

# CHAPTER 1

Miranda St. Billiard took fifty thousand volts in the face and thought it would be the end of her. The blast sparked over her armored battlesuit and raised every hair on her body. She staggered, threw back a heel to dig into the dusty earth, and forced her stuttering servos to push her into the next burst of energy. Her assailant fired twice more, missing by millimeters, then ducked into the mud brick house from which he had sprung. Miranda raised her particle beam rifle.

"Shooter, hut 127!" she yelled into her comms, not at all sure it worked anymore. She took aim to the right of the door, along the path her assailant had turned. Then she sent three bursts of anti-neutrons through the wall where she thought he might be. Fist-sized holes erupted through the mud brick to the room beyond. "TDA, high cover!"

The gray sphere of her Tactical Data Assistant chirped from its hover above her shoulder and elevated to ten meters. It would scan her six, just so no surprises came calling.

Where, for saints' sake, was the team? Hadn't she seen Perez just two seconds earlier, Perez with that cannon strapped to her arm, that anti-neutron cannon that could take out the whole house without the muss of a door check? Great Lady, this job sucked.

Miranda shrugged her mission pack solidly back onto her armored shoulders, cranked up her servos, then slammed through the perforated wall of the house as if it were paper.

Dust, dirt, and mud brick gravel sprayed ahead of her. A picture frame clattered against her visor, bounced off her armor, and flew into the wreckage. Tables fell over. A plastic chair jumped across the room like a startled bird, almost striking the two wide-eyed, cowering figures against the far wall.

A mother, maybe, and a kid. The kid was a girl, dressed in raggedy homespun, bawling and scared out of her mind. Six years old at the most. The woman held her, shielding her from a monster.

I'm the monster, Miranda thought.

She brought up her rifle and targeted the pair.

Have to do 'em. Miranda gritted her teeth. Have to. The TDA was watching. Command had given her strict marching orders. This was a weapons free environment. Leave no schisoids at your back. If absent a team to secure them, terminate.

It was her job.

The woman wailed in forlorn surrender. The little girl screeched. They knew they were dead. They knew the Army of God had come to exact Community's justice. They had spoken sacrilege against the Lady and would suffer a grisly penance. Gunned down like the steaming male corpse at their feet. Or staked and burned, or just burned. Erased, obliterated, cleansed from God's good people. That was it, that was all there was.

Miranda knew the reality of that moment. She knew both woman and child would die or she would die in their place, and still they would die.

This was the vengeance of God. It wasn't a democracy.

She loosened her fingers on her weapon's grip, then reestablished a determined hold. So what if they were a mother and child, she thought above the screeching and blubbing. So what if they were unarmed, she thought, trying to close her mind to their gushing tears and cowering. So what? What difference did it make? Should they go free, and the TDA report it? Should Miranda, who was stuck in this job, who didn't choose it and didn't much like it, pay the cost of their momentary freedom? Pay just before their lives were taken by another of her comrades? Should Miranda St. Billiard cease to breathe, crucified and maybe impaled, because two probable innocents were stuck in the wrong place at the wrong time, and maybe hadn't chosen that place, and maybe prayed to be somewhere else? What difference did it make if they lived or died except that Miranda might survive if the latter became the case?

Let the TDA record the kill. It might earn her a promotion.

Then she realized, startled, that the TDA wasn't there. She had left it outside, elevated out of sight. It would stay there for seconds, maybe a minute, before its chronometer suggested something was wrong. It wasn't there. Soldiers weren't there.

No one was watching.

"Go," Miranda heard herself saying, then remembered to wink and cut off her commo. "Go," she repeated. "Scram." She gestured emphatically toward the door.

The two just trembled there, screaming.

"Run, damn you!" Miranda burst at them, kicking debris at them. They ran then. They scrambled from her presence like scorched cats, stumbling, falling, picking themselves up in the doorway, and disappearing out of the house.

Miranda stood there, trying to breathe. Every intake of air was an effort and a miracle, each one stolen, each one under the heat of an imagined laser scope marking her back.

No one barked disapproval. No one blew a hole through her back. No one threw her to the deck to disarm and immobilize a traitor.

She'd gotten away—

Two baritone burps behind her. Miranda closed her eyes and groaned. She knew the sound of Perez's cannon.

Miranda stood there. She didn't trust herself to move. She had whipsawed from self-loathing, to ecstasy, to horror, all in a few short seconds. If she moved, she might turn around, crash back through the wrecked house, and shoot Perez dead. She might

shoot dead anyone she met, hoping they'd do her the same humane courtesy.

So, she didn't move. That she might live, she chose to hide once again within herself. She breathed, she straightened, she wrapped herself in the cocoon of ice that had protected her through two decades of harsh Community life. She made herself what she had to be as a Soldier of God for the One True Church. She made herself cold; she made herself untouchable; she made herself the monster.

She winked to switch on her commo.

"—ledge. I say again, this is Bravo 4-2 to FIST! Where you at, LT?"

Miranda turned from the shattered room. She trudged back through the hole in the wall to the dusty path between buildings.

The street showed her a charcoaled monochrome. Behind her stood the shattered house. Across the path another home shuddered in the act of collapse as it gave way to perforation stresses. Rubble littered the dusty lane. Smoke blackened the sky, snatches of gay blue peeking through it. A half dozen battlesuits ranged over the narrow street, two or three clearing doorways, a few on security up the street and down. Perez, short and petite when outside her suit, stood hulking and wide within it. She stood a few meters from Miranda, hovering, apathetic, over two charred corpses. With that huge anti-neutron cannon wrapping her right arm, with the mission pack bulging over her back and the composite ablative plating defending her ti-nanoweave undersuit, she looked like an oversized fiddler crab. She stared at Miranda, her TDA hovering to the right of her bulbous helmet.

"Looks like a couple got past you," she called, her voice thrown loud to penetrate her visor. Her words were thunder over Miranda's reactivated commo.

Miranda tapped her helmet at her ear, then signaled a thumbs up.

"Sorry, lieutenant. We called, but you didn't answer. Thought you was dark."

"I got hit a couple of times. Fried a few circuits, I think. Just now got all my systems rebooted."

"Shiny. Think these two'll reboot soon?" Perez kicked the smallest of the steaming bodies.

"Nah. Looks like a full kernel meltdown." The attempt at humor sickened Miranda, but she kept her face carefully stoical. She looked down at the blackened corpses. Letting them go had made no difference, no difference at all.

"Ha!" Perez's laugh was genuine and hearty. "Kernel meltdown, that's good, LT."

Yeah, real good. Miranda wanted to puke.

"Six, this is 4-2," Perez called on the section net. "I found your wandering FIST, boss. She's a little shook up, but on the hoof, over."

"That's a roger," a tinny voice answered. "We got us a clear from the top. Come on in to the assembly area to check systems and get a charge."

"And your fire support team leader?"

"Put her on a leash and bring her with you."

"Wilco, boss. 4-2 out."

Perez offered Miranda a wicked grin. "That's my LT, LT. I gots my marching orders."

Miranda pointed her weapon at the ground, a signal of mock surrender. "Then I guess I've no choice, Corporal Perez. Take me to your superior."

Perez widened her grin, and with a gesture called in the other battlesuits. "Shoot,

LT, I said he was an officer, not a superior. You want my superior, we gotta die."

"Her grace be served." Miranda's response was immediate and reflexive. After the last few minutes, that scared her.

She turned to march for the assembly area. Her TDA drifted down toward her shoulder, her partner and her guard.



Miranda entered the assembly area twenty minutes later. The place encompassed a bright, hot network of animal pens and barns just outside the mud brick town. Dust from the arid plain wafted in clouds across the complex, clattering against armor and undersuits. Tau Ceti 4, Miranda thought as she scanned the scene. One of the poorer, grittier outposts of Community, so low-rent, they hadn't even named it. A crappy colony orbiting a crappy star, now made crappier by the Army's invasion.

Soldiers ranged over the desolate terrain, some queued up at generators, cables plugged into mission pack receptacles. TDAs bobbed by the dozens above shoulders, the sun unable to coax a glint from their matte gray surfaces. More grunts guarded schisoids at a corral chosen for easy security and its punitively heavy carpet of cow shit. Hundreds of prisoners, Miranda noted. Men, women, and whimpering children. Wounded cried out, ignored by their guards. Miranda tried not to sag her shoulders.

Kim GinnKwan met her at the challenge station on the perimeter. He laid a gauntleted hand on the sentry's shoulder plates to show no sign or countersign was necessary. He waved to Miranda, Perez and the others and slapped Miranda's shoulder when she finally drew within range.

"Heard you got hit," he said, his gray eyes seeking out hers past her visor. His own visor was rolled up into his helmet.

"It was nothing. I'll need a checkout when we boost back to orbit."

"Those toy EM guns ain't nothin' but a tickle. You'd think these people would learn."

They do learn, Miranda thought. They learn desperation.

"We steamed sixteen," Perez said, cradling her cannon in the crook of her free arm. "That includes one the FIST here drilled, and the two that got around her."

GinnKwan furrowed his brow at the news. The man was lanky, with a long face marked by a white scar tracking from his temple to the corner of his mouth. He looked ferocious on his best days; he grew scarier when he heard bad news. "You say the LT bagged a hostile? How did this happen?"

"Don't look at me. I guess she got hungry."

"It just happened," Miranda said. "One second I was mapping target reference points and the next this fella introduced himself."

"It was a good ambush." Perez looked serious for a moment. "They took us all in, boss. If they had any decent weapons, we'd be vapor by now."

GinnKwan nodded, but he didn't look happy. "Yeah. Tactics on these schisoids pan out better than usual. The brass think they got help. Ex-military, maybe. Still," and he turned squarely to Miranda, "FIST is fire support. That's what it spells, y-hear? You bring down artillery when I ask it. Your job ain't tusselin' hand-to-hand."

"I get it, Kim. More than willing to stick to my specialty. But you have to get the

bad guys on board..."

"Um, before you officers start snapping at each other..." Perez waved her free hand for attention. "I'm down to twenty-seven per cent charge."

"Go," GinnKwan said. "Top off. VIP coming down in the next few mikes, so don't jack your jaw too much."

"Sir, yes, sir!" Perez threw him an exaggerated salute.

"Get outta here, you widget."

Perez sauntered off toward one of the generators. Miranda watched her go, wishing she could feel such nonchalance with so much blood on her hands.

She started at a wrap on her visor.

"You home?" GinnKwan frowned down at her. "For pity's sake, Miranda. You daydream more than a poet in love. Is that why you got yourself shot?"

"It was an ambush. Nothing to do about it."

"Yeah. Come on, let's report in. Drop your visor. I'll share chocolate."

They ambled away from the challenge station, moving through the roil of battlesuits without paying the soldiers much mind. Miranda wrinkled her nose when she unlocked and raised her helmet visor. In rushed the heat and stink of the town, a stomach-churning morass of ozone from weapons, of cow shit, sweat and blood. Her face began to bead perspiration. Despite her seals and layers of environmental controls, the rest of her would follow.

"Two more hours on this miserable rock, then we boost to orbit for eighteen in the rack. Sound pretty good to you, FIST?"

"I could use the down time."

"Course, you know what needs doin' first."

"Yes."

"Three hundred and fifty-seven prisoners, last I counted. Intel's written 'em off, says they got no meaningful information." GinnKwan offered her half of a candy bar he had taken from a pouch on his battlesuit's harness. "That's a lot of prisoners. They won't be linin' 'em up at a ditch and shootin' 'em in the back."

"I know my job. Have I ever fagged out on you?"

"Well, I'm just sayin'..."

Eating the candy proved bothersome. Miranda's commo boom kept getting in the way, and her stomach didn't feel like taking in treats.

They intercepted two other battlesuits, officers out of a rival section. Miranda recognized the shorter one's dark, wiry hair and thick, lumpy features. He sported a roguish grin, as if practical jokes would explode from his gear. His companion looked unfamiliar. He stood tall, and his smooth, round face had the dazed, overwhelmed look of a newbie.

"Hey, Genaba." GinnKwan slapped armored knuckles with the shorter officer. "How's life for the worst section leader in the Army of God?"

"Don't know, Brother Kim. Perhaps you'd like to enlighten us on that issue."

The two soldiers laughed and shoved each other. The servo-assisted strikes would have killed an unarmored man. Some of their punches could have shattered reinforced doors.

"Hey, Miranda." Genaba steadied his footing after a particularly violent shove from GinnKwan. "You shouldn't hang out with widgets like him. He'll give you a bad

reputation."

"She's a grunt artilleryman," GinnKwan teased. "How much worse could her reputation get?"

"Hey!" Miranda brought her servos to max and slapped GinnKwan in the chest unit. He staggered, and Genaba laughed.

"Genaba!" Miranda called, and jutted her chin in what she thought was a challenging gesture. "Who's your friend? He doesn't talk much."

"Edo St. Teresa Sidaris," the tall officer said. "Assignment out of AIT."

"That's advanced individual training school, for all you low IQ types." Genaba elbowed Sidaris's mission pack, rocking the man off-balance. "He's my brand new FIST."

"Wow, fresh meat." GinnKwan eyed the officer's battlesuit. Unlike the others, it was free of dirt and scoring marks. "Fresh coat of paint, too."

"I just got here." Sidaris said it like an apology. "Shuttle off of *Procyon*. I missed the battle."

Miranda smacked her knuckles against Sidaris's hand. "Don't mind them; they're incorrigible. It's nice to have another fire support officer on hand, even if he is a newbie."

"I'll try to do my duty," Sidaris said.

The others guffawed at his expense.

"Come on, you slackers," GinnKwan said. "I imagine you're off to Escobar to report out before bunk time?"

"Forget that." Genaba dismissed the prospect with a flip of one gauntlet. "I just want to get back to my rack so's I can mark the calendar. Eighty-four days and a wakeup, peoples."

"You're short, all right." GinnKwan spat at Genaba's feet. "Short on dedication to the Lady."

"And you're a mewling conformist."

"Slopehead."

"Knucklescraper."

They continued across the dust-blown livestock yard. Their TDAs bobbed overhead. Some sort of native bug buzzed in Miranda's face.

"So, where you from, FIST Sidaris?" Miranda asked to distract her thoughts. The closer she drew to the command post and Escobar, the closer she drew to her next great horror.

"Vega Prime," Sidaris answered. "But I haven't been there in seven, eight years."

"May the Reverend Mother preserve us," GinnKwan called. "We got us here a pasty-faced intellectual."

Right, Miranda thought. The St. Teresa family had a reputation for pointless scholarship, as it had blessed Community with a number of famed philosophers. Also, its family base of Vega Prime was home to the Church Academy, where all the sisters in the Community of God were trained and ordained. "Like I said, don't mind him. He bunks on the grunt ship anyhow. You don't even have to look at his mug unless you're on a mission."

"And then it's *my* mug you look at." Genaba hooted, and GinnKwan joined in. Miranda didn't get it. Maybe it was a guy thing. Or infantry.

"What about you?" Sidaris nudged Miranda's arm. "I guess, being colleagues, we should know each other."

"God help us, he moves fast!" GinnKwan couldn't help but heckle.

"Hey, watch it!" Sidaris protested. "It isn't that at all. I was just— It isn't that at all."

He looked flustered. Any other time, Miranda might have found it amusing. Just then she caught sight of the company command post. Captain Escobar stood there at a gouged and dented plastic table, surrounded by his commo man, his executive officer, and the first sergeant. Miranda almost forgot about Sidaris and his hecklers. She took a moment to harden her shell of ice.

Sidaris was grabbing a figurative lifeline. "Uh, I see you're St. Billiard." He pointed to the name tag centered on Miranda's breastplate. "Is that a small family? I don't think I've heard—"

He stopped. The officers halted and stared at him.

"Umm, did I say something..."

Yes, he had, and he knew it. Miranda could see the backpedaling in his eyes. He tried to cover stupidity with ignorance.

GinnKwan cleared his throat. "You don't know your saints, newbie. St. Billiard. That's the patron saint of lost children."

Yes. The patron saint of lost children. The patron of all those raised in the government crèche. The only name given an orphan in Community. Most people hardly thought of such things. Their name was something that came at birth. But that simple order of given name, saintly honorific, and family identity meant everything, whether or not they knew it. It meant family. It meant community. Miranda's truncated name meant neither. She stood out as nothing against a constellation of names. Because of that, because she could claim no family to orbit, Miranda lived as property of the State. There would never be a calendar in her future, a piece of paper on which she could mark her remaining days as a Soldier of God. She could never resign her position. She could not flee her duties. The government owned her.

Her stomach shuddered.

"Hey," GinnKwan said, touching her arm as gently as armor allowed. She felt nothing through her own enclosure, but heard the scrape of his fingers. "Hey, it's all right."

Sidaris, embarrassed, cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, I—"

"Shut-up!" GinnKwan and Genaba shouted.

"I was just saying—"

"It's okay," Miranda interrupted, her voice husky. "No biggie." She pushed past the men and continued across the yard. "Come on, slackers. We have to report to Escobar."



Admiral Assad had his own report to make. His shuttle had set down minutes earlier in a large corral near Escobar's command post, and had just returned to orbit. But the admiral stood in the stirring dust like a fresh lieutenant awaiting his betters. A cathedral ship, he thought again, and the Reverend Mother's, at that! It had appeared in orbit not long ago and had monitored the assault with threatening silence. Cathedral ships were no coincidence. This planet, this backwater dustball, this barely tenable outpost of

Community, somehow rated Church's attention. It wasn't just the budding schism. Those sorts of things were common enough. This dirty amalgam of rickety, mud brick hovels was more important than the military knew.

Assad waited for quite a while. His aides scrambled far behind him, developing the graphical brief of his report, which they sent to his TDA. The admiral waited beneath that hovering sphere, his smart duty uniform wilting in the heat and adhering to his body from sweat. Troopers swarmed the area, but none dared approach Assad's corral. They whispered, perhaps, and perhaps they glanced, but they avoided that center of power.

Finally, the sleek, burnished form of the Reverend Mother's shuttle fell from above like a great, silvery maple leaf. This was not some lumbering taxi but the conveyance of humanity's life-appointed guardian. Such was the Reverend Mother's role, and the regal organic form of her ship reflected that honored status. Assad was one of her more prudent followers; he retained his position at the Reverend Mother's whim, and had seen enough of purges that he feared to disappoint her.

The ship put down in a burst of dust and pebbles and lowered its ramp into the dirt. First to disembark were four inquisitors, those terrible assassins of the Holy Church, who enforced Church will and defended the Lady's faith. All women, the inquisitors. They were uniformly athletic, blank-eyed, hard-mouthed women, with long hair pulled into loose, ladder-like braids. Their ceremonial vestments included light chain mail gathered at each woman's waist beneath a broad leather belt, each belt holding a particle beam pistol, exotic bladed weapons and pouches of unguessed-at death. Except for the brown leather of that belt and the white cruciform struck across each mailed chest, the inquisitors arrayed themselves only in gray. They knew no anger, nor love nor remorse. They were the predator brought to perfection, all in the name of the Lady.

Assad often wondered why Community called them inquisitors. He had never known them to ask any questions.

He watched as they lined up on either side of the ramp, each facing away from the ship. Security, Assad knew, and shivered at the thought. What might they do if threatened, those women? They were cold as statuary, alert as cats. The four of them could kill every soldier within earshot without the bother of concerted thought, despite the armor and weaponry between them and those possible victims. Assad's soldiers, feared throughout Community, were meager stuff compared to those elegant killers.

When all stood in place at the foot of the ramp, another figure exited the ship, a petite woman, short, in somber dress, but her step confident, even cheerful. She descended with two inquisitor escorts, each one towering above her, and a shiny white Administrative Data Assistant hovering high above her shoulder.

The admiral's first impression was of an inexperienced girl, but he recognized the folly of that estimation. Her light step and smiling, youthful face served as bait to trap the unwary. This was an emissary of the Honored Reverend Mother St. Anastasia Gabriel Possenti, the guiding heart and striking fist of Community and Church. This "girl" garnered such great power and hard, knife-edged faith that Assad cringed from her friendly smile.

As the inquisitors wore gray, the emissary covered her person in black. Her ankle-length robes surely boiled her under Tau Ceti's relentless rays, yet she showed no discomfort as she approached. In the beating heat and light of the sun, her black was a void, a trick of the eyes, and disturbing. Assad imagined her vestments woven not of



cloth, but from an impossible fluttering rift in space, a doorway to God. The woman undoubtedly welcomed that reaction. She magnified it with a hood of that same matte black, white trim framing her innocent face.

The face she showed him might have been his daughter's, just of age, or that of any fresh female crewman. It was a face found in recruiting vids, except for the starburst emblem of Community displayed across her forehead. The gold embedded in that tattoo glinted in the harsh sunlight. The rays of that starburst reached far from its center, past the woman's temples and onto the bridge of her nose. For all of Assad's uncouth life, those black robes and that starburst had ruled the many worlds. They had subjugated billions of men, had birthed and murdered governments, had fallen over the last days of opposing faiths as a shroud falls over the dead. Now, that shroud fell on the admiral, who felt naked in sin beneath it. Nonetheless, he stepped forward.

"Sister Immaculate, we are honored by your presence. I wish we could offer a more suitable reception, but the operation is still under way."

The sister widened her smile and reached out a plump hand to touch the admiral's elbow. "That's sweet of you," she said with clear sincerity, "but I'm just a poor servant of God, dear admiral, just like you. I neither require nor deserve such honor." She slipped that same hand into the crook of Assad's arm and marked a measured if bouncing pace toward the dusty command post. The admiral fell in beside her, conscious of the surrounding inquisitors. He felt flustered to hold a Sister Immaculate on his arm. Unsure how to handle such unexpected intimacy, he fell back into his mission.

"We've concentrated the heretics and singled out their leaders. My TDA is transferring the details to your ADA right now. To note, these people showed more initiative than might have been imagined—"

"How are your troops, admiral? The Reverend Mother was concerned to see two souls lost on your battlefield graphics."

"Two serious casualties, sister, and two killed in action. The enemy suffered ninety-three dead, seventy-four wounded. But their tactical sophistication—"

"Does not interest me, or the Reverend Mother. We're concerned most about you and your men. It must be terrible to lose two of your own, to have two wounded. This doesn't happen often, and there are so few of you..."

"Uh, yes, sister. No need to concern yourself. We Community troopers are a hardy bunch. We're just fine." Assad tried not to squirm under the light of her false distress. He knew the woman the emissary served would not blink at sending him to his death, or at causing it herself, if he warranted such attention.

"I'm so glad, admiral. I so admire our Army of God. The Reverend Mother will also be pleased. She's watching you, you know. She's pleased with what she sees."

That scared Assad more than anything she could have said. He didn't want the Reverend Mother watching him. With only a few years to retirement, he wanted to remain quietly unobtrusive.

She flitted an index finger into the air. "Oh! There is one thing..."

Here springs the trap. Assad tried not to cringe. He waited, but no inquisitor blade sliced into his back.

"The Reverend Mother has one concern: where are the instigators? Are there no monks among these people?"

"No, sister. No monks, though we believe they may have been here. We found an

inquisitor, though."

The woman's pace did not falter, but Assad noticed her posture stiffen.

"We found her among the heretics." He would come no closer to interrogating the Reverend Mother's envoy. What brought the Inquisitas to the aid of the enemy? Didn't Community *want* this schism quelled? "I'm sorry, I'm at a loss. What should we do with her?"

"With whom, admiral?" Her smile, her whole manner, had grown brittle.

"With the inquisitor, sister. We have no authority over her. What are your— the Reverend Mother's wishes?"

"Well!" She looked befuddled, as if handed a surprise. "I don't know what to say. Are you sure you found what you think you found? There are no inquisitors here that I know of, at least not beyond my own honor guard."

Liar. No inquisitor so much as sneezed without Church's permission, and they only left the cathedral ship as part of an escort, or as part of a mission. The admiral recognized danger in his question, but to this one he required an answer.

"Sister Immaculate." He tried to wet his lips, but had no spit. "Forgive my rudeness, but I really think—"

"I'm sure you aren't at all rude, admiral, but there is no inquisitor on this planet. You're mistaken, I'm sorry to say. I would know if that were not so. If, however, you'd like to ask Her Holiness directly..."

"No, I'm sure you are correct."

And that was that. The admiral knew when to close his mouth.



Captain Escobar ordered his officers out of the Sister Immaculate's presence. Only a few enlisted men worked nearby. Some guarded prisoners. A few stood sentry on a makeshift dais cobbled together from boards and a dinner table dragged from a house. The captain knelt in his battlesuit, hoping the deference due a ship's chaplain suited one in the envoy's position. He clutched his unit's Bible under one armored arm.

"No, no, that's too much." The sister halted before him. She released her grip on Assad and coaxed Escobar up by his shoulder D-rings.

He tried not to stare at her, or at her escort.

"You're Jose St. Sebastian Escobar," the woman said, and bowed deeply to him.

"We appreciate your service and that of your troopers. You have Community's gratitude."

Escobar looked at his admiral and swallowed hard.

The sister actually tittered. "Oh, I'm sorry. I've embarrassed everyone. I sometimes get— Well, we really do appreciate all that you soldiers do."

"Yes, sister," Escobar said. "Thank-you." Despite fear, despite the necessity of caution in the face of power, he felt a twinge of pride.

"These are the prisoners?" The woman nodded toward the guarded corral.

"Yes, sister," Escobar said. "These schisoids defied Church, taught from heretical texts, and engaged in battle with—"

"Captain, please. Let's not stoop to vulgar language."

"Excuse me, sister?"

"This term schisoid, it's laced with hate. These aren't monsters, but our own

brothers and sisters in the Lady. Why don't we treat them as such?"

"Of course, sister. I beg your forgiveness."

"Quite all right. You're an honorable man, I know." She stood there a moment, expecting something. The instant was long enough, and pointed enough, that Escobar's skin began to crawl.

Finally, she arched an eyebrow at him. "I see you brought your Bible?"

"Oh! Yes, sister." He pulled the book from the crook of his arm and offered it to her. "Very sorry."

"I understand, captain. You're nervous, but you needn't be. I am your servant more than you are mine." She took the book, raised it to her lips, and kissed it. "Now, gentlemen," she said with a sunny smile, "shall we begin our Celebration? Captain Escobar, would you assist?"

"Yes, sister." Escobar bowed his head in one precise, military snap, then turned to position himself centered before the dais, facing it. He realized the honor the Sister Immaculate afforded him. He tried to appear professionally neutral though his chest swelled within its cramped composite armor.

The sister approached the dais and daintily mounted its makeshift steps with the aid of one of the troopers on station. Her Inquisitas guard deployed before her, displacing the troopers to the right and left of the structure. They stood as their counterparts had at the ship, remote and alert, hands clasped behind their backs and their feet a comfortable width apart. Admiral Assad stood ignored in the dirt.

The sister sighed as she stood atop the dais. She embraced the Bible at her chest and looked down at the people about her. She grinned at Escobar, at the scattered troopers, at the admiral. "Well, I guess I'd better start looking official. ADA, public address mode, please."

The ADA elevated to ten or so meters. As it did so, the Sister Immaculate held out the thick black book, opened it to its approximate middle, and released it. The book hovered where she placed it, at a favorable level for reading. Of course it did, Escobar thought. The unit Bible was as blessed a treasure as the battle streamers commemorating his company's victories. He kept it always in good repair.

The sister surveyed her broad congregation, casting her gaze across the array of animal pens and mean, ramshackle houses, taking in the soldiers, administrators and dirty, defeated schisoids— that is, heretics. She straightened, then spread her arms wide, the black of her robes streaming from her wrists like the wings of a great bird.

"Church is everything!" Her voice boomed from the little ball over her shoulder. "Four thousand years ago, our forebears took flight from a dying Earth. They sailed in their great generation ships with only the guidance of Church to sustain them. Without Church, there would be no Community. The human race would be dead, tumbling in space, or a dim reflection of its former glory, wretched survivors living as animals on a few inhospitable worlds. Church brought us through the Dark Age of Wandering. Thanks be to the Lady."

The soldiers responded in standard form. "Her grace to serve!"

The sister dropped her hands, then leafed with pointed regality through the pages of the Bible.

Escobar marveled at the transformation from bubbly, caring, admiring equal to the scourge of God's enemies. The change was unnerving, complete, and seamless.

"Let us pray..."



Kim GinnKwan, as required for all Celebrations, wet the index and second fingers of his left hand and reached into a pouch among many at his waist. He withdrew the gauntleted digits coated in black ash, which he smeared liberally across his forehead and cheeks. All those present of his homeworld did the same. They marked themselves as befit the unworthy. They were exiled from the saved of the faith.

"Great and gracious Lady, mother of God's own son, heed our petition and intercede for these brave men and women who protect your faith from the beast and his devils..." GinnKwan listened from fifty meters away, the sister's black silhouette tiny across the cattle yard. He felt nothing. This Church and government had vilified his people. He was pariah, his family persecuted. If there weren't so many of the Gemma Galganis, they would probably be dead. Instead, they were made examples. GinnKwan stood, his anti-neutron assault rifle cradled in his arms, marked with ashes, with no course of action but to take Community's punishment. He was a citizen, after all, and faithful despite the sisterhood's edict. Hardship was not a stranger to his world.

"A reading from the gospel of Matthew," the sister said through her ADA. "After they went to the Mount of Olives, the lamb of God made his retreat in a place called Gethsemane. 'My soul is aggrieved,' he said to his acolytes. 'Let us pray for deliverance from hard times to come.' And he went a little distance away and prayed, 'Father, I am afraid. Let this cup pass from me, for I cannot bear what will come in Your name.' He thought of escape, but then his Mother appeared to him. She held him to Her breast and soothed him. She said unto him, 'You, as I, serve the Lord. For there is nothing greater in this world or any other than the will and the plan of the Creator God. Go, and see to your duty. For what gain is there in fearing for your flesh when you should surely fear for your spirit instead?'"

That was the point, GinnKwan conceded. Gemma Galgani had failed to serve. The whole family was scourged for the sake of its communal soul. Justice and love were hard things in Community.



"Always, there is Church," the Sister Immaculate said after closing the Bible and handing it to Escobar. She spoke in a clear, steely voice, one that brooked no doubt from the hundred-odd infantry scattered over the dusty ground. "Church is the basis of government. Church builds hostile planets into havens for humankind. Church protects. Church teaches. Yet Church, despite the blessings it heaps upon the Lady's children, is beset by devils."

"Amen," Perez said under her breath. She stood mesmerized by the sister's homily, alerting to every nuance that held a lesson from the Lady. Far from the dais, Perez could hardly see the speaker, but she didn't need to. The lesson, after all, held more power than its teacher. Church was beset by devils. Perez and her team had exorcised sixteen of them. That had to mean points in Heaven.

"Some question the authority of Church in all the myriad endeavors of man. They

speak of freedom, of free will and self-determination. In truth, they speak heresy and promulgate schism. They seek to divide the Lady's family against itself and dilute the faith that makes us all possible. We cannot tolerate such cynical attacks. There is no freedom, no will, no fate but that sought through the Handmaiden of the Lord as she taught the son of man. She served, so we serve. She served without question, so we serve without question. That is our everlasting quest. It is the bane of man that our bodies are mortal yet we treasure them more than our undying souls. It is for our salvation that the Blessed Mother shows us the true path of service so that we might live forever in the home God builds for us. All grace be to the Lady, through whom all souls are saved."

"Her grace be served," Perez called back with all the other troopers.

"In the name of the Father, the Mother, and the son who served, amen."

"Amen," Perez responded. She blinked and glanced about her. The other Joes at the charging station fidgeted, wiped their noses, or started up with soldier jokes, covering the fifteen minutes of solemnity from which they all withdrew. Perez knew that some of them were fakers. She knew full well that some of her brothers and sisters in arms saw prayer as a form rather than faith. They made the right moves and said the right words, but no muscle or bone supported the exterior flesh of their piety. That bothered Perez, but she shrugged the thought away. She would never report her less devoted comrades. Regardless of their lack of belief, they were good soldiers. There wasn't a slacker among them. In a firefight, that mattered more than ecclesiastical merit points. Anyway, they knew enough to pretend and keep quiet. If they didn't tell, neither would she.

Like with Lt. St. Billiard. Maybe those schizoids got around her. Then again, maybe she let them go. It was queer, but the LT was square; Perez would not mention her suspicions on that point.

Of course, it didn't matter what she did or did not report. The Army of God had a talent for self-policing.

On cue, the section net chirped over her commo. "All teams, message from Six," GinnKwann's voice said. "All personnel requiring absolution for actions during the current operation will report to the chaplain shipboard for their act of contrition. Chaplain available post-0830 hours, tomorrow, ship time. The milk and bread at regular chapel hours. Section Six, out."

That was how they caught you, Perez thought, and nodded. Faith officers monitored who sought absolution as well as who did not. They interrogated everyone's TDAs for any unusual comments or actions. They debriefed every soldier, asking not about that soldier's experience, but what she thought of her comrades' actions. The faith officers were thorough, and devious. Their boss, the task force chaplain, knew everything.

Perez had once considered testing for a faith officer slot. The position meant more pay and a private bunk. But those guys were rear area oxygen thieves; they didn't go into combat. Perez was a troop of the line, and a cannoneer at that.

She looked down at the gauge on her wrist. Seventy per cent charge. Five more minutes, at least.



"There we go," the Sister Immaculate said, her tone bright, as if she had just

completed a beloved gardening task. "Thank you, Captain Escobar. Now, run along and fetch me the schism leaders."

He was gone like a fresh private. Escobar hoofed to his first sergeant, posted safely out of range of the sister, and ordered the heretic leaders brought forward. He was glad to have assisted in the holy sacraments, but happy to escape the presence of its minister.

The sister sighed as three prisoners, two men and a woman, stumbled before her ahead of their guards.

"Sister Immaculate," Admiral Assad announced, "these are the leaders of the failed schism, identified by their peers. We found blasphemies against the Lady in their houses. We found journals questioning the sacred texts."

The three prisoners stood before their judge. One of the men, bald, limping, and bandaged on one arm, trembled beneath the sister's regard. The other two watched her with challenging eyes. If they feared the future, they hid it well. Escobar signaled two troopers to flank the trio, then moved to stand by his admiral.

"I've heard terrible things about you." The sister's voice reverberated off the buildings, still broadcasted by her ADA. "You've sinned against the Father, the Holy Mother, and the Community of God. You've denied your Lady and have turned others from the one true faith. Those are the accusations. But Church is not without fairness or compassion. We seek the truth. I'd like to hear your side of the story."

She waited. For a moment, no one spoke. Then one of the prisoners, a hard, wiry man, took a step toward the dais. "We've committed no crimes," he said. "We work hard. We revere the word of God. We only wish to worship in our own way."

Escobar noted that *his* voice wasn't amplified.

The sister looked from the man to her soldiers and back again, as if stunned. "Oh, my," she said, "I'm distressed to hear you say that. You realize, don't you, that Church is not a forum for debate. You've no right to challenge the precepts of our faith."

"Why not?" the woman prisoner cried. "*You* did! This faith of yours isn't the faith of our fathers! You've *altered* it! You've changed it to fit your personal needs, your *political* needs!"

The sister knitted her brow. "So, the accusations are true. I had hoped it was all an unfortunate misunderstanding. I'm sorry, but you tie my hands. For three thousand years my order has guarded the faith. It's heresy to lecture me on its truth or falsehood. I'm afraid you must now face punishment. It grieves me to order what must be ordered, but I would dearly love to offer you mercy. Since all those who sin are children of God, I give you this chance at grace. I will hear your confessions and offer absolution before you die."

"You've corrupted the faith! You've fed us lies!" the woman prisoner shouted.

Escobar made the slightest signal. A soldier stepped forward and slammed the woman hard in the back with his weapon. She grunted and fell to her knees.

"You condemn yourself." The sister shook her head. She turned to the people held in the corral. "Is there no one here with humility? Does no one wish redemption?" She listened to her answer: a grumbling murmur of defiance. "Very well. May God grant mercy onto you all." She made a cross toward the prisoners, crossed herself, then turned toward Admiral Assad. She showed him a broad grin. "Form is served. These three are the fomenters of evil. I suppose we should stake and burn them. Those others shared in

heresy, so they'll have to be punished, too."

The ADA had ceased broadcasting, probably at the sign of the cross.

The female prisoner struggled to her knees. "You *bitch!* You *murderer!* You're nothing bu—" She fell under a storm of kicks and rifle slams thrown upon her by the nearby soldier. She thrashed under his boot, her face in the dust. The wiry man turned to the soldier responsible, but froze when assault rifles pointed his way.

"Keep her conscious," the sister said. "We can't have her unaware through punishment." She turned and climbed from the makeshift platform. "Admiral Assad, we must show mercy to the children. They can't help what their elders do. All children six and below will be sorted for re-induction, those under three to Church, the rest to the government crèche." She offered her hand once more to Assad. He took it, cradling it at his elbow. They started toward her shuttle, her escort of inquisitors falling in around them.

Escobar signaled for his officers. In a moment he stood surrounded by his four section leaders, his XO, and the FISTs.

"You know what to do. GinnKwan, you have the schisoid leaders. Genaba, Bella, separate out the kids and run the others into that barn. St. Billiard, Sidaris, flip a coin for who does the deed. Questions? Get it done. Remember, you're on parade." With that last, he cast a subtle glance across the flock of hovering TDAs.

The officers saluted, then scattered.

"Miranda."

She froze in mid-turn, then faced her commander again.

"You okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"Be steady."

"Always am, sir."

"Do your duty, lieutenant." Escobar saw the wary appraisal in her eyes. She knew what he meant, but hoped that was only paranoia on her part. Miranda was one of his least steady officers. She had plenty of reason to hate the government she served; life was miserable for wards of the government crèche.

Her moment of cautious appraisal ended. She offered an ambiguous throwaway.

"Duty is all I am, sir."

He saluted her before she did him the honor. He thought he owed her that much.



Miranda escaped her captain and caught up with Sidaris a few dozen meters away.

"What was that about?" The rookie FIST asked her. He was a bug-eyed baby, peering this way and that to watch everyone's business.

"We'll need accurate mission data." Miranda pointed at her temple, then made a motion as if zipping shut her lips.

He stared at her, cocking his head.

Oh, for pity's sake. "I'm putting my TDA into restricted mode to quick-sync a boresight to orbit. Do the same. Now."

"But we'll be offline. What if something—"

"Nothing's going to happen. We won, remember?"

"But—"

"I'm the senior FIST here, lieutenant. Restrict and sync your TDA now."

She watched him frown, watched the accusation, maybe the report to superiors, cross his eyes, but he started the routine to update his TDA's targeting links.

Miranda did the same, carefully pacing her speech to his. "TDA, sync boresight to orbiting base. Max tolerance five meters. Signal when ready. Enter restricted mode."

The TDA spoke over her commo, repeating back the commands in its tinny robot voice. She acknowledged. It chirped compliance, then fell like a brick into the open palm of her gauntlet.

Sidaris's orb slapped into his hand.

"Kill your commo," Miranda said.

"Say what?" But he winked in the proper manner.

Miranda glanced about for other TDAs or listening ears, then stepped close to her counterpart. "We have maybe ninety seconds. I don't know what they told you in the academy, but we're about to cram all those people into that barn and then burn them alive in it." She surrendered two precious seconds, letting her words sink in.

He blinked. "No. That's a war crime."

"It's our orders."

"It's mass murder. I won't do it."

Miranda sidestepped, whipped one leg behind Sidaris, and slammed him hard in the chest. Sidaris stumbled backward and pitched over her leg. His arms pinwheeled. His weapon flew outwards to the end of its tether, and he crashed to the ground on his back. Because of the mission pack, this placed him almost in a sitting position.

Several battlesuits laughed in the distance, and pointed.

Miranda let her weapon dangle and caught the TDA hurled from Sidaris's grip. She dropped to her knees and put her face to his. "Do I have your attention? We are going to *kill* those people. They're staking and burning the leaders now. If we refuse, they kill us. If we refuse, we die with the schisoids. You will not protest, you will not make a scene. If you show so much as a flinch of remorse, I will *end* you. Do you understand? Whether by the muzzle of my weapon or by turning you in, I will *end* you. Say you understand."

He stared at her, wide-eyed.

"Say it, you moron!"

"I understand." His voice trembled, from fear or anger, Miranda couldn't tell.

She stood, let her weapon dangle, and offered him her hand. "I'll do it; it's my responsibility. Obey my orders and do not interfere. You do that, we'll get through this."

With Miranda's help, Sidaris struggled to his feet. He accepted the TDA she handed him. "How can you—"

"Shut up, We're out of time." She took hold of her weapon, then opened her other hand just as the TDA chirped within it.

Each sphere rose to a meter above its owner's head.

"Let's go to work," Miranda said, and prayed the Lady to forgive her.



GinnKwan's men ransacked nearby buildings and returned with adequate pillage



for their task: a dented can of petrochemicals and several rusted lengths of narrow gauge rebar that they burned with their weapons into pointed, meter-long lengths. They then forced the prisoners spread-eagled onto the ground. While four soldiers held down their arms and legs, a fifth hammered the rebar through palms and ankles, pinning the condemned to the dusty earth. Finally, two troopers drenched the writhing, screaming prisoners with flammable liquid from the dented can. It was routine, a ceremony of grisly justice ancient before its practitioners were born.

That didn't make GinnKwan like it any better. He stood to one side, his rifle in the crook of one arm, scowling at the task before him. It struck him as sick that a disavowed of Community should be the executioner of heretics.

"Bad business," Genaba said from beside him. The shorter man wiped ash from his face with a dampened rag. "Them people aren't too smart, goin' up against Community like this. Hard lesson for them to learn."

He offered GinnKwan the rag. The lanky lieutenant shook his head.

"Suit yourself," Genaba said, and stowed the rag in his harness. "I gotta get going. We have admin guard on the kids."

"Lucky you."

Genaba slapped GinnKwan's shoulder and laughed. "Not luck, all charm. Your ugly face would scare the little buggers." Then he was gone, ambling away from the screaming heretics as fast as feigned apathy could propel him.

"Hey, quit hollering," a soldier said as he doused one man with fuel. "Look at your partner there. She ain't screamin'. But then, it's hard to holler without no teeth." He laughed, and signaled his officer.

GinnKwan wanted to shoot him. Instead, he snapped a fuse igniter he took from a pouch on his battlesuit. He held the sparking cylinder out from his side.

"Please," the wiry man begged, his words distorted through sobs. "I don't want to die."

"Better you than me." GinnKwan tossed the sparking igniter.

The prisoners went up like a kitchen grease fire. All but the woman intensified their struggles. She was already too close to dead.

"Regular, or extra-crispy?" one of the soldiers called.

Everyone laughed but GinnKwan. "Shut that up!" he bellowed. "This is a job, not entertainment!"



Miranda turned toward the whooshing sound of the fire. Her eyes tracked a blast of smoke rising into the air and took in the indistinct thrashing through the flames. She turned away. She had her own sins to consider. Terrified faces and grabbing hands showed at the barn's only window. She wished she could shutter that window, but if she did, she would still see the faces. She had seen them too often in too many places. She saw them in her nightmares. She was trapped in a cycle of mental self-flagellation. Even when safe, after absolution through the chaplain, the hundreds of faces Miranda had burned assailed her. They pleaded, they screamed. They never forgave. Why didn't she just give up, just walk into the desert and blow out her brains? Others had done so before her.

Because Miranda wanted to live, that's why. She felt sick at what she had to do and the fact that she would do it, but self-preservation overrode pity. There was no other way. Fate had stripped her of choices.

Two soldiers slammed their rifle butts into those faces at the window, onto those grasping hands. "Get back!" they yelled, but no one obeyed.

GinnKwan's section chief strode up from the roped-closed barn doors. "That's it, LT. Tight fit, but we got 'em in."

Miranda nodded, hefting the black disk of a graviton marker in both hands. "I need your people out of here, chief. Fire Control's in on this, and they hardly ever miss. Hardly."

"You get no argument, LT. We're gone."

Miranda turned to Sidaris. He stared at her as if at disease.

"Take this up the ladder. Drop it through a hole in the roof dead center on the layout. If there isn't a hole, make one."

"Lieutenant St. Billiard—"

"You have to do your part." He'd damned well *better* do his part. She wouldn't be the only one covered in blood.

She shoved the graviton marker at Sidaris. He cringed from it. Some faith officer, somewhere, would take note of his reaction. Miranda stood there, waiting. She counted slowly down from ten. If he didn't take it then, she'd start the commotion to turn his ass in.

But Sidaris took the black disk. His gauntlet rattled against it.

"It's all right," Miranda said. "It's our job."

He nodded. He took the graviton marker, turned away with sudden determination, and jogged to the ladder held against the barn by Miranda's forward observer. He climbed up, awkward in his battlesuit.

"Just about done here?" GinnKwan stood at Miranda's side.

"Just about." She wanted it done. She wanted to escape. Was this how she had come to the crèche? Had her parents endured what these people would?

"You okay?"

"Shiny."

"Miranda."

She looked at him. His visor was locked open. His blue eyes showed an edge of red and the scar looked livid beneath its coat of ash.

"I'm good, Kim." She looked long at his TDA, then at hers. "And I got nothing to say."

He nodded understanding. "I'm with you, FIST. You remember that. Hey, CO wants us at the CP. He's moving it back because of your party."

"Sounds wise. I'll be there shortly."

Sidaris returned as GinnKwan departed. He gave Miranda a half-hearted thumbs-up sign. She nodded, then ordered him and her people to the rear. In moments, she stood alone in the yard.

She tried to ignore the cries for mercy sounding from the barn before her. She took an arming device from a pouch on her battlesuit, tuned it to the correct frequency, and keyed in the security code. When all showed "GO", she closed her eyes and steeled herself. She told herself she had no choice, that she had to do it. Refusal sounded noble,

but would make no difference. The act would still get done, by Sidaris maybe, or Captain Escobar. Why should she die for no good reason?

She pressed the initiator button.

The screams from the barn changed from cries of fear to terrible, panicked agony. The graviton marker would guide in the strike from the orbiting guns. It would also tear at the flesh of those around it, distorting space in its intense, if local, gravitational field. Those it devoured suffered tremendously, but not for long.

"Control, FIST. Fire mission, over." Miranda tried to hide the catch in her voice.

"Fire mission, roger."

"Low yield EM point spread, fifty meter base, on my marker, over."

Dead air while the tech located the graviton emissions from her marker. "Roger, FIST. Marker Echo Unis 126, over."

"Affirmative. Delay of thirty seconds, over."

The tech read back her mission. Miranda confirmed it. Then the clock started ticking.

Miranda stood there, something insidious pouncing upon her mind. This was something novel, something surprising. A great peace entered her soul along with a quiet thought.

She could, you know, just walk toward the barn.

She could walk toward the barn. She couldn't be more than ten meters outside the optimal circle of impact for the cannon fire arriving in thirty seconds. In thirty seconds, she could be free.

Maybe they'd call it an accident.

But, she didn't step toward the barn. She willed herself away from it, berated herself for a coward. She turned from the barn, from the faces, the hands, and the terrified screams, and ran.

Thirty seconds later, a bolt of fire burst from the sky and onto the barn. The roof flew apart like the casing of a firecracker, then the building erupted in flames.

She returned to the CP breathless, the exertion of the run dulling her ragged emotions. It shored up the strength she needed to hide her sorrow and self-reproach. Too many people watched; she could not discern the true believers, who might betray her for the wrong thought, the wrong expression, the wrong display of wooden enthusiasm for her monstrous job. She could trust GinnKwan, she had known him for years, but she could not trust his TDA, or hers, or Sidaris, or most of the other officers and men. Miranda suffered her terrors alone; they all did.

She approached Escobar's gaggle of battlesuits and watched as they saluted him in a rattle of armor plates. Most of them turned away from the commander and tramped off into the dust. The dispersal had the look of a change in orders. This made Miranda nervous. One never knew what those orders might be.

"What's up?" she called to GinnKwan, who waited for her with Genaba and Sidaris. Behind them, two soldiers folded the commander's table as he carted his gear toward the landing zone. The four officers were alone in seconds.

"The admiral sent down a warning order," GinnKwan said. "We're stuck here a while, tasked to conduct a hard target search for schisoid monks or whatever the h—."

"Watch it," Miranda said. "Language."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"This is all kinds of FUBAR," Genaba said, and spit onto the ground. "We've

been on this rock for two straight shifts, and they want us chasing fairy tales. We deserve some rack time."

"Well, that isn't the way they're callin' it." GinnKwan shrugged his loaded shoulders. "Admiral thinks there are people down here incitin' the populace to ornery behavior, and those 'people' are called 'monks'."

Miranda looked from sweaty face to sweaty face. Sidaris avoided her eyes. Genaba flexed his lower jaw and swatted at bugs with unnecessary violence. Miranda couldn't read GinnKwan. "Guys. There are over a million people on this planet..."

"Well, hopefully we won't have to do the whole planet," GinnKwan said. "Right now we gotta move our gear and our men to the LZ for boost to orbit. Recharge and refit. We drop again in twelve hours. By then, maybe we'll have some answers."

Genaba released a bark of a laugh. "By then, I'll maybe have bribed my way onto sick call. This is SNAFU, FUBAR and every other bad acronym you could imagine, I tell ya. It sucks and blows at the same time. I got eighty-four days left in this army and I have to spend it all *here*? Over *schisoids*? Why don't they just shoot me?"

"Keep talkin' like that, and maybe they will." GinnKwan reached to flick Genaba's TDA with an armored digit. The little sphere avoided the jab, but GinnKwan had made his point. He sought to transmute actionable complaints into little more than tolerable 'soldier talk'.

"Hey!" Genaba laughed again, longer and more heartily, to show he took the hint. "Keep your hands to your own floatin' junk, you lughead."

"Oxygen thief."

"Dipstick."

"Why do you call them schisoids?" Sidaris asked his lieutenant.

"What?"

"Schisoids. Why do you call them schisoids? Makes them sound crazy."

"They *are* crazy," Genaba proclaimed, loudly enough to erase his current sins, if any had been recorded. "They tried to cause a schism in Community. So they're schisoids. What more do you want?"

"I just thought. We defeated them, no question about that. So, why do we have to insult them, too?"

Everyone looked at him. Genaba's mouth hung open.

"What?" Sidaris asked, looking from face to face.

"GinnKwan!" Genaba called. "You wanna trade?"

"Not on a money bet," GinnKwan answered, and spat into the dirt.

Genaba slapped his FIST hard on the shoulder, causing the man's mission pack to rattle. He grabbed him by a harness strap and jerked him in the direction of the landing zone.

"What?" Sidaris complained. "Is a little respect too much to offer..."

GinnKwan searched his pouches and came up with half a candy bar.

"Was I ever that bad?" Miranda asked.

"You had your moments." GinnKwan snapped his candy in two and offered part to her.

Miranda shook her head, wicking sweat from her untidy hair onto the helmet ring about her neck. "So, what's it about?"

"What's what about?"

"The mission. This search."

"Nothin'. These people, they won't pay no attention to no monks. They'll be meek as lambs when they see what happened here."

"But, what's that mean? Are we stuck here?"

"For a while." He smiled at her. "Not your problem, though. You ain't no grunt; you're support."

They moved along. Miranda angled toward the landing zone, but GinnKwan tapped her shoulder and hooked a thumb in another direction. "Not yet," he said. "Got a call from Perez, up at the processing center. She wants me to bring you up there."

"Me?"

"That's what she said."

"Why?"

"Nothing official." They detoured south through the maze of corrals and barns. "It's Perez. She says she has something for you. It may be a joke, or she found some dirty graffiti. Who can say with her?"

They passed through a rain of black soot. It drifted down from the burning barn, the charred molecules of wood, hay, leather ... and people. Miranda determined not to look over there. She lowered her helmet visor until they were through the worst of it.

"So. You okay?" GinnKwan asked. "About earlier."

"Earlier what?" She looked at him, her face contorting in pain.

"Not that," he said quickly, "the thing with that new guy, the thing about your name."

"Oh." She forced her expression to smooth, though she felt no less punched in the gut. They changed from one horrible subject to another. "It was nothing. I'm used to it."

"Don't give me that. I know you, FIST. It's been eating you since that newbie opened his mouth."

Actually, she'd almost forgotten it. "I said it's okay."

GinnKwan harrumphed. "A little *too* okay, if you ask me."

His comment stung. She clenched her jaw.

"Don't launch a snit," he continued, hunting his pouches for another slab of candy. "You always do this, imagining everybody laughing at your back. 'There goes St. Billiard, the little orphan girl.' Believe me, I recognize the syndrome."

"I'm that obvious?"

"Not really. It just takes one to know one. That's comin' from a fella whose whole family, over 600,000 people, suffers a communal act of contrition for botchin' a planet terraform. We don't get to hold our heads up anywhere. We're *those* people."

She heard the flint in his tone. It dragged her partly away from herself. Others had issues of family at least as irksome as hers. "I'm sorry, Kim."

"Yeah, I guess we're all pretty sorry, aren't we? A sorry bunch of grunts, that's us. But, seriously, it isn't that big a deal, Miranda. In my case, it happened eight hundred years before I was born. In yours, that Sidaris puke probably never heard of the crèche. Well, he probably has, but he doesn't think about it. Not a big concern of his, most likely. He sees a saint on your nametag, he doesn't think orphan. He probably figures you for a religious fanatic flake is all."

"Oh, thanks. That makes me feel *so* much better."

"Seriously, nobody cares about your name. That St. Nino Laurent maggot sure

doesn't, and he's from a rich family that wouldn't take well to controversy."

"Kim! You're so bad!" Playfully, she struck his armored flank. Even so, she flushed from embarrassment. She couldn't help her feelings for Cecil St. Nino Laurent, nor could she say why she liked him. He managed processing for the personnel section, a rear area oxygen thief, Kim often assured her. Though thin, almost effeminate, and perhaps more intellectual than end-of-shift fun, he had gallons of charm Kim could never claim, and he made Miranda happy. Everyone knew it and forever gave her grief.

Was that the gist of Perez's little scheme? Was Cecil planetside?

Miranda shook her head. More sweat flew from her hair, spattering her face. She tasted salt at the edge of her lips. "I'm not listening, Kim GinnKwan. Don't bring Cecil into this. You don't understand. You have a name."

"Oh, yeah, like my family's name is worth a steamy crap."

The re-induction center occupied a mud brick hut away from the center of town. Admin and medical troops crowded the place, busying themselves with prisoner dispositions. Next to the building stood a wired-in pigpen enclosing some thirty bawling children. Perez paced the fence. When she recognized her officers, she waved them over with her cannon arm, a gleeful spark in her eyes.

"Shouldn't you be gone?" GinnKwan asked, his face stern. "You want to get stranded with these brats?"

"Lieutenant, this you don't want to miss. C'mon, Lt. St. Billiard. You're gonna love it." Perez took off for the guarded pigpen gate. She turned frequently to urge them along, a picture of childlike mischief.

"This can't be good," GinnKwan said as he and Miranda followed. "With her sense of humor... well, watch out."

"C'mon, you officers! What you got, the iron-poor blood?"

Perez coaxed them up to the gate, then past the guard. She took Miranda's arm and pulled her through the sobbing roil of dirty, terrified children.

Within that crowd, a woman sat cross-legged in the dirt. She hunched forward, her hands clasped before her in an attitude of prayer. The children hardly noticed her though they scattered before the soldiers.

Miranda gasped.

The woman wore incomplete regalia tarnished and augmented with local clothing, but Miranda could not mistake the sword, the belts, and the cross against her chest. Inquisitas. Her face sucked Miranda in. It so startled her that she forgot prudent fear. She sank to her knees before the woman and reached out to touch those incredible features. She had almost stroked the dirty skin when GinnKwan gripped her wrist and drew back her hand.

"She's me," Miranda choked out.

GinnKwan said nothing. He gave Perez a dirty look.

Perez chortled, satisfied.

The woman was almost Miranda's mirror image. The same straight nose. The same small ears. The same firm jaw and full lips. Her sand-colored hair hung much longer, the ladder-like braids tattered from lack of care, but it was Miranda's hair despite the difference in length, with the untamed nature of Miranda's own locks.

"Congratulations, LT," Perez said. "You're an inquisitor."

The woman just sat there, leaning forward and clasping her hands. Her eyes

remained closed. Her lips moved silently.

"She's *me*," Miranda repeated. "Who *is* she?"

"She's Inquisitas," someone said from beyond the gate. "They have no identity but their station in the church."

Miranda glanced away from her uncanny double. She turned toward the voice across the pen. Cecil stood at the fence, leaning his thin, sharp-faced frame against its upper rail. His head came only to the gate guard's shoulder. He presented a stiff and superior manner — habits affected from a family of wealth — and he wore his field uniform clean and starched, the garb of a man unused to physical labor. But Miranda liked this clean, spit-polished admin officer. She liked him a lot.

"I'd appreciate your leaving the internment area," Cecil said. "That occupant in particular makes me nervous."

GinnKwan took Miranda's arm, tugging her away from the praying inquisitor. Miranda couldn't help several distracted glances back at that strange apparition.

"Why's she here?" GinnKwan asked as they passed through the gate.

"Prisoner, I imagine," Cecil said.

GinnKwan laughed. "An inquisitor? What you been smokin'?"

Cecil put up his hands. "I found her here when I took over. I'm to process kids and send them upstairs. I stay away from that one."

"If she's a prisoner, then why's she armed?" Perez asked.

Everyone stared at her. "You want to try and *disarm* her?" Cecil asked.

They cast nervous glances toward the inquisitor, now obscured by the milling children.

"Did you see her?" Miranda asked Cecil, then realized that she whispered.

"I saw her," he answered, and frowned. "The resemblance is amazing. It tempts me to do a background check, but inquisitors don't have backgrounds, and no way am I taking a blood sample. Not while she's conscious, and not while she is who she is."

Miranda's eyes widened. He thought there was a relation? The resemblance had so unnerved her that she hadn't considered its obvious inference. She wanted to ask him exactly what he meant. She grew acutely aware of the hovering flock of TDAs.

Cecil looked at her, a little uneasy. "You came up through the crèche, Miranda, like some of these children will. Most of these brothers and sisters will never see each other again. There's always the possibility..."

"My God, my sister..."

"Whoa!" GinnKwan thumped Miranda's shoulder to snap her back to reality.

"Miranda, understand what you have here. Are you thinking, girl?"

Miranda's brow wrinkled as she glanced from worried face to worried face.

"She's Inquisitas," GinnKwan said, enunciating with exaggerated clarity. "She's an inquisitor, and she's outside the cathedral ship, away from her Reverend Mother."

"She's on a mission," Cecil said. "That means she's killed somebody, or intends to..."

Miranda gasped. "No, I can't hear this. What if she *is*—"

"You'd better hear it," GinnKwan said, "because if she's committed a mortal sin, she ain't in the mood to socialize. No inquisitor is allowed the slightest grace in sin. When they're sent on their vengeance missions, they're offered last rites and disavowed. To succeed in their mission is a sentence to damnation. No forgiveness. No absolution."

And *no* inquisitor fails in her mission, or lives long past its success." He grabbed Miranda's helmet ring, forcing her to acknowledge him. "That woman in there, don't get attached. She's just waitin' to die."

"And she doesn't belong to you," Cecil added. "Her only family is Church."

Miranda stared into GinnKwan's face. His eyes had lost their cavalier front; they begged her to see reason.

"You gettin' this?" he asked her.

She took time to settle, to harden her expression and stuff the shock of revelation deep behind her eyes. "Yes," she said, "I'm getting it."

Perez grinned like a maniac.



Miranda returned to orbit after GinnKwan practically dragged her to the landing zone and shoved her onto the trooplifter pod. He did not mention the inquisitor. There were too many listening ears and listening machines. He was right, of course; he was always right. Faith officers would take notice of the discussion down in the pigpen, but would hopefully ignore it as a normal, expected reaction to strange circumstances. Soldiers got away with more than civilians. The powers tolerated a little loose talk and grousing as a release valve for pent-up anxiety among Community's elite. They saw it as background noise against more substantial treasons.

But, that face...

Miranda rode the pod to orbit, hardly noticing the usual rattles and heat, the ship quaking like it might blow apart. She ignored the harness in which she hung like a slab of meat at a butcher's shop. She hung with eleven other battlesuited soldiers, Kim across from her, watching her. She hardly noticed the cramped dismissal of comforts, her suit squeezed among conduits, current transfer boxes, structural stanchions and heat exchangers. Miranda startled back to full reality only when they docked, when the end bulkhead of the pod rolled down, and the techs came aboard to release her from her suspension gear and guide her through the docking ring collar. Once on home station, they promptly hung her in another contraption in order to get the suit off her body.

"You been beating up my battlesuit, lieutenant," the chief complained from beside her. He had plugged a diagnostic box into her mission pack and scowled at its readouts. "I got a level two electrics warning here, and your left scapular servo is showing a bearing fault."

The chief had to yell for Miranda to hear him. Three mechanics crowded around her with impact wrenches, working apart her sections of armor to the scream of rotating acorn nuts. A load specialist stood one foot on the scaffold of her egress harness and one foot on her right shoulder, working the cantankerous pulley device that raised and lowered her as the mechanics required. The pulley complained under strain. Even without its human occupant, the battlesuit weighed in at two hundred kilos.

The frenzied activity and screaming racket found further expression in the other eleven battlesuits with their eleven scaffolds and maintenance crews. Beyond the scaffolds, the chamber soared three levels high, the upper reaches a spider's web of struts and braces, the frugally exposed skeleton of a mighty starship. Overhead cranes traversed the two hundred meter length of the chamber, their clattering gears and groaning motors



accenting the character of the industrialized workspace. Below, the three-meter irises of the four docking rings pierced the exterior bulkhead. They stood apart, separated from the chamber's bustle by red and yellow warning stripes painted along the decking. Nothing disturbed that area of deck except scheduled business at each of the irises. Battlesuits entered and left at those docks, moving with practiced order while polluting the air with military vulgarities both playful and earnest. Robot trucks traversed the floor outside the iris zones, beeping to warn humans out of their pre-planned paths. They carried crates, drums and sometimes crew while soldiers on foot dodged around them. Shipping containers stood in ordered blocks on the deck, full of spare parts, resupplies, transfers and jettisons. They either came from somewhere, went somewhere or just sat around until needed. EVA doubled as the ship's primary warehousing space.

The chief leaned close to Miranda's face. "I might have a burned-out primary board here. Did you spend your time down there poking your fingers into power sockets?"

"It's called combat, chief. You might have heard rumor of it."

"Huh. Once we get you out of here, I'm giving this beast a level two workover. Might have to send it to depot."

"Would that deadline me for the upcoming op?"

"Sorry to say, but you might get deadlined for the next several days."

"Shiny! I get some time off."

The chief glowered at her. "They should take these repairs out of your pay."

"Crackin' her chest," one of the mechanics called, and the chief backed off a few steps. The same mechanic allowed one more turn of his impact wrench, then he and his partner grabbed hold of Miranda's chest plate and tilted it away from her at the waist. The cool ship's air touched her for the first time in hours. Miranda sighed, closed her eyes, and shivered as her sweat went cold.

She hung there bereft of armor, defenseless, but free.

She wondered why no one worked at her waist to remove the last layers of applied technology, then realized the bay had grown quieter. She opened her eyes and followed the chief's stare to her left.

Black robes billowed along the edge of the docking ring zone. The egress crews had fallen to inactivity, watching the sister's progress along the line.

Don't let it be me, don't let it be me, Miranda worried. She realized her vulnerability suspended in the harness. She hung in her scaffold spread-eagled, very nearly in a pose of crucifixion.

The sister halted in front of her.

"Lt. St. Billiard."

"Chaplain."

The sister nodded. She turned to the chief. "Remove your men for the moment. We wish to speak privately."

Oh, no we don't, Miranda thought.

The chief nodded and signaled his mechanics. They backed off to one of the dispatch desks fronting the docking rings.

"You others, back to work," the chaplain ordered to the immediate resumption of riot.

The sister stepped closer to Miranda. Her face was pretty, smooth, unlined. She

might have been Miranda's age, in her mid-to-late twenties. Shipboard was often the first posting for women pledged to the Lady.

"You had an incident planetside, lieutenant."

"No, sister. I got a little zapped, but otherwise shiny."

"Concerning a prisoner at the internment center."

"Oh, that." The pretense at nonchalance already gave Miranda a headache. "I'm glad you reminded me. It was strange."

"What was strange, lieutenant?"

"The woman in the pen, sister. She dressed almost like an inquisitor, complete with a sword and crossed chain mail."

"There are no inquisitors down there."

"Of course not, ma'am. Our orders didn't mention any, so I imagine she was an impostor. Though who would impersonate an inquisitor... I mean, it doesn't get any worse than that."

"Believe me, it gets worse. So, you did not take this woman for who she appeared to be."

"No, ma'am, and if she were, then it's no business of mine."

"That is correct, lieutenant." The sister seemed to soften. Miranda saw relief in her eyes. "Interfering with the mission of an actual inquisitor is a serious offense you do well to avoid."

"Yes, sister." Was she safe? "But, seeing as the woman was an impostor, something else seemed really strange about her."

It took a moment for Miranda to realize that she, not some other, had spoken those words. The chaplain's eyes narrowed. She tilted her head with interest.

"Go on..."

"Oh, it was nothing, really, probably my imagination." Oh God oh God oh God.

"Lieutenant."

"Well, and I swear this is the truth, sister—"

"Don't swear, soldier. It's a sin against the Lady."

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am. But this woman, she looked a lot like ... well, like me."

"Is that so?"

"Well... I think so. Or I thought so. I'm not sure anymore."

"Perhaps you were mistaken. These things happen more than you might imagine."

"Yes, sister, I'm sure you're right. But wouldn't it be something? I mean, if I had a sister?"

The chaplain stared at her, eyes glazing in contemplation. She worked the angles, moved toward a decision. What shall we do with this nuisance St. Billiard? Censure her, crucify her, space her, ignore her? Miranda hoped she had played sufficiently ignorant that the latter would win the argument. She waited, glad that her past several hours' sweat disguised the new stuff beading at her forehead and sluicing down her back.

"You are correct," the chaplain said, nodding. "That woman, she is your sister."

Miranda's mouth hung as if its muscles had been cut.

"She is your sister, lieutenant. As am I. As is every other woman in this task force, in Community. And every man here is your brother. Do you follow me, lieutenant?"

"Umm, okay..."

"So very often, so often it's a nuisance, children of the crèche imagine this same fantasy. You wish to belong, to find family in this world. You wish it so much that your mind and soul supply that family in places where none exists." She stepped back and raised her voice so that those to either side could hear if they listened. And they listened. "Desist in this delusion, Lieutenant St. Billiard. You have here, throughout the Army of God and throughout Community, more family than anyone could wish. We are all your brothers and sisters. There is no need to go searching for more. Am I clear, lieutenant?"

"Golden, sister. I don't know what came over me."

"Quite all right. Let's ensure it doesn't come over you again."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Very good." She started to turn away, but Miranda wasn't dumb enough to think the interview finished. The sister paused. "By the way, I'll soon shuttle back to the headquarters ship. You are welcome to share the cabin with me."

"Oh, that's so generous, sister, but I'm afraid I can't. It'll be a while before I'm out of this thing, and there are maintenance issues; it might have to go to depot. And I have after-action reports..."

"I understand. You cannot be faulted for seeing to your duty."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll just take the regular shuttle. If it's all right with you."

The chaplain nodded once, the gold in her starburst tattoo reflecting the overhead work lights. Then she turned away and reversed her track up the bay.

Miranda collapsed limp in her harness.

The chief stepped close to her. "So, I need your help to send a battlesuit to depot?"

"Shut up and get me out of here," she said.