

THE GAUNTLET

By Ilsa J. Bick

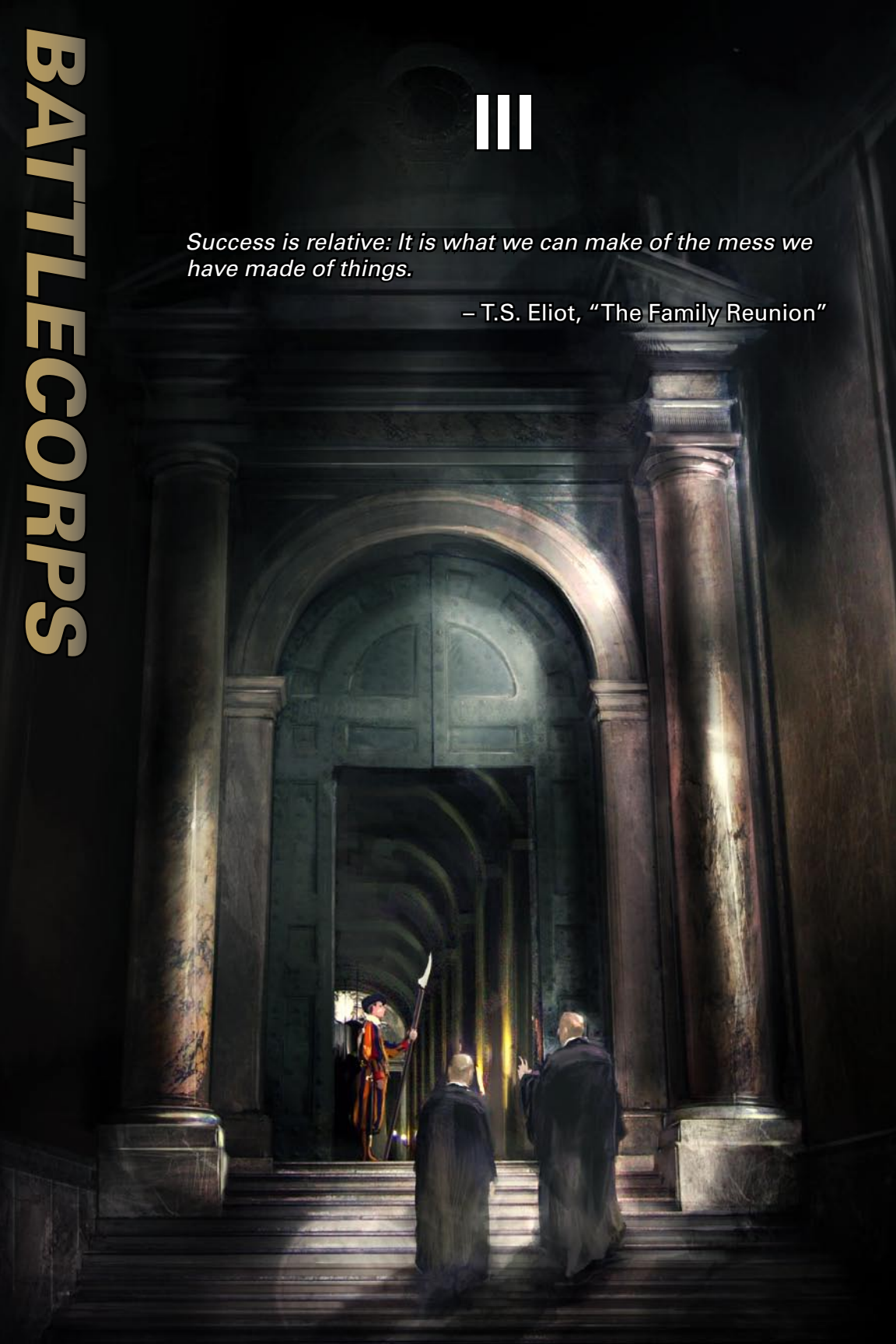
ATTENTION: This story contains some mature content.

BATTLECORPS



Success is relative: It is what we can make of the mess we have made of things.

– T.S. Eliot, “The Family Reunion”



Rome, Terra 12 July 3028

Nick Rossi craned his head around one wall of Emma Fusco's cubicle. "Hey."

"Yeah?" Emma didn't look up from her computer. Two new cases in three days generated a lot of paper, and they were up next. Her desk was tucked into an anonymous office cubicle at a right angle to Nick's, an arrangement the new *polizia principale* mandated because she thought this would encourage partners to work more efficiently. Emma didn't like it. The old arrangement, face-to-face, had been better because then she and Nick could toss ideas out more easily. (On the other hand, this was less distracting. No furtive glances that she wanted to kick herself for later.) But now she just felt like one of those office workers you see in cartoons. Plus, the walls of her cubicle backed up on the air conditioner, a window-mounted unit that was supposed to cool the entire bullpen but just ended up making a lot of noise, smelling of mildew and dripping condensation. And that sucked. "What?"

"I need three words that describe what a tryster says."

"What?"

"A tryster. Nine letters and the fourth one's a W."

Emma rolled her eyes and hunched over her keyboard. "Nick, give me a break. I'm working here. You know what I can't figure? Why do you keep doing those crosswords if I answer most of the questions?"

"You're smarter than I am. I'm trying to figure out how to think like you."

"Read a book. And flattery will get you nowhere. Next one up, you're doing the paper."

The soft *ding* of an incoming message from Nick's computer. A pause. A tap of keys. "Emma?"

"Nick, I'm going to kill you."

"Naw, this is legit. Remember that guy, that Swiss Guard grocer guy? Pio?" Nick went on without waiting for an answer. "We finally got that cross-check on his inventory."

"Okay." Emma inputted more data then reached for a fast-food drink container still half-full with melting ice, and tipped a cube into her mouth. The ice squealed as she crunched down. Pio was old news. After almost two weeks of getting nowhere, including a check of the nearby Kerensky tunnel, and a bored shrug from Open/Unsolved's squad leader when she inquired after Tull (and oh, Colonel Reinhardt had *not* been happy to see her again when she'd petitioned for Pio's service records), the murder was nudged from her radar by fresh cases. Besides, other than serving under Damien Tull but retiring well before the murder, there just wasn't anything to pursue in terms of the Guards, or the Vatican. Pushing back from her desk, she swiveled her chair until she faced Nick. "And?"

"And it turns out some stuff's missing." Nick's head disappeared for a second then popped back into view. He wore a blue shirt with a yellow tie that highlighted the cornflower hue of his eyes. "Flour and sugar."

"Yeah?" Emma was more interested now. Sugar was used to cut crystal. Flour cut dust. She came around to Nick's cubicle, stood behind his right shoulder. "Show me."

"Right here." Nick told his computer what to highlight. "The guy put in an order for seven sugars, and five bags of flour. Here," he said, pointing when she leaned in over his shoulder for a closer look. "Four bags of flour left on the shelves, but all the sugar was old."

"Hunh." Emma read the inventory again and said, "I checked with my people on the street. None of them had ever heard of Pio and no chatter afterward, no stories. There was nothing in his service record. He was squeaky clean."

"Emma." If Nick wore glasses, he'd have peered over the top at her, and it was then that she realized she'd unselfconsciously put a hand on his shoulder and they were now nearly cheek to cheek. Nick's lips ghosted in a smile, and he didn't ease back. "Since when has a squeaky clean record ever deterred or satisfied you?"

They were close enough so she was seeing double. Emma straightened, a little nonplussed. "Since the captain took a big bite out of my ass last year over that Tull fiasco, that's when," she said, with a little too much cop-tough-as-titanium bluster.

Nick didn't blink. "Looks okay to me. In fact, it looks just fine."

"Get serious."

"I am."

She blew past it. "I can't read into Pio's record something that isn't there. I don't think this has legs," she said, backing away, grateful that she had more work and her mind was already jumping ahead three squares to the interviews she had to finish up before they caught another case. She scooted around to her cubicle and dropped into her chair. Unfortunately, the paper on their case had not written itself or disappeared. "Right off the top of my head, I can't think of where we can go with this."

"I could say something about this being half-baked."

"Please." Emma jabbed keys. But she did smile. "Don't."

"Okay." Pause. "By the way."

"Yeah?"

"Nice perfume."

Her turn to pause. "Thanks. And Nick?"

"Yeah?"

"Can we meet."

A pause. "What?"

"Can we meet. A tryster's first three words, nine letters: Can we meet."

"Oh. Wait a second." Pause. "Hey, that's right."

She sighed, a little relieved they were back to ground she navigated with ease. "I know that."



12 July 3028
2300 hours

The tiny cubicle Father Michael Conley rented by the week but never slept in was perched over a curry house. The room smelled of cumin and coconut overlain with cigarette smoke and the faintest tinge of mildew from a moldy carpet Conley wouldn't have walked on in his bare feet even if he hadn't been in, well, not exactly in hiding but not taking in the sights either. The curry house was in the south side of Piccadilly, and the food not half bad but he'd no appetite and used the congealed green glop of a half-eaten palak paneer as an ashtray. The continual neon glow from the shops, restaurants and theatres off the Circus was so bright the darkness thinned to a grainy veil.

Dressed in olive drag trousers and a black tee, he sat hard by the window and smoked in the gloom, looking for the world more like a commando than a priest. He had a bird's eye view of the Circus: a continual stream of newsfeeds scrolling along the buildings the way they did in nearly every city center from Times Square to the Kremlin, and a mass of humanity—some in hovers but most on foot—churning round and round, like water spiraling a drain but never quite disappearing. He wondered if that was what God really saw whenever He decided to look down on what He'd created—if He bothered to look at all.

The thought brought another image to his mind. Standing over a sink, scrubbing Blair's dried blood from beneath his nails.

Anything for the good of the bloody Church.

Conley sucked down smoke. Well, no good dwelling on it though he felt the need to pray. Yet dropping to his knees in this place felt faintly ridiculous. Come to think of it, he hadn't visited a church since coming to this godforsaken city, or even gone to confession. And yet what confessor could absolve him of his crimes? His lips turned down in a grimace. The hell of it was he actually knew the answer. For men like him, there were confessors like the Cardinal Protector.

All this blood, a man dead, and for what? Conley fingered a cigarette pack from the window sill, shook out another smoke, lit that with his dying smoke, then ground the butt into the cold glop of spinach and cheese. They were still no closer to understanding who was involved, or even—exactly—in what. Blair clearly had suspected something because the data on the crystal was only

half complete: a list of numbers but no idea of where the accounts might be squirreled away. Without the names of the banks, they couldn't backtrack to the architects, those individual account holders. No account holders, no way of knowing who was in league with whom.

So where was the data? Not in Blair's home, or his office. As soon as Conley discovered that the information was incomplete, they'd gone back to Blair's house (hoping to take care of some unfinished business, and yet another worry). When they found nothing, they'd broken into the man's office, but the result was the same. After that, there wasn't much else to do but for that woman to melt into the shadows again and vanish, and for Conley to await his orders as he had always done.

And that woman, whatever and whoever she really is—very strange. A little calculating, as if she played up certain things for my benefit. I can't imagine she could be so bloodthirsty and not betray herself eventually. Though the Cardinal Protector must know what he's doing, employing her.

So a man—not exactly innocent but who was Conley to judge—another human being was dead and for nothing and now... His dark eyes drifted down to a newsfeed screaming in breathless, crimson capitals: *Torso discovered in Thames. Yard still stumped.* He wondered if the pun was intentional and thought, given news organizations, it probably was.

His link chirped. Without bothering to query for ID, he screwed the bud into his ear and punched in. "You've seen the news, Eminence?"

"Yes." The Cardinal Protector's voice was deep, basso, smooth as black velvet, with just the touch of an accent that reminded Conley of a Bremen native. "But if you've been thorough he won't be missed, at least for awhile and perhaps never, especially if he arranges to elope and resettle elsewhere in the Sphere."

This, the priest considered, was true. To all public accounts, Blair and his mistress had left the planet that very night and were, even now, en route for Deneb Algedi where they would stay for a short time before setting off again, the two agents posing as the lawyer and his mistress, effectively leaving a trail of planets from which they'd hopscotch their way around the Inner Sphere. By the time anyone suspected, this would be long finished and barely a blip on anyone's HUD. Except...



He pushed those thoughts aside for the moment. No use panicking yet. So he said, "I'm not doing any good here. I think I should come back to Rome."

"I agree. The Davion security chief should arrive in the next week to ten days, and I'll want you in Rome if, God forbid, anything happens."

"Then I'm on my way."

"Excellent. And, Michael, I know this troubles your soul. But we are at war with the followers of Satan. Remember, *signifer Sanctus Michael repraesentet eas in lucam sanctam.*"

Michael's mission: To call away from the earth and bring men's souls to judgment. Somehow this did not comfort Conley. *Who am I to bring anyone to judgment? I can barely look at myself in a mirror.* Aloud, he said, "Yes, Eminence. I hear and obey."

There must have been something in his voice because the Cardinal Protector said, "Michael, my son, do you wish me to hear your confession?"

His eyes were shut tight, but he still felt the burn of tears pricking the lids. He nodded then remembered that the Cardinal Protector could not see him. "Yes," he said, aware that his voice trembled. He searched for a calm place in his soul to begin and could find none. But he tried anyway. "My God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee and I detest all my sins..."

When he was done and the Cardinal Protector had absolved him of sin and dispensed penance, Conley punched out and dropped his earbud into his pocket. He did not feel clean, or relieved. Instead, he felt...wrung out and yoked with a weight that was growing too heavy for his heart. Stained. Blood still on his hands, leaking through his skin and staining his soul.

Work, focus on simple things. What I do, I do for the good of the Church. There is that; there is always that.

He spent three minutes gathering together his few belongings and then an extra twenty wiping down every conceivable surface with tissue paper he flushed down the toilet, depressing the handle with his knuckles. He used the edge of a coin to pry up the shower drain and rooted around beneath the lip of the sink, searching for



stray hairs. Not that anyone would come looking for him, but he always took precautions.

As he worked, he said the requisite number of prayers the Cardinal Protector had set for his contrition and absolution, but his mind wandered and he thought back to what he'd said to the Cardinal Protector—or, rather, what he'd omitted. Yes, the public record had Blair and his mistress off-world. Except...

Except when they'd arrived at Blair's home that first night, the mistress was gone. Nothing hurried in the look of the home, and they'd quickly searched it top to bottom. The woman was just... gone. Had something Blair said sent the woman running? Possibly. Perhaps she was the one with the missing information, though that didn't seem likely. Their available intelligence on the woman turned up nothing extraordinary. Yet her disappearance niggled at Conley like a bad tooth.

When he was done, he spent a moment just looking over the still flat, trying to think if there was anything he'd missed. The carton of leftover food and cigarette butts was in his left hand; he'd toss the carton into an incinerator on his way to Heathrow Spaceport. The sum total of his hours spent in this flat was minimal and so, yes—his dark gaze skipped from window to chair to icebox—he thought he'd wiped it all.

A voice in his mind, unbidden, but not that still, small voice he rarely heard anymore but one very much his own: *All except the blood on your hands.*

"I can't help that," Conley said to the empty room. "As God is my witness, what I do, I do for the good of the Church."

But if God was listening, He didn't answer.



New Scotland Yard, London, Terra

28 July 3028

Detective Inspector Kip Collins didn't rank high enough for a corner office, something decent to look at, say, Big Ben and Parliament just across Bridge Street, or even a goggle at the pier hard by Westminster Station, where the tourist boats trolled the Thames in a foamy gray-white scum of prop wash, and gulls gathered like clouds for a hand-out. No, Collins's peepers got an eyeful of the dustbins tucked in the far left corner of the courtyard, a black cloud of blowflies instead of gulls. Brilliant.

Seated behind his institutional gray metal desk, Collins decided, instead, to scowl at the wavering image of his chief forensics investigator on holo. "What do you mean you can't narrow down an ID? For Christ's sake, Dawson, you've had the remains for going on three weeks. I've seen you pull DNA from a...a..." Collins couldn't really think of an appropriate analogy, gave it up, and finished, irritably, "I've seen you do it. So what's the problem?"

"You mean, beyond the obvious?" Dawson, a pinched-looking, priggish man, gave Collins a withering look. "That we're talking a nibbled torso, cell bloat, disarticulated limbs, and no head, no fingers, no feet? No dental records, no fingerprints, no footprints. All we've got besides the carcass are rotting clothes stuffed with currency and weighted with rocks. Anything on the currency's long gone. So, not much left to do identification on now, is there?"

Finger-combing his scruff of sand-colored hair, Collins puffed his cheeks and blew out. "What about DNA?"

"What about it? Yeah, so we've got DNA from what was left of the marrow. So bloody what? Unless it's registered, it's no cop. Valueless. Registering DNA for ID purposes is purely voluntary. Remember, registration was only introduced ten years ago. Sure, parents will register their kids. But until registering becomes mandatory, most adults won't do it, except maybe some wife cottons onto her husband's shagging somebody who ain't her. Then she might take in some hairs from his brush, or dandruff, or some such, and then she's got something if the wanker decides to up and vanish, or if she wants to string him up by the short and curlies in a settlement. Although I can tell you, a lot of them wives are just as happy the sod's gone, especially if he leaves behind some nice wad of bling. But how many blighters believe they're going to end up snatched, or belly up, anyway? Answer: no one.



All I can do is match DNA against the global bank and the Yard's outstanding warrants and felon database. The Yard's tied in with everyone on-world. Big zero. You can run missing persons, but someone has to report first. Might not be too many people sorry this particular bloke's gone. If it was me, my mother-in-law would second that."

"Mmmm, she's a fine sense of the absurd. So we know he's not a criminal, or if he is, he didn't get caught until just now." Collins wrinkled his nose as if Dawson had ripped a big one. "What *can* you tell me?"

Dawson looked off to one side and Collins heard the sound of paper being shuffled. "Your torso's a man's," Dawson said. "Roundabout fifty, fifty-five, I'd say, judging by the condition of what's left of the heart and liver. No identifying marks, no tattoos, no moles, no scars. But I can tell you he sat on his rather broad bum most days and didn't eat his green leafies. Nasty hemorrhoids, but a nice set of knickers. Designer and all."

"Desk jockey, then." Collins pinched his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger and twisted, thinking. "Abel over at Evidence said the clothes were first-rate, not off the rack, so hand-tailored and that costs, though in the name of Christ, who tailors their shorts? Sounds like a rich fart, and that could be anybody. Only there's the currency. All different notes and such. Doesn't mean much except..."

"What?"

Collins blinked back to attention. "Well, I was just thinking. Currency's a bit off, know what I mean? Like it's a dare, or a puzzler. Who has access to that much cash? A banker mostly, except you'd expect to find the body hard by Southwark or London Bridge now, wouldn't you? But no, body's deliberately sunk in a bee line for St. Paul's. I just can't figure it, though. Dump a torso you don't want identified but stuff his pockets with cash?" Collins scratched the back of his head. "Like taking out an ad."

"Maybe the cash is a signal to someone, somewhere."

"Yeah." Collins sighed. "Only who, and where? And what's the fracking message?"

They were silent a moment. Then Dawson said, slowly, "You know, there's one thing you haven't mentioned, Kip."

"Yeah? What's that?"



"There's the cash, right?" Dawson cocked his head to one side. "But what about the rocks mixed in with the cash?"

Collins looked puzzled. "What are you talking about? They're rocks."

"No, no, Kip. You aren't thinking. There are rocks, yeah. But then?" Dawson winked. "They's *stones*."

BATTLECORPS



***Intraorbital Shuttle,
En route ComStar First Circuit Compound
Hilton Head, Terra
2 August 3028***

Myndo Waterly, Precentor Dieron, scanned the news dispatch illuminated on her noteputer twice over. Normally, a story in the *London ComStar Times* would never have captured her interest, but after the encrypted communiqué intercepted by ROM was delivered, she saw that she now had more than one set of worries.

Thumbing to the passage in the attached story again, she read the highlighted words: *...variety of stone peculiar to ancient church constructions in the south of England. Sources close to the investigation say that New Scotland Yard is now looking to the nearby Temple Church for possible leads. "It seems to fit," said one official, who spoke with this reporter on the condition of anonymity. "The Temple Church was built for the Knights Templar, and they were the pope's go-to men during the Crusades, the money brokers. Original bankers, if you like, and subject only to the church's authority. When you consider that the clothes weighted down with the body were filled with cash and Caen stone, and directly opposite St. Paul's Cathedral— though it's Anglican, I'll give you that— the connection's there. A pun, you look at it right. Sort of robbing Peter to pay Paul, that kind of thing, or vice versa."*

This official hinted that they were very close to making an arrest but refused to speculate on rumors that the unidentified torso was, indeed, an influential banker who perhaps got himself into some shady business...

Well, thank Blake, the police hadn't hit upon the right profession— unless they *did* know and chose not to divulge the information in the hopes of flushing out the killer. (She was not unfamiliar with the tactic of planting news stories or tidbits into ready ears where they stood the best chance of making things happen.) Yet, the police were close.

Waterly turned her gaze to the view outside the shuttle. They were still fairly high, arcing over the North Pole and scything through the deep lapis of the mesosphere edged with the darker cobalt of the stratosphere. The interior of her cabin was dimmed, and her reflection—all eyes and a grim set to her mouth—was a little startling, as if she'd been caught hanging, outside, in mid-air. Then her eye snagged on a scintillating curtain of intense green-



yellow light edged with deeply red bands above and below.

An aurora, probably the result of a solar flare, and a rare treat: Hilton Head was too far south, and the charged particles that spiraled to Terra did so along the planet's magnetic field lines, eventually entering Terra's atmosphere at the poles. Beautiful, yet...She frowned. There was something else about the aurora she was forgetting but couldn't put her finger on it...

Her eyes dropped back to her noteputer. New Scotland Yard was closer to being right than it knew, but whoever had assassinated Ian Blair (and she had absolutely no doubt that the victim *was* Blair) hadn't planted clues to taunt police. And while there were probably any number of conspiracy theorists and bizarre cults, those stones and that cash were meant for someone with ready eyes and knowledge. Someone like her.

The Primus? Perhaps, but I think not, or else I'd have been apprehended already. After last year's dust-up over the Silver Eagle—and, oh, Tiepolo doesn't really know how very specific I was with that ISF agent—if the Primus knew, I'd be reading my own obituary from my grave.

The affair of the *Silver Eagle* had been a warning: a close call that left Waterly doubly cautious. But Tiepolo wasn't stupid. He had his eye on her now, and if she was to engineer the rifts necessary to end the threat of Davion-Steiner domination of the Inner Sphere, she must insulate herself as well.

As, for example, Ian Blair—a lawyer with no knowledge of why the money was needed, or anything that might lead back to her. But *someone* knew. The Capellans? Staring at those ghostly supercharged flickers of light, she ran a finger over her lips, thinking it over. Yes, the Capellans were the most likely candidates. After all, it had been their plan to begin with, and Karns their man until yet another well-placed word to ISF ended with their spiriting away both the doctor and his treasure trove of secrets, and placing the doctor—a man no one except one particular power would miss—under her control.

If there was anyone within ComStar who understood the enduring hatreds born of ancient slights and insults, and the enmity born of religion, she did. She had prepared well, however, and though there was now this wildcard in play—and *Davion, too, mustn't forget that*—she had eyes and ears where it counted most, in every corner and where her opposition least expected.



Yes, and then I will enjoy watching Hanse Davion or that accursed Archon try to explain that away. No matter what Steiner's denials, Davion will remember not only because he legitimately had the thoughts but because now there's doubt, and Karns's particular legacy. And because there is the child, my dear Archon, there is the child, and DNA does not, cannot lie.

Who better to understand the damage such revelations would bring, properly timed, than another religious? The child would ruin everything for the two Houses, including whatever plans for conquest the Fox had up his sleeve because, oh, he was planning something, she was sure of it. The Fox was wily and sly, but he was like a rat, too, nibbling at the margins, slithering through tunnels and byways. Well, that precious Federated Commonwealth would become null and void, and that would simply hasten the day when she ascended to Primus.

Because I will save ComStar and the Inner Sphere from Davion's thirst for domination. The child is the key to bringing down Hanse Davion, yet another offspring from that accursed bloodline, and someday ComStar will rule with a presence in every realm, an ear to every door, an eye peering into every soul, so help me Blake.

Later, when the shuttle had entered airspace above the First Circuit Compound, she would remember what had troubled her about that aurora, now vanished. From an old legend peculiar to the ancient Orientals—the aurora was the fiery breath of a dragon, or a prediction that someone very important was about to be born.

As the shuttle skimmed over an ocean so smooth it looked like blue plate glass, her mind went, without rhyme or reason, to that farcical trial of excommunication of the previous year, and what Primus Tiepolo had quoted from the Word of Blake: *"A well-placed word can defeat a BattleMech legion, but worry for the messenger if his duplicity is revealed."*

At the time, she'd merely scoffed at his using a turn of the phrase and his own actions to her advantage. She'd wished to be able to dredge up something from the Word of Blake to counter his arguments but come up empty. Now, in the aurora, she had an answer.

"No, Primus Tiepolo, not a well-placed *word*," Waterly murmured. She stared at her twin trapped within the shuttle's viewport. "A well-placed *heir*."

In-system, Terra

2 August 3028

On another ship, Gloria (not her real name but it would do) studied the newsfeeds just as intently, her smoke-gray eyes darting back and forth as she read the London newsfeed. Reading it again gave her gooseflesh, and she shivered. A little like stepping over her grave. She chafed her bare arms, felt the forest of hackles. My God, if she'd delayed by even so much as a day, she'd be just as dead.

Someone on to us?

The idea made it hard to swallow, and she took a sip from a tall clear glass of very cold water: a luxury that she particularly enjoyed under acceleration. The water didn't help much, though. The glass was sweaty with cold condensate, and she traced little figure eights with her right index finger as she thought.

Someone knew that there was a plan of some sort, but whoever they were, they didn't have the whole thing, or they'd have come after her first, not Blair. If they knew, if, God forbid, someone recognized her from six years before. But that was absurd. After she'd been discovered—after she'd seen the wisdom of choosing a different path with a wholly different powerbroker—she'd been very careful about where she'd gone. Changed the color of her hair and even the color of her eyes. (Now, though, when she looked in a mirror? She saw the resemblance, how she'd made the choice unconsciously, as if all the byways she'd taken through life were converging to precisely this end, this self-made present.)

They knew about Blair. So that must mean they know someone in the Vatican's involved, but not who, or what's planned.

She could cut and run. A dumb idea. They'd just hunt her down. She couldn't abort because she wasn't running the show. She was expendable six years ago, and in many ways, that hadn't changed. Not that she'd much choice. For heaven's sake, the Maskirovka had even gone after that doctor, and she was nowhere close in terms of the Capellan food chain. She'd been thrown a lifeline—for a price—and she'd taken it. Gladly.

But it won't end with Blair. If they're smart, they're going to watch Reinhardt— if they know about him. They might not. Blair was always a little anal that way and very good at sequestering information and money. That may be why they went after Blair in the



first place, to find out who's involved inside the Vatican, neutralize them and shut things down.

Then a new thought occurred to her. What if people connected to the *Vatican* had been the ones to get rid of Blair? That wasn't as far-fetched as it sounded at first blush. With the operation in full-swing, Reinhardt, and whoever was pulling Reinhardt's strings (because no colonel commander of any guard anywhere had that much power), might already be operating on the theory that a little mop-up as you go saved a world of headaches later on. Apparently, Blair had outlived his usefulness. Maybe Reinhardt would, too, after this was over.

Or, maybe, the Vatican had sent out its own agents to discover who was involved and dismantle the plan to save the Church embarrassment and exposure. Wouldn't do to see godly men who didn't hesitate to extort, steal, lie. Murder.

And now that she thought about it a bit, she wondered if she'd come as close to death as she surmised. Maybe her death was beside the point. Maybe Blair's killers had acted only after they'd known that she was off-world because she still had an important part to play. But when her part was done? There might be someone waiting to take her out, along with Reinhardt. That someone might just be ISF, the Vatican, the Capellans, or another fanatical Waterly loyalist.

Not totally out of the realm of reason. Myndo Waterly might not have much reason to keep me alive once this is over.

Too many players, and not all the hands visible. She took another sip of water, let its wetness roll in her mouth. Closing her eyes, she held the cool glass against her forehead as if she'd a fever. Too much to think about right now. She had to concentrate on the job. Just finish the job and get out. Just finish it and disappear.

The fretful wail of a child pricked through her thoughts like a pin piercing a balloon. She exhaled, very slowly, and replaced the glass on its tray.

Yes, finish the job, and then run like hell for the Periphery.

She pushed up from her seat and made her way down a short corridor linking her quarters with the next over. She called for lights then crossed and bent over a crib jury-rigged to a bulkhead. The child was half-asleep and whimpered when she picked him up. The boy's forehead was sweaty, and his honey-blond curls were



a little damp, but then he stoppered his mouth with two fingers and leaned his forehead into the hollow of her throat. Her heart suddenly swelled with something close to pity.

Hair's not mine, but those are my eyes beneath all this artifice. He could almost be mine.

"Ah, poor thing, don't cry. You miss mummy, I know." She cupped his head in her hand and pressed her lips to his hair. The baby smelled like sweet milk. "But don't you worry. Everything will be over, soon enough."



In-system, Terra

3 August 3028

Ardan Sortek's eyes stung with fatigue, and he was so tired that the last stim he'd let dissolve under his tongue left him more jangled than alert, his thoughts bouncing in a herky-jerky of disconnected bits and half-conjectures, with all the agility of a hobbled BattleMech mired in quicksand. Pushing up from his workstation, he stretched and worked out the kinks in his shoulders and neck, grateful for the gravity.

His eyes drifted to a computer screen, and the image frozen there: that moment when the doctor's killer glanced over his shoulder. No mistaking the recognition in those eyes, or their nearly feral malevolence...no, no, not malevolence. That was the wrong word. Ardan screwed up his face in thought. Panic, yes, that was there, but also a sort of grim determination. And the reaction: one moment lying on his back talking to the doctor about a dream, and then the next, leaping up, murder in his eyes...

Like a door opened somewhere in his mind, and now there's no stopping him. But from what?

Ardan hadn't a clue. Yet his gut told him that the doctor's killer—*by Christ, he's not even got a proper name*—was headed for either of two places, and of those, only Terra was proximate. Terra was also the only planet that made sense because Ardan didn't believe in coincidence, not with the wedding in a month's time. But what was the trigger, really? Ardan had watched the doctor's death so many times over he didn't need the computer to run it anymore. The images flickered on the screen of his mind, and the blood, so much of it, most of all. He was missing something; he knew it. Felt it. But what? He'd looked for clues in the room, the way the doctor was dressed, even the luncheon the doctor had shared with his patient depicted in the footage from a monitored patio.

Time was Ardan's enemy. Another three days, and he would make landfall. He'd wanted to head straight for Hilton Head and assess ComStar security for the wedding. Despite having received multiple assurances from the compound's security captain, he didn't trust anyone with Hanse Davion's life and doubted the ROM could provide the kind of protection that Ardan's prince and best friend would require. No secret that ComStar held a historical enmity for the prince, and there might be an enterprising adept waiting for his shot.



But first he would travel to the Vatican. Not his idea of fun, but he would be remiss if he didn't also inspect security arrangements made for Cardinal Flynn's visit. Flynn was due to arrive at the Vatican on August 9, remain as a guest of the pope for three days, after which time Cardinal Maraschal of the Roman Catholic archdiocese on Tharkad would join him. After almost another week in Rome, they would then continue together to Hilton Head where both would officiate at the wedding on August 20.

Common sense told Ardan that Flynn wasn't exactly the most welcome man on the planet. Before Maraschal arrived to take the media glare off Flynn, Ardan was certain some very unhappy Roman Catholics would be more than willing to show just how unwelcoming they could be.

The reality wasn't pretty, the animosity between the Roman Catholics and those of New Avalon not quite as smoothed over as the Vatican Press Office had pretended when announcing the visit. Two undeniable facts: Hanse Davion was New Avalon Catholic, and Melissa Steiner an Old Roman. A semantic difference? Not on your life.

The New Avalon Catholics were a touchy subject. The party line was that the two branches, created in the wake of Stefan Amaris and his Greenhaven Gestapo's siege of the Vatican in 2770, existed in relative tolerance and harmony. That was horse shit. No secret that the Old Romans (read: the Vatican) still smarted from the insult. So Ardan would be damned if he'd let Cardinal Flynn wander into the proverbial lions' den without checking out the place.

"Because who knows how many assassins are waiting in the wings?" he murmured, and then grunted at the absurdity of his question. The answer was, of course, as many as required.

His mind clicked back to his current dilemma. He had to figure out where their patient had got to. He had a head start, only for where? If he was loose somewhere on Terra and someone who wasn't Ardan or one of Ardan's men intercepted him...

"Computer," Ardan said. "Replay, time index seven-point-two-three, audio only." Audio only because he was concerned that the images were distracting him from something important.

The computer complied, and the doctor's voice picked up in mid-sentence: *Tell me again about this dream you keep having. This is, what, the fourth time in a week?*



Another voice, the patient's, and one Ardan knew almost better than his own: *No, the fifth. Every night, the same damn thing: I'm in my 'Mech, my BattleMaster going down this long tunnel. The Gauntlet, I think, on New Avalon. Red light all around, darting ruby streamers and I'm starting to sweat, run hot. There are other BattleMechs. Ardan in his Victor...on my left, I think—and then he says the strangest thing...*

The doctor: *Wait. Ardan's never spoken before, isn't that right?*

No...you're right, that is new. Or maybe...

What?

I was going to say that maybe he was always saying something only I'd never heard clearly before...

Go back then in the dream. Let your mind drift and just tell me what you see and what you hear.

Well, I know that the tunnel's so long and there's death all around and dry dust and bleached bones...

But what do you hear?

I...I hear water.

Water. A lake, a river?

A river, yes. Like I've stumbled into a vault for the dead with the river Styx flowing through like blood, and there's no ladder for heaven, no way of getting out because the Eye of all the gods is watching, waiting. All the 'Mechs, they all go into the dark, dancing into a tunnel of death under the hills to a house under the sea. I look to Ardan and then he's right beside me, in my cockpit and his lips are moving but now I can hear him...

And what does Ardan say?

He...he asks me if I believe in God the Father, or the old baby. Isn't that odd...Old baby. Well, I mean, what do you think?

It's a little off, yes, just a bit. (Pause) Are you a religious man?

Me? No, not really. I'm a...heretic, I think. Someone once called me that. Long time ago. There was water, I remember, and fire in the sky. But I can't exactly remember who.

What comes to mind when you think about God?



That I am a heretic? (An uncomfortable laugh) I mean, it's hard to think that there's someone up there, watching all the time, judging everything you do, an eye on things. I mean, if there's anything.

So you're not sure.

No. I...Maybe I should be. I don't know. You know, the funniest thing just popped into my mind. Something important, an old saying, I think. Better to believe in something and risk nothing than to believe in nothing and risk all. Something like that....

Pascal.

Sorry?

Pascal's wager. He was a mathematician but thought belief in God was rational, that humans are compelled to gamble. Let's go back. What did you mean when you said the Eye of all the gods? Do you mean the Eye of God?

No, I mean all guh...I don't know. But Ardan caught the new suspicion in the patient's voice, as if he wondered what trap was being set. Well, I mean...there's one there, right behind us.

The surveillance cam?

If you say so. If that's what you say it is.

You don't believe it?

I can think what I like. I have eyes. I can see.

Of course, of course. (Pause) Tell me, how do you feel about a child?

(A very, very long pause) Then: You mean, like having my own? Like a son?

If that's what pops into your mind.

I...I don't know...Other than the obvious, you mean?

What's obvious?

Why, that I should protect the child at any cost, of course. The child is all that matters.

Protect the child.



Yes. Now, a shift in his tone, as if the patient had experienced the dawn of something coming clear for the first time. Yes.

Whose child?

I...well, Melissa, she wants children, and of course, there's no question that an heir would solidify the regime, continue the dynasty and...

But Melissa isn't part of the equation, and you're not solidifying any regime.

What are you talking about? What's more important than assuring our security? For that, I need an heir who...

No, no, I think you're misunderstanding me. I understand you feel threatened, but I asked about you. I didn't ask about him, I want you to...

What's this, you or him? Him who? I'm trying to tell you. My enemies will stop at nothing to...

No, no, his enemies. Your fears have no basis in real...

What do you know? A squeal of leather, and Ardan's mind supplied the image: the patient, sitting abruptly, swinging his legs around. What, now you're saying I'm crazy, that I'm insane? I told you. I have to protect the child, and that's all there is to it.

No, no. In Ardan's mind's eye, he saw the doctor now, his hands up, palms out, like a man fending off a snarling dog. Calm down, let's just...

Don't you tell me to calm down, like some kind of lunatic! You sitting there, scribbling on that little tablet of yours and all the time you're thinking, aren't you? You're judging me, like God or something, sitting up there, spying on all of us and...

No one's judging you. I'm simply pointing out a fallacy...

See, see? You don't believe a word I've said, all these months.

The sound of fabric against leather, and Ardan knew that was the moment the doctor shifted in his seat. Ardan saw the doctor's face in close-up, even though the angle of the image and its focus hadn't really changed—but Ardan could imagine the sweat pearling along the doctor's upper lip because *he'd* have sweated under the hot fury in those eyes, too. *It's not that we don't believe you...*



Oh, the royal we...

But you're under stress. Perhaps we're going at this too quickly.

No, no, don't you understand? It's all locked in, up here, in my brain, and I can't get at it. Like the dream and...

What?

I know what's wrong. With the dream, I mean. You know what it is? Ardan's not married. He doesn't have a child, but I know what the child means in the dream, I know that child, and I know I have to protect it...

What do you mean?

The patient's voice, only risen a notch, building toward panic: I...I don't know...something...

What is it? The child? Protect the child?

Yes...yes, it's the baby, it's the child, it's that boy and he...he...

We should stop a moment...

No, no, I don't want to stop; why do you people keep trying to stop me? Don't you understand, I have to save...

Let me call for a sedative and then...

No, no, I can't sleep, there's no time for sleep, there's no time because...up there! Can't you see it? There's danger, and that Eye...

That's just a holocam. It's always been there, it's always watching and it hasn't changed. No, just try to calm...

God, you don't understand! They can't win. I can't let them. I wish I could make you see what I see and know...

Try to tell me then. I'm here. Tell me.

I'll...I'll...I can't...the words won't... Fear in the patient's voice now. It's in my head, I know it is, but I can't get it out. Like it's all tangled up in a ball, like yarn a cat's batted round.

We'd better...I'm going to call for...

No. Then, more forcefully: No, no, I won't let you!

And, finally, the doctor, realizing the danger but much too late: No, what are you doing, nono...!



"Pause," Ardan said, and the doctor's voice cut out in mid-scream. The sudden silence was ringing, always something about that transition to silence that Ardan did not understand because silence *did* have a sound all its own.

Ardan replayed the conversation in his mind, and his thoughts hitched in the same places: the *Victor*. And what he'd said... "I said *godfather*," Ardan murmured. "I never said God *the* Father. I asked Hanse if he'd mind being a godfather."

But long afterward. The same was true of Ardan's *Victor*. His 'Mech was refurbished, made of bits and pieces, and restored *after*. On the other hand, none of this was classified; Hanse had stood as godfather; and although the Retreat was essentially quarantined, people talked. Casual bits of conversation, either overheard or used directly: Who would think these would be problems, or worse, seeds around which to build delusions?

Even as he thought back to that day three years ago, Ardan remembered another snatch of dialogue, something Hanse had said about his *BattleMaster*: "This old baby saved us all."

A child needing saving and protection, the Gauntlet, a long dark tunnel of death and bones, and an eye, or God's eye. This all had to mean something. Everything, jumbled together in the cauldron of a sick, deluded man's mind. Leading to what? Where?

But Ardan's weary brain couldn't parse the puzzle, and he felt the heaviness of his fatigue like the drape of a woolen cloak soaked through. Ardan's quarters had a single reinforced window and he now turned away from his workstation. "Lights out."

The computer instantly complied, and the window filled with stars more numerous than grains of sand in the palm of a child's hand. Or—depending on how you looked at things—a million bright, staring eyes.

"God in heaven, where are you?" Ardan whispered. "Where *are* you?"

