

THE GAUNTLET

By Ilsa J. Bick

*Hell is oneself,
Hell is alone, the other figures in it
Merely projections.*

– T.S. Eliot, “The Cocktail Party”

They think I’m crazy, but I’m not.

Ardan says he’s my friend. He says the doctors are for my own good. He says he wants only the best for me, that he’d follow me straight to Hell down that twisting dark tunnel of bones and dry dust and ruby fire.

But he’s not my friend; this isn’t doing me any good, and he can’t possibly know about Hell because I live it. I’m there. It’s me.

They think they can keep me here, with their judging Eyes. They think I don’t know what they’re planning, what they’ll do to Melissa and Katrina...

But I know. And they won’t.

Because I will stop them, no matter what.

ATTENTION: This story contains some mature content.

Prologue

*The world turns and the world changes, but one thing
does not change.
However you disguise it, this thing does not change:
The perpetual struggle between Good and Evil.*

--T.S. Eliot, "The Rock"



Vatican City, Terra
8 August 3028
2350 hours

A steamy night in Rome: a Sunday, the sky clotted with clouds, and much too hot even for the drunks and dusters normally littering the pavement around Termini Station. The air was liquid with humidity, and the faint tug of a freakish east wind off the Tiber River carried the fetid aroma of spent DropShip fuel, rancid garbage, and methane that seeped up in thick fingers from the city's guts. The stench was so heavy it left a bad taste in the killer's mouth—like oily, rotted meat—and if he brought his ear close to a grate, he could hear the endless trickle of water bleeding through caves honeycombing the underbelly of the city. Like another world down there: ancient, vast. Dark as the Pit.

Dark, dark, dark. They all go into the dark...

Wraith-like, the killer slipped in and out of shadows along the ancient Vatican wall hemming Via de Porta Angelica. As he walked, the folds of his cassock flowed round his legs like black water. He clutched a heavy rosary of onyx beads strung on tough wire and capped with a silver crucifix in his left hand. He liked the weight. The fingers of his right hand wrapped around a garrote secreted in his pocket. There was a pistol in his right pocket, too, and the metal was cool against his knuckles, but he didn't need the pistol, not quite yet.

When the killer made planetfall a week ago, no one looked twice. His matched set of purple-black shiners was gone. Before leaving Milton, he'd dyed his hair muddy brown: a quick rinse job, just enough to hide his natural red. He'd scanned the daily newsfeeds but saw nothing. (And, yes, they *would* be careful; no use tipping him they were on his trail. Ah, but *he* knew his enemy, the thoughts behind those smiling masks.) On a recharging layover off Alula Australis, he worked up the nerve to mingle and even bought drinks for a skinny blonde with cords of knotty muscles and bad skin. The booze was cheap, and the blonde was efficient, if not inspired.

But no one recognized him. No one cared.

Once in Rome, he rented a cheap flat that went week to week. The disguise—the cassock and rosary—was easy. Then he'd shaved the beard. (He hadn't wanted to. The beard was nearly as good as



a face job. Except most Roman Catholic priests didn't have beards, and he needed to be a priest for this to work. No choice.) Now his cheeks felt naked, the damp air dragging across his face like clammy fingers.

He'd had time to think between Milton and now, time to plan. He knew what was coming and where he must go. He wasn't sure *how* he knew, but the thoughts welled up, under pressure, spewing from the bedrock of his mind the way oil spurted from a subterranean pocket. Maybe he'd absorbed more on that trip to Rome—when he was a teenager and yet how cleanly etched the memories, as if scrawled with a diamond stylus—than he suspected.

So long ago, the dancers all gone under the hill, walking the vaults of the dead, all those dry bones in tunnels of dust winding into the dark, twisting toward the ladder to Heaven beneath an unblinking Eye...

Ahead, the barest suggestion of the great basilica: first its golden glow that turned the night amber, and then the illuminated double-brick of the actual dome. Peeping just above a crenellated brick wall running away due west along the Via della Conciliazione and through the Borgo District, he glimpsed the entablature gripping the capitals of the right colonnade of Doric pillars, four deep, marking St. Peter's Square. A few seconds later, he made out his goal: the double, brick fornices of St. Anne's Gate.

Two and a half minute delay after key-in before the alarms trip when the guard doesn't re-key; a full three minutes quarter before the nearest guard gets there; four minutes until automatic lock-down, and then I'll be shut in tight, no way to get out, so I have to be fast, I have to be efficient.

A light speared from the gloom to his right. The gate's halberdier—a boy, really, no more than twenty from the looks of it—played his torch over the killer and said, "*Ciao, Padre, io devo vedere la vostra identificazione, per favore.*"

"*Sì, sì, of course.*" He was ready for this, a request for his identification. That, actually, was the trickiest part. Dipping his left hand into his pocket, he retrieved an identi-tag and handed it over for scan. He waited, patiently, as he imagined priests must as the Swiss Guard propped his halberd (a ridiculous, outlandish weapon) against a near wall and slid the identi-tag through an electromagnetic reader. There was a soft *bleep* as the computer toggled through the codes, and then the reader winked green.



Nodding, the guard returned the identi-tag. “*Grazie, Padre Gambino,*” he said, as he clamped his flashlight to his side with his left arm, keyed the gate with his right hand, and then used both hands to pull open the heavy wrought-iron. “*Così, abbastanza caldo per voi?*”

Well, that was a good question. The killer wondered if Father Gambino *would* have found it hot enough for him. But, considering that he’d shoved Gambino, plastic bag still knotted around his neck, beneath stinking garbage bags bloated with rot that bulged from an oversized dustbin—well, he couldn’t very well ask. So, he improvised: made a show of blotting away sweat, making certain that the boy’s attention was caught by the flash of the crucifix in his left hand while he eased the rope from his pocket with his right. Ducking his head, he kept his face canted slightly to the left—*the Eye, remember the Eye*—and slid by, passing close. “Hot enough for the damned,” he said, “*non pensate, eh?*”

He caught the boy’s flinch and realized a misstep. (Probably real priests never said *damned* except in a sermon.) No help for that now because he was through, the trap set.

Whipping round, he snapped the garrote around the sentry’s throat, yanked it tight as a noose, and kicked the boy’s legs out from under. The boy’s hands flew to his throat, his torch clattering to the cobblestones, a spear of light lancing off an iron bar, and he began to flail as the killer dragged his body into thick shadows blanketing the base of the walls—away from the cams. Away from the Eyes.

Two seconds... five seconds... ten...

The killer bent to his work with a will, using his knee as a fulcrum and levering the boy’s writhing, heaving body so the head and chest hung a bare five centimeters above gray cobblestones slicked with moisture. Silently, desperately, the boy fought for his life, thrashing, the fingers of his left hand snagging the rosary. The chaplet ripped free of the killer’s hand, the beads pattering against the stones like tiny marbles. But the killer hung on.

Thirty, thirty-one...

The boy’s struggles grew weaker as his weight strangled him, and then the killer felt the first tremors shudder up the rope and into his very bones as the boy’s brain, deprived of oxygen, began to die, the cells fizzling one by one, like comets screaming to earth. The killer yanked back harder, his shoulders burning, sweat pouring down his face.



Forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven, come on, come on, die, can't you; die, come on, die...

The boy gave a terrific jerk, as if jolted with a PPC. His limbs began to quake in a terminal, awful seizure, and the full ripe stink of feces bloomed as his bowels let go. And then, mercifully, he died.

Sixty, sixty-one...

The killer hunkered on his haunches a moment, panting. Then he rolled the boy over...

A tiny voice, a faint whisper in his mind: *Why? You know he's dead. Why do you need to see this? Unless they're right and you are mad.*

...and in watery silver light that sprayed from a halogen above the gate, he saw that the boy's bulging eyes were going glassy; his mouth gaped; and an inky blotch smeared the boy's chin from a gush of blood when he'd nearly bitten his tongue in two.

Seventy seconds...

No time for this. Go! The killer patted around until he found the chaplet: all the beads still intact, thank heavens, the heavy wire unbroken. He dropped the rosary into the left pocket of the cassock. Stretching for the gate but careful not to leave the safety of these dense shadows, he retrieved the guard's torch, clicked it off, dropped it into his left pocket. Then, he listened. He didn't want to wait. But he clamped down on the urge to run, and concentrated, focusing his senses to a point, bright as a laser.

The distant blat of a cab. The groan of that wretched, evil wind. The wild thud of his heart in his ears and, beyond... was that... oh, dear God, no, not *now*... there, *yes*, he heard it: that soft sigh only a hovercar makes. Getting louder, coming this way, and precious seconds drizzling away like sand through an hourglass.

Go, go, go!

To his right was St. Anne's Church; to his left the northwest entrance to the Guards' barracks. He went left, ducking through an archway into a courtyard that was nearly pitch black, with only the very faintest silver-blue glow from the spots beyond that illuminated St. Peter's Square. The barracks were dark, the guards and few nuns who lived there asleep... save for a trio of curtained windows fired with light at the far left corner of the barracks' second floor.



That made him pause. Still up? At this hour? He watched the curtains, straining to detect the faintest movement or trace of shadow. But... nothing.

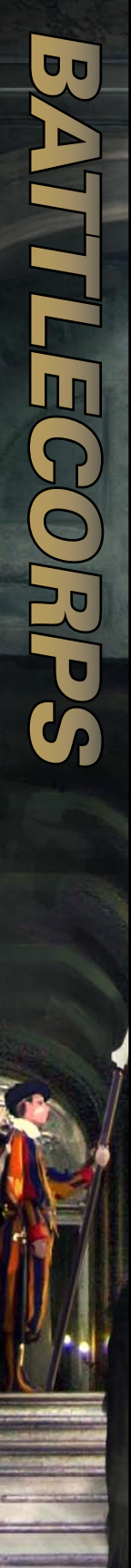
Go, just go, find him!

Faster now: gliding through the courtyard on a diagonal toward the Square, turning for the marble steps that led to the commander's apartment... and then, something off to his right. What? Tensing, his gaze skipped right to peer through an iron latticework bolted over a leaded glass panel. Beyond, he made out the pillars closest to the Guards' barracks and the sheer cliff of the brooding Apostolic Palace, the windows dark and black as empty sockets. But there was something *there*, out by the pillars; he could have sworn...

A starburst of birds exploded in a tangle of wings. He let go of a breath. Pigeons, roosting round the colonnade. Nothing to worry about. No one around to recognize him. And no Eyes, not under the Guards' noses.

Turning, Hanse Davion bounded up the stairs, his black cassock swirling, its hem fraying a bit, like his mind: a chaplet to count prayers he'd never learned in his left pocket, and a pistol in his right.



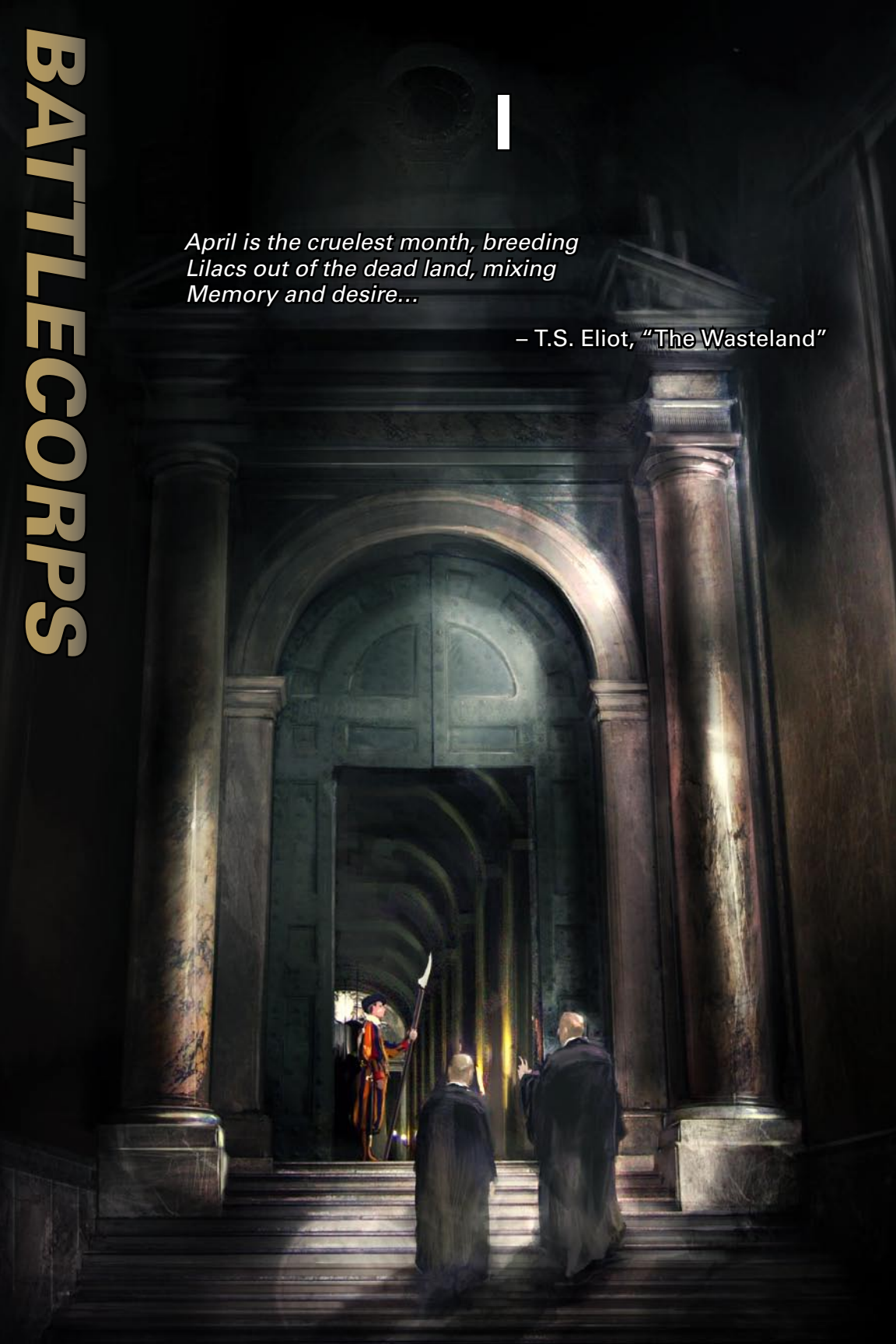


BOOK ONE:
Descent

BATTLECORPS

*April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire...*

– T.S. Eliot, "The Wasteland"



ComStar First Circuit Compound

Hilton Head, Terra

20 April 3022

Sunset along the beach, a cool evening in late spring: the kind when couples walk the beach hand-in-hand and marvel at splashes of deep pink and fiery orange spilling west from the eye of heaven toward a sea darkling to indigo. Seagulls wheeled around invisible axes on a light breeze that skimmed a chill from the water, and Hanse Davion was grateful for the light jacket a grade II acolyte had, with all humility, suggested he put on before leaving the ComStar compound. Hanse had seen Terra's Cape Cod, a coast that was by degrees rougher and wilder, with dense thickets of jade-green sea grasses over humps of white sand dunes and beaches that dropped away to a floor pitted with troughs and innumerable smooth, multicolored pebbles. He didn't recall seeing many shells along the Cape, but Hilton Head's beach was flat, level, hard-packed, dark sand and there were shells here, mainly sand dollars, living and dead. The smell was different, too. Hilton Head was brinier than the Cape, where the sea was colder and laced the air with a scent of aluminum.

The breeze shifted, and then he picked up the aroma of something that was not the sea or sand—the slightly sweet scent of a woman who was unlike any he'd ever met.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Katrina Steiner said. She stood less than a half meter away, the setting sun touching her golden hair with spun fire. Her gray eyes, dense as thick smoke, sought out Hanse's. "A fitting end to a momentous day, don't you think?"

"Yes. We did a good thing today. Yet..." He let the sentence die, unsure if he wanted to reveal that much.

"What?" A wisp of hair dragged across her face, and she tucked it behind her ear, in a way that made her look surprisingly young. "It's ComStar, isn't it?"

He didn't allow his surprise—and pleasure—flood into his face. "What bothers *you* about it?"

"Oh, I'm not sure it's bothersome as much as interesting. ComStar advertises its neutrality yet brokers our alliance. How long before ComStar starts insinuating its tentacles into other realms, brokering other deals and alliances? Because make no mistake, with a foothold in every realm won through treaty, ComStar has designs



on more than simple stability. A precentor is a political animal, and while ComStar may be the religion, a precentor has roots."

"Are you suggesting that a precentor would turn against ComStar?"

The Archon thought. "I can't say that such a thing's impossible. Whatever the religion, there is the individual, and the individual has ambitions and desires. I can see a primus, perhaps wedded to a particular concern or just simply convinced that Toyama's way was better than ComStar's current incarnation, turning districts against one another to serve ComStar. How else can they conquer? ComStar's not neutral, as much as they pretend otherwise." Katrina narrowed her eyes and then put a finger to the side of her nose and nodded. "I spy with my little eye. We need to keep a close watch on ComStar, Fox, if for nothing else than by tradition and doctrine, they have no love for you. You're as cursed now as John Davion was then, and don't ever forget it."

He was struck again by the Archon's perspicacity. The more time he spent with Katrina Steiner, the more he envied her long-dead husband even as a portion of his mind whispered a warning: *This far, and no further. Remember what is at stake.*

Yet, as much as he understood that voice of caution, he also knew what he could never acknowledge aloud. He desired this mature, worldly woman, who tugged at him with a smoldering sexuality that was his equal, as formidable as his own iron will.

My God, what am I thinking? Don't be a fool.

"Do you think Melissa will come round to the idea?" he said, injecting a lightness he didn't feel. *Yes, safer to think of Melissa. She's a child, and I can't possibly conceive of doing anything to harm a child. Think of the child, and then you're safe because you will protect a child, whatever the cost.*

Katrina's eyebrows knit at the abrupt change in subject. "To the marriage?"

"Yes." He forced a laugh. "Just think what a number of tongues we'll start wagging! Not only our ages, but the religions, too! It hurts my head to think about it. I'm certain that your pope will have something to say about it."

Now Katrina looked amused. "Fox, you're such a heretic, I wouldn't have imagined you'd care. If anyone can understand bargains with the devil, it should be the Church. Popes are more



political than you think. Pope Victor XXVII insists upon his Swiss Guard, and your Pope Benedict XIII has his Palatines. Both know that to exercise force, they must be prepared to display and perhaps use it. So I suspect that both will feel each other out and see this as a kind of, I don't know... an alliance of convenience, something that will reflect well on both. But..."

"What?" he prompted when she didn't continue.

"Well, you know all this talk about the popes and their little armies... I don't know why, but ComStar popped into my head again."

"They don't have an army."

"I know that. But every religion needs its army, its zealots—or it can't survive."

"Don't forget money and influence." Hanse shrugged. "Maybe it's like onward Christian soldiers, or something. You know, the more people are besieged, the more stubbornly they cling to a faith. ComStar's got to be like that at some level, what with the adepts, the acolytes, the way they pray to their machines." He did not add that he thought the Kuritans as much a danger as the Capellans. *And I'd watch that Waterly if I were Primus; she's a deep one.*

"You're probably right." Then Katrina inhaled and blew out a cleansing breath. "So much bloodshed over God, or gods, and each sect thinking they have a monopoly, a lock on the truth. And what does it really matter?"

"A lot to the people who share the beliefs?"

"Probably." Katrina gave a thin smile. "I remember visiting Rome a long time ago and touring the Vatican. My father had arranged a private audience with the Pope and it was... magical. He was a very calm, centered man, and I could feel the pull toward that kind of self-containment. You'd think that the Vatican would do away with anything martial, especially after Amaris. But they haven't. The Guards are still there; the factional in-fighting between New Avalon and Rome won't ever end; and the thing that the Vatican's chosen to retain after Amaris? The Desecration, the absolute embodiment of all the Vatican's lost. Now what sense does that make?"

"You know, I wondered the same thing. Ian, my eldest brother, once took me to Rome when I was fourteen, fifteen, something



like that. He was always the bookish one, very knowledgeable about ancient history. We visited the Vatican, though I guarantee you we did *not* have a private audience with the pope. You're right about popes being political animals, with the same need for armies and well-planned routes of defense and escape as the next man. I think more than one pope needed that escape route to Castle Stant'Angelo northeast of the plaza. But what I couldn't figure out then was why the Vatican kept the Desecration, never repairing the damage Amaris's men did to crypts, what with knocking open tombs and disinterring the bodies, then breaking through the crypts' walls to flood the chambers. That was sacrilege no matter what your faith. Seemed to me then that you'd want to get rid of that, not glorify it by keeping it around, something for everyone to gawk at through a ferroglass barrier. But I understand now."

"And that is?"

"The Vatican wants to make sure that you see what's gone and irretrievably shattered. We need relics of the past to remind us of how bad we really can be. The veneer of civilization is very tenuous, very thin, almost fragile. Take away our technology and government and any semblance of civil order, and we're animals. I've seen it happen in battle when good men turn savage. In the end, man or beast, there's nothing but dust and bones for all of us—like those ossuaries stretching away into darkness beyond. Rome's like the Sphere: built upon a necropolis, with their dead in a darkness not much farther away than a spadeful of earth."

"Or the darkness beyond the skin of a DropShip," Katrina said. Her voice was dreamy. "Dark, they all go into the dark, the vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant." She caught his look. "Something an ancient poet wrote a long time ago."

"It sounds a little sad, almost"—he searched for the word—"hopeless."

"That's because it is. For all our aspirations, we're very small, Fox, and we all come to dust in the end."

"Well, then, we'll have to make sure that comes much later than sooner."

"If we have the power," Katrina said, and she touched his sleeve, lightly, but he still felt the charge. Yet if she picked up on his welter of emotions, she gave no indication. "If we can muster the will. Part of me wants to believe that we *can* prepare. Another part feels as if, despite our alliance, war's inevitable, or maybe we'll



make it ourselves in order to sweep away corruption or simply to protect ourselves, and those we hold dear." Now she threaded her arm through the crook of his elbow, so close he felt her warmth. "At least when it comes, we'll run the gauntlet together, our two realms."

He couldn't help thinking of his own Gauntlet back on New Avalon: a twisting half-klick of canyon maze; a dark tunnel of death with hidden passages and weapons blisters along the floor and walls designed to test and hone a MechWarrior's skills. More than a few MechWarriors were entombed there—figuratively, of course.

Like Rome, in a way—a civilization constructed on ruins that crumbled to bones and dry dust even under the eyes of all the gods. No different from our Houses, constructed upon myomer and titanium and human blood.

"Together," he said, aware of how his emotions spilled over into a single word, trying to tell himself that he couldn't help it but knowing that he could, if he'd wanted. But this was as close to a declaration—a private dare?—as he could manage. "Always together, Katrina."

Wordless, she stared at him for a long moment, the color spilling across her throat, and he cursed himself for a fool. What, he would destroy a hard-won treaty because of an attraction he couldn't—*wouldn't*—act on?

"Prince," she said, her voice thrumming with emotion. She unlinked her arm but did not move away. Her energy rolled off her body in waves, and still, she faced him, a hand's-breadth away and so close, he saw the pulse bounding in her throat. "Hanse Davion, what are we playing at?"

"I never play." His own throat was dry as sand, his voice husky. With exquisite gentleness, the kind he might use with a fragile shell he feared might break, he took both her hands and raised them to his lips. Her skin was warm and soft and tasted a little of salt.

"Not play," he said, his heart beating against his caging ribs. "I would never play, Katrina. Not with you. Not ever."

The Archon had a corner suite with a span of windows looking east, so the vantage point provided to the acolyte was excellent.



The sun was so low in the west that ComStar's airy compound of glass and metal glowed bronze, and the sand and sea blazed with flame. So there was no mistaking Hanse Davion's cap of copper hair, or Katrina Steiner's swirling honeyed mane. Pausing in her work, the acolyte saw when the prince turned, faced the Archon, said something and then raised her hands to his lips and then...

"By Blake, aren't you done yet?" A querulous woman's voice behind her right shoulder, and if she had not been well-disciplined, the acolyte might have flinched with surprise. "The reception's two hours away, and the Archon's going to want the use of her rooms, and here you are, wool-gathering."

Turning, the acolyte fingered a lock of her rust-colored hair back into the folds of her cowl and dropped her eyes. She was a freshly-minted grade I acolyte and so not only was she mostly invisible, nearly everyone in the compound outranked her. Adept Bluma, a prune of a woman, was three grades her senior and never let her forget it. "Forgive me," the acolyte said as she stepped away from the windows and turned to gather together her cleaning supplies. "The evening was so beautiful I lost track of time."

"Lost track of time." Bluma's lips puckered into a rosebud of disapproval. "You spend as much time *keeping* track as you do losing it, you'd be done a shade faster..."

Bluma was still prattling, but the acolyte was no longer listening. Instead, she wheeled her work cart laden with cleaning supplies and linens out of the Archon's bedroom under the watchful eye of a guard and turned left, heading down a short corridor for the Archon's sitting room. And as she walked, the acolyte thought of a slim packet secreted in her light gray jumpsuit and considered that her masters would be pleased indeed.



Rome, Terra

10 May 3027

My God, I'll die yet.

Damien Tull closed his eyes, shivering as his lover's tongue teased his nipples and flirted with the sensitive flesh of Tull's buttocks, his thighs. Tull was so aroused, so hard, it hurt, and he felt ready to burst, his skin prickling with hot needles of desire. His head was light, and he felt a little drunk, though he'd had absolutely nothing stronger than a few glasses of a good, spicy red wine he could still taste in his mouth, and on his lover's tongue. The rumble of traffic flowing far below this attic garret receded as his knees trembled, and his consciousness grayed in a giddy, vertiginous swirl of lust.

When his lover paused, Tull gave a small cry of loss. "No, please, don't stop." Tull's voice was thick with need, and he swallowed, the rope chafing a little as it rode the hump of his Adam's apple. The rope looped over an exposed joist in the ceiling and the end was twined round a brass bedpost. Tight, but not too tight: just enough to reduce the supply of oxygen to his brain, so that every sensation was magnified a hundredfold, and his consciousness dissolved into a sea of sensation. He had to focus to keep from slipping off the low wooden stool upon which he perched. "Please, for God's sake, *please*."

"Not so fast. I want to make you last." His lover laughed, very softly, and his breath smelled a little of smoky char and spiced wine layered over an earthy scent of musk and a man's sex. But he complied, his tongue skimming Tull's neck in a feathery caress, probing round Tull's ear while his busy fingers stroked and pinched and squeezed. "You like that, do you? You want more?"

"God, yes," Tull gasped. His fingers twitched, but, of course, he couldn't use his hands, not with his wrists bound behind his back. But that was what he wanted: to be utterly ravaged, to be enslaved and die in a swirl of sex. There was time later for repentance, for prayer and self-recrimination in the comforting darkness and anonymity of a confessional under the invisible eye of a merciful god.

But that was for later, and this was now, and he had to look; he had to see, to stamp the moment on his consciousness so when he'd slipped behind the mask of his uniform within the cloistered shell of Vatican rules and regulations, he still could find pleasure



in fantasies—until the next time that couldn't come soon enough when he would die all over again.

An oval, free-standing attic cheval mirror framed in cherry wood stood directly across, and so he could see everything: the rope around his neck, and his lover standing just behind; his lover's hands sneaking around Tull's waist, playing over the line of his hips, the swell of his thighs. His lover's body excited him; he was like some cruel god, taking what he wanted, dispensing pleasure only when it suited him. It was the spectacle of his helplessness and arousal that mesmerized Tull, just as the danger—his life hanging in the balance as it were—was a potent aphrodisiac that kept him coming back like an addict, begging for more, and even more.

"God, you're going to kill me," Tull said, and then he gave a breathy, delighted laugh that ended in a groan as his lover found him and squeezed. "You know that? You'll be the death of me."

A pause.

"Well," his lover said, "now that you bring it up."

