Blatroot with the thick syrup sauce contrasted with the bitter han-herb buttered noodles and the oyster stuffing seasoned with Sass seaweed and spiny-ear flowers imparting a tangy earthy taste. Several different salads were sprinkled among the dishes like after-thoughts and all the breads obtainable snuggled within their cloth-lined baskets, awaiting the grasping hand of a hungry diner, their fresh-baked aroma intoxicating.

But Cor Caroli XX just stared at the fire, eyes droopy and blank, the white and black spotted snow tiger pelt wrapped indifferently around his

broad and fat shoulders looking so much better on him than it did on the animal from which it came. He sometimes thought that humans had pelt-envy and wanted the pelt of every other animal to make up for the inadequacies of their own lacking skin.

He was no different he supposed.

The soft sounds of his wife's foot-falls floated into the room, his ears catching the faint trace of noise and registering it in some corner of his mind. She glided gracefully to her seat at the far end of the table, yet stopped short of actually sitting. Rather, she stood and contemplated her obese husband for whom she felt so very sorry. Pity was not a normal attribute of which she would have been accused, but for the man she had grown to love over the years, sorrow was mostly what she felt.

Cebrenia was as diametrically opposite to her husband as one could get. Her flaming red hair hung down in intricately detailed curls to her mid-spine in graceful cascades of scarlet. Several curls fanned out astride her face, highlighted with just a touch of green leaf, framing her round, small facade perfectly. She was petit, her body toned and fit to perfection, her personal training regiment harsh yet effective. The clothes she choose to wear when around her husband were generally revealing, the low-cut neck-line and padded brassiere giving her bosom an appearance far from the truth. She really wasn't sure why she still went through the bother of making her breast appear larger than they were. Her husband seemed to prefer her size as it was, but that small touch of vanity still lingering in the back of her head was difficult if not impossible to flush out.

Her face was smooth and ageless, the cute little nose and light blue eyes twinkling with flecks of green melting many a man's knees. Her mouth was small, the lips well-formed yet narrow. She had never liked the full-lipped fat protuberances that seemed to be all the rage among the other Nobles, preferring her natural look to the fake and pretensions injections or genetic modifications marking most Nobles nowadays. Her ears, usually hidden beneath the swirl of red, held numerous earrings including the dangling ruby dagger that was the mark of the Lesser House Rigel from which she came.

She was a classic beauty; her features marking her as one of those select few whose presence flowed from them like honey, whose very appearance would stop all conversation when she deigned to enter a room. Her bearing was aristocratic, her speech princely; yet when someone raised the courage to actually talk to her they would find her a simple country-girl playing in a world of immortals.

Those who saw Cor Caroli and Cebrenia together always wondered what possible deed she must have committed to be sentenced to life with the obese tediousness that was her husband. But most didn't realize that it had been an arranged marriage and Cor Caroli didn't look anything like he did now at the time of the consummation. She had

been rather miffed that her father had arranged the political marriage when she was but sixteen without even consulting her, but she had grown to love the man she called Cory. She saw through the weight and the many problems following him like a poisonous gas, ready at any moment to suffocate and tear the Lesser House St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration to shreds. She still saw him as the trim and muscular man she had married those many years ago.

But she had to admit, late at night when she cried herself to sleep more times than not, that she felt sorry for him, almost pitied him, though she would never tell him that or admit it. He was a proud and strong man and the activities of The Church of the Blessed Prophets of late had stressed him right to the limits. That he wasn't the smartest man in the galaxy was actually appealing to her, for then she didn't need to act all high and mighty around him, or subject herself to his depreciative sarcasm. She had known far too many men like that.

But the stress he was under showed now more than ever. The man never refused food. She had never seen him -- except perhaps when they had first been together, those first few years of bliss that seemed so much like a fairy tale -- sit before such a sumptuous fare and not dig in with both hands and possibly even a foot. But there he sat, staring blankly at the fire, devoid of any emotion, as weak as the storm outside was filled to bursting with energy.

She frowned, then walked slowly over to him, wrapping her arms around his large neck and snuggling against his head. His hand reacted from instinct and laid itself atop hers, gently rubbing her knuckles, as he knew she liked. "Ccccook will be very ddddisappppppointed if you don't eat. He'll think he ddddid something wrong," she said sweetly, her voice light like fresh picked raspberries.

He spoke much quicker than she would have expected, his vocabulary, when he was in this mood, short to non-existent. "I have eaten more than enough in my life-time to skip a meal or two and not make any difference."

She smiled, kissing him on the cheek and then stepping to the side so that she could look into his dark, depressed eyes. "You ccccan't let them... No, that's not ccccorrect, is it?" Her stutter always surfaced at the worst times, of course. It always amazed her that in this age of medical wonders, such a simple malady as stuttering could not be remedied. It was a stigma for which, were it not for her beauty and mannerism when around other Nobles, they would have exiled her to the shadowed corners or the back-rooms during parties and official functions. Cory never commented on it and made certain that others who did were made to feel his full wrath. "You cccccan't let her ppppush you around like this. She has no ppppower over you anymore. The Church is no longer the ppppower it was and the Lesser House St. Ppppeter is no longer shackled to it."

He looked up at her, taking her small, delicate chin in his large hand. "What would you have me do, my sweet? I cannot oppose The Church of the Blessed Prophets, and the challenge to the throne that I have initiated seems to be as ineffectual as I am."

She pulled her chin from his hand and stood up straight, the fire suddenly flashing in her eyes sharp and poignant. She hated it when he spoke like that. This was not the man she loved. "You are Cor Caroli XX," she forced out in her anger, the stutter suddenly forgotten. "You are heir to a long and proud tradition that stretches back in four thousand years of unbroken succession." She stalked away from him, swishing her long cut dress behind and revealing her firm legs up to her hip, the frilly white panties barely there stark against the velvety green of the dress. She stopped by her chair, a good twenty feet from him, then turned to face his open expression and down-turned eyebrows with a flourish. It was rare, very rare, for her to speak thus, but she was sick of all the moping and self-pity. "How many systems do you ccccurrently have bbbbacking you?" she said with chin held high, the haughty tone of her voice like the Noble who thought that she already ruled the galaxy. She knew the answer well enough.

"Thirty-three, as you well know," he said cautiously. The last time she went into a fit like this, she had thrown a large goblet at him that bounced off his head. He absently rubbed the long-healed spot in remembrance.

"Including bbbboth a Greater and Lesser House from the Imperium. The Lord Archangel Bbbbhagadatta is willing to follow you to *the Void and back* if you ask him and has ppppromised a sizable pppportion of the Imperium Navy. You've clandestine support from many others as well and the fleet that you are bbbbuilding is strong and well-equipped."

He shrugged desultorily. "It makes little to no difference if The Church of the Blessed Prophets doesn't back me."

The goblet flew, spilling its contents in a long spray of red wine splattering the ornate carpet and the walls. Expecting this reaction, he ducked just in time as the empty goblet soared over his head and landed with a clatter against the far wall.

She leaned on the table with both hands firmly pressed down, her chest heaving with the anger now possessing her completely. "*What do we need The Church for!? Tell me that? What in sweet Gossomer's name do we need with The Church?!*" She was literally screeching now, her face livid with the shame she felt at having to be the bitch of a House so weak and pitiful. "The Church *abandoned* the Lesser House St. Peter when the first Imperium fell, blaming *your* ancestors for the mistakes and arrogance that it contaminated humanity with! *Everyone knows it! Why do you think The Church hasn't destroyed you by now, you fool?!*"

He stood and walked over to pick up the chastised goblet, having a difficult time bending over far enough. With the trophy of her hatred in his fat hands, Cor walked slowly and deliberately to his fiery and impassioned wife, of whom he thought the world. She followed his every move, seething inside at his inability to become angry, his inability to see what it was that they were doing to him.

"You needn't get so upset, my pet. It makes no sense to become angry at events that we cannot control." His voice was calm and even, the anger she radiated absorbed by his bulk and turned into harmless gas.

"Aaarrghhh!" she hollered as she turned away from him and stomped over to the fireplace, crossing her arms under her breasts. His sloth seemed to seep from the depths of his fat folds and infest his brain with its indolence. Why did he refuse to even try? What was the point of being married to a House if that House was weak and pathetic? She had thought that she had turned things around when The Church had approached them to back them for the throne. But that had obviously been a mistaken opinion. Nothing had changed.

He stepped up behind her and slipped his hands around her tiny waist, but she knew that ploy all too well and glided away from him. "You cccan't just let them dddd this to you," she stammered the staccato bursts of words no longer held in the grip of anger. "There must be something that we cccan do. We are the House St. Pppeter of the Sacred Cccconsecration." As always, her stutter became worse after her anger.

He followed her, again attempting to place his hands around her warm and inviting waist, one hand slipping up to cup a breast seductively. She slapped his hand away, but didn't try to escape this time. Her anger was spent -- the damnable stuttering giving her away -- and she leaned into his mass and exhaled slowly, her body giving into the inevitable defeat that always seemed to follow them like a lost puppy.

"You become too excited far too quickly, my little pet," he whispered into her ear, nibbling on the lobe to soft cooing.

"But why must we always ggggive in, always dddd as The Ccchurch wants and never get ahead? Why? And what about all our pppplans for revenge against Volans?" She closed her eyes and luxuriated in his warmth, the seething anger inside her simmering like a witch's cauldron, only to be diffused by his closeness and love. "Why must life be so hard for us?"

He stroked her silken hair as he replied, the blank look returning, his mind already working on the next stage of his plan. "Soon, Cebrenia. Soon we will be respected again as is our due. The Church will learn what it is like to play with the Lesser House St. Peter." At least, that was if his subordinates had undertaken the next phase.

Good help was so hard to find in these hectic days.

* * *

Planet Laye III
Under control of the Greater House Aldebaren

The ship wasn't large. It didn't need to be.

All that mattered was that the emblem of The Church of the Blessed Prophets was clearly scrapped off its recognition board. The internal control systems, when later deciphered, would contain the most up-to-date secret identification codes of The Church and clear indications that the origins of this ship was the Church Prime House St. Paul of the Redeemed Spirit. Its design and configuration, though slightly altered, was very familiar to anyone associated with The Church of the Blessed Prophets or with its numerous vessels plying the systems in search of supplicates and heresy.

Had anyone bothered to scan the ship, something that was not done very often to a vessel of The Church of the Blessed Prophets in fear of the repercussions, they would have discovered that it was un-manned, the crew having left via escape pods several hours ago. They had been picked up as pre-arranged and were far gone by now, to never be associated or linked with the ship or its errand. The on-board bio-genic computer had been given its orders and although it had balked at first, it had been more than happy to accept after the morality sub-routines had been ruthlessly extracted like abscessed teeth.

It slipped innocuously passed the outer research stations belonging to the Kedu University, passed the large outer defense belt that had not been used in over six hundred years and seemed an out-dated version of the proverbial rusted sword hanging on the belt of the old warrior. Most Imperium planets had such structures, built during the terrors of the Drek and Druzni Wars and then left as intimidation factors, rotting away to slowly become more of a threat to the planet it was supposed to protect than to any would-be assailant.

The ship slipped passed the myriad of ships parked in high orbit, most on business runs or supply runs to the multitude of universities and higher academies sprouting on the planet surface like wild lichen. It settled into a low, decaying orbit, sent in the proper and required entry codes, then lazily descended to the heart of the main city, populated by thirty million mostly innocent souls.

When the ship reached the correct altitude, the computer activated the device.

The concentrated pulsed-gravitonic blast rolled over the city within minutes, reducing all to smoldering rumble in the blink of an eye. The pulse continued to propagate outward, rolling over the landscape in diminishing waves of destruction until the wave fronts met on the other side of the planet and created a secondary phase-enhanced juncture, utterly destroying the city of Jal Tor and its ten million inhabitants, unfortunately located at that node.

It took all of fifteen minutes in totality.

It vaporized a total of well over one hundred million.

The ship, on its way out of the system, was captured and thoroughly dissected. The repercussions radiating out from the planet Laye would be almost as harsh as the weapon had been. Such weapons were not all that uncommon in these days of paranoia and Druzni incursions, but no one had actually used one against a human system since the Treaty of Human Exclusion was signed in 2610 Y.I. There had only been two Houses that had refused to sign the Treaty the way it was written, the clause allowing the Imperium the right to abridge the entente when it deemed it necessary not to the liking of the Houses or its Nobles. Such unlimited power was not to the reluctant Houses' liking and thus they had never become a signatory to the treaty.

Those Houses had been the Lesser House St. Peter of the Sacred Consecration and the Church Prime House St. Paul of the Redeemed Spirit, the Seat of The Church of the Blessed Prophets.

Although weak, humans have a rather interestingly high tolerance for pain when faced with tortures aimed to reveal information. It is indeed bothersome to be forced to exert extra effort. It's almost worth foregoing the pleasures of the torture and simply do a mind-drain. But then what would be the point?

Bavayia of Dwad-Mehstiv

**Penal Colony of K'ar Krack'a
Level Five**

Anolis and Crocus walked swiftly down the corridor, their minds split fairly evenly between worry over the fate of Antlia and how they were going to go about getting the requested information on the Morype Slug. Crocus had figured that he could simply access the main information node in the secondary by-pass juncture in the crawl-space between Level Five and Four. Once in, he could then work his way to the main memory core buffer and extract the information entered in the last few cycles concerning any new arrivals.

If it wasn't there, then he would have to find a way into the memory core for Level One and search for the Slug's initial examine, a method that would take far longer and possibly trip far more security blocks. But one way or another, he was going to get the information. It was obvious that Antlia could no longer be trusted and so any information he gave was suspect. There was no way that a pretty face would ever make Crocus divulge any information on their plans to escape. It was far too important a matter to let loose lips ruin.

Of course, Antlia's Tanu was one of the more personable and pretty ones, but that still was no reason to sell them all out. It wasn't like the man had to sell Xyl information to have sex with her. She seemed to enjoy him as much as he did her, so whatever possessed Antlia to give them all up like that must be something far greater. But then it just might be that he truly loved her and wanted to take her along, as he said. That explanation was the most foolish of them all as far as Anolis was concerned. It wasn't like there weren't billions of other attractive

women out in the galaxy with which he could hook up. To want this particular one was this side of insane, especially when telling her of the plan would most likely end with his death. It was a line of reasoning that neither of them quite understood.

For them, women were mere objects to be captured and then discarded rather than passions to be sought for one's own pleasure. To be tied down to women was unthinkable. To be tied down to just *one woman* was beyond insane. What could possibly infest the mind of a man -- apart from a Borl -- to make him actually *want* to be with just one woman for the rest of his life? What was the point? How boring would that be after a few months? With some of the women the brothers had known, it'd get boring after the first few hours.

It was a line of reasoning so far beyond the spectrum of their experiences that they actually shivered to even think about it. They ran into but one guard along the way.

It had become as agitated as a droid could get at their appearance in the area, but fortunately the brothers had the pass given them many years ago for just such contingencies. Since the power-relays for the prison habitation areas were always going out at all hours of the cycle, it was necessary for the brothers to have access to the power conduits regardless what time it was. It had provided for a convenient way to get emergency information at odd hours, just as it would now. The guard had seemed reluctant at first to accept their explanation, but then appeared even more reluctant to check with its supervisor and so had let them pass unmolested.

"I'll give you three to one odds that Tethys is the one to kill Antlia," Crocus stated matter-of-factly as they trundled down the first access corridor, his hands still shaking slightly from the encounter with the guard, though such encounters were far easier when his brother was around and the guard didn't surprise him by sneaking up behind him. They had the nasty habit of doing that.

Anolis smiled. It was his *this is a sucker bet* smile. "I'll take that if you give me four to one that Thaliana beats him to it."

Crocus thought about that for a moment, then responded with a laugh. "Now what would be the point of that? That completely negates my bet."

"Not really. Yours still holds. Mine is just a contingent, that's all."

Crocus frowned, aware that his brother was somehow conning him but not certain how he was doing it. His brother was always trying to con him in some way. He claimed it was his brotherly duty. Crocus figured that it was just spite or perhaps jealousy. The man was always jealous of Crocus' superior abilities.

"I'll even go one step further and give you seven to one that Ailanthus doesn't even have

him killed," Anolis asserted with that devious smile of his.

Crocus didn't have an opportunity to answer, for as they rounded the last corner before the main power juncture shaft, Denebola was standing there with crossed arms, three guard droids hovering around him with weapons drawn like annoyed wasps.

They both skidded to a halt, almost dropping their equipment in their surprise.

Denebola smiled, his eyes glittering with the anticipation of the upcoming encounter. He spoke, his voice echoing in the corridor as if amplified. "So why would Ailanthus want to kill Antlia?"

Neither brother said a word. Crocus was unable, his eyes fastened on the guard droids, his hand starting to shake again, sweat beginning to run from his pores as if chased out of his body. Anolis knew better than to say anything. The Security Warden had already heard too much.

Denebola looked at both men for several moments, his smile never lessening, then spoke again as the guard droids took up positions around the two brothers. "Well, never mind. I'll find out soon enough. It's not like Ailanthus will go anywhere without his two favorite brothers, now will he?"

"We've done nothing wrong, Security Warden," Anolis slurred out cautiously, knowing that this was not a good development. It was a rare person who came back after being seen with the Security Warden.

Denebola turned his back on the two brothers as he led them toward his infamous interrogation cells. "If that's the case, then you've nothing to worry about. This is just a random interrogation, nothing more." He spoke as if addressing two recalcitrant children, gesturing with his hands without ever looking back at them. "But of course, if you just tell me what I want to know, we can skip all that torture nonsense... Though that would be a shame, really."

Anolis looked at Crocus, aware that his brother was fighting just to stay standing, much less move as the guards hovered close by, clicking, beeping, whirring in some demonic form of communication. An interrogation droid would not be the best thing for Crocus at the moment. Although Anolis was confident that his brother would die before giving up Ailanthus, it was the dying part that bothered him. The man still owed him for the last few bets and he'd be damned if Crocus got out of paying because he died. Now that would be unfair. Of course, there was also the fact that they were brothers and if Crocus were to be killed, Anolis would have to kill Denebola. It was just the way it was. And killing the Security Warden was not something Anolis wanted to even contemplate.

When they reached the main interrogation cells, Anolis and Crocus were separated, each put into a different white-walled room perhaps a meter by a meter, bare and sterile, a single chair with straps all the furniture adorning. The interrogation droid would provide all the other

equipment necessary. There was a small drain on the floor for the blood sometimes shed, the prisoners assigned to clean the cell after each session doing an excellent job of cleaning up. The room was even hotter than the rest of the colony, kept that way on purpose. An annoying background hum was grating on the nerves subconsciously. It was known to sometimes drive prisoners crazy without the interrogation droid ever having to be called. They would expel their spent matter cores and give up everyone, regardless of whether they knew anything or not, just to have that noise stopped.

Denebola was certain that these two would not be that easy, especially Anolis, who seemed to have more spite and malice towards the Security Warden than fear. Those were the ones worth torturing.

He thus started with Crocus.

He actually had no intention of working on Anolis, except as a last result. It was always possible that Crocus would die of fright before anything useful could be extracted from him. But Denebola was confident that the man would crack just fine, especially with his fear of droids. That could be used to advantage in a situation like this. If he could just figure out what had caused this unreasonable fear of machines, he could use it on all the prisoners and never have to worry about the security of the colony again. Wouldn't that be nice? Boring, but nice.

That, however, would have to wait.

The interrogation droid would come much later. First, Denebola would have some fun with the man, fun that would have Crocus screaming for him to stop. Then the droid could come in and extract every last bit of the escape plan and whatever else he had hidden in that thick skull of his. Then Denebola would have Ailanthus by the balls and there wouldn't be a thing Corvus Lupus could do to stop him, or to protect his investment. Denebola had come to the conclusion that Corvus was getting a substantial kick-back from someone to keep Ailanthus and Tethys alive. He would have to set up a hidden holo-link to catch the expression on Corvus' face when he discovered that his favorite pets had been caught trying to escape. The punishment for attempts at escape was easy: death. Then from where would Corvus get his kickbacks?

Usually, Denebola would wait at least a few hours before even going in to see his victims, the psychological torture of waiting in a barren cell with no idea what was about to happen a wonderful primer for the first stage of questioning. It was amazing what interesting ideas prisoners in such situations came up with on their own while they sat staring at the white, featureless walls. Sometimes, on those bad cycles, Denebola would come in for the first round of questioning and the prisoner would spill the entire contents of his meager information repository without Denebola saying a word, sometimes before he even closed the door.

He would generally, just on the principle of the matter, torture them even more after that, just because they took all his fun away by being spineless Drek-spawn.

But with Crocus it would have to be different. Denebola was uncertain as to what the exact plan for the escape was and thus had no idea when they planned to leave this paradise. As such, he would have to forego the first phase and jump with both feet into the second phase, which wasn't really all that bad a thing.

He stepped into the cell, where Crocus sat stripped naked and tied to the chair, the straps tight and binding, the man's wrists and ankles already red from his futile attempts to break free. Denebola found that nudity was still a good terror weapon, that false human pride and modesty always a good way to begin the break-down process, especially with the females. They were always terrified for some reason when tied up and naked. Well, that wasn't true either. It bothered both men and women alike. He had to admit that there were plenty of strong females who just spit in his face or offered him sex for their lives. He laughed at them. It just wasn't that simple. He would probably end up having sex with them anyway, so offering it as a way out was rather vain, if not superfluous. Those women he tortured with gusto, relishing every scream, taking in every scent of burnt flesh until his erection was so hard that it was ready to burst and *then* and only then would he violate them with a force leaving most unconscious, if not dead.

It was one of the few things worth living for.

Denebola was intrigued that Crocus seemed relieved when no droid came in with him to the cell. The poor man had no clue that the interrogation droid paled in comparison to what was about to happen. Maybe this would even cure the man's fear of the droids, if it didn't kill him first. Denebola set his large case down on the floor slowly and methodically, smiling at his captive with a friendly expression. "Morning, Mr. Ara," he said with genuine mirth in his voice as he opened the case and began removing the various items that would be his repertoire. "How are we doing this cycle?"

Crocus spit at him, a thick globule of mucus striking Denebola in his right eye. He smiled even wider as he wiped the spittle away with a clean cloth. It was good that the man's mouth wasn't dry. This might last nice and long, just like he wanted.

"So," Denebola intoned drolly, pulling each piece of equipment out and examining it carefully, making certain that Crocus saw each in turn. "This will go much easier if you just relax."

Crocus struggled futilely against his bindings, staring at Denebola like a trapped animal. "I've done nothing wrong, Security Warden. And neither has my brother," he spit out with venomous intensity. "You can't just pluck us out of the colony and torture us. We have rights!"

Denebola tsked, pulling out an exquisitely tooled long, curled device used for penile probes. It was one of the better tools he had. "First off, call me Denebola. Security Warden is so..." he waved a hand in a circular pattern which he had seen so often with Nobles, "... *formal*, and we're about to get *very* intimate with each other, so I think we can dispose of formalities. Second, I haven't even interrogated you yet so I really don't know if you've done anything wrong or not. And third, you're here tied to that chair, so obviously I can do this to you. Make sense? Good. As for rights...", he pulled a small burner out and flicked it a few times to see if the heating element still worked, then finally looked over at Crocus. Crocus' eyes had grown wider and wider as he spoke and now his mouth hung open as Denebola continued to test the burner, making the element turn white hot over and over. "You have no rights here. This is prison, not a vacation resort. You weren't sent here for singing too loud in the choir."

Crocus narrowed his eyes, trying to maintain a calm demeanor, but the sweat glistening off his body was not as much due to the heat as it was to his fear, a fear that was growing exponentially with each new instrument of pain Denebola pulled out and examined.

"So, shall we begin?" Denebola asked as he peered over the instruments neatly placed on the small fold-out shelf that came with his case. He picked one out at random, holding it up to the light so that it shined. It was a pen-like tool with a needle sharp protrusion that could be inserted underneath the fingernails, leaving behind a small sliver covered in a corrosive acid. It was nasty.

"Aren't you going to ask me a question first?" Crocus croaked in unbridled fear.

Denebola tilted his head slightly and looked at his captive, the blank look on his face so inculpable and innocuous that it was almost ludicrous. "Questions?" he asked with a slight lilt to his voice. "That doesn't come till much later."

Crocus swallowed hard.

Denebola loved this part of his job. It would be the first thing that he would miss if -- when, he had to think that it would be when else go crazy -- he was able to get assigned to the Imperium Navy. He somehow doubted that the navy would allow such tactics. Pity, really. They were quite useful at times.

He reached forward and took hold of Crocus' left hand, which though tied down tightly, the man still managed to move around. "It'll just hurt more if you squirm like that. Sit still, man. I haven't even started yet." The first needle went in and Denebola could see the force of will Crocus used to hold back the scream. His face went white and his veins strained on his neck to keep his mouth shut. Tears streamed out of his eyes as fast as the sweat coming out of his pores.

"I'm so glad that you didn't scream like a baby," he commented dryly as he positioned the instrument for the next finger. "Some people just can't take their torture and it puts a damper on the whole job for me." He inserted the second needle.

He could hear Crocus' teeth grinding together, could see that the man was going to blow an artery if he kept the pain in much longer. But the satisfaction was so much better this way. The longer it took, the more Denebola enjoyed it. Breaking a weak man was disgusting to him. It took no effort and was no better than torturing a child, something that he would never even deign to consider.

It wasn't like he was a sadist.

But breaking a strong man, that was where he gained the most satisfaction. Seeing the will struggle and strive to compete against the pain and then slowly wither away till all that was left was a hollowed out shell of excruciation: that was worth all the wait. He had once worked on a Druzsni bitch for five hours before she finally screamed out and the sensation of pleasure had been almost sexual for him. Of course, she had died shortly thereafter, both her hearts bursting almost simultaneously, a feat he didn't think was possible. She had been a pleasure, even though he had gained nothing out the torture. It had just been an experiment, a passing curiosity really.

But this torture of Crocus actually had a point. This torture was the one that would get him off this Creator forsaken snowball and back into the real action. That he would have to forego this pleasure after he left was a price he was willing to pay. It also made this torture, which could very well be his last one ever, special to him and he intended to prolong it as much as he could.

Crocus didn't even come close to the record for holding out, though he did do better than most humans. He let out with a stream of expletives at the sixth needle insertion, sounding almost like a Drek had screamed it, so proficient was the use of the words.

Such sweet gratification.

Denebola had several versions of his torture routine, depending, of course, on what species he was working or how strong he determined the victim was beforehand. The technique he was using now was one of the best. By not asking any questions, the physical torture was infused with the psychological torture of not knowing what Denebola really wanted. With no questions, the victim had no way of stopping the torture by saying the right combination of words. It didn't matter what the victim said because nothing was asked of him and thus the victim's hope for an end to his torment was torn away mercilessly, leaving behind nothing but the unrelenting pain. This method could break the strongest man.

With Drek it was a different story.

Druzni were a completely other matter. Druzni bitches seemed to thrive on the fact that they could take the torture without comment, almost as if it were a challenge to them. They always lost in the end, screaming like over-taxed coolant pumps before bursting in agonizing anguish, like Crocus was beginning to sob now, his ragged breathing like an animal as he struggled for each howl of agonizingly painful breath. If he thought this was bad, wait till he experienced the burner. Denebola was just getting warmed up.

* * *

Cetus only stumbled upon Denebola escorting the Ara brothers by sheer accident. As part of his job, which could be described simply as warden's snitch, he sometimes wandered the corridors trying to pick up on whatever he could overhear. He found it extremely fortuitous that he had caught the last glimpse of the brothers and Denebola as they made their way into the administrator section. He wasn't certain where the Security Warden was taking them, but there were few options. This was just for what he had been waiting. This couldn't have been better if he had planned it. Now he could go to Ailanthus with something important, with the lives of two of his ardent followers on the line. That would be something he could use. It could be the first step into getting onboard that transport when it left here.

He hurried as fast as his little rat legs could carry him, disregarding the guards watching him with annoying despicability. Denebola had programmed his image into the guards so that they wouldn't always bother him in his information gathering errands. Every once in awhile, though, to Cetus' annoyance, the guards would be programmed to stop him and question vigorously, even going so far as taking him to the interrogation cells. Denebola wasn't stupid. He knew that the other prisoners would quickly pick up on the fact that his little informant was never harassed and then he would have to pull him out of some Drek cooking pot, or at least what was left of him. It was the torture of Cetus that sometimes made a bad cycle for Denebola a much better one. Other than that, the rat-faced man had free reign over a large portion of Level Five.

He reached Ailanthus' cave quickly, but was rather stunned at what he found.

* * *

Ailanthus awoke to the sounds of women's voices and soft caresses on his face and hair. He was completely disoriented, the last thing he remembered the scene with Orion Morgase on the plains of that desolate planet. But this certainly wasn't desolate and the fine scent of

perfume and female wavered on the air like mist. He blinked twice, his eyes focusing on the stalactite-bound, craggy ceiling of the Tanudana area.

A face moved into his vision, a face he knew all too well, her strawberry-blond hair and green-green eyes matching her smile for a refined and radiant vista. "What...? How did I get here? Did you drug me?" he asked groggily. He felt like he had slept a full cycle's sleep, yet his mind was all in a fog with swirling bands of memories slinking around his subconscious like tattered remnants of lost lives.

Her smile turned to a frown as her eyes narrowed. "Of course I didn't drug you, you z'cav. What a stupid question. And besides, you didn't drink anything, or have you forgotten that also?"

He sat up, pushing away the hands that now seemed determined to explore every part of his body. He scowled at the seven Tanu who encircled him on the velvety soft silk cushions, all attractive, all scantily attired. He would have thought that they had enough pawing while he was asleep. "Then how did I get here?" He asked irritably.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Xylella asked with up-raised chin, standing above him like a Noble.

"I was coming back to your compartment to...." He stopped short of declaring his full intentions of strangling her. He didn't think that it would play very well in the current situation.

A smile nipped at the corners of her mouth as she tilted her head to the side. "To do what, Ailanthus? You weren't considering harming me, were you?"

The other Tanu pulled away from him and stared, like pups ready to defend their mother.

"The thought had crossed my mind," he said honestly, eyeing her closely.

"And what changed your mind?"

He made to stand, but the seven Tanu grabbed him and held him down, their strength surprising. He looked at them and their hold on him. It would take some doing, but he could get out of this. They weren't trained warriors. Flashes of various moves flickered through his mind out of the fog like light-beams diffused. He was getting very tired of this memory recall anomaly he was experiencing. He didn't use any of the various techniques of which he was now aware. It would be a useless exercise. And besides, it wasn't all that uncomfortable. "Why do you think I changed my mind?" he asked pithily. How was it that she was starting to look prettier than before? That was odd. His mouth turned down at one corner in annoyance.

Her eyes twinkled briefly. "I'm still alive." It was simple and direct and he nodded at her as he smirked.

"So you are." He looked at his captors again and they let loose reluctantly.

"Well, now that we have that little matter settled, my girls found you stretched out in the corridor like you had died. They were kind enough to bring it to my attention." She pursed her lips gingerly. "What happened to you? Are you sick? You don't have Drek scales, do you?"

"I wish it were that easy," he lamented as he stood and searched for his clothes, to the sounds of disappointment from the gathered harem. "But it's a long story and I *don't* have the time to tell you." He glowered at her from under his eyebrows. "Suffice it to say, I had an attack of consciousness and now need to speak with Antlia. So if you don't mind...? And why am I naked? Was it truly necessary to strip me down because I fell over?"

She stepped before him gracefully as he tried to leave, speaking in a lethal whisper, her hand sliding along his forearm. "Is what you said before still valid?"

He looked down at her, his face set hard. "You aren't dead, remember?"

She nodded her head, then handed him his clothes as she stepped aside to let him pass.

But instead, he grabbed her and took her out into the corridor, still naked, away from the prying ears of the other seven. She had given him an idea the last time they had spoken and he might as well try it out now, while he was here. He spoke softly, his mouth so close to her ear so that he was almost kissing it, her scent strong and intoxicating to his senses. He could feel as much as hear her intake of breath, the slight shudder running through her. "Can you get one of your more experienced girls to keep Denebola occupied, like you were willing to do for Antlia?"

She turned to look at him, her eyes boring into his with an unusual reaction in his innards, then blinked, once, deliberately. "Of course, Ailanthus. I owe you."

He had the terrible urge to kiss her then and there, but suppressed it brutally. She was Antlia's love, not his. He wasn't about to go there. He might be a convicted prisoner, but he still had his honor. He wasn't about to get caught in that mess. And besides, he was naked and she might get the wrong idea.

He released her with more force than he intended, then started to dress before he walked swiftly back to his cave.

He didn't see the large smile gleaming in Xylella's eyes as he walked away from her.

Our captors took the individuality out of humanity and replaced it with a fear of cohesive organization. If we're ever to succeed, to rise above the subsistence level to which we have been relegated, then we need to learn to think for ourselves. We must remember that the herd is usually wrong.

Excerpt from:
To Be Free
St. Orion Morgase
The Morgase Insurrection
2795 P.Y.I.

By the time Ailanthus returned to the cave, Thaliana was as close to being frantic as a Druznsi could be. As he stepped into the entrance, he had the uncanny and disturbing feeling that she was going to run to him and throw her arms around him and kiss him, an event he would have been hard pressed to explain, much less comprehend. But, as was more in character, she punched him hard across the jaw, sending him sprawling to the dirty floor.

At least he knew how to handle that.

She stood over him as he rubbed his chin and looked up at her with shocked bemusement. "Where the nine moons of Dnath'car have you been? Do you know how worried Tethys was? *Do you?!*" she snapped with clenched teeth, ready to kick him in the stomach should he utter the wrong answer.

Tethys raised an eyebrow ever so slightly at the mention of his name, not aware that he had been worried or that he had told her that he was.

Ailanthus stood slowly, not sure whether she was done or not, then wrinkled his nose at the smell suddenly assaulting him. It was that same smell of deceit and decay he had smelt when he left the cave to go to Xylella's. Whatever was producing it had to be dealt with soon, else it poison all of them with its foul stench. Must be some garbage that was overlooked. "I didn't know you cared so much," Ailanthus shot back with feigned adoration.

She reeled back to strike him again even harder, but Tethys took hold of her arm and she turned on him instead, struggling to get out of his

grasp and spilling rarely heard Druzni expletives on him like tainted water.

He totally ignored her and spoke directly to Ailanthus as Thaliana became extremely perturbed that she couldn't break free from Tethys' grasp. "What did Denebola have to say?" Tethys was never one for long, drawn out phrases. His voice betrayed no fear that Ailanthus might have been hurt or that he might have betrayed the whole plan to Denebola's tortures. It was a simple question directed toward a friend who had gone to the market. Tethys had never been the most sentimental person and it was one of the reasons Ailanthus and he got along so well.

Thaliana finally kicked back into Tethys' left leg, making good contact but causing little effect on the big man. He looked down at her with an open expression.

"Let me go, Tethys, before I'm forced to hurt you seriously," she intoned in pernicious whispers, looking up at him with glowering eyes of flaring blue icicles.

"I somehow doubt that," he said as he let her go.

She gave him one long last look, purposely not rubbing her arm where his hand imprint still pulsed red, then crossed her arms under her breasts and transferred her glare back to Ailanthus.

He stepped further into the cave, checking to see who was all there, the now familiar shape of Christl sleeping in the corner and the old man grinning idiotically somehow reassuring. "Amazingly enough, I didn't go to see Denebola." Someone was missing. "I was summoned by Xylella, of all people."

That brought more of a reaction from Tethys than anything said or done so far. "The Tanudana summoned you?" he inquired with skeptical pessimism. It was not unheard of for one of those life-sucking succubae to summon a new victim out of the depths of the mines, but for that particular one to summon Ailanthus had bad news written all over it.

Thaliana's face flushed red for a moment, her eyes hardened even more and her face took on a look of murderous rage. Ailanthus was not immune to this display and spoke to correct any misconceptions the Druzni seemed to be operating under. "Not for sex, mind you." He suddenly figured out who was missing, whose presence was usually an annoyance. "Where's Antlia?" he asked suspiciously.

Neither Tethys nor Thaliana knew. The man had been gone when they had returned from the bathing areas.

"Don't try and change the subject, z'cav," Thaliana spit out as she stepped closer to Ailanthus and, he could swear, sniffed him. Was she trying to find out if he had sex recently, like Grundle beasts did to each other?

Hesiodus spoke at this point, his dried-out crackle sharp and defined in the darkness of the cave. "He be mumbling something 'bout some body or other be named Denture Bowls, or something like that, he be." He hobbled slowly out from the shadowed recesses, his broken and decayed smile like so much superannuated weaponry.

They all looked at him like the mad man he was, then understanding dawned upon them.

"*Denebola?*" Thaliana hissed as she crouched down into a natural fighting stance, as if the man was standing right in the cave with them.

He narrowed his eyes a little, his face concentrating hard on the name. "Yes ... Yes... Yes!" he exclaimed in final triumph. "*That* be the name he did be using."

"Shit!" Ailanthus snapped as he turned on his heel and started for the cave exit. "That moron." He ran straight into Cetus, knocking the little man over with ease. Ailanthus barely looked down at him. "Not now, worm. I've a little crisis on my hands."

Cetus spoke up quickly, aware that his chance was slipping away. "You've an even bigger problem than you think," he stammered out in confident tones that seemed somehow lacking.

Tethys stepped forward with two easy strides and lifted Cetus up off the floor, his feet dangling uselessly. "Speak now or die," he said simply.

Tethys had threatened Cetus so often that it had lost all sense of meaning for the little man and so he simply narrowed his eyes and spoke his mind. "Denebola has taken the Ara brothers to the interrogation cells." It was said with baleful severity. "And I don't think that they're discussing the quality of the food in the chow hall."

"This isn't turning into a good cycle," Ailanthus grumbled through a severe frown, running a hand through his sleek and greasy hair. He made a snap decision, hoping it was the right one. "Tethys, take Thaliana and go find where Denebola has taken Anolis and Crocus. I'll go hunt down Antlia and make sure he doesn't make it worse on himself. The little shit is going to fuck everything up for us."

Thaliana grabbed Ailanthus' arm as he made to leave. "And what do you want us to do when we find them? Listen to their screams as Denebola tortures the whole escape plan out of them?"

"We kill Denebola," Tethys said with little emotion, staring hard at Ailanthus.

Ailanthus stared back just as hard, aware that Tethys was sending him a subtle if not unmistakable message: Antlia should be killed also.

Thaliana turned to look at Tethys, the frustration in her voice matched by the dissatisfaction on her face. "Although I'm not opposed to killing humans whenever the chance arises, I think that perhaps this would be a mistake. If we weren't trying to escape within the next few cycles, I'd be all for it. But we are, and what do you think fat-ass Lupus is going to

do when he finds that his Security Warden has been murdered, or comes up missing?"

"She has point, Tethys," Ailanthus barked out softly, rubbing his forehead and trying to think of what he could do to save Anolis and Crocus, not to mention the escape plans. He had been foolish to think it could all work out so well. It made him angry that he had failed to see the simple logic of Thaliana's statement for himself. The simple idea of just killing Denebola had also occurred to him at the same time and, with the last twenty years as background, it had appeared very reasonable at first glance. But it was stupid to think that they could just kill Denebola and not have a fall-out from the act. Lupus would lock down the whole place, including the landing pads and the Noble shuttle until he discovered who had killed his favorite whipping post and then he would retaliate against all those in the penal colony, making them know in no simple terms who controlled this place.

It was all happening far too quickly and Ailanthus was being far too rash. This wasn't like him. He hadn't survived his time in here by being rash. He would have to calm down and think this through. Where was that little memory system in his head when he needed it? He was going to have a long talk with whomever placed that whole contraption within him. It bombards him with useless memories at useless times, but when he really needs it, nothing.

"I can help, hee, hee, yes I can indeed," Hesiodus giggled out.

They turned to look at him, Cetus forgotten but still held in Tethys's large hand like a place of refuse.

"Not now, old man," Thaliana threw at him with heavy malice.

"But help I can, can I. Yes indeed."

Thaliana stalked over to where the old man stood on wobbly legs and was about to strike him down for good, tired of his constant glee and optimism leaching out of him like sweat.

But Ailanthus stopped her short. "Wait, let's hear what he has to say at least."

She looked at Ailanthus, the fury in her eyes making them cold-hard seething orbs of liquid indigo. That was twice now that he had stopped her from an action she had set out to commit and it was beginning to make her particularly offended. It was only her feelings towards Ailanthus and Tethys, as well as her honor-pledge to never hurt them that keep her from going off like a Vrang cat and leaving bloody pieces strewn through-out the cave. She was going to have to have a talk at them when this was all resolved, preferably when they were in the transport far from here. She would definitely have to have a talk with them. She was a Druzni after all and such disrespect was not to be tolerated.

"How is it that you think you can help?" Ailanthus said to the old man with a voice that said he had better not be screwing with them.

"How about this?" Hesiodus said in a voice that was not his at all, a voice strong yet ethereal, that seemed to come from everywhere at once yet was as soft as a puppy's fur. There was a shimmer, a brief diffused glow of light... and then Denebola was standing before them.

Ailanthus' eyes widen as his jaw dropped. Tethys was impressively shocked enough to actually utter a string of curses. Thaliana staggered back a step, the sudden transformation of the old man into Denebola more than she had ever expected to see. Cetus, squirming in Tethys' firm grip in an effort to escape, let out a squeak and intensified his struggles to get free even more.

"It's Denebola!" Thaliana screeched in defiance, ready to hurl herself at the demonic apparition in total abandon.

Tethys put his other hand around Cetus' scrawny neck and began to squeeze. "You tried to trick us you little rat." The calmness with which it was said was far more frightening to Cetus than the words or meaning implied.

"Nooooo," he squealed like a tortured animal, clawing at the hand around his throat frantically. "I swear I didn't. I had no idea he could do that!" His gagging matched his bluish face well.

"No," Ailanthus said as he moved his head slightly to the side, staring at the image of Denebola before him and scrutinizing the apparent contradiction. "It's not Denebola."

"Well of course it's him," Thaliana said in aggravation as she stepped forward to attack the man. "Who else could it be?"

"It's Dwad-Mehstiv," Ailanthus said with a deep, rolling loathing building inside him, memories scratching at his mind concerning all that was evil about the species, yet not providing anything solid or definitive. He felt sick, yet had a wonder in him that wanted answers.

Both Tethys and Thaliana's eyes widened even more and Tethys actually let Cetus drop to the ground roughly, the little man scrambling away from the others and into the shadows where he felt safe, hidden.

The image of Denebola blurred again and turned into an exact likeness of Thaliana, causing intakes of breath as they all stepped back from the display, thoughts of Anolis, Crocus, and Antlia gone for the moment.

Dwad-Mehstiv spoke, it's voice a perfect duplicate for the Druzsnis'. "Do you see now how I can help?"

"*Don't do that*," Thaliana hissed at it, not knowing whether to attack the creature or just stand in awe.

None of them had ever seen Dwad-Mehstiv before.

Sure, they had seen the holo-vision programs and the obligatory intelligence briefings each species seemed to have stored away concerning the enigmatic species, but to see one in the flesh, so to speak -- Dwad-Mehstiv actually had no flesh -- was a completely different matter. This was only one of the species, yet all those present

acted like a whole herd of the beasts had congregated in the cave. If there was one common thread that could bind all the species in the galaxy together, it was their hatred of the enigmatic shape-shifters. No species had escaped suffering at the instigation of Dwad-Mehstiv.

Dwad-Mehstiv shifted again back to the old man's shape, staring at them through brilliantly lit eyes. "We are wasting time," he said in that strong, clear voice that was flat yet filled somehow with an under-current of raw power.

Ailanthus spoke up, his mouth dry, his mind howling at him to kill the creature out right, kill it with an asynchronous pulse-varied thermogravimetric quantum burst to disrupt Dwad-Mehstiv's bio-genic conformal flow patterns and send its unholy soul -- if it even had one -- straight to hell. Unfortunately, he was fresh out of that particular weapon system. But the voices continued to howl at him, to force him to act and avenge the millennia of wrongs afflicted by this species as if Ailanthus had personally suffered all the evils himself. It was like a storm raging in his head, pounding at his shores with unrelenting fury. "Why would you want to help us? You're Dwad-Mehstiv." Nothing else needed to be said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "We do not *all* hate humans. There are many of us who helped during your struggle for freedom."

"Bullshit," Tethys growled, his own flooding memories demanding that he kill the old man immediately, to not listen to anything said for it would be all a lie. "You all lie. You're all the very core of evil." It was a whole sermon for the usually quiet man.

"And all humans are liars and an unworthy sub-species that does not deserve to have any freedom," Dwad-Meshtiv said in a drool, mocking voice. "We have all heard the various myths and tales and sundry fey notions of our respective attributes. Must we truly re-hash them here?"

"You still haven't answered my question," Ailanthus said calmly, trying hard to suppress the many voices screaming for death, though they were beginning to fade slowly to a distant thunder, as if they were aware that Ailanthus would not listen to them this time. "Why would you want to help us?"

"I could go into a long discourse as to *why* I felt it necessary to help humans, but that would be a waste of time. Let me just say that I am able to shape-shift into most any biological shape I wish, but I still need to be able to get a transport and fly it. I can't just fly off this rock by myself. This I cannot do without your help. Thus, my intentions are purely selfish."

"And we're supposed to just believe you?" Ailanthus questioned doubtfully.

Dwad-Mehstiv shrugged again, a motion it seemed quite fond of. "It does not matter whether you believe me or not, really. All that matters

is that I help you and you let me escape with you. That is all that really matters, is it not? For both of us?"

They all stared at Dwad-Mehstiv as if in a trance, no one wanting to be the first to agree to anything it said, not wanting to be the first to attack either. It was well known that Dwad-Mehstiv were extremely difficult to kill. Seeing that they weren't flesh and blood, the typical hack and slash energy weapons were rather useless.

"We are wasting time and the entire operation is in jeopardy if this friend of yours decides to tell this Denebola your plans. Then it will certainly be senseless as to whether you believe me or not."

"I hate to say it," Thaliana said through clenched teeth, her fists balled up in controlled rage, "but it has a point." Although Druzni and Dwad-Mehstiv had not directly fought each other, the animosity between the two species simmered just under the boiling point. Dwad had done more than enough damage to the Legion over the millennia without the need to physically engage in combat.

Ailanthus reluctantly had to agree, though he hated it. And how did the creature know so much? About the plan? About Crocus and Anolis? "What do you have in mind?" he asked hesitantly, the voices in his mind coming back for a moment in a frenzy of activity at the suggestion that he would actually listen to what it had to say.

The old man shifted back into Denebola. "That we walk right into these interrogation cells and deal with the situation as we find it."

"Well now that's brilliant," Thaliana spit at him, shaking her head as a smile of pure malice cracked her face. "I'm so glad that we have Dwad-Mehstiv here to help us out."

"It might just work to get one released," Ailanthus said tightly, eyeing the Denebola image with as much distrust as if it were the real person. "But not both, and we still have the problem with dealing with the real Denebola. Although I would like nothing better than to kill the man, it's not an option at the moment, as Thaliana has already pointed out." He took a deep breath, then made another decision, one he didn't like but which he knew had to be made. He had never felt comfortable with making these hard decisions. "Tethys, you and Thaliana take Dwad-Mehstiv and get at least one of the brothers out. I'll go round up Antlia, who can't have gone too far and then come to you so that we can figure out what to do about Denebola. I understand that his tortures take a while, so we have some time to work with. Crocus isn't so weak that he'll crack right away."

Dwad-Mehstiv seemed shocked. "You are willing to allow one of your own to endure this torture because you refuse to kill this Denebola? You are indeed a strange species. It is concepts like that which made you so much more formidable than we ever believed possible."

They ignored the off-hand complement.

Ailanthus started to walk out again when Thaliana grabbed his arm and stopped him, speaking at him with harsh, clipped tones. "I'm obviously rubbing off on you in the wrong way. That plan has every mark of a Druzni grand strategy all over it and that's never good."

He had to smile at the oxymoron. Druzni grand strategy plans were notoriously bad. "Do you have a better plan, 'cause if you do, let me hear it. I'll be more than willing to listen," he shot back callously. When she didn't answer, he looked down with a frown at her hand around his forearm. "I didn't think so."

She let go and then sighed, running her hand through her short, vermin infested hair.

"Make it work, Thaliana," he said less harshly, giving her one final look and then running off to track down Antlia and stop him before he signed his own death warrant.

Thaliana watched him run off, then turned to look at Tethys. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

Tethys smirked, then motioned for her to lead the way. Dwad-Mehstiv, looking like Denebola, followed the two humans out of the cave, walking behind them causally.

That left only Cetus, still cowering in the shadows, aware that this plan was beginning to take on a life of its own. He stepped out cautiously. The utter surprise of Dwad-Mehstiv had made him nervous and aghast that such a creature should appear just like that. Dwad-Mehstiv didn't show up in penal colonies and they didn't graciously offer to help humans, of all things. That it was Dwad-Mehstiv there was no doubt. What he doubted, and feared, was that the creature had its own agenda that didn't include any of the others. And thus didn't include him and that he could not have.

A soft sound came from the inside of the cave. He turned to look, not aware of anyone else who could be in here. Then he saw her, curled up against a wall, a towel hap-hazardly covering part of her chest, sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. A vicious, leering smile worked its way onto his petulant face. The first thought that jumped into his tiny mind was to ravage her then and there, the very prospect causing tension in his groin. But that thought was quickly superseded by an even more sinister concept.

His mind was so conditioned into deviousness that the idea bloomed like a night flower. He was already fairly certain that he had a place aboard the transport -- so long as Dwad-Mehstiv didn't screw things up - - but this idea was going to assure him a place.

And he knew exactly where Pitatus would be at this moment.

Tethys was not at all comfortable with walking the length of Level Five with Denebola. That was something Cetus would be seen doing and as such, Tethys didn't need his reputation sullied. But he wasn't about to make an issue of it, at least not in front of Thaliana. She would mock him about that for months.

The situation became much better when several guards, spotting the Security Warden wandering the Level alone, glided down quickly to hover protectively around Denebola and his prisoners. This made it look much more like an interrogation run than a simple stroll. They had not spoken much since the cave, the idea that they would be engaging in idle conversation with the Security Warden not conducive to long life in the colony.

As such, when the idea struck Tethys, so hard in fact that it actually hurt, he couldn't help but spit it out. It wasn't that often that he came up with good ideas. He was glad when Ailanthus had taken over the responsibilities of leadership between them those many long years ago. Leading was not a concept with which Tethys felt comfortable. He was more than happy to follow Ailanthus and enforce the rules as Ailanthus interpreted them. And one of the reasons was that he was never able to come up with the great, practical ideas in any kind of practical time. Case in point was this idea. It was at least fifteen minutes since they had left the cave and now the idea popped into his mind, almost knocking him over. Most people assumed that he never said much because he didn't need to say much, his bulk and brute strength more than enough communication. But in fact it was because he didn't have all that much to say, because he hadn't thought of anything yet and didn't want to sound stupid.

But it worked for him and that was all that really mattered. This way he didn't need to do much heavy thinking. Let someone else do it. Let someone else take the responsibility, shoulder the blame, take the heat when it didn't work out. He was not born, he was certain, to take responsibility for others.

He spoke quietly, the whisper sounding odd coming from him. "I've the perfect way to get the brothers out of Denebola's hands. Instead of Denebola, we have Dwad-Mehstiv look like Corvus Lupus."

Thaliana gave him a tight smile, her eyes giving much more of an indication of her delight as they sparkled than anything she might have said.

"Although it is a worthy idea, it is not practical and shows your limited knowledge of Dwad-Mehstiv abilities," Dwad-Mehstiv said just as quietly back to them, his voice a perfect copy of Denebola's. It was something with which neither Tethys nor Thaliana were happy. It was far too spooky to be walking and talking with Dwad-Mehstiv, much less with Denebola. "I can only shape-shift into a being whom I have touched, whom I have made an impression of in my mind. This Corvus Lupus I

know not, nor have I ever touched, thus it is impossible for me to change shapes into him." He stopped, then turned to look at Tethys a moment, his still young, shining eyes twinkling. "But this idea is worthy of you, Vj Br'tak."

Confusion was stark like contour lines on Tethys' face. "You confuse me with someone else. The name's Tethys," he said with much less confidence than he should have had concerning his own name, for the words sparked images in his minds like distance neurons firing far down in the recess of his memory.

Dwad-Mehstiv nodded its head ever so slowly, cracking a smile that was brief, fleeting. "Yes, of course it is. My apologies." He turned back again and started to walk.

Thaliana looked at Tethys with raised eyebrows, mouthing *that was strange* to him. He looked back with equal perplexity. He had no idea what that had been all about. He had never heard that name before, but somehow doubted that Dwad-Mehstiv would make such a glaring error. They were not known for making errors at all. He stored it in his memory for later perusal, the more pressing matter of freeing Anolis and Crocus coming to him in clear, precise waves with each scream penetrating the outer walls of the interrogation area as they came closer.

"Can you tell which one that is screaming?" Thaliana asked with tight lips.

"Does it matter?" Tethys answered reflectively.

One of the new escort droids came up to their little group as Dwad-Mehstiv dismissed the guards that had attached themselves to his person during the journey through the main Level. The droid's large, bulbous visual system eyed the Denebola twin with what could only be seen as perplexity.

"I wish to see the prisoner not being interrogated at the moment," Dwad-Mehstiv said in a commanding tone.

The droid didn't seem very impressed. "I have no recollection of you ever leaving the first interrogation cell, Security Warden. How is that possible?"

"You dare challenge me?" he asked the little hovering annoyance. "Just get me the other prisoner."

"This paradox must be resolved first, Security Warden," the droid intoned as he moved toward the door from which the hideous screams tolled, causing Tethys to become more and more incensed. How he hated these damn things.

"I left several minutes ago. You even spoke to me when it happened. Are you malfunctioning? I can not have a malfunctioning guard droid on active status."

Tethys was amazed at how much like Denebola Dwad-Mehstiv sounded and acted. If he hadn't known, he would've never believed that this was not Denebola. He was handling the droid with precision.

The droid stopped on its way to the door where the real Denebola was, then turned to look at the Denebola-double. "I do not comprehend. I have no memory of you leaving the interrogation room. I have run a level one priority systems check and have found no faults with my systems. Thus, it is impossible that you are who you say you are."

Dwad-Mehstiv stepped forward authoritatively. "Do you wish to check my prints, my retinal scan, my DNA? This is absurd. But go right ahead and check and then go report to the system diagnosis supervisor for an overhaul since it is obvious that you are malfunctioning."

The droid moved forward and extended its identification systems. "I am a BAIS Mark X Penal Colony Maximum Control Unit. I am incapable of making mistakes or malfunctioning."

Dwad-Mehstiv put his hand on the identification control pad, affecting his attitude of complete contemptuousness to perfection. It was apparent that Dwad-Mehstiv were consummate actors. He turned his head slightly and whispered to Tethys. "Do you humans purposely make these machines so arrogant?"

Tethys shrugged slightly, fascinated that Dwad-Mehstiv was actually going to be able to fool the droid. This was another obstacle he had not foreseen. He looked at Thaliana out of the corner of his eye and saw that she was just as fascinated, though it was difficult to tell through the perpetual frown she wore. He was glad that she didn't smile all that often, else he would be even more attracted to her than he was. He shook his head, not understanding from where that errant thought had come. She was Druzsni and not for him.

The droid backed away from Dwad-Mehstiv and if Tethys didn't know better, he would think that the machine appeared even more confused. "I will report to the system diagnosis supervisor immediately, Security Warden. Another droid will get your prisoner for you." And with that, the little machine moved out of view down the corridor.

One of the other droids opened a door and appeared a few moments later with a naked and frightened Anolis. His first reaction upon seeing Thaliana and Tethys was for his face to drop in despair.

Thaliana spoke up before the man blew the whole thing and implicated them all. "Say nothing, Anolis. It is not what you think."

He looked at her askew, lowering his eyebrows in confusion. Then he heard the screams of Crocus, screams that tore into Tethys as if he were the one being tortured. It was like a white hot knife was being shoved into his heart and turned ever so slowly, hollowing him out until he felt nothing but rage inside, a rage that must have shown on his face for Thaliana took hold of his upper arm and shot Dwad-Mehstiv a look of urgency.

"I will be back," Dwad-Mehstiv said firmly to the new droid in charge.

Anolis' face fell, the screams of complete submission coming from his brother forcing tears to spill out of his eyes. "*You bastard, you fucking bastard!*" he yelled at the Denebola look-alike. "We know nothing!" Then he turned to look at Tethys and Thaliana, his anguish like a physical blow to them. "And you?! How can you just stand there and let this bastard do this?! *What's wrong with you?!*"

Thaliana began to drag Tethys away. And he knew why. Had it not been for her, he would have already broken the door down to the interrogation cell and strangled the real Denebola with his own entrails. But he knew, somewhere under the rage and seething frenzy holding his reasoning like the bite of a constrictor snake, that he could not kill Denebola just yet. Now wasn't the time. He was thus glad Thaliana was here to keep him stable, to keep him from acting out on his emotions like he was want to do.

Dwad-Mehstiv took hold of the still naked Anolis and began to move away from the interrogation cells, aware that the screams had stopped. "We must leave this area now, before the real Denebola comes out of the room, as I fear he will shortly."

Anolis looked up at the man holding his arm tightly, halting his struggles at the words spoken. "The real Denebola? What the hell is going on here, Tethys?"

As if one cue, the door to the interrogation cell holding Crocus opened.

A friend?

*There is no such thing as a friend.
Companions, compatriots, acquaintances.
These are the more proper terms.
For all these people will eventually
betray you, and in that betrayal,
the concept of friendship is a hollow ideal.*

Attributed to St. Cor Caroli I
The First Imperium
58 P.Y.I.

Ailanthus made it about three minutes from the cave, his mind abuzz with options about which he did not want to think, when he realized quite suddenly that they had left Christl behind, quietly sleeping and oblivious to what was happening around her. This wouldn't have been such a crisis if not for the fact that he also realized in the same breath, like a rancid taste of Drek dung, that Cetus had been left behind also. The combination of those two factors was not what he would call optimal circumstances.

He wanted to go back and make certain that she was safe, a feeling that struck him as rather odd considering that he knew her all of a few cycles. But he also realized that he didn't have the time. He'd have to decide between actually catching up with Antlia before he entered any of the administration areas or going back to make sure Cetus wasn't hopping up and down on Christl.

The decision was easier than he would have thought.

Antlia had to come first.

There was no question about that. The man could not be allowed to breath a word of his dissatisfaction to anyone. Christl would just have to fend for herself, a feat he was quite certain she was capable. She had already surprised him with her mental and physical toughness, two traits he didn't believe a spoiled Noble brat from a soft, university life would be capable of achieving. Nobles were not known for their toughness or ability to adapt. They were a weak breed.

But the fact that he had thought of Christl at all, that her face seemed to hover in the back of his mind like a floating time-bomb, was disturbing, if not a little frustrating. He had known her all of perhaps four cycles and had actually been in contact with her perhaps a few hours of

that time in totality. And yet, it was her safety that seemed to dominate his thoughts at the oddest hours of the cycle, not just now. It was like one of those jalpa vines of which he heard tell; that attached themselves to one's foot without you even noticing and then never let go, regardless what one did, climbing up the leg and entangling itself firmly in place as if it was supposed to be there.

And if it wasn't Christl, then Xylella's face flashed before him like a catatonic vixen of vexation, the two of them switching back and forth in his head in illusionary splendor like twin rotating pulsars, each vying for the ability to destroy him in totality. Twenty years in this pit of despair and not once were his thoughts disturbed by such erotic phantoms; now two of them were harassing his thought processes with mischievous intent. He would have had no problem with such thoughts at any other time, but at the same moment as their escape plans were unraveling like so many mismatched Hyper-space lines was not very conducive to his mental health.

This was, perhaps, the worst time to have a romantic attractive to anything.

It was a problem he would have to remedy, that actually would be remedied in short order when they escaped this vacation paradise and left Christl's sorry-ass behind. Unfortunately, he was having trouble convincing himself that it was so straight forward. Leaving her behind had seemed like such a wonderful idea at the time of its conception and now, now that he was close to actually putting that plan in motion, it seemed far less reasonable, less logical.... less ethical, if that was even possible.

And then there was Xylella.

What was he going to do about her? In a moment of weakness, he had allowed himself to be swayed by the voices tumbling and rumbling in his head like an asteroid storm. It'd certainly be a simple matter to also leave her behind. Who would know? It wasn't like she was going to get off this rock anytime soon and come track him down. And what difference would it make anyway? What difference did it make that the entire colony knew after the fact? It wasn't like he was ever going to come back or meet old lost friends at the K'ar Krack'a reunion. He'd rather die in the attempt to flee than be brought back here. They had all unanimously decided on that a long time ago. This was a one-way trip. There would be no returning for any reason.

But then why did the thought of leaving either female here still bother him?

Maybe it was because that although no one else might know, he would still know. He'd know that he betrayed both women when they needed him the most. Normally such a concept would be like the many chips of rough quartz flying off the borers during mining: too worthless to even bother thinking about. But ever since that odd and dramatic

remembrance in the Tanu area, he was having terrible attacks of conscience that had never afflicted him before. And affliction was certainly the correct term. Conscience was not a commodity traded often in the colony. It was a hindrance if nothing else, an impediment not worth the extra mind-power necessary to conceive. Two months ago, leaving both women behind so that his core group could escape wouldn't have elicited an iota of remorse or regret, much less a full scale attack of conscience.

Maybe he was getting old.

Either way, he was going to have to settle this growing problem quickly, as if he didn't have enough to do already.

He saw Antlia at the same time that he barely heard the obscure announcement over one of the guard droids communicators that the transport was arriving.

It was early.

They were never early.

If Anolis and Crocus had not managed to disable pad 2B, then the shuttle might as well land on the surface. Pad 2B was much more difficult to get to, if it was even possible at all. He didn't think that there was much else that could go wrong. And that thought scared him more than any other. He wasn't ready for any more surprises, especially those of which he couldn't conceive. Those were generally the worse kind.

"Antlia!" he yelled in a misguided attempt to stop the man. "Wait. We need to speak!"

Antlia was standing by the first of the main corridors linking Level Five with the first series of administration office access conduits, which allowed the human staff to come down to the Levels -- a rare to never seen event. He was being accosted by the three guard droids hovering around the entrance like angry bees defending the hive, their apparent agitation whenever prisoners approached seemingly misplaced when one considered that the guards had all the weaponry at their disposal.

Ailanthus reached him and put his hand on Antlia's shoulder. The man literally jumped, turning around to see who or what was attempting to attack him. When he saw that it was Ailanthus, he stepped back roughly, the fear coating his face like a layer of sweaty grease, stark and real.

"Stay away from me!" he spit out in quivering mistrust.

The guards hovered by watching indifferently, the interactions between the prisoners not their top priority. And since the bothersome human was no longer talking at them in that incessant yammer of non-logic, so much the better. Maybe these two bi-peds would kill each other and they could go about their business.

"Antlia, we need to talk," Ailanthus said calmly, pointing around the corner so that they would be out of hearing range of the guards.

Antlia shrugged him off, stepping back another pace, the bitter smell of fear and panic-stricken paranoia like day-old urine in the back of the stalls. It was pungent, an odoriferous permeation of hatred. "No, you're trying to fool me, to get me back to the cave so that Thaliana or Tethys can strangle me to death! *No way, asshole!*"

Ailanthus grabbed him by the upper arm roughly and dragged him away from the guards, who seemed to have taken a bit more interest in their conversation with the mention of killing. Antlia struggled, but Ailanthus was by far the stronger and hauled him away, face set determinedly.

"Have you learned nothing from the last time you decided to open your big mouth? *Sweet Gossomer, man.* Have all your faculties left you?" Ailanthus railed forcefully between clenched teeth. "And what *exactly* were you planning on doing in the administration area?"

"What the hell do you think?" Antlia whined back. "What choice have you left me? Tell me that?" He finally managed to pull his arm free and stepped back from Ailanthus. He was sweating profusely, yet there was a calmness to his eyes giving Ailanthus pause, telling him that Antlia was on the edge of the precipice, already leaning over to fall. It was the calmness of knowing death was near.

"I was wrong, Antlia. I was mistaken about Xylella and you."

He looked at Ailanthus with clear eyes, yet there seemed to be nothing behind them, like crystal orbs looking out over the nothingness of creation. "You lie," he breathed back softly. "I deceived you, remember? I *betrayed* you and the group, and you know what...?" His voice was like a drifting comet, burning off its outer layers as it approached the fiery destruction of the sun, flaring brightly in one last glorious display of intrepidity. "You're right. I *did* betray you all by telling Xyl. And since I've already betrayed you and am going to die on this stinking, *mother-fucking* pile of Kroor-shit, why the *hell* should you all get away? I can't betray you any worse, and I'll be damned if I'm going down alone." He stepped in close to Ailanthus, his eyes still strangely calm, in stark contrast to his molted and red face, his trembling lips, pulsating neck veins like twin pulsars ready to collide. "Since I've lost your trust and your friendship and since you've decided in your merciful heart to spare me a quick death and leave me to the slow torture of existence here, I thought, 'hell, why not just tell Denebola all of it, bargain my safety out of him and possibly ease my life here a little.'" He stared hard at Ailanthus, his anti-matter core about used up, his body trembling with the fatigue that was setting in as surely as he was going insane. He smiled, a demonic apparition taking Ailanthus by surprise. "And you know what, *Ailanthus?* That's just what I'm going to do, so *fuck you* and all the rest of them. Fuck you."

Ailanthus wasn't really sure what to say to all that. It was quite a summation of the feelings the man felt, yet it was so out of character for

the humorous, always happy man that it was like a black hole suddenly spitting out all its destroyed matter in one burst of radiation. What did one say to that? What did one say to a man who was already falling to his doom with no way out?

"I've decided to take Xylella along, Antlia," he said breathlessly, aware of a new odor rising from the man like a putrescent morass. "She convinced me."

He looked at Ailanthus for several moments, saying nothing, his breath ragged and heavy, his eyes, for the briefest of hopeful moments, melting. But then it was over and his face was back to the cold, hard hatred. "No," he said softly at first, a vicious grin encompassing his face like a macabre mask. "No." This time stronger, more forceful, his passion erupting like a pent up volcano. "You're just trying to *trick me*, to convince me that you've changed your mind. It's not going to work." His voice was literally dripping with cynical disregard. He spit on Ailanthus' shoes, then tried to push passed him.

Ailanthus placed a firm hand on his shoulder and pushed him back, not even deigning to look down at his soiled shoe. "Believe me, Antlia." He was quickly becoming disenchanted with this whole conversation. This was not the Antlia he knew, which told him that he never really knew the man at all.

Antlia's smile turned into a rich, deep frown cascading to his loathing eyes in ripples of pure malice. "The *great Ailanthus* never changes his mind. The *great Ailanthus* is too perfect for that. You can't fool me that easy, z'cav. You must really think that I'm stupid. Admit it!" he shouted suddenly, spittle flying like blaster fire. "You think I'm stupid, just another fawning crony to the great Ailanthus, *master* of K'ar Krack'a and all he surveys." He didn't try to step passed Ailanthus, determined now, it seemed, to stand his ground and let loose with a barrage of words meant to inflict as much damage as possible. "You think you're so damn special and you think you're so damn slick. So *fucking* important to those around you. You act just like one of the *fucking Nobles* who you constantly rail against. That's what you are. A *fucking Noble*. Just tell Antlia what he wants to hear and he'll follow along like he always has, none the wiser

"Well, I am the wiser, Ailanthus. I am. I see through you're little game here and I'm not falling for it this time. You've got it *all* figured out, don't you? You've got Tethys to do all your dirty work, Anolis and Crocus to do your computer work and Thaliana to service your dick, all willing to truckle to your every whim. You don't need me, never did, and now I see that all too clearly. I was just a charity case to help along and maybe get some use out of before dumping me like so much Drek refuse. So to hell with you, Ailanthus. To *everlasting hell* with you and may the Creator forsake your soul forever!" He spit again, this time right

in Ailanthus' face, the liquid hot and acidic, the sensation of burning to Ailanthus as if the man had drawn a blaster and fired.

He wiped it away with a furtive hand gesture.

Did they all feel this way? Was this suppressed rage in all of his supposed friends, waiting to erupt like this in unequivocal rage? He had never seen it coming, had never known that Antlia felt any of this. But this wasn't about Ailanthus, was it? This was about Antlia and his rapidly growing descent into a hell of his own making. "I didn't know you felt this way," was all that Ailanthus could say at, his mind trying to find a way around this, a way to salvage this man from his own grave.

"Well now you do, you z'cav! Now you do! And let me tell you a little secret. They all feel that way. ALL OF THEM!" The words were shot out in lethal, punctuated bursts of fury. "So unless you plan on killing me right here and now with your own two bare hands, let me pass." He tilted his head to the side, his maniacal grin back, his eyes flashing like twin lasers. "But that's right The *great, fucking Ailanthus* never soils his hands with actually killing someone. That's Tethys' job, isn't it? *Isn't it?!*"

Ailanthus spread his arms out in a gesture of reconciliation. "I'm not going to kill you, Antlia. I told you, you can come with us."

Once again the fleeting flash of hope surfaced in Antlia's eyes, like the sun peeking out through tattered storm clouds, only to be concealed again with ever blacker tempests. "I don't believe you and I don't care! I don't give a *rat's ass* what you think anymore. You've abandoned me to my own devices and this is it! *This* is what I've decided to do. Eight years of friendship, eight years of all that I've done for you and this is what you leave me?"

"Then what can I say to you to convince you that I'm serious, that I'm telling you the truth?" Ailanthus pleaded, his voice taking on that quiet, diplomatic intonation with which he used to placate those ready to commit violence against him. "Tell me what I can do to convince you?" Here in K'ar Krack'a, talking one's way out of violence was rather limited. Most people in here who decided that they were going to resort to violence saw it as the only option and didn't want to talk about it.

"Nothing," he threw back caustically, seeming to huddle within himself, shrinking before Ailanthus' eyes like a demented dwarf. "There isn't a *damn* thing that you could say to me that would change my mind in any way. All you say is Kroor-shit. All of it. You've lied from the first moment that I laid eyes on you and you will always lie. It's in your nature. Now let me pass." The last sentence was said with a furor of open aggression, boding an ill-wind toward Ailanthus

But he didn't move.

It was passed the time for that.

The critical mass had been reached.

"What if I took you to Xylella and let her tell you the truth since you won't believe it from me. How about that, Antlia?" He was running out of options rapidly and the one remaining option was the last one he wanted to take. He had the naive assumption that he could just tell Antlia that he was once again included in the escape, but that course had been blown apart with the first words Antlia had said. Now Ailanthus was quickly circling the whirlpool for the last time, his idea bank drained like a shorted bio-net relay.

Antlia narrowed his eyes at the mention of Xyl's name and this time his stance eased somewhat, the hope in his eyes spawning anew. "Her I might believe," he said so quietly that Ailanthus barely heard it. "But you bring her *here*, to me," he added with hostile temerity. "You bring her *here*."

"You know that I can't do that, Antlia." Ailanthus looked around the small speck of corridor in which they stood, the guard droids just around the corner at the entrance to the administrator conduits. This was no place to be holding this conversation. He extended his hand out, palm up to show that it held no weapon. "Come back with me and we'll talk to Xylella and straighten it all out."

Antlia seemed confused now. His anger and passion toward Ailanthus was knocked off track by this latest tactic, the idea of talking to Xylella giving his eyes the first real signs of hope that seemed so fleeting in the man.

This confusion was the opening Ailanthus had wanted to create, for he could then exploit it as he was best at. "Come on. You said yourself that I won't kill you, that it's Tethys that does all that."

Antlia backed up a step, as if the extended hand held death itself in its exposed palm. He stared at the hand, his head glistening with the sweat of indecision. "This is a trick, I just know it is." He looked up furtively into Ailanthus' eyes and held them strongly in stark, open frankness. "Is this a trick?"

"No, Antlia. No tricks." Ailanthus was beginning to feel sick, a small loathing in the corner of his stomach brewing a toxic mixture of acid. "Just come with me and we'll go talk to Xylella."

"I..." he stalled, wiping the dripping sweat from his face hap-hazardly, the drops off his nose like liquid percolations of his soul oozing out with every second gone. He licked his dry lips once, twice, his eyes skipping back and forth between the outstretched hands promising help and the hard eyes promising release. "But you said --"

"What I said before, I was wrong," Ailanthus cut in, not wanting to lose this one opportunity presenting itself with no possibility for error. He tried one more prod, one more enticement. "The transport's landed already, Antlia. He can leave next cycle."

There was a flare of real hope, a semblance of the old Antlia crawling out from behind the storm clouds threatening to tear them both apart. "Next cycle?" he whispered with cracking voice.

Ailanthus nodded.

Antlia reached out tentatively, his confusion like pock-marks on his face. He knew that it was wrong, that the earlier appraisal of the situation was not flawed and yet... Next cycle He could leave next cycle and never have to see this place again. "Ok, Ailanthus. We'll go talk to Xylella. I'll believe her."

Ailanthus forced himself to smile and it was one of the hardest gestures he had ever made. Antlia walked over and stood next to him, meekly waiting yet still filled with a repressed rage coursing through him like acid. "There you go, Antlia. Nothing to it. Let's get away from here. Being this close to the Administrators is bad for your health." His voice was forced jocularity, his manner forced comradery.

Antlia smiled at him, a smile of real relief and happiness. His whole body relaxed at that moment and the old Antlia began to emerge from under the black clouds of paranoia.

They walked away from the guard droids and into a darker, rough-hewed corridor where no Cetus' might be lurking to give up Ailanthus later. He had not done this often, but he knew the rules and the dangers and most of all he knew the precautions to take. Tethys had shown him the move in the first few hectic cycles they had been deposited in the penal colony. It was a simple move really, provided that one had the strength and the position.

"I'm sorry I told Xylella," Antlia said in quiet supplication. "I really am."

"I know, Antlia. I know." It was said softly, like a requiem.

There was a sickening crunch, a snap of the neck ending his life in a heartbeat. And as Antlia's limp body sagged to the dirty ground Ailanthus' emotions drained out of his body like so much urine, leaving behind a blankness filling him with nothing. The eight years of friendship and shared hardship with Antlia simply didn't exist at that moment. All there was were basic life systems -- heart, lungs, liver, kidneys -- running an empty emotional shell that was nothing. He touched Antlia's forehead once, then left him, his life-less eyes wide open, laying there in that dark and dirty corridor to be found by whomever.

He walked away quickly, not looking back.

There never was any looking back.

Power resides in those who have information. True power resides in those who know what to do with that information. Ultimate power resides in those who do not need the information.

Syrtis
Spymaster of the Imperium

Tethys and Thaliana froze for an instant when Denebola stepped out of the interrogation cell and looked right at them. It was an instant that saved Denebola's life. It was in that instant that Dwad-Mehstiv shifted into the shape of another administrator with whom he had been in contact recently. If Dwad-Mehstiv had not reacted so quickly, Tethys would have lunged at the Security Warden. Tethys would have certainly died in the attack from the weapons of the droids, but he would have made certain that Denebola didn't survive either. And that was all that mattered to him.

As it was, when Denebola saw Dwad-Mehstiv as the administrator, with the three prisoners around him and the guard droids hovering calmly as if nothing was amiss, the thought that they had come to free Anolis and Crocus was but a fleeting chirp in the back of his mind, not even worthy of consideration.

Dwad-Mehstiv spoke up, his voice smooth and confident, as if he had been speaking with Denebola for years. "I am taking these prisoners to the Prime Warden as he requested, Security Warden. If you're finished with the Prisoner Crocus, I will take him also."

Tethys could hardly believe the lies Dwad-Mehstiv freely spit out like a hard-working female chun spider. Thaliana just stood by, ready for action, ready to snap the demented human's neck right off. Denebola and she had never been friendly in any usage of the word and if possible, they would both love to kill the other.

Denebola looked at Dwad with raised eyebrows. "The Prime Warden asked specifically for *these* prisoners?" he asked in shock, the coincidence far too close for his liking.

"Yes. He was very specific."

Denebola's face screwed up into a spasm of rage and hate, his eyes blazing forth. "What

is that idiot doing now?" he asked indignantly under his breath to no one in particular. "He wants them *now*?" he repeated needlessly.

"As soon as possible, yes."

Tethys and Thaliana stood trying to look inconspicuous, unconcerned with the debate going on between the two administrators, looking as pissed off as they could at the interruption of their lives. But inside they were both ready for action, ready for Denebola to refuse to believe such a wild explanation for their presence and set the guards on them. If it had just been Denebola standing there, neither Tethys nor Thaliana would have had a problem striking him down where he stood. But the guard droids were another matter. Any attack here, within their sight, would elicit a lethal response neither of them believed they would survive. And so they watched and waited, wondering if this was going to work or get them all killed.

Tethys was not willing to wait much longer.

Both he and Thaliana would much rather die taking Denebola with them than be cut to pieces by the droids for doing nothing.

Denebola hesitated a moment, not certain it seemed whether to buy into the fact that the Prime Warden wanted to see the very people he was trying to catch in the act of escaping or whether he should disbelieve it all and make an even bigger enemy out of the Prime Warden. It wasn't like Lupus to just suddenly want to see them all. It wasn't his style.

Unless, of course, he was helping in the escape and had discovered that Denebola had caught onto the plot and was trying to crack it. That would make sense. Indeed, it made more sense with each passing second. It was even possible that Lupus had discovered Denebola's presence in the main memory core, rooting around the secured communications log. If that were the case, then this was certainly a move Lupus would make. It was one of those cunning, preemptive strikes for which he was infamous.

He pursed his lips, his eyes losing their focus as he thought through what he was going to do next. He spoke, his voice distant like echoing thunder as he started walking off. "Stay here and keep the prisoners here." An interrogation droid came hovering passed Denebola as he moved away, its sinister lack of external features belying its torturous purpose. "Let the droid start in on the prisoner Crocus. I'll give it the questions to ask when I come back." He wasn't about to let Lupus get all the credit for discovering the escape plan, especially when he probably knew about it anyway, was probably an active helper in its execution. He stopped after a few strides, looked back over his shoulder at the administrator. "Strip them all down and put them in separate cells." Then he turned to look at the lead guard droid. "No one leaves this area."

They were the only words necessary. The machine would add nothing to the statement and carry the order out with efficient certainty, as was its purpose in life. There was none of this human uncertainty and re-interpretation of orders that often left Denebola with a bad taste

in his mouth. That was why he liked the droids so much. They were simple and efficient and willing to carry out orders with little to no complications. He thought a moment, to make certain he had not forgotten anything he needed to tell the droid or the administrator, then turned smartly on his heel and walked away rapidly.

Thaliana spit in his direction, letting loose with a series of Druzni expletives burning Tethys' ears.

"Ah, my sweet Druzni, you'll sing even better when your turn comes," Denebola cheerfully called back over his shoulder with a wave of his hand.

Tethys watched the interrogation droid enter the cell where Crocus was and had the driving desire to march in after it and tear it apart until all that was left were scattered bits and pieces. But he knew that it would do no good, especially since he probably wouldn't even get close to the droid before the guard droids sliced him into large, bloody slabs. But he seethed nonetheless, more so because he could do nothing and doing nothing was never his style. He would remain stoic and aloft and wait to see what transpired, wait for Ailanthus to make the next decision. Ailanthus always made the decisions. It was easier that way for Tethys.

And then he could hear the sobs coming from inside the cell, the terror bottled up inside leaking out through the cracks like fleeing cockroaches. It made his stomach churn.

Anolis was becoming frantic. He was more than ready to rush in after the interrogation droid to save his brother. Dwad-Mehstiv took hold of his arm and held him in place.

"Let me go you, you bastard!" he screamed in utter shock and horror at what was happening to his brother. To be left alone in that cell with an interrogation droid was the worst thing Denebola could have done. Crocus' fear of droids would be allowed ample food to grow, blossom, and the screams and whimpering wails leaching out at them in waves of palpable torment told them all that Crocus' fears were eating him alive. They had to get him out of there. "You have to do something, Tethys. *Listen to him. Can't you hear him?!*"

Tethys growled back, his own inability to help eating away at him like his own cancer. "Of course I can hear him, you fool, but what can we do?" It was said harsher than he wanted but he needed to be firm now, else lose all sense of control.

"We can leave, that's what we can do," Thaliana spit out in disgust, looking at Dwad-Mehstiv with hatred in her eyes, transferring her hatred to it in lieu of anything else. Dwad-Mehstiv were handy that way, a ready species to hate and despise when nothing else was available. "There's nothing that we can do here."

"*Leave?!*" Anolis wailed.

"We can not leave," Dwad-Mehstiv said simply, matching Thaliana's stare easily, the hatred in her eyes washing over him like so much

harmless solar wind. It could care less about her feelings. As far as Dwad was concerned, she was of a lesser species and so it would be akin to a Druzni caring what a fly thought. "The guards will not let us leave, as per Denebola's orders."

She knew he was right, but the intensifying screams ringing out of the cell were becoming unbearable to her. Thaliana, who had tortured her fair share of humans – in a past about which she had yet to share with her prison compatriots -- felt a discomfort she knew was dangerous. This person being tortured she knew. Whereas the screaming and pleading yelling from a sniveling, pathetic human would normally not phase her in the least, it was different when she was the one committing the torture, getting her satisfaction out of making human males scream. But when she had to listen without participating, when it was happening to someone for whom she cared, it was completely different and that bothered her. Crocus, though annoying and sometimes childish in his immaturity, was still a companion. She had shared bread with the man. She had worked side-by-side with him and sometimes even fought with him and to a Druzni, these were not events to be taken lightly.

And yet, she still had the nagging feeling that to feel this way was wrong. Nothing these humans did, apart from Ailanthus, should bother her at all. She was becoming weak. And a weak Druzni was a dead Druzni. Her fists were so tightly closed that small droplets of blood drip-dripped from her imbedded nails to form a pool of crimson fluid by her feet as if it were her own soul pressed out with each excruciating wail, her conflict at her own inner emotions like a torture all its own.

The guard droids hovered near them, completely oblivious to any human concerns, oblivious to the screams and tension in the air. They were like demented pets staying around even after they had tried to kill their owner.

"Can you do anything?" Tethys demanded of Dwad-Mehstiv, his own inabilities exposed to all like so much raw flesh.

"And what exactly would you have me do?" it asked calmly, eyeing the droids with detached interest. "We are stuck here until this Denebola returns, at which point he will have deduced that Corvus Lupus did not request that I take you to him. Denebola will then return with many more of these interesting droids. That is, unless you can figure out how to disable these machines." He tsked in annoyance at what seemed to be cool observation. "Only humans can make machines to rule over them. That is so like your species."

"We can't disable them at the moment, so that's a moot point," Tethys shot back acidly.

"I thought not," Dwad-Mehstiv said with a tight smile. "So then we wait ... And listen."

Anolis was now huddled against a wall, his knees up to his chin, his hands clamped firmly over his ears in a futile attempt to block out the

death knell of his brother. If the interrogation droid were to come out and start work on Anolis, it would not be more agonizing than what the man was going through at the moment. He could not imagine what his brother must be going through.

Tethys was struggling hard with himself to keep from tearing into a suicidal frenzy. Guard droids were not picky about laying into prisoners who attacked them, their numerous weapon systems more than enough to liquidate all in their way, and when they did decide to start shooting, there were no innocents to avoid. All was far game. But this was Crocus and Crocus he considered a friend. He was not the type of person let a friend endure this without trying to do something.

And yet, if it were Ailanthus in there, Tethys knew with certainty that he would've already broken down the door and charged in to rescue him. Was that that way it worked? Were there different levels of friendship in his mind, Ailanthus worth dying for and Crocus not? Would he have this crisis of decision if it were Thaliana?

And then the oddest thing happened.

The guard droids, who constantly emitted a cacophony of beeps, hums and clicks, fell silent with one group bleep, wobbled slightly, then slowly yet surely settled to the ground, where they rolled over to their sides and stayed, seemingly inert.

They all stared at the apparently disabled droids in shock.

This had never happened before. They had never even heard of it happening. That they were planning on doing this exact thing to the droids when they made their escape never crossed their minds.

"I'll be damned, it works," Ailanthus said simply as he stepped out of the shadowed corridor, a small device in his hand at which he gazed with a mixed look of admiration and frustration. "Christl was right about the frequencies. Hmph. Imagine that." He made certain to look at Thaliana.

Anolis looked up from his huddled state, Crocus' screams not abating in the least. "What about Crocus? What about the *interrogation droid*?" he barked out in sobs of empathy for his brother, the fleeting hope almost lost in the terror.

Ailanthus stepped up next to Thaliana and Tethys, handing the device to the big man to examine. "Different model droid, different frequencies and internal protocol systems." He looked at Dwad-Mehstiv searchingly. "We'll have to deal with that differently, I would think."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Dwad-Mehstiv shifted to the likeness of Denebola. "Simply solved." He moved to the door and opened it as the others looked on.

"When did you get the numbers from Christl?" Thaliana asked caustically, not wanting to display her relief that Crocus would be saved. She hoped that no one saw the momentarily lapse of control.

"She gave it to me the other cycle, after you had gone to sleep." He said it without any inflections, without any other meaning, the blankness that was his emotions after the death of Antlia still enveloping him utterly. It was just another statement

Thaliana stored the information. She placed her own impressions on the statement and planned on taking it up with the little human bitch later. It was obvious that her little display in the bathing area had not been as effective as she had believed. She would rectify that situation with brutal assurance. No one crossed a Druzni where a male was involved.

The interrogation droid pulled out of the cell and blithely made its way back to its little enclave in the maintenance section, totally unaware that the other droids had been incapacitated. It was not a guard droid and was not programmed for such observations. Torture was its only function and thus torture was all it cared about.

Dwad-Mehstiv stepped out of the cell and indicated for them to go in and get their friend. Anolis was the first to hustle in, followed quickly by Tethys. Thaliana stayed outside, as did Ailanthus, watching for the return of Denebola.

"Where's Antlia?" she asked quietly, somehow knowing the answer before she even spoke the words. It wasn't Ailanthus whom she blamed for the nightly encounter with Christl. He was a human male and vulnerable of the human female -- of any female actually -- and thus it wasn't really Ailanthus' fault that he had been seduced. And anyway, she had a problem with remaining angry at Ailanthus for very long. It would defeat the purpose.

Ailanthus looked into her eyes for a moment, then looked away and stared at the open cell door. "We won't speak of Antlia anymore." It was said with such a dearth of emotion, such a lack of any sympathy, a blankness flowing out of the man like swirling fog around tombstones, that she took a step back as she nodded her head. She didn't think that humans had such abilities. Death, to her, was not uncommon. She respected his wishes and didn't voice the question lurking in her mind as to how it had occurred. It was not important. All that was important was Christl's punishment and Ailanthus' safety.

"The transport is here," he said just as flatly. "We leave this next cycle."

"Sounds good to me," she intoned as Tethys stepped out of the cell without Crocus, his face pale and drawn, his eyes a fiery passion of pure malice. "He'll live, but he'll need medical attention."

"Leave him in there," Ailanthus ordered.

Tethys was about to protest, to voice his displeasure with such a callous statement, but he held his tongue. It wasn't his place to counter Ailanthus... At least not here. And as he thought about it, he realized

that they would still have to deal with the real Denebola and that the decision, as was usually the case, was sound.

But Thaliana did speak up, her mind not understanding the subtleties of what Ailanthus was saying. "Why? How can we leave him in there in his condition? You're harder than most Druzsni I know if that's truly your intent."

Ailanthus turned to look at Dwad-Mehstiv, ignoring the Druzsni for the moment, a dangerous proposition at best. "Do you think you can catch up to that interrogation droid?"

"Yes."

"Then get it back here. We'll need it."

Dwad-Mehstiv nodded once, then turned and left, shape-shifting into a four-legged Grol beast for better speed.

Ailanthus turned to look at Thaliana, whose hands-on-hip stance would have normally set off warning bells, but which now just impacted on his blank mind and bounced off to roll about the dirty floor. "We still have to deal with Denebola. We can't just leave. He'd have the entire colony shut down looking for us and then all our plans would be useless."

She nodded curtly, accepting the explanation, but not the rebuff at his ignoring her. She would deal with that later.

Anolis stuck his head out of the cell, a look of anguish and relief mixed on his face like dirty sweat. "Someone help me get these straps off of him. We can't leave him here."

"He stays where he is at the moment," Ailanthus commanded firmly.

Anolis' jaw dropped at the unexpected words. "You can't be serious. He needs help and medical attention! He's bad off. He's really worked over. You *have* to help him, Ailanthus. *You have to!*"

He couldn't bear to look at the pleading Anolis. "I realize that and we'll get him help, but for the present, he stays where he is, as do all of you." He looked at the droids looking so forlorn laying tilted over on their sides on the ground. "We need to move these out of sight." Tethys and Thaliana took this task on and moved the light-weight machines into an adjacent empty cell quickly. By the time they were done, Dwad-Mehstiv was back with the interrogation droid in tow. It placidly hovered behind him, awaiting orders.

"What a *fucking* minute!" Anolis screamed louder than he wanted, his emotions clouding his judgment completely. He grabbed Ailanthus' arm forcefully, a rare event for anyone who valued their life. He hissed at him with clenched teeth, his eyes seething anger. "You can't leave that thing in their with him. He'll go insane! Are you fucking crazy?! What did he, what did we ever do to you that you'd leave him in there to *suffer* like that?!"

Ailanthus looked down at the arm grabbing him, then into the eyes that hated him. "Don't worry, Anolis." It was said with a calmness he

didn't possess. In all the years in this hell-hole, he had lost only three people. And they were all near the beginning of his time. To lose two in one cycle was a catastrophe.... And yet... what was the price to pay for the successful escape of the others? Two people? Three? Were Christl and Xylella also to be expended in the sake of his own survival and that of Tethys and Thaliana? The voices in his mind flared briefly for a moment as if in contradiction to his own thoughts, reminding him of innumerable times that he had sacrificed the few for the many. It was never easy and yet it had always been justified. "I'll be in there with Crocus and the droid isn't going to do anything. I promise. But we have to do this, else we don't leave."

Anolis didn't seem convinced, but he did let go and sulked where he stood, seething in his own impotency to either come up with a better suggestion or to stand up to Ailanthus.

Ailanthus looked at Dwad-Mehstiv now and nodded, still not comfortable with the freely given help the creature was displaying. "Have it go back in the cell with Crocus."

Dwad-Mehstiv lowered its chin slightly. "You wish it to continue its interrogation of the human?" it asked skeptically.

"No. I just want it in there for now. The rest of you stay out here. When Denebola shows up, he's going to be accompanied by more guards, I'm certain. Make sure that he goes into the cell here. Since Crocus won't be screaming, I assume that he'll want to find out why. When he opens the door, I'll incapacitate the new droids, at which point Tethys needs to grab Denebola from behind and hold him. We'll go from there."

Tethys handed the device back to Ailanthus.

"Why not just kill him?" Thaliana questioned blithely.

"Because that would be too good for the bastard," Ailanthus answered back calmly, the blankness of his emotions like a deep hole with slippery sides. "Do we all understand the plan?"

They all nodded in affirmation.

He looked at each in turn, then stepped into the cell. "Now we just have to wait."

What a moron.

Lord Comté Jovian Aldebaren VII
Comments concerning the Prime Warden
Penal Colony K'ar Krack'a.

When Denebola was informed by the secretary droid that the Prime Warden was in an important meeting and not to be disturbed, it passed in one ear and out the other. He didn't take orders from machines. He used his security over-ride code on the locked door -- he had made certain a long time ago to have access to *all* the areas in the colony -- and man-handled it open in his rage. He was greeted with the lusty sounds of a sexual act in progress, his eyes taking in the scene in one sweeping motion.

He frowned.

Why a man would want to have a women in the rectum, Denebola never understood. It was a concept eluding him to the extreme, the soft, sensual pleasures of a woman's vagina more than sufficient for any sane man. To even consider plunging deep into the orifice that produced shit held such revulsion for him that he almost left the room.

But he didn't.

He was determined to speak at that perverted ass-hole Lupus and his demand that Ailanthus' group of prisoners be brought to here, to him. It was absurd to the extreme and in direct conflict with what Denebola was attempting and he'd have none of it. That he had to see this disgusting, denigrating act, he would have to live with. If Lupus had a man bent over the desk and was having his way with him, at least he could understand that act a little more. Not much, but at least it made more sense.

The girl -- and girl was certainly a good description of the young thing that the flappy, grotesquely white-skinned Lupus was laying into like some kind of sack of potatoes -- was sobbing uncontrollably, the blood running down between her quivering, lean legs indicative of the damage Lupus had already inflicted.

The Prime Warden didn't bother to look up at the interruption spoiling his fun, his eyes clouded with the pleasure he was obviously enjoying, the thin rays of hatred for Denebola radiating out in spikes of pure malice. He didn't stop his wonton plunging as he spoke, his words

forced out between his panting breaths of exertion: sharp and punctuated. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing?! Have you lost all sense of sanity?!"

"We need to talk." was all Denebola said as his face vividly displayed his displeasure. The bitter smell of blood, fear and terror in the office hung like a thick fog bank of deception.

Lupus slowed his offensive intrusions into the rectum of the young thing as he turned his head now to look at Denebola with wide-eyed disbelief at the temerity of this man. "Can't you see that I'm *busy* here?"

The young lady turned her head to look at the man standing there and giving her a brief respite, her eyes pleading with him to help her, her split lip and quickly dis-coloring eye of blue-black aggression indicative of her treatment prior to Denebola's grand entrance. The whitish substance clinging to her chin and lower lip he didn't even need to guess at to know what Lupus had forced her to endure already.

"This is of vital importance," Denebola intoned forcefully.

Lupus stopped in mid-stride with a suddenness that made the girl shudder, pulling out his engorged member to a squeal of pain and turned fully to face Denebola. It was a sight the Security Warden didn't need to see. "Is the colony in full riot?!" he shouted as the girl slid to the floor and huddled against herself in fear and pain. "Is it all burning down?! Are they outside the door wanting to KILL ME?!"

"No."

Lupus indicated to the girl on the floor. "And you interrupted my pleasures for what exactly, then?!"

Denebola indicated to the whimpering girl. "You should send her away."

Lupus looked at the girl at his feet in disgust, then back at Denebola. "First you break into my office as if it's your own and then you *presume* to tell me what to do? Are you mad? Have you been smoking Urea again?!"

Denebola decided that leaking some sensor data at this moment was not a bad option. He needed to get the Prime Warden's full attention. Plus, he wanted the girl to be able to get out of here and away from Lupus' perverted sense of pleasure. It was okay when he tortured such things for information, it was another matter when he had to watch someone else do it for the sheer pleasure. That was simply disgusting. "I know all about you and Ailanthus and Tethys."

That produced the response for which Denebola was hoping, almost more than he had hoped. The Prime Warden's eyes popped open wide for a snap of a second, then narrowed to primitive slits as he tilted his head slightly, his multiple chins jiggling like cow-bells. His voice was smooth, clean, the anger present before toned down and subdued behind the deadly timbre that rang out. "You can leave now, girl."

She didn't need to be told twice, the trail of blood following her passage out of the office sickening to Denebola. Torture for questioning was one thing, but this was not to his liking. This was a disgusting display of power. That Denebola did the same thing with his prisoners never entered his mind, never even occurred to him. What he did and what Lupus did were on two separate planes of existence. To Denebola, Lupus was nothing more than a perverted miscreant with power, while he was the Security Warden who had a job to accomplish. It was a reasoning that permeated his mind and kept him as sane as he wanted to be.

"Close the door," Lupus said as he pulled up his pants and made his way over to the other side of his desk.

Denebola complied, then spoke, trying to maintain his cool and not let his anger erupt. He was in control at the moment and planned on keeping it that way. He was in for a surprise. "Why did you have Ailanthus' little group ordered brought here, to you?"

Lupus look up, his face now screwed up in confusion. "What the fuck are you talking about? You have been smoking Urea, haven't you? I'll make sure that ---"

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Denebola cut in fiercely. "You're going to just sit there and tell me what the hell you think you're doing helping them escape, that's what you're going to do. You sit here and play your little perverted sexual games with what you consider to be your own personal slaves and completely ignore what goes on in the main colony, except of course for Ailanthus and Tethys, who seem to hold some special place in your twisted heart. You disgust me, Corvus Lupus."

Lupus sat up straighter. He was certainly not used to being spoken to in this manner.

Denebola was certain that the fat failure of a man was about to crack, to spill all his illicit activities and beg for mercy. He would love to take Lupus' fat ass down to the interrogation cells and have at him. That would be the perfect end to this day.

"Are you quite done?" Lupus asked quietly, calmly.

"No. I'm not. Your time will be soon over, your power broken by your own greed and selfishness. I know it all, Lupus and I have no qualms about spilling it all to the proper authorities. What you did to that girl just now will be nothing compared to what they'll do to you. It'll be your just reward."

Lupus stared at Denebola for several moments without saying a word. Then his mouth curled into a balefully malicious smile. It worked its way up along his cheek bones, along the folds of fat lining his face like thick pastry rolls, into his eyes sparkling like candles. He laughed, a short chuckle throwing Denebola completely off guard. "You fool. You absolute fool. You've no idea what you're dealing with, do you? You're a bumbling fool looking for glory and a chance to leave this place, but

you just don't get it, do you? It's not just the prisoners who never leave here, it's the staff also. This is just as much our prison as it is the prisoners. We've all been banished here, all of us."

Denebola felt the rage boil up inside him at the remarks aimed to lacerate him to the bone. He certainly didn't expect the man to react this way. Not at all. Perhaps he was even more insane than he had guessed. "I know all about the communiqués between you and whomever it is that's paying you off. I know about all your work to keep Ailanthus and Tethys alive. I know it all, Corvus. And I'm going to bring you down."

Lupus laughed even louder, slapping the desk hard with his hand, then reaching into a drawer and pulling out a bottle of amber liquid and two dirty shot glasses. "You don't know shit, Denebola," he babbled in gleeful mirth as he sloshed the liquor into the two glasses, spilling just as much on the desk-top as in the glasses. He pushed one roughly across the desk. "So that was you who's been rummaging around in the memory core. I thought as much." He emptied the shot glass in one fluid motion, then filled his glass again with the fiery brew. "You're so out of your league, Denebola. You don't have a clue as to what is happening with those two, do you?"

Denebola refused the drink. "I know enough, Corvus."

Lupus' eyebrows rose as he reached across the desk and took the glass meant for Denebola and grabbed it, downing the contents easily, then throwing the glass at Denebola. It hit him in the chest, causing little hurt apart from a bruised pride and the shock at the act. Denebola was quite aware that Lupus was intentionally trying to provoke him and he was trying hard to remain calm. It was not easy.

"You're a fucking moron, Denebola. Did you know that? *A fucking moron*. You come here with your bright ideas and sparkling image, your misplaced sense of duty and your holier-than-thou attitude that would make a high domini of The Church look like a Tanudana and think, with your shit-filled brains and constipated mind, that you know it all, that *you* are going to clean up the scum and corruption of the penal colony with your oh-so-ever brilliant detective work." He threw his now thrice-emptied glass across the office, smashing it into tiny pieces of crystalline shards. "You're pathetic. Have you ever stopped to think why you were sent to this hell-hole? Have you? Have you once looked at your own shit-filled reflection in the mirror and seen what it is that you are? You're a failure, Denebola. Just like everyone else here. For Morgase's sake, even the fucking droids are failures.

"You've got to be kidding to think that you could change things around here." He leaned back in his chair, the creaking of the material under the enormous pressure like a loud, crippled wall-roach. He shook his head a few times in amusement. "What a piece of work you are, Denebola. When did you over-ride my security-code on my door and

install your own? When did you decide that *you* had the authorization to break into the memory core and root around into areas in which you've no business? Since when did you decide to start spying on me! *ME!* Who the *fuck* do you think you are?! A member of the I.I.S. perhaps? Is that WHAT YOU THINK?!" He grabbed the neck of the liquor bottle and took another long, deep swig.

Denebola was about to speak, to counter the words spilling out of Lupus like vomit, but the flatulently fat Lupus cut him off with another burst of a chuckle and a stream of words flowing like envenomed spittle. "I might be stuck here, but I'll be damned if I'm going to wallow in this hell-hole. I'm going to do whatever I can to make my life here tolerable and if that includes taking credits to keep two obscure prisoners from ending up in the Drek or Kroor cooking pots, then what the hell? I'm easy. And if that includes getting my sexual pleasures satisfied with every last prisoner they send to me, then so be it." He leaned forward suddenly and hurled the half-empty bottle at Denebola, the contents sloshing out as it missed the ducking man, coating him with the amber liquid, then smashing against the far wall, next to the remnants of the shattered glass. "And if I want to have my too-good-to-drink-with-me Security Warden fed to the H'chalk, then I'll damn well do that too, you stupid, short-sighted son-of-a-bitch!"

Denebola wiped the excess liquid off his clothes as he answered, trying with increasing difficulty to keep from leaping over the desk and strangling the life out of that fat neck. But that was just what Lupus would want. It would be just the event to keep Denebola here forever, if not as an administrator than as a prisoner.

That was not about to happen.

To be an administrator here was bad enough. To come here as a prisoner would be beyond even contemplating. "You've no right to treat me like this. I'm your second-in-command here and it's my right to know what you're doing with the prisoners. You can't just leave me out of the loop and expect me to accept that with open-arms. It's unacceptable."

"Rights?! What the fuck are you talking about with rights? You sound like one of the sniveling prisoners. You have *nothing but what I choose to give you*, you Kroor-shit for brains moron. This isn't the Greater House Prabhasa Free Council. This," and he emphasized his words now with a pudgy little finger that he stabbed down on his desk with short, little bursts, "is an Imperium Penal Colony and I, I, am the sole authority here! You are *nothing* but my slave, Denebola, to command as *I see fit* and be damn happy that it isn't you bend over this desk with my penis jammed into you instead of some fresh young thing falsely imprisoned in this hell-hole! Do I make myself clear, Security Warden?! I might as well have a damnable confessio questioning my every gastro-intestinal movement for proper Church content then to have you telling me what I can and can't do in my own DAMN PENAL COLONY!" Small

flecks of spittle rested at the corners of Lupus' tightly closed mouth as he finished, his eyes sending hardened spears of pure, black malice at Denebola. He was shaking in his chair, the rolls of fat jiggling in abscessed, quivering virulence.

The Security Warden took a step back at the spat of words flinging around the office like thunder. "Your superiors will hear of this treatment of me, Prime Warden, of that you can be sure. You sit there in your chair with your fat rolls hanging down like shit and dictate policy that benefits no one but you and expect the rest of us to just bend over and let you shaft us up the ass and like it."

"And you honestly think that they'll believe you over me?" he shot back with rancorous abandon. "I was appointed by the *Imperium itself*, you stupid clack worm. Haven't you been listening to me? You can't be that stupid, can you? But then I suppose if you actually believe that you can get off this rock, then yes, I suppose you are that fucking stupid." He paused a moment as if to collect his thoughts, or perhaps to re-load his tongue with more condescending remarks to throw at Denebola. "What's happening with Ailanthus and Tethys is far from what you believe is happening. As to escape plans, that's your province and if they did happen to manage to escape, well ...what can I say? Reactor cores eventually burn the lowest man in the shaft, if you know what I mean. Shame, really. But then, what the *fuck do I care?*" He laughed again, a short deranged burst of offal. "Oh, and what was that you were saying about my ordering Ailanthus' and his cronies up here? I did no such thing, so if that's what you've been told, then Ailanthus and his cronies are probably attempting their escape as you stand here sticking your dick in your mouth making a jack-ass out of yourself."

Denebola, hit by those two statements at once, was completely taken aback. His eyes widened. Lupus had just more or less told him that he knew of the escape plan and was doing nothing to stop it because he was going to blame Denebola for it anyway and ruin what was left of his reputation. And if that wasn't enough, Denebola had just been duped into leaving a majority of Ailanthus' group in a non-secured area with someone who was pretending to be an administrator.

Dwad-Mehstiv.

He was afraid that one of them had made its way into the colony and now he knew for certain. He had tried to warn Lupus earlier, but the man had completely disregarded his ascertain and now he knew why. Denebola was certain that Lupus had known of the presence of Dwad-Mehstiv in the colony all along. Its presence was obviously a part of the escape plan. And now he was here, listening to this demented fool babble on about nonsense instead of breaking up the escape attempt. He couldn't have been set-up better if he had written it himself. He'd been blinded by the bulk and flab of Lupus and not seen the cunning

mind still throbbing underneath in all its manipulative slyness. He had been caught in a net he helped make and now it was almost too late to extricate himself without leaving behind part of his soul.

"If you never gave the order to have the prisoners brought to you, then I must leave now," Denebola stated with clenched fury, the smell of the liquor on his clothes pungent, intoxicating. The lingering smell of the blood and fear of the girl was sitting heavy on his chest. He should have taken that drink.

"Leave?" Lupus said in mock surprise and derisive elegance. "But we're having such a good time." He paused a moment, then waved his hand distractedly as his voice took on the dismissive tone of dealing with a clear inferior. "Get out, you moron and go break-up the great Penal Colony Escape Plan." He laughed a broken snort of pure animosity. "If you can, that is."

Denebola left the office quickly, determined not to let Ailanthus get passed him this time.

Lupus' voice followed him out of the door like a last, parting wave of vaporous lust. "And send that girl back in here. I'm not even close to being done with her!"

Denebola didn't even bother to look to see if she was still out here. She'd have been very foolish to stay.

*It is better to receive a wound from a friend,
than a kiss from an enemy.*

Druzsni Maxim

Ailanthus stood looking at the pathetic shell of Crocus sitting in the torture chair, still strapped in, his wounds open, sore, bleeding, the burn marks on his inner thighs and genitalia like blackened marks of forbearance; permanent souvenirs of his time with Denebola. His breathing was labored, his head hanging down in total abandon, blood dripping from his battered face and congealing on the floor in a floral pattern of ochre gore. The bitter, stinging rancidity of fear and sweat filled Ailanthus' nostrils like a black vapor.

Normally he'd feel great empathy for Crocus, would feel his pain as much as Crocus was feeling it. But he felt nothing. The blankness that had formed over him, that had enveloped him in its sweet embrace like a warm, winter blanket, held him tightly in its unrelenting grasp. He could feel nothing through its thick membranous covering, the death -- the murder of Antlia; one might as well call it as it was -- like a weight about his neck bearing him down into a mindless abyss. He had killed before and would kill again. But this, this was not just a killing, a necessary event in the greater scheme of life in the colony and the escape plan. With Antlia's death came the death of part of Ailanthus. He had vowed to himself to protect all those he and Tethys had taken within their defensive shields, vowed to watch over them and not let any harm befall them. But that no longer held any validity for him. That was now no more than a saying scribbled on the walls of an insane asylum, like so much Drek drivel.

But there was more; for in the back of his mind, crawling out from under the sub-conscious tepid morass of his life, came the unheeded thought that the death of Antlia had a more sinister motive, a motive that went back to the first humans to ever stumble about the plains in their ignorance. Had he killed Antlia not for his insane behavior and inability to be trusted but rather to gain his woman? Did this have to do with Xylella? Did Ailanthus somehow want her so badly that he was willing to kill to get her, to remove the one rival in his path to her conquest? Had he truly become that immoral? Had this place of lubricity eaten away at his moral structure to such an extent that he would even

consider killing a friend to gain a female? It was a thought pounding for attention inside his head, demanding that he acknowledge his own depravity and admit that he was as bad if not worse than Denebola.

What other friend would he turn on next? Thaliana for her jealousy of Christl? Christl just because? Tethys? It was driving him crazy and he could do nothing about it, could not let any of it out of his mind for the fact that all his emotional receptors had been nullified. He had no outlet and he certainly couldn't just tell anyone that he thought he had killed Antlia because he wanted his woman. That wouldn't go over well with the others. And he wasn't even sure he wanted Xylella, wasn't sure if he lusted after her in such a way. How could he admit what he had done to those who would not understand if he didn't even understand it himself?

He would have to do what he always did.

Just keep it inside, absorb the pain and the grief like a sponge and let it slowly eviscerate him from the inside out like a swarm of larval beetles.

And sitting here, staring at Crocus, smelling his death coming off the still living corpse like fetid streamers of gothic decrepitude was not the best for Ailanthus in his state. He hoped that Denebola made his way back to the cell quickly. He didn't know how much more he could take of his own moral inferiority.

Crocus stirred, a low moan escaping his lips like a banshee. He rolled his head as if it wasn't quite attached, then looked up at the interrogation droid. He started to sob, uncontrollably, his whole body shuddering in spasms of fear. "No more," he breathed out in barely perceptible whispers, the words echoing in the cell as if they had a life of their own, as if spoken from a deep, ageless well of lost souls. "Please, by the Hand of the Creator, no more."

It ripped into Ailanthus like a serrated knife, sliding between his ribs and lacerating his heart. Each word impacted him with punctuated reproach for his past deeds.

No more.

He stood and made his way over to the broken man, kneeling beside him and taking his hand. He could feel the urge in Crocus to retract, a barely felt tingle of electrical nerve impulses that seemed half-hearted in the attempt. "The droid won't hurt you, Crocus. It's over. We just have to wait for a few more minutes and we'll have you out of here. I promise."

Just like you promised Antlia that you wouldn't kill him, right?

Maybe the Imperium had it right all along and he did deserve to be imprisoned here.

Crocus didn't seem to register anything Ailanthus said, the words flowing over him like a fine mist, leaving nothing but a thinly contrived veneer of perceptibility. "No. I'm not telling you anything, because I

don't know anything. You can't trick me by using his voice. I don't..." His voice trailed off into a wracking series of sobs and coughs shaking his body till Ailanthus was certain that the soul would slide out onto the floor like disused soap water. He patted the man on the shoulder in what sympathy he could muster through the wall of his own emotions and moved back toward the door, listening, waiting, wanting Denebola to appear and end this never-ending nightmare. Even his voices, the voices he had begun to rely on, had failed him. Either that or they also didn't approve of his recent actions and had left him, abandoned him to his own much-deserved fate. He could easily understand if they had. He would abandon himself if he could.

And then he heard voices.

Denebola's to be specific; mad, arguing, demanding. The sounds were muffled, muted by the heavy door -- which told him how loudly Crocus had been screaming earlier to have been heard so far away -- but he could still make out the general slant of the conversation. Denebola was questioning Dwad, now shape-shifted as the administrator. Ailanthus could hear the guard droids buzzing, their weapon systems arming, the whine of their actuators inducing fear in all prisoners.

Get him to come to the door, he thought to himself as he stood ready to proceed with the plan. He was not at all certain if the device to disable the droids would work through the heavy door. He didn't want to have to find out.

Denebola was now questioning the identity of Dwad, demanding some form of identification, which Dwad certainly didn't have regardless how consummate an actor he was. Denebola was becoming furious and the guard droids were becoming agitated, never a good combination for those nearby.

Then he heard the magic words.

Denebola finally figured out that Crocus was no longer screaming.

The door opened.

Ailanthus activated the device. The guard droids buzzed once in annoyance, then in confusion, then finally settled to the deck like the others had. Denebola had one foot in the door when he noticed the change in the air, perhaps even felt the loss of his protection. Ailanthus made ready for the strike at the man's throat when Denebola was grabbed roughly from behind by his hair and dragged out of the doorway. There was a moment of panic, the brief sounds of struggle and then the all too familiar sound of Tethys' fist pounding someone in the face.

Denebola, however, was not one to just give up that easily and although he was most likely firmly in the grasp of the bigger man, his voice was not silenced and words were pouring out with a smoothness that was lethal.

Anolis and Thaliana came into the cell.

Ailanthus looked out to see if all was okay, the sight of the droids laying inert on the deck humorous on some level that he found odd.

Anolis rushed to Crocus' side and began the process of freeing him.

Thaliana stood by the door with crossed arms, not at all convinced that what they were doing would work, that it would help in the least in their escape. There was a time and place to torture humans and this was not it. She would rather they just kill the man out-right rather than fool around with revenge. Revenge was certainly good -- a Druzni specialty to be sure -- but it was best attended to with a cold heart and not the heat of passion. Coldness made the reverence of the revenge that much sweeter.

Dwad-Mehstiv stayed outside, watching, waiting. It didn't trust humans nor their nefarious schemes and plans. It was certain that there were at least ten items the humans had over-looked that would come back to haunt them at any moment. The machines laying on the ground looking somehow lost, for anyone to come along and find who happened to wander by one of them. It was not an auspicious start.

Ailanthus moved over to help Anolis and they worked quickly yet carefully to remove Crocus from the chair. Anolis held Crocus up, his legs working as well as his mind at the present, like rubberized Jell-O.

Then Denebola was roughly thrown into the chair and strapped down. The man was still groggy from the fist to his head, but his mind was beginning to clear and as he looked about him realization dawned with a clear sheen of panic-stricken sweat on his face. But he wasn't about to let Ailanthus see his fear, unaware that it was already starkly displayed down the inner leg of his pants and the whiteness of his face under the dulling crimson of his own blood. "You'll never get away with it, Ailanthus. The Prime Warden knows all about your little plan." He had trouble getting the words out passed his swollen and thick tongue, the bitter taste of blood in his mouth familiar from his younger days.

Crocus looked up from tending his brother at the words spoken by Denebola. "Ailanthus? If he knows..."

"If he knew, he would've done something already," Ailanthus answered back calmly, his eyes fastened on Denebola's as he cinched down on the arm straps much tighter than necessary. He received no satisfaction from the grunt of pain escaping Denebola's lips. "He's just trying to save his own life by trying to make us nervous." He could see the fear begin to creep into the corners of Denebola's eyes and that gave him no satisfaction either. It was like he was tying up the pupen beast or putting out the trash.

"You think so, do you?!" Denebola shot back, his head beginning to clear more and his tongue becoming sharper. "Lupus has been protecting you two since you first got here, did you know that? Someone's been *paying him* to keep you two alive. Do you really think

that he'll let that cash source dry by your escaping?! He's a greedy, fat ass-hole and not about to let his free money just disappear like that, Ailanthus! But I know all the information, I can help you bring him down!"

Ailanthus tried to ignore him, but the man was actually beginning to make sense and it was bothering. However, it bothered him even more that he felt nothing at the notion of leaving this man, this fellow human to the inhuman devices of the interrogation droid. What had he been reduced to? Was this what his time here had produced?

"Just kill him and get it over with," Thaliana commented dryly. "I grow tired of his running mouth with all its Kroor-shit."

"Not yet," Ailanthus said as he re-checked all the straps to make certain that the man would not escape without aid. "Not yet." He looked up at Thaliana and saw the disapproval in her eyes, in the curl of her lip. "Ask Dwad-Mehstiv to come in here looking like Denebola."

She arched an eyebrow and had one of those rare Druzsni moments when she actually saw ahead more than a few minutes. "I don't think that the interrogation droid will do as you ask to this Denebola if another Denebola orders it. They're a little more intelligent than that."

Ailanthus frowned as he rumbled that statement around in his mind, then finally understood. She had a point. He looked around and found Crocus' clothes thrown hap-hazardly in the corner. Anolis, more concerned about his brother's wounds than his nudity, had yet to touch them. Ailanthus walked over and pulled the shirt out. It stank with the sweat of fear Crocus had so copiously exuded. He walked back to Denebola. "Although I would much rather see your face during this, I don't have much choice. Pity, really." Ailanthus couldn't believe that those words had come from his mouth. He quickly pulled the shirt over Denebola's head as the man's astonished eyes disappeared under the fabric. Each intake of breath pulled the cloth in a sucking motion to his mouth. Until then, Ailanthus had no idea that the man was breathing so hard. He appeared as scared as Ailanthus was emotionless.

"You won't get away with this," Denebola forced out between his panting, the confidence in his voice faltering. "This isn't going to work.... You won't be able to do this. *I know you too well, Ailanthus! YOU AREN'T A KILLER!!*"

Tethys erupted with a close-fisted shot across Denebola's jaw that shut him up with bone-jarring force. "Save your breath, z-cav. You'll need it."

Thaliana didn't seem at all satisfied with the solution Ailanthus had found, but went outside the cell and retrieved Dwad-Mehstiv in the form of Denebola. It wasn't her place to make suggestions about torturing or killing humans. Both options were certainly fine with her, it was just that she preferred one over the other and what Ailanthus was doing she considered a waste of time.

Dwad came inside, took one long look at the scene, then turned its head to look at Ailanthus with a frown. "This I will not do," it said simply.

Tethys crossed the cell in two strides and grabbed Dwad-Mehstiv by the shirt-front, expecting to intimidate the creature into doing as they wished.

Instead, Dwad-Mehstiv shifted into the likeness of a H'chalk and easily peeled off Tethys' grip. "You obviously mistake me for one of your own kind, human, whom you can threaten with immunity." It released Tethys, then returned to the form of Denebola.

Tethys stepped back from Dwad-Mehstiv looking at it with renewed distrust. Anything that could change its shape that suddenly and easily certainly couldn't be trusted.

The interrogation droid hovered placidly in the corner, unaware of anything occurring around it. It was here for interrogation and torture and not human interactions. It could care less what the carbon-based units did.

Denebola spoke and one could hear the blood in his mouth gurgling around, his voice muffled by the shirt. "Is that Dwad-Mehstiv? Have you sunk so low Ailanthus that you need help from one of *those*? No one will ever give you shelter, Ailanthus, once it becomes common knowledge that you work with *Dwad-Mehstiv*. You aren't even worth torturing. You're a betrayal to all that is human. YOU DISGUST ME!"

Had Ailanthus been able to feel anything at the moment, had the blankness that so completely covered his mind not been so intense, he might have been impressed with Denebola's temerity and agreed with his point. Harboring or even befriending Dwad-Mehstiv was not the best way to influence friends and gain popularity. But as it was, Ailanthus felt nothing but the slightest tickle of loathing, a loathing for himself for what he was about to do, for what he had done already. It was as if a curtain were closing over this part of his life and would never rise again. He hoped that it would get better once they escaped.

He didn't bother to answer Denebola, but rather turned to address Dwad-Mehstiv. "Order the interrogation droid to begin on Denebola." It was said with just the thinnest veil of a threat.

"After what you believe Dwad-Mehstiv did to your species, why is it that you are so ready to torture your own kind so easily?" it asked in all sincerity. "How can you justify such as this? Are you truly such a vicious and uncivilized species?"

Ailanthus didn't make the same mistake Tethys made by threatening physical force. That was obviously not the way to approach Dwad-Mehstiv. Memories flooded him again, the voices from his past -- or were they his voice from the past? -- spilling out a wealth of knowledge concerning Dwad-Mehstiv, the most poignant of which were those from his memories of Morgase himself. Unfortunately, these memories seemed patchy, sketchy at best, a quilt-work of faces, ideas, concepts

bringing to him a notion of Dwad-Mehstiv that was covered by a fine mist of congealed time. Hatred permeated the memories; hatred and a slow-simmering sense of revenge. The thoughts of killing Dwad-Mehstiv outright filtered back to the front again, demanding, requiring that Ailanthus avenge the outrages of the past. But there was nothing useful in the information, nothing to help him figure out how to get Dwad-Mehstiv to cooperate.

They had always regarded humans as animals, lower beasts on the evolutionary track that had accidentally been able to gain the upper-hand. Dwad-Mehstiv saw nothing but uncivilized barbarity in humans, a coarseness in all they did that translated itself to the way they treated each other. It had been one of the reasons that Dwad-Mehstiv had taken it upon themselves to save humans from their own aggression and ruthlessness and teach them a more evolved sense of worth.

It hadn't worked out the way they had intended.

"You don't know what we've been through. You don't know enough about the situation here to understand nor to offer an opinion." Ailanthus had no problem keeping his emotions in check, his anger controlled. The blankness of his mind was a perfect shield. "If you don't do as I ask, you won't be going anywhere with us. You said yourself that you need us to help you get off this rock. Do this, or we all stay here. All of us."

Although Tethys knew -- or at least thought he knew -- that Ailanthus was bluffing, he still reacted harshly, his mouth turning down into a frown of mythical proportion. Staying here was no longer an option. Not after what they had already done to Denebola.

Thaliana shook her head at the attempt. Humans always expected everyone to just follow along with their plans as if they were flawless. They had no idea that most species laughed at them behind their backs. Or at least they did until the Imperium Navy showed up. Then the laughing usually stopped. Funny how that happened.

Anolis was far too busy attending to Crocus to hear anything.

"You would do that," Dwad-Mehstiv said with a slight nodding of its head like a rocking horse. "You truly hate this man that much."

"I do," Ailanthus responded blankly.

Dwad-Mehstiv considered a moment, looking at the man seated in the chair, the shirt over his head sucking in and blowing out with each labored breath at a much quicker pace, the smell arising from him almost toxic in its pungency. This was certainly a human undertaking. It had that fetid, bestial scent of duplicity. "You are, then, well suited for the role for which you have been chosen." He turned to look back at Ailanthus. "I will do this, but this is the last time that I am willing to aid in the killing or torture of another. It is not our way."

Before he could even tell the interrogation droid what to do, Tethys blasted out a sermon with a spittle of words. "Not your way?! What the

hell are you talking about *not your way*? Dwad-Mehstiv is known throughout the galaxy as the most vicious, merciless species to ever curse the void! You tortured and tormented humanity for over *one thousand years* in your so called misguided attempt to pacific us and you stand here and have the balls to say that it's not your way?!" Sweat was dripping off of him in the heat of the cell like lost beads of belief. "How dare you judge us with your hypocrisy!"

"Shut-up Tethys," Ailanthus forced out. "It's already agreed to do this. Don't piss it off."

Dwad-Mehstiv seemed completely non-pulsed by the darts thrown its way. It passed over him with complete disregard, though there was something that the human said that struck Dwad-Mehstiv as odd. "That the insignificant species that happen to infest this galaxy at this point in time believe us to be vicious and merciless is of little consequence to us. Your opinions do not matter to us." It now turned to look at Tethys. "And you are wrong in your assumptions that we tortured your species in any way."

"How can you say that?!" Tethys shot back, seemingly ignoring Ailanthus' suggestion, ready once again to attack Dwad-Mehstiv regardless of whether it would work or not. "I've the memories to prove it, to prove that you destroyed humanity for some twisted purpose that not even you fully understood at the time! I KNOW WHAT I'VE SEEN!!" The contradiction in that statement made no difference to Tethys at the moment, nor the fact that he had just admitted to all that he was having the same memory relapse as Ailanthus was. The Dark Ages of Human Bondage took place well over six thousand years ago and for Tethys to say that he remembered it was an illogical if not absurd statement.

But Ailanthus understood perfectly.

"You're babbling, Tethys," Thaliana stated with down-turned mouth, all this talk of whether or not to kill Denebola slowly or quickly so much wasted time to her.

Dwad-Mehstiv smiled and it again nodded its head. "Memories of past lives. You two make a good pair. I'm glad to see that they were correct in at least something." It turned toward the interrogation droid and spoke, ordering it begin work on Denebola, slowly, increasing every hour until it was ordered to stop. It was done with such practiced ease that it made the others a little nervous. Then Dwad turned to look again at Ailanthus before it walked out of the cell. "I just needed to make sure that you truly wanted this. I did not want to be blamed for this later. I know how you humans are."

The interrogation droid moved over toward Denebola and began with no preamble. They all stood around watching at first, waiting for the first sign of the agony that would soon be all Denebola knew. None of them stopped to consider the words Dwad had used, nor their implications,

far too fascinated and enthralled by the way the little droid began to work on the man they had all learned to hate.

Then Ailanthus walked out, helping the incapacitated Crocus. He had seen enough.

Tethys spit on Denebola again. "I hope it lasts for cycles, ass-hole."

Thaliana was the last to leave the room, the low moan Denebola was now emitting as the little droid happily plied its trade, somehow comforting to her. She leaned over so that she could whisper into his ear, her voice smooth and seductive, a last vestige of hope for the man. "I wish I could stay to hear the sweet sound of your screams, but a life away from this hell-hole calls me, my dear human. But perhaps this will allow you to remember me during your last few cycles of life, for I'm certain that you're a strong enough man to endure this for a long time." She reached down his pants front and grabbed his penis, then yanked as hard as she could. His horrific screams filled the cell like a solid block of pain. She smiled, then dropped the blood-soaked organ on the floor, wiping her hands on his shirt front. "And I hope you rot slowly from the inside like you deserve."

His answer was a soul-tormenting squeal of pain as the little droid cauterized the wound caused by the removal of the human's sexual organ, then continued with its own program.

She smirked. Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after-all.

She closed the door.

And smiled again.

Sometimes claiming credit for an act that one didn't do can prove just as beneficial to your business. Always remember: take advantage whenever it is possible, however it is possible. This is the secret to success.

Excerpt from:
Politics of Business
Cos van der Rijj
600 P.Y.I.

**City of Sirciv Eav on Job's rest
Current Seat of The Church of the Blessed Prophets**

The Dei Glorium frowned.

It wasn't just any frown, but a full face-length scowl accentuating her drawn, thin features like a sheet of see-through parchment. She stood at her window, the monsoonal summer storm whipping at the glass in lashing gushes of saturated fury. The storm had set in quickly, the black boiling of the clouds bloating out the fiery rays of the sun within a half-hour, the darkness now accompanying the driving rain as black as her foul mood.

That those who had been killed on Laye III in the senseless act of terrorism -- such acts were actually never senseless, someone somewhere having a perfectly logical reason for the action -- were for the most part non-Church members was of some comfort. To lose that many believers would have been a disaster. Trying to explain such a wonton act of destruction against members of The Church of the Blessed Prophets would be difficult, if not impossible, the always popular *they were all sinners* line not holding as much clout as it used to. The Creator was not supposed to act in this way, although She had been known to punish those who didn't hold to Her values. She was a bit of a capricious bitch in that way. All love and goodness until you crossed Her and then *bam!* A plague upon your whole damn planet.

But the destruction was bad enough for the repercussions that would eventually flow down like the rain dribbling off the window and falling into the squalid mud below. Of course, the worst problem at the moment was trying to explain to the Imperium that The Church of the

Blessed Prophets had no part in the destruction. The last thing she needed right now was a war with the Imperium. She wasn't ready for that just yet. Although she could certainly organize hundreds of billions of loyal followers to fight for the survival of The Church of the Blessed Prophets, floating human bodies in the way of Imperium war cruisers didn't really have the positive effect that most non-military folks thought it did.

And then there was the response of the Greater House Aldebaren. That they felt themselves separate from the Imperium, in rebellion so to speak, was certainly a plus. She could not see the Imperium running to defend the likes of a rebellious House. However, if the Greater House Aldebaren decided to defend its honor with a military engagement, then The Church of the Blessed Prophets might have to move to support the Church Prime House St. Paul sooner than it wanted, seeing that the Church Prime House St. Paul was the Seat of The Church of the Blessed Prophets. And in supporting the Church Prime House St. Paul, The Church of the Blessed Prophets would be, in essence, condoning the attack, which was exactly opposite her intended purpose. That could cause a problem. A military contest with a House, especially one that was rebelling against the Imperium, was not part of the plan at this time either. It would move the time-table up considerably and she wasn't yet ready for such a move. If at all possible, it was Houses like Aldebaren that she wanted to cultivate, to bring into the fold of The Church of the Blessed Prophets and use against the Imperium, not engage militarily.

It was a bad omen all around.

"You do realize that the evidence is pointing directly at the Church Prime House St. Paul," Coronalis finally said as he looked up from the read-outs on his portable display, the investigation notes from the Imperium smuggled to him by one of his many inside contacts. "Whoever did this, did a good job of indicting the Church Prime House St. Paul. A very good job. I'm impressed even. They had the newest security codes, from that day actually." Coronalis stood several paces away from the Dei Glorium.

He no longer sat in her presence.

Ever since she had opened her sensor banks to him and revealed her plans concerning the destruction of the Lesser House St. Peter and the reacquisition of the Imperium, he no longer felt comfortable around her. She was far more dangerous than he had ever believed and he knew that he now stood on a razor-thin edge. Any wrong move on his part and he was certain that she would crush him. There was more power under that frail looking body than even a supernova held upon detonation. The Creator had picked this one well to serve His ends, if that was what she truly was doing. He was beginning to have his doubts.

He figured that was never a good sign.

The Dei Glorium, who had been staring blankly into the storm, blinked at the High Confessio's words. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she turned ever so slowly toward him, the words forming in her mouth drawling out purposefully yet quietly. "We know that the Church Prime House St. Paul did not do this, correct?"

He looked up at her, her eyes like tiny mini black holes, sucking in all they surveyed and devouring it. "That's true."

Her eyes lost their focus as she stared passed him for a moment, then turned back toward the storm, a particularly strong gust of wind causing the rain to pelt the glass like tiny rocks. A flash of lightning stabbed across the sky like the tentacles of a giant squid, illuminating the city below in garish hues of bluish-white. "Then there's but one other that could have access to those codes"

"You suspect a spy?" he asked, not understanding to whom she was referring. As far as he knew, those codes were a closely guarded secret, only a few specialists even knowing of their existence, much less the day to day changes occurring. He didn't even know the daily code changes. He could find out if he really wanted to know, but he was not directly in the line of those in the know. The ship's computers knew, but breaking into them was about as difficult as breaking into the Dei Glorium's pleasure box. It wasn't about to happen any time soon. And anyway, he didn't have a need to know on a daily basis. What did he care? He had access to the most important person in The Church of the Blessed Prophets, perhaps even the galaxy. What were codes to him?

She laughed, a short chortle of derision at his ignorance. It was amazing to her how much he really didn't know. "That's a stupid remark, Coronalis. The codes are changed daily, from here. If that day's code was used, then how did a spy manage to get access to it the two days prior, when the vessel first began its trip toward Laye III? Think about it." Another flash of lightning broke the dark sky apart, the thick bolt flashing to the ground like the retribution of the Creator Itself, vaporizing some sinner where he stood. "Think about it, Coronalis. There are only three main code discs in existence. The master is here. The Church Prime House St. Paul has one. Do you know who might have the other?"

Coronalis noticed that the Dei Glorium was becoming more irritating with each passing day, more brusque and severe with each passing week. But he understood where she was going now. The only other House that would have access to the other book would be a House that had a strong connection to The Church. And there was only one of those left. "The Lesser House St. Peter," he said quietly as he nodded his head, the pieces now falling into place.

She clasped her hands lightly behind her back, but he could see the tension in her thin, bone-protruding shoulders. "The Lesser House St. Peter. I gave it to that useless Cor Caroli myself."

Coronalis looked back at the display screen. Yes, it all made sense now. "He's trying to frame the Church Prime House St. Paul. But why?"

She turned to look at him with those small amber eyes burning into him like the pinchers he used for withdrawing a confession from a recalcitrant supplicant. "Why? That's simple. Cor Caroli appears to know that we plan on backing the Church Prime House St. Paul instead and leaving him to burn in re-entry. *This* is his subtle way of telling us that he knows and isn't going to take it laying down." She ran her tongue along her upper teeth, then took a deep breath as she looked away again. "It's obvious that I under-estimated the fat little fart."

"Or perhaps his wife," Coronalis offered, knowing of the little vixen the fat man had married. She was sharp, much sharper than anyone gave her credit. Whoever thought that the spouse of a lord as being intelligent? It was considered an oxymoron.

Her eyes snapped back to him and narrowed again. "Yes. Yes. *Perhaps.*" It was said with such brutal coldness that Coronalis could only think of a cat ready to pounce on its prey. "Cebrenia is her name, I do believe. *Cebrenia.*" It was said with a glare of what might have been jealousy. She frowned again, another close stab of lightning illuminating her white cloak and making it appear luminescent for a moment, then throwing her back into the gloom that was the day. The thunderous peal vibrated the window as well as a few small items on her desk, rattling them as if the Creator were reaching into the Dei Glorium's own sanctum and saying, *who are you compared to me?* "How are we proceeding with the other plan?" She inquired quietly, almost listlessly.

Coronalis put the display pad down on the desk, finished with his perusal of the data concerning the destruction of Laye III, and licked his lips furtively. "The proper people in the media industry have been already contacted by our operatives in the Lesser House St. Peter. An announcement is expected within the next few days, depending on how Cor Caroli reacts to the data." He paused, wanting to say more but not daring.

"*What*, Coronalis? Speak your mind," she said with far too much iniquity dripping from her tongue.

He took a deep breath, then plunged in. "If Cor Caroli is truly behind this newest event, then it's possible that he may see through this deception."

She turned away from him again and toward the window, where a slice of lightning illuminated the vague outline of a tornado ravaging the city, its tattered black clouds spinning around in a destructive dance of natural rapture. Odd that the weather control system had not spotted

that anomaly and taken steps to prevent its formation. But that wasn't her concern.

"No," was all she said in response.

He waited for more to follow and was rewarded several minutes later with the rest of her response. He was far too used to these conversations to have interrupted before she was done. "Cor Caroli will jump at the opportunity to prove The Church of the Blessed Prophets wrong. Now that I think about it, this atrocity actually could not have come at a better time. No, he will see this as what it is: a chance to strike back at me. And he will take it. We have but to be patient."

"Yes, Dei Glorium," he answered automatically. But his mind was working fast now. If his own plan were to work, he would have to time it just right. And he would have to be careful. If the Dei Glorium's far-reaching sensor-net ever detected what he intended, his life would end. It would be neither quick nor merciful. "And what of a reaction from The Church of the Blessed Prophets to the destruction of Laye III?" he asked tractably.

It was several minutes again before she answered, the increase in both the intensity of the lightning and its closeness like a sign from above. One just needed to make the proper interpretation. All religion was simply interpretation. "I'll release a statement to the effect that The Church of the Blessed Prophets abhors this senseless act of destruction and I'll make a public denunciation of the Church Prime House St. Paul of the Redeemed Spirit."

"Will Lord Cardinal Nerodia understand this?"

"The Lord Cardinal will do as I tell him to do," she said with anger. She had already spoken to the man about his recent foolish attempt to gain support for his bid for the throne before The Church of the Blessed Prophets even backed him. That could have been disastrous; might still be.

She smiled and had Coronalis seen the wicked grin encompassing her whole face, he would have fled the room. "If Cor Caroli can show this much initiative and fight, then perhaps we're about to back the wrong House."

Coronalis rubbed his mouth with his hand, the dryness suddenly filling him ominous.

* * *

Planet of Elysian's Promise Seat of the Imperium

"They expect you to make a statement, Sir," Commander Amalthea stated tacitly, standing at ease before the desk of the Lord Marshall Bhagavan.

He looked up at her, his frown deepening until the wrinkles on his face formed a cavalcade of running lines all converging on his mouth. "I don't make statements. You know that."

"This isn't just a simple incursion by Drek raiders or a small skirmish on the Druzsni border, Sir. There haven't been this many people killed at one time since ...since..." She faltered as she tried to figure out when the last time such a massive loss of life had occurred. "I don't think that anything like this has happened since the Wars of the Imperium Succession over a thousand years ago."

He leaned back in his chair, the remembrances of that conflict coming to him in a flood of images from the memory enhancements stored within his mind from all the former Lord Marshall Bhagavans before him. "Yes, I remember that disaster well. The Battle of Vitirna was vicious. I don't remember ever making a statement then either." He looked up at her, a tiny smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

She frowned.

She hated it when he did that, drawing on those memories from centuries ago like they were his own. It was spooky. She had been offered the same with her own family's memories and had vehemently denied it. She had enough to do with her own memories without the interference of generations of others poking their noses in where they didn't belong. "But this is different. That was during a war, when it was assumed that people would die. We aren't in a war at the moment and the death of that many people deserves some sort of explanation from the head of the Imperium. And whether you want to admit it or not, *your* the head of the Imperium for the moment, Sir."

He hated it when she used logic against him. It was so difficult to refute. He sighed, opened his mouth to speak, then closing it with a snap as he eyed her a moment longer, then looked back at the report on his display regarding the destruction of Laye III. This was certainly a bad one. She was right about that. It wasn't every day, hell, it wasn't every century that an entire planet was ravaged like that in a surprise attack. Someone somewhere had a vendetta to grind, that was certain. The last time humans had used a Thumbo Worm against humans was well over a thousand years ago. There were treaty stipulations in place to prevent just such an occurrence, punishments in place that would strip the offending House of all that it owned, kill the Nobles in a public execution that would be brutal beyond compare. Who would be foolish enough to risk all that?

She stood there looking down at him, aware of the pressures the man was under on a day-to-day basis. "You need to make a statement of some sort, Sir." Her voice was almost pleading.

"Why?"

"Because when that many people die like that, the rest of us want to know why and whether it will happen again and what the Imperium is

going to do to make sure it *doesn't* happen again. People want to be comforted." Her voice was smooth and even, that slight brogue making her words flow like a bubbling stream.

He liked that about her.

He didn't like her persistence.

"I can't tell them what happened," he said laconically. "I barely understand it myself. And anyway, the attack was made against the Greater House Aldebaren, which as far as the public is concerned isn't even part of the Imperium. They're in rebellion, remember? Why should we spend our resources to defend them?"

"Then at least say that you're looking into it and will eventually catch those responsible. And if you use the fact that the Greater House Aldebaren is in rebellion and thus not worth paying attention to, then you've validated their rebellion in the eyes of the citizens and I don't think you really want to do that, Sir. There are treaties in place here. There has to be retribution or every one is going to start setting those damnable things off all over the place.... Sir."

He leaned forward and looked directly into her eyes. She certainly was sharp. The thought of promoting her right there and then flashed through his mind. There was precedent for it, memories of others less worthy being elevated to important positions running through his mind like a broken holo-vid recorder. He brushed the thought aside easily. "But that would be lying. I seriously doubt that we'll ever know what really happened, that we'll do much of anything about it, or that we'll ever catch anyone even remotely associated with this." He stared at her a moment longer, those eyes of hers holding such a deep well of beauty. "But you're right about not sending the wrong signal concerning our rebellious Houses. You are right there."

"All those things don't matter," she said emphatically, putting her hands on her hips and placing one foot ahead of the other in that oh-so-typical *I'm right and you're wrong* stance of hers. "They'll believe anything you tell them for the simple fact that *you're* the Lord Marshall Bhagavan."

He looked at her a moment longer, then leaned back again, looking down at his desk. It was then that he hit upon the perfect solution that would not only make her shut-up but also go away. His eyes lit up and he looked up at her again. "You do it."

"Me?"

"Sure, that's the perfect solution. You talk to them as my personal representative. You seem to know exactly what to say to calm the masses."

"But that's not part of my duties, Sir." She had abandoned her casual attitude and stood almost at attention now, her face wide with shock at the suggestion of going before all those media types and talking. She wasn't good at making speeches or talking publicly.

"Then you need to read the very fine print, my dear Commander." He stood and extended his hand out to her. "Thank you so much for volunteering. I'm sure that you'll do great." He gripped her elbow and began directing her toward the door and before she knew it, she was outside with a hardy pat to her firm rear and the door closing behind her.

She cursed softly.

When would she ever learn to guard her tongue?

Rohini sat back down and looked over the data on the destruction of Laye III. It was a mess. Not only was the weapon used a brutal, crude attempt at gaining attention, it was banned. No House was supposed to have such weapons anymore, except for the Prime House Volans. This opened up so many plasma vents that it might take years to close them all. The last thing he needed was for House to start pulling out non-existent Thrumbo Worms and hurling them indiscriminately around the galaxy.

"You do realize that the Church Prime House St. Paul had nothing to do with this, do you not?" Syrtis said from the corner as he stepped out of the hidden door and made his way slowly over to deposit himself in a chair.

"Yes, I figured that one out on my own, which is why I told Amalthea that the Imperium would probably end up doing nothing."

"But you are going to have to do something, Rohini. Just sitting on this will be the perfect opportunity for Lord Ganymede to step in and declare you incompetent." Syrtis picked up one of Rohini's date pads and began to examine it.

Rohini leaned forward as he looked at his Spy Master, the underlying thought that the man had just offered like a nano-phased vibration in the anti-matter core. If one ignored it too long it lead to a breach in the containment field and that was never a good thing. "You aren't implying that Ganymede did this so he could use it as an excuse to grab the throne, are you?"

"Why not? I would not put it passed the bastard to kill that many people. It was not like it was a major production center or anything like that. Just a few facilities of higher learning."

"By the Creator's Hand, you're being serious."

"When am I ever *not* serious, Rohini? Ganymede is making a play for the throne and this is the beginning, mark my words." Syrtis put the data-pad down and looked up at Rohini, the seriousness in his eyes slightly clouded with doubt.

"You don't believe he did it either, do you?" Rohini said with a large intake of breath, narrowing his eyes and considering what Syrtis was trying to tell him.

"No. No I do not. But it does not make much difference now. Whether Ganymede ordered this or not, he will use it to his advantage. That you can believe."

"Then who did this, because it certainly isn't Nerodia's style. He's much more subtle than that."

"This is true," Syrtis said as he stood and paced about the room, then stopped and sat on the edge of Rohini's desk. "At the moment, I do not know. But I will find out."

"As always. But you do have an idea, right?"

"Possibly, but weak. However, I did not really come here for that. What I came here for is to tell you that Ganymede is calling all of the Houses still loyal to the Imperium to a secret meeting, tomorrow. Why, I do not know yet, but I am certain that it has to do with this terrorist act and the throne. As soon as I get a better picture of what he is up to, I will let you know." He stood, re-evaluated Rohini for a moment, then moved toward the hidden door. "And perhaps you should keep in the back of your mind the question of *why* the attack was made on the Greater House Aldebaren, a House in rebellion to the Imperium?" He hesitated at the door a moment. "And you know what?"

Rohini looked up at the man whom he was beginning to rely on far too much. When the leader of the Imperium began to go to his Spy Master for advise, then something was definitely wrong on Elysian Promise. "What?" Rohini asked, though he knew that the question was rhetorical.

"That cute assistant of yours was right. You should speak to the masses. Ganymede will never expect that."

Rohini smirked at Syrtis as he disappeared into the darkness and the door closed behind him. He wished he could just disappear like that.

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