

Bright Star

The Apprentice, Volume 2

A Twelve Systems Chronicle

E.G. Manetti

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Dedication

For my parents who gave me roots and wings

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Prologue – The Twelve Systems

The society of The Twelve Systems is dominated by the warrior elite, the genetic descendants of the Five Warriors. These five powerful warlords ended three centuries of interstellar warfare known as the Anarchy to establish the modern Order and its governing protocols. In the millennium since the end of the Anarchy, the warrior elite have consolidated societal control into a handful of vast commercial interests of which the most powerful and wealthy are the cartels.

Owned by the great warrior families identified by their family emblem or ‘cartouche,’ these commerce enterprises are locked in fierce competitive struggles for increased prominence. To command any cartel is to control immense wealth and influence. To command one of the five largest cartels is to number among the two score most powerful individuals in the Twelve Systems.

Fourth among the cartels is the Serengeti Group which controls Vistrite, the semi-liquid crystal essential to all advanced technology. Under the command of the devious, ruthless and unconventional Lucius Mercio, Preeminence of the Blooded Dagger Cartouche, the Serengeti Group has begun to contend for third among the Cartels.

For the first time Lucius Mercio has taken an apprentice, Lilian. The brilliant scion of a disgraced cartouche, in return for her life Lillian swore to serve three years as Lucius’ indentured servant, yielding him total control of her body, intellect and will. Within the first four months of her bond Lilian proved her worth, loyalty and courage. She has yet to begin the task for which Lucius acquired her. To achieve his ambitions, Lucius requires Lilian’s brilliance. To make use of it, he must keep her alive. It is proving more difficult than he anticipated.

1. Shrine Beggar

The Five Warriors of Antiquity – Era of Three Systems

1. Socraide Omsted – controlled three of the four planets in the First System.
2. Rimon Ben Claude - controlled both planets in the Second System.
3. Mulan Tsao – controlled Artesia in the First System.
4. Jonathan Metricelli – controlled the two Vistrite Planets in the Third System and the Vistrite trade.
5. Sinead Standingbear – controlled Sinead's World in the Third System.

Sevenday 23, Day 7

I am the sum of my ancestors. I am the foundation of my family. Eyes closed, Lilian resolutely forces her breathing to even, forces her panic into a small cold knot she can surround and contain with her discipline. *Honor is my blade and shield.*

The hard cot on which she sits is bolted to the stone walls of the Incarceration Halls, an intimidating stone edifice that predates the Fourth Warrior, Jonathan Metricelli. *Honor knows not fear.* As she has countless times in the past bells, Lilian reaches for the reassurance of her thorn and conservator's seal only to find them gone, taken with her belt and racing shoes.

A day that began so pleasantly has deteriorated into disaster. Racing in the Garden Center with the rising of the Seventh Day sun is one of Lilian's few pleasures. The great parkland of Crevasse City offers miles of trails, and at her preferred bell, quietude that is so often lacking the other six days of a sevenday.

Honor endures. Even Lilian's extraordinary discipline is unable to ignore the scent that is unmistakably an incarceration cell. A miasma formed from harsh cleansers overlaying the scent of anger, pain and desperation that has seeped into the very stones.

Adelaide's aid, I erred. Lilian pulls her knees to her chest and then drops them quickly as the stench of drying blood overwhelms her senses. *I am the sum of my ancestors.*

Honor acts as duty commands. She should have been more attentive. This morning, enjoying the exercise, caught up in her expectations for the coming sevenday, Lilian paid little heed to her surroundings ...

...the Shrine beggar came out of nowhere. Normally those desperate denizens of the Garden Center cling to the shielding walls of the Five Warriors' Shrines, subsisting on the twice daily Shrine gifts of soup and the pittance the tender-hearted yield. Lurking in the shadow of dense foliage, the beggar is invisible as Lilian rounds the turn...

The unmistakable sound of the cell door recessing has Lilian straightening her shoulders, and raising her chin. She will not rise for the guard, she will not cower either.

It is not the guard. Sergeant D'Angelo enters followed by the unmistakable figure of

Master Trevelyan.

Milord! Lucius Mercio has not abandoned his apprentice and conservator. Although unknown outside of Blooded Dagger Cartouche and Serengeti, Master Trevelyan is milord's spymaster and enforcer. He is here to execute the will of Monsignor Lucius Mercio, Lilian's bondholder.

"Mistress Lilian, what say you?" Master Associate Trevelyan is a tall robust man of fifty plus years. His erect posture, precisely creased suit, close-cropped brown hair and sharp, no nonsense manner bring to mind the militia.

Rising as Trevelyan speaks, Lilian summons control with the Warriors' Litany, *I am the sum of my ancestors*. Deep breath, respond, "If you please Master Trevelyan, the beggar had a garrote ..."

...a blur of movement caught in the corner of her eye has Lilian reaching for her thorn as decades of training and recent experience warn her of peril. Her assailant crashes into her from behind, tumbling them both hard onto the pathway. A knee attempts to pin her to the path as a sharp bite scrapes along her face and neck. Garrote! Awkwardly striking up and out, Lilian slips her three-sided blade between her throat and death. The cord that would strangle yields and Lilian tumbles free of her attacker. Rolling to her feet, Lilian spins defensively, thorn at the ready.

The ragged figure of her attacker is on his knees, gazing at something in his hands.

Stunned by the suddenness of the attack, poised for continued battle, it is several long breaths before Lilian comprehends the sight before her. The man is frantically attempting to press his partially severed hand back onto his bleeding wrist. In slicing free of the cord, Lilian half-severed one of the hands holding the garrote.

Blood, so much blood. Lilian's blow opened the major arteries. The man on his knees will be dead in moments. Seizing a section of the garrote from the pathway where it fell, Lilian frantically attempts to tie off the wound.

The now keening man hampers her efforts as he continues his futile efforts to reattach the damaged limb by will alone.

The wire that was once a garrote does not serve. It cuts rather than constricting the flesh. Tossing it aside, Lilian rips her nape ties free of her queued hair and slices the leather lacings to gain one of sufficient length.

The beggar has collapsed, curled inward around his wounded limb. Ruthlessly, Lilian shoves the moaning figure onto his back and reaches for the gory stub. Swallowing her rising gorge Lilian resolutely ignores the gruesome, partially severed hand that flops against her fingers. The leather slips off the blood-slick wrist. Lilian grabs again for the wrist as the beggar pulls away.

"Rimon Condemn you! Be still or you die," Lilian profanes as she once again wrestles the man into position. So much blood, it is everywhere. Her slick hands slip as she again attempts to lash the leather around the stump.

"Crevasse swallow it!" Lilian scrubs her hands on her tunic and once again reaches for the gory wrist. This time she succeeds in lashing the leather around the stump. The flow of blood is slowing.

Raising his head, the beggar captures Lilian's gaze. "May the Five Warriors..."

Whatever the shrine beggar might have asked of the Five Warriors, or offered, is forever lost. Lilian will not soon forget the staring eyes in a face so emaciated as to be fleshless.

"Self-slaughter by proxy," Trevelyan shakes his head.

By definition bereft of family and employment, a Shrine beggar's existence is one of cruelty and humiliation. More than one has chosen to end it quickly by embracing a speeding transport. Self-slaughter by proxy.

With patent incredulity, Sergeant D'Angelo challenges the suggestion, "By attacking a racing woman in the Garden Center?"

His gaze hard, Trevelyan speaks with deliberation, "Mistress Lilian's conservator's seal and thorn were visible and she is well known in the district."

"She slayed another," Sergeant D'Angelo's insists weakly. Despite his personal inclination, he must observe the protocols and strictures.

"Mistress Lilian," Trevelyan bites out Lilian's full title in rebuke to D'Angelo's casual third person reference, "Conservator of Desperation and the Western Fisheries, defended Monsignor Lucius' property as is her duty."

"Master Trevelyan, I do not challenge it," D'Angelo readily acknowledges. Truly he dislikes his duty in this. It cannot be helped. The apprentice has shed blood, and not for the first time. It cannot be overlooked. "Nonetheless, it is not the first time Mistress Lilian has shed blood in the Garden Center."

I am the foundation of my family. It is true, not even two months gone Lilian pulled her thorn when three drunken scions of the warrior elite assaulted her as she returned home late from the Cartel. In that instance, Lilian was able to break free with only minimal damage to her would be rapists, avoiding a charge of Excessive Defense. Sergeant D'Angelo attended to that fracas as well as this.

Apprentices may not slay except in defense of their bondholders. The mere drawing of blood, if it is warrior blood, is equally forbidden except as necessary to defend the bondholder or the bondholder's property. Already serving a sentence of Trial by Ordeal for Guilt by Blood, a finding of Excessive Defense could send Lilian to the Final Draught, execution by poison.

"Then as now, Mistress Lilian used no more than necessary force to preserve Monsignor Lucius' property," Trevelyan affirms as he gestures at Lilian, who as an apprentice is Lucius Mercio's property. Trevelyan is also quick to draw a parallel with the prior assault where Lilian was not indicted for Excessive Defense, violence beyond what was necessary. "As conservator, she is permitted annihilation if there is no other recourse."

Nodding, pleased to have the important Serengeti Master Associate provide him with a rationale to justify releasing Lilian, D'Angelo agrees, "As you voice Master Trevelyan, I

yield Mistress Lilian into your custody.”

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The brief transit from the Incarceration Halls to the massive city-block edifice of Serengeti Headquarters passes in silence. Trevelyan will not speak in front of the unknown driver and even if it were permitted for Lilian to speak without being addressed, she would not. *Honor endures. Honor acts as duty commands.* Her incessant repetition of the Warriors’ Litany is all that enables Lilian to contain the rioting in her belly and ignore the dull ache in her head.

Milord will not be pleased. Do not. Do not. Should Lilian dwell on milord’s likely response to this latest debacle, the riot in her innards will not be contained. *I am the sum of my ancestors...*

As silently as they transited, Lilian and Trevelyan enter the nearly deserted Cartel. The normally bustling boutiques and restaurants at the Lobby level are shuttered and dark. Seventh Day is reserved for reverence to the Shades of the Five Warriors and a day of liberty within the cartels and most other commerce enterprises. Only a few are present and most are Serengeti Militia.

As they enter the riser, Trevelyan says, “Lilian, yield your thorn.”

With only the barest hesitation Lilian lifts the sheathed blade from her belt leaving her scarlet enamel conservator’s seal dangling prominently at the front. The six inch, three-side blade unique to Adelaide’s Discipline is sufficiently small that even a commoner is permitted to carry it. Without it Lilian might have fallen to Patrick Volsted’s assault at the beginning of the rainy season or the Shrine beggar this morning. By milord’s will, Lilian is free to carry her weapon within the Cartel restricted only by the stricture that forbids apprentices to bear arms in the presence of their bondholders. *Milord?*

As Lilian begins to form a question, she is halted by Trevelyan’s motion of negation, “We will speak when we are within the dispensary, not before.”

Acutely aware of the monitors that will record their passing and all that they may say, Lilian nods her obedience as she follows Trevelyan from the riser and down the fourth storey corridor to the dispensary. Within the dispensary the monitor records are only accessible by the Master Medic or Monsignor Lucius Mercio, the Cartel Preeminence.

Honor knows not fear. Lilian is certain milord awaits. *This day.*

The single dispensary attendant on duty motions them toward Master Chin’s office, “They are waiting.”

Two men are seated in the Master Medic’s office. The smaller, Master Medic Chin, has broad features with sharp cheekbones and a blade of a nose complimented by almond shaped, deep set black eyes and a mobile mouth. His golden complexion is topped by dark, tightly curling hair kept short. In his early sixties, the slender man of average height moves with precise grace as he rises at the sight of Lilian.

The man who rises alongside Chin tops him by at least a foot. Lucius Mercio is a tall virile man in his late forties. His olive hued aquiline features are set in their customary harsh, intimidating lines. Over the past seasons Lilian has become accustomed to milord's forbidding expression. This is more. *Milord is angered.*

Fear lances through Lilian as she recalls milord's correction on the other occasions she angered him. It is of no comfort that then, as now, she warranted correction.

Honor endures. It is Seventh Day and milord has been pulled into the Cartel due to Lilian's error. The rioting in her innards surges and is suppressed as the ache behind her eyes increases. *Honor acts as duty commands.*

Lucius had barely taken a seat in Chin's office when the entry chimes sounded. Trevelyan acted quickly removing Lilian from incarceration. His spymaster's efficiency does naught to reduce Lucius' ire. It has been barely two months since Lilian's last involvement with the militia and unlike the last occasion, she has used Excessive Defense. With all that is in play, how could she? Lucius lacks not the resources to address the challenge, it should not be necessary. Rising with Chin, Lucius turns to greet his wayward apprentice.

Socraide's Sword! The woman appears to have been dragged through a crevasse.

Rigid with tension, the slender, athletic form lacks its usual grace. Her face is pale, the fine bone structure and determined chin daubed with mud. The deep gray eyes are blank, yielding naught of her thoughts and emotions. Lacking its customary severe bindings, the long dark red hair is loose and matted, the gray leggings and faded teal tunic are splattered with more of the dark substance contained in her hair and besmirching Lilian's face. Black rings the fingernails of her hands. *Blood not mud. Lilian is covered in blood.*

Lucius' anger with Lilian is now tempered with new ire. She is his conservator, his vessel. How dare they? In two strides Lucius reaches Lilian, "You were not permitted to cleanse?"

"C-cleanse, milord?" Lilian stutters as she tilts her head to meet milord's fierce gaze, not quite able to understand the question. Above average height for a woman, in her racing shoes Lilian barely reaches milord's broad shoulders.

"You are covered in blood, woman," Milord snaps as he eyes her begrimed form with increasing disgust.

Blood. So much blood. Do not be sick. Must not be sick on milord. Answer milord.

"There was a basin," Lilian looks at her hands recalling how rapidly the water turned red as she attempted to cleanse. Within moments the water was so fouled Lilian could not bear to touch it. In the bells since, Lilian has successfully ignored the tacky substance dried into her hair, clothes and skin. Now she gags with recall, "It was insufficient for... I could not... I-"

It is impossible. Her rioting belly refuses to be contained. Hand clasped over her

mouth, Lilian bolts into the freshening closet.

“Well done, Lucius,” Chin scowls as the freshening closet door closes to the sound of Lilian’s retching.

»♦«

“Lilian, this is ill done,” milord paces the length of Master Chin’s office as Lilian meekly submits to the Master Medic’s attention.

Cleansed, garbed in a medic’s turquoise trousers and holding the matching tunic to her breasts, Lilian is seated on a medic’s table. Chin deftly applies ointment to the abrasions that cover her left shoulder and side where she was slammed into the gravel by the Shrine beggar.

“Yes milord,” Lilian’s admission ends on a gasp as Chin finds an exceptionally tender spot. Her innards settled, Lilian is increasingly aware that the ache behind her eyes is becoming a throb. *Honor endures.*

“How Lilian?” Milord scowls, “You are better skilled than to slay without necessity.”

Honor acts as duty commands.

“I erred, milord,” Lilian’s pained admission addresses milord’s pacing boots. “I... I was inattentive and...”

“Lilian,” milord’ boots are planted firmly in front of her. His tone signals he will tolerate no prevarication.

“I have not varied my race route in over a month,” Lilian chokes out.

Lilian races with the Seventh Day dawn not only for the quietude but the obscurity. There are many who believe she should have accepted the Final Draught in contrition for the crimes of her father, Remus Gariten. Her failure to do so has added the charge of cowardice to that of corrupt genetics. Even at that early bell she has been subject to jeers, spitting and even thrown rocks. Altering her path each sevenday did much to alleviate that insult and assault. After milord granted her the conservator’s seal she became over confident, certain that it shielded her from routine despoil.

“Foolish,” milord snaps, “It does not explain your lapse.”

Lapse? What says milord? Startled, Lilian releases her inspection of milord’s boots to address the stern visage. “Milord, I do not... I beg milord’s pardon... I-”

“Lilian, cease,” Lucius’ harsh tones are as cutting as a blade. “I know you are able to deter such a meager assailant without a deathblow. Why? How dared you?”

Lucius’ earlier rage has reemerged. Does she think his favor, his conservatorship, gives her the right? Lilian is no longer warrior. She has sworn she has no ambition to reclaim that status. This day’s events tell another tale.

Deathblow? Meager assailant? Lilian lightly shakes her head, attempting to clear her wits. It does naught but flare the throbbing behind her eyes into an insistent

pounding. Milord thinks... milord believes... no. In this Lilian bears no guilt.

Throat tight, Lilian forces her eyes to meet milord's harsh gaze. "It was an error, milord. I was inattentive. Surprised. I sought only to sever the garrote before it ended my life. I knew not of the beggar's wound until I found my feet. I... I tried to halt the blood... wet... slippery... I..."

The pounding behind Lilian's eyes expands and blossoms into a dark spot obscuring her vision. There is a roaring in her ears. Chin's voice, "Enough..."

Large strong hands enclose Lilian's shoulders, ease her onto her back. Milord's voice, "Chin..."

»♦«

"... it is fortunate that the Fifth Warrior's Shrine Attendants were the ones to summon the militia," Trevelyan's voice penetrates the cloud that surrounds Lilian. She is on her back, the surface is hard. Milord's penthouse? Milord's dining table? No. There is stiff canvass beneath her, not cool stone.

What is Master Trevelyan discussing? *Fifth Warrior? Sinead's Shrine?* Lilian dimly recalls the Shrine Keeper arriving at the morning's carnage shortly before the militia.

"Lilian," at Master Chin's call, Lilian turns toward the voice. The medic nods encouragingly, "How many fingers?"

"Two Master Chin," Lilian replies automatically and then notes the absence of the headache that so bedeviled her. "My thanks, Master Chin."

"Lie there a moment," Chin smiles before moving away.

"Shades' Grace," at milord's voice, Lilian turns her head. Milord is pacing... "Bribing the Militia to keep silent is one matter, bribing prelates is more difficult."

"True enough monsignor," Trevelyan voices from the small couch, "Although, even before offered an incentive for silence, Sergeant D'Angelo was not eager to involve the media."

"His superiors certainly know the value a media stream would place on such incendiary information," milord's voice holds annoyance but no true heat.

Media? Rimón's Mercy. Lilian's protocol review had half the Twelve Systems screaming for her blood. Were this morning's incident public knowledge, the outcry could overwhelm the evidence.

"And having been compensated, they will not risk your ire, monsignor," Trevelyan assures, certain that the militia will remain bought.

Confident that Trevelyan's combination of bribery and intimidation can contain any secular function within the Third System, Lucius is far more focused on the Shrines. Not all the local prelates are friend to Lilian and prelates are notoriously more difficult to influence or corrupt. It was several months before Lucius succeeded in silencing

the vituperative attacks of Socraide's Shrine Keeper when Lilian first returned to Metricelli Prime after her family's ruin. This day they had the Luck of the First Warrior, "Sinead's Shrine will protect the Seer if at all possible. Word of this will not reach the media."

Maman? Lilian's mother, Helena Faesetili, a Seer of Visions since before Lilian's birth, is disordered in her wits. The condition places Helena outside protocol and stricture except to protect her or, should it become necessary, others from her. Her derangement shielded Helen from being forced to the Final Draught with her spouse, Remus Gariten. The voice of the Shades is not to be hindered. Sinead's Shrine will keep silent for Helena's sake if not for Lilian's.

"Lilian, drink this," Chin has returned and levers Lilian to a sitting position as he presses something cool and heavy into her hand.

It is a juice pouch. Lilian eyes it warily, "If you please, Master Medic, I do not wish to be silly."

In Lilian's experience, Chin's potions have a tendency to lower her inhibitions and loosen her tongue.

"There is naught in the juice to make you silly," Chin insists, "You are dehydrated and you have not eaten."

"Lilian, do as Master Chin instructs," Lucius orders, his attention drawn by the exchange.

"Yes milord," Lilian agrees and then cautiously sips juice. At the taste of the cool citrusy liquid Lilian is suddenly aware of a raging thirst. Within a few breaths the pouch is empty. It is immediately replaced with another.

"Self-slaughter by proxy?" Milord continues his conversation with the spymaster.

Her wits beginning to clear as she consumes the second pouch, Lilian vaguely recalls Trevelyan's discussion with Sergeant D'Angelo. It seems an unlikely finding. Assault with a garrote holds little resemblance to the practice of flinging oneself in front of a speeding transport.

"A stretch, I grant you," Trevelyan responds to Lucius' challenge, "but Lilian is warrior trained and her thorn was clearly visible."

"And she is well-recognized in the Garden Center," Lucius follows the logic. No sane commoner attempts a warrior bearing a blade.

"Which makes self-slaughter even more credible," Trevelyan adds, "Her poverty is well known, other than the blade she has naught of value."

"Well done, Trevelyan," Lucius approves. "Does this come to light, the finding of 'self-slaughter' makes the miscreant the agent of his annihilation not Lilian. There can be no indictment of Excessive Defense."

Clever. Master Trevelyan is remarkably clever, Lilian thinks admiringly. Even as milord's conservator, under the terms of her Trial by Ordeal, Lilian's annihilation of another for any cause other than the defense of milord could send Lilian to the Final Draught.

"The nape ties were inspired, had the assassin not struggled, it might have succeeded," Trevelyan comments.

"And his resistance to Lilian's attempt to sustain his life gives the finding of 'self-slaughter by proxy' further credence," Lucius concludes.

Resistance?

"Yes Lilian, resistance," Milord insists as he grasps her chin and tilts Lilian's face to his, capturing her will. The juice pouch slips unnoticed from suddenly nerveless fingers. Milord's fingers tighten on Lilian's chin with a determination matched by his words, "The blood spatters on your clothes and the assassin's, the churned ground, the marks from your attempts to bind the severed wrist all confirm your statement that he struggled."

Struggled? It all occurred so quickly, her fear, her desperate defense against the garrote, her frantic attempts to halt the blood. Eyes wide and confused Lilian confesses, "It was so slippery. All that blood, my hands, his wrist... I could not seem to catch hold."

"He struggled, Lilian," Milord commands. "Recall it. Do not forget it."

"Yes milord," Lilian agrees. *Her recall does not matter, only milord's will.*

"As it should be," Milord's slight smile indicates he is no longer angered.

"What should be?" Lilian asks. *It is well milord smiles.*

Milord smiles? Demon shit. Lucius' smile disappears into a flat line of disapproval. Lilian is unknowingly speaking random thoughts. Lucius turns on Chin, "I thought the juice would not make her silly?"

"The juice did not," Chin shrugs, "The injection I gave her to clear her head pain will--," with a glance at Lilian, Chin amends, "is making her silly."

Brows lowering at the Master Medic Lucius bites out, "It would be preferable if Lilian remained sensible a while longer."

Unconcerned by the censure in Lucius' tone, Chin offers another unrepentant shrug, "She is ill from the events of the day. If Lilian is to recover, she must sleep. You may interrogate her on the morrow."

"How long will she remain awake?" Lucius asks noting Lilian's owl-like gaze.

"A bell or two. No more," Chin replies as he stows his instruments. "You should send her home."

Home. *Katleen!* Lilian's young sister would have expected her bells gone.

“Peace Lilian,” Lucius reassures his increasingly dazed apprentice. “Katleen is in the care of Sinead’s Shrine.”

Sinead’s Shrine, Lilian nods. Before their ruin her sister spent a good deal of time at the Shrine and is a favorite with the Acolytes. They will be underfoot for days now, Lilian sighs.

“Who will be underfoot?” Lucius queries. Lilian’s wits are definitely wandering.

“Underfoot milord?” Lilian tilts her head to examine milord’s boots. There is naught under milord’s feet but the floor.

“Monsignor,” the deep baritone of Mr. George, milord’s driver, sounds from the entrance.

Knowing he has not summoned George, Lucius looks again at Chin and receives a bland expression in response. With a sound of irritation Lucius turns back to Lilian.

“Milord frowns. Milord is displeased,” Lilian observes in forlorn tones.

“Milord is sending you home,” Lucius returns resignedly as he helps Lilian from the table, holding her firmly as she begins to sway.

Turning to George, Lucius instructs, “George, see that Lilian is returned to her home and endeavor not to hear whatever she may voice.”

“Yes monsignor,” George acknowledges accepting Lilian from Lucius and her thorn from Trevelyan.

With George’s aid, Lilian navigates a path to the door as Lucius addresses Trevelyan, “Discover who this man was and his purpose in this attack.”

Neither Lucius nor Trevelyan believes for a moment that it was a random act. There are many in the Twelve Systems who wish to see Remus Gariten’s tainted offspring annihilated, his corrupt genetics eradicated.

2. Bright Star

To end the Anarchy and establish the Rule of Order, the Five Warriors created The Code of Engagement and Governing Protocols. Bound by these agreements Socraide Omsted, the First Warrior, and Rimón Ben Claude, the Second Warrior were compelled to abandon conquest and turned to stellar exploration to expand their territory and advance their ambitions. By the time Socraide and Rimón stepped into eternity the Three Systems had become Six Systems. Of the new systems only the Sixth System contained Vistrite, the semi-liquid crystal essential to all advanced technology.

By the close of the ninth century of Order the Six Systems had become the Twelve Systems with none of the additional systems holding Vistrite. Advancements in wealth and technology were unevenly distributed in the more distant systems. In these underdeveloped systems, little has changed since the Order of the Five Warriors was first established. ~ *excerpt from The Foundations of Order, a scholarly treatise.*

Sevenday 25, Day 1

Thirty years. Thirty years working to become your own woman. I'll not lose it all due to Mercio's plaything. In her early fifties, the portly Odds Manager waits impatiently in the antechamber of Crevasse City's most notorious black raider. She cannot quite believe she erred. It is all but certain that Lucius Mercio's doxy, Lilian, will live past the end of the seventday. No one expected the pampered warrior to survive the trial of Cartel apprenticeship for more than a season. A half year is fantastical.

Hilda used the unprecedented opportunity of Lilian's Trial by Ordeal to lure new customers to her wager pools, offering longer odds than prevalent and expanding the pools well beyond standard. Paying out four-to-one when Lilian survived the dry season was a minor setback. The coming First Day, the eleven-to-one wagers will be due when Lilian survives a half year, which she most likely will. The Odds Manager has six commerce days to discover sufficient funds to cover her losses. Tiger Sylvester is her last hope for an arrangement that will keep her afloat.

A burly thug appears in the doorway and motions Hilda into the interior.

Wordlessly the guard takes his position to the left of the man seated in the throne-like arm chair, bookending his equally burly counterpart who stands to Tiger's right. Tiger Sylvester, notorious black commerce raider, is of average height and build. In his early sixties Tiger keeps his receding hair closely cropped displaying uneven features that include a nose that has been broken several times and a ragged scar defining his left jaw line. His deep-set black eyes hold intelligence, ruthlessness and, at the moment, complacency.

Tiger does not offer Hilda a seat as crosses his legs and slouches comfortably in his chair. "It's over for you, Hilda. The odds have dropped to even that Lilian will survive past the rains. You'll never cover your wagers. Sell out now and I'll take you on to manage my interests on Sinead's World."

Ignoring the raider's obvious intimidation tactics, Hilda grapples with her shock that

Tiger wishes to absorb her legitimate enterprise rather than exploit it. It is well known in the Third System that Tiger's legitimate commerce shields illicit endeavors that include everything from decadents dealing to assassination. She expected Tiger to demand the use of her tottering Odds Management enterprise in his black dealings. Instead, he is interested in expanding his legitimate commerce interests.

The black raider's strange turn is no more fantastical than the survival of Remus Gariten's foul spawn, Lilian. Lilian should have self-slaughtered in despair. She should have run afoul of the apprentice protocol or her Trial by Ordeal and been forced to the Final Draught. Lilian will never succeed at the full three years. If Hilda can avoid bankruptcy at the next Settlement Day, the longer term wagers will see her right in the end. *How badly does Tiger want to expand?*

"Half interest, not full sale," Hilda counters desperately.

Tiger gives a bark of laughter at the woman's temerity before his face hardens into cruelty. "You lack commerce judgment. I can wait until Settlement Day and collect your bankrupt holdings for a fraction of what you ask. I withdraw my offer of employment. I have no use for you."

"I can bring you two other Odds Managers in similar difficulty you could buy out," the woman baits. Tiger's smile fades and his eyes narrow. *Oh yes, he's interested.* "If Mercio's doxy survives past the New Year, at least one other."

Tiger puts his feet on the floor and rests his elbows on the arms of his chair. The New Year is five months distant. For several moments he does not speak as he considers his new associate. "Deliver the other Odds Managers you have promised and you may retain half interest. Fail, and I take it all."

»♦«

A fine drizzle mists the vista of the Garden Center and cityscape visible through the glazed surfaces that comprise two walls of Lucius' opulent office. Lucius is oblivious to the panorama commanded by his commerce suite on the top level of the thirty-five storey tower. He is focused inward and on the future. This day's events will alter the course of Blooded Dagger Cartouche, Serengeti Group and even the future of the Twelve Systems. The sound of the eighth bell chimes pulls Lucius from his reverie and his attention to the scarlet door which is recessing to admit the lithe form of his apprentice. *Lilian.*

Unnoticed by the windows Lucius observes that her gray eyes are bright with anticipation that is echoed in tightly controlled energy of her movements. He can discover no lingering effects of the traumatic events of a sevenday gone. Once again Lucius wonders at his apprentice's remarkable resiliency.

Attired in the black of a Blooded Dagger apprentice, her hair gathered tightly to her head in a warrior's queue, Lilian's athletic form moves gracefully into the chamber intent on his massive ebony desk. Discovering the scarlet leather chair lacks an

occupant, Lilian glides to halt. Frowning slightly in confusion, Lilian turns sweeping the chamber with her gaze. When she finds him the frown eases as Lilian comes to attention, her obediently neutral expression unable to fully hide her excitement.

After five months Lucius has barely scratched the surface of the young woman's formidable reserve. Born a warrior, his prodigy was raised in luxury and privilege. At the early age of fifteen she was sent to Mulan's Temple, the great University on Artesia in the First System where she remained for nine years. Lucius expected a sheltered academic, frightened and resentful of her loss in status, unable to fully submit to his will.

Lilian met none of those expectations. Pragmatic, courageous, fiercely loyal to her friends and protective of her small family, Lilian has demonstrated her commitment to Lucius' will, his Cartouche and his Cartel on more than one occasion. She confounded him on her First Day and regularly since. It is not a state Lucius enjoys. He is very much looking forward to confounding his apprentice some bells hence. The thought brings a smile to his lips as he motions Lilian toward him.

Milord? Lilian considers the empty desk chair in momentary confusion. Where is milord? Pivoting slowly Lilian scans the expansive chamber seeking milord at the crystal conference table in the corner, on the scarlet sofa facing the wall-size reviewer, in the comfortable seating area. There is a slight sound and then a shadow by the windows coalesces into a man.

Milord!

Garbed in gray almost the color of the exterior mist, milord was invisible until he moved. His sudden appearance from shadow sends a brief frisson of shock through Lilian increasing her barely contained excitement.

Lilian knew when she sealed her bond that Monsignor Lucius, at the impossibly young age of thirty-eight, succeeded his father as Serengeti Preeminence in the midst of the worst societal unrest since the Anarchy. Through brilliance, ruthlessness, daring and uncanny prescience milord salvaged the Cartel and moved it to new heights. She is now certain those traits have not lessened over the years.

Milord holds out his hand, a smile softening his harsh features. *Milord is pleased.* As Lilian reaches milord, he pulls her close. His large, strong hands grasp her shoulders and then move to cup her head. His thumbs gently trace her jaw. Milord's dark gaze holds heat and a spark of dark humor. *I am the sum of my ancestors.* Milord's amusement can prove very disconcerting. Mesmerized by milord's touch and intimidated by the hint of mischief, Lilian attempts to hold on to her control.

As Lucius lightly strokes the delicate jaw, trepidation mingles with excitement in the bright gray eyes and the lithe form trembles slightly. Pleased at the evidence that he has overset his stoic apprentice Lucius yields to impulse and pulls Lilian into a kiss.

Milord's mouth is on hers, demanding, insistent. Releasing her reserve Lilian yields to

milord's embrace. Her lips part and milord's tongue sweeps in, challenging, taking. Large, strong hands mold her against his length. Her breasts are pressed against milord's chest, her thighs to his. As her senses swim milord's mouth retreats, milord's embrace ceases.

Relief and disappoint mingle as milord ends the contact and moves away. Eighth bell is for status, midday is for milord's pleasure. Lilian finds it difficult enough to maintain her balance and contend with milord's often inexplicable will without the added confusion of disruptions to the established routine. *I am the sum of my ancestors.*

"Lilian," milord begins only to be interrupted by a chime from the ebony desk. Frowning with annoyance milord crosses to his desk, Lilian in his wake. A few quick taps on the techno console and milord's frown deepens. "Master Trevelyan will be joining us."

»♦«

I am the foundation of my family. Anxiety coils in Lilian's chest as she obediently settles into the comfortable chair to milord's left. Master Trevelyan's presence at her eighth bell status review is a significant departure from protocol as is the use of milord's seating area rather than the conference table. Most unusual of all is that Lilian is seated to milord's left and not at attention behind milord's shoulder. It is uncomfortably reminiscent of her bells spent answering milord's and Trevelyan's interrogation after the Shrine beggar incident. It is not an experience that Lilian wishes to revisit, although she is certain she has no choice.

This is ill. Milord's expression is forbidding as he demands, "Trevelyan, what have you?"

"I regret, monsignor," Trevelyan replies as he ignites his slate, "my findings are inconclusive."

"Inconclusive?" Lucius echoes, eyes narrowing. "Explain."

Random violence is common enough in the less savory sections of Crevasse City. It is exceedingly rare in the Garden Center District which is home to the warrior elite.

Referencing his slate Trevelyan cites, "The Shrine beggar was born here in Crevasse City in the Refinery District. Apprenticed in a tannery at the age of sixteen; at the age of twenty, sentenced to five years menial labor in the Great Crevasse for assault and robbery. Subsequently employed at a tannery for two years until injured while unloading a shipment of hides; evicted from his residence several months later for failure to pay rent."

Lifting his gaze from his slate Trevelyan completes, "That was a year gone. Since then the record is a sporadic one of occasional labor intermingled with Shrine beggary. He was migrating steadily away from the center of the city and into the plains until three sevendays ago when he first appeared at the Garden Center Shrine."

"A sudden abrupt shift in his pattern of movement," Lucius interrupts. "Hired?"

"It is the most obvious conclusion," Trevelyan's frowns in frustration, "It is unlikely though, he had but a pittance."

"Payment upon success?" Lucius hazards.

"Mayhap monsignor," Trevelyan agrees without conviction. "I can discover no evidence of a confederate and there is another possibility."

Lucius' fingers steeple as he considers his spymaster, "Voice it."

With a tightening of his lips Trevelyan says, "The man was thrice presented to the Shades."

"Disordered in his wits?" Lucius startles.

"Three separate Shrines did not find him so, including Jonathan's Shrine in the Garden Center," Trevelyan replies in clipped tones.

Had the man been proven deranged he would have been taken into the care of the Shrines and constrained to the extent necessary to protect him or others from acts of madness. At one time or another most Shrine beggars will present themselves to the Shrines of the Five Warriors in the hope of the relative comfort of Shrine confinement. Very few are ever found truly deranged.

Lucius cares not for Trevelyan's findings. Too many possibilities, too little real information. "What of your Shine informants?"

"Nothing useful," Trevelyan admits. "The beggar was only within the Garden Center Shrine Ring for a few days before he attacked Mistress Lilian; kept to himself, did not say much, favored Jonathan's Shrine."

"Not much value in that," Lucius recognizes. "Half of the Third System follows the Fourth Warrior."

Lucius knows one other avenue of inquiry. His Cartouche, Blooded Dagger, owns the Vistrite crevasse, "What of his time in the Great Crevasse?"

"He tended the sanitation conduits," Trevelyan does not need to reference his slate for this. "He executed the terms of his sentence without incident or complaint. Beyond that my operatives have naught. It is three years gone and none noted the man at the time."

"He was sound of body and with a clean record of Crevasse service," Lucius interjects, "Yet he chose the life of a Shrine beggar?"

With a clean record of Crevasse service, the Shrine beggar could have returned to the mines as a laborer. Life in the Crevasse is difficult, the wages are among the best in Twelve Systems.

"It does call into question the man's motives," Trevelyan admits. "It is insufficient evidence of true derangement."

"Lilian," Lucius turns to his apprentice who has been silent and motionless for the

discussion. "Have you aught?"

Absently fingering her scarlet and gold conservator's seal, Lilian shakes her head, her voice soft, "Naught, milord. I am certain I never encountered him before that morning."

Honor is my blade and shield. There is no purpose to be served in inquiring who wishes Lilian ill. The list includes half the Twelve Systems and includes scores, if not hundreds, of those harmed by Remus Gariten's foul crimes who might wish to retaliate against his tainted offspring.

Honor knows not fear. Whether random misfortune or a deliberate assault, it is Shades' Grace that Lilian lives. *Honor endures.* She dare not forget again how many wish her ill. It is not only her life in peril. Does Lilian fall before her bond proves, the life of Shrine beggar will not see Katleen to her majority. *Honor acts as duty commands.*

"Enough," Milord's voice holds conviction as it pulls Lilian from her concern. "If the beggar was deranged, there is naught to be done. If there is something more nefarious in play, we have little means of discovering it. Trevelyan, leave the investigation active in the Shrines and the Crevasse, perhaps the Luck of the First will favor us. Beyond those measures, expend no more of your attention. There are great matters before us, they must not be hindered."

Turning back to Lilian, milord's gaze once again softens, "Attend me in the Synthetics lab at tenth bell."

Accepting milord's words as dismissal, Lilian rises as a hint of her earlier brightness returns. Months of labor are about to bear fruit.

»♦«

I am the sum of my ancestors. I am the foundation of my family. The familiar verses of the Warrior Litany soothe Lilian's spirit as she moves rapidly through the corridors to her worksite. Lilian regrets the Shrine beggar's death, but she cannot regret that she lives.

Although a few admiring glances follow the arresting twenty-four year old as she navigates the crowded corridors, there are many more sneers. All within the Cartel recognize Lucius Mercio's notorious apprentice and fallen warrior.

The disgraced heir to a defunct cartouche, Lilian was expected to end her life in penitence for the criminal acts of her father. Failure to do so has added cowardice to the indictment of blood taint or corrupt genetics. If she is able to execute her three year bond, none will be able to demand Lilian's death, but she will never again be counted among the warriors. At the moment, Lilian's mind has no room for her sordid family history or even her present trial. She is focused on what is to occur at tenth bell.

"A training exercise, Lilian, it was naught but a training exercise," Chrys' bright eyes

and smile break through Lilian's inner litany as he intercepts her at the entrance to her worksite walkway.

Tucked into a corner by the risers, Lilian's worksite has a wall at the back, no one across the aisle and two taciturn associates occupying the front two worksites. The Grim Twins, as Lilian mentally refers to the discouraging associates, are not present. Lilian is almost certain that they are Trevelyan's operatives. The proximity of their worksites to hers provides Lilian with protection from harassment and milord with close monitoring of her behavior.

Dismissing the Grim Twins from her mind Lilian brightens in response to Chrys' greeting, her lips softening. Chrys, Lilian's first friend in the Cartel, is a tall sandy haired young man with light brown eyes whose blocky suit in the black of a Blooded Dagger apprentice gives him an unprepossessing appearance. Lilian has viewed Chrys often enough in training to know that beneath his boxy-cut suits he owns a strong, powerful physique.

In the absence of the Grim Twins, Lilian does not hesitate to speak, "A training lesson that would have come to naught without your aid."

Five months ago, perplexed by an anomaly in the operations of the Vistrite mine and refinery on Desperation in the Sixth System, Lilian begged aid from Chrys. After several sevendays of investigation and analysis Lilian identified a plot to create counterfeit Vistrite, a substance both illegal and potentially lethal when improperly used in sophisticated technology.

Ruthlessly protecting Blooded Dagger and Serengeti supremacy, Lucius Mercio had the counterfeiters hunted down and the operation dismantled. At Lilian's suggestion, Monsignor Lucius retained key elements of the criminal operation in the hope of fabricating a legitimate synthetic that could expand the wealth and influence of his Cartouche and Cartel. It was a wildly unconventional decision. Lilian and Chrys are certain it will succeed. If it does, their opportunity for advancement and a successful bond proof is all but assured.

"Are you ready?" Chrys returns. "There is much to accomplish before tenth bell."

"I require only a moment," Lilian replies and then hastens to her worksite to rapidly work her slate and worksite reviewer. Actions complete Lilian rejoins Chrys, her mind intent the coming tenth bell and promise of synthetic Vistrite.

»♦«

Milord is pleased. Seigneur Rachelle and Master Simon have done well. The familiar astringent scent of the Synthetics lab tickles Lilian's nose as she peers around milord from her position behind his left shoulder.

"Remarkable Rachelle, truly remarkable," Milord praises his R&D Seigneur as he carefully rolls a small cylinder between his fingers.

Glowing with pride at both her accomplishment and milord's acknowledgement, Rachelle

responds formally, "It is an honor to serve Blooded Dagger and Serengeti."

This day Seigneur Rachelle's shapely, well-toned six-foot figure is encased in a beautifully tailored suit in Blooded Dagger scarlet that flatters her flawless mahogany complexion. Gold glitters at her throat and wrists. From behind Seigneur Rachelle's left shoulder, Chrys meets Lilian's gaze, his expression echoing her awe.

Returning the ten centimeter rod to the tray held by Master Simon, milord selects a small flat disk the size of Lilian's thumbnail. Held to the light, it shimmers dark green going to black in the center. Admiring the object, milord remarks, "Had I not witnessed it, it would be difficult to believe this was fabricated and not pulled from the Crevasse."

At milord's words Simon preens slightly, increasing the gangly technologist's resemblance to a stork with his sharp, pointed face above a short torso affixed with long legs and arms.

After returning the disk to the tray milord collects the final object, a slender spike the length of Lilian's pinky, and passes it to Master Trevelyan. Trevelyan, in turn, shakes his head in wonder, "Remarkable monsignor, truly remarkable. It is impossible to distinguish the Synthetic from true Vistrite."

Vistrite technology controls everything from lights to stellar transit. In complex technologies the synthetic Vistrite will fail abruptly after mere days of use. In simple devices, such as lights and door controls, it will endure for several years, almost as long as true Vistrite. In the under-developed systems, where distance from the Vistrite Crevasse makes the simple devices unaffordable, the inexpensive Synthetic will be exceedingly popular and profitable.

"Lilian, what think you?" Milord demands holding out the slender rod.

Milord! Milord wishes her opinion. Milord has acknowledged her. Reverently Lilian collects the small object and rubs it between her fingers. While similar to refined Vistrite, it is not the same. There is a *wrongness*. Rolling the small cylinder between her fingers Lilian is unaware of the intensity entering her eyes as she raises her face to milord, "It is not as silky as true Vistrite, milord."

"So I noted," Milord agrees. "Rachelle?"

"It is as you note, monsignor," Rachelle replies, her smile in place as she instructs her protégé, "Irina if you would?"

Irina is a pretty woman with black eyes, pale skin and glossy chestnut hair gathered in a soft chignon. Her voice is laced with excitement as she explains, "Monsignor that slight coarseness is a series of minor imperfections that develop during construction. The flaws persist throughout the crystal which is why it will never support advanced technology."

It is as Lucius intended, limited to simple technology the Synthetic will never threaten the supremacy of Vistrite. Nodding, Lucius returns his attention to Trevelyan, "Are the

arrangements complete on the Western Continent?”

“Aye monsignor,” Trevelyan grins, returning the small spike to the tray. Blooded Dagger’s Security-Privilege Master, Trevelyan is charged with keeping the Cartouche secure and Cartouche secrets undiscovered, among which the Synthetics is currently the most precious. “Eventually it will be known that the new construction is not a water filtration plant. By then you should be ready to reveal the true purpose.”

The prototype Synthetics facility will be located in saltmarshes associated with Lucius’ Western Continent fisheries. In a few months, when construction reaches the stage where the Iron Hammer controller technology will be required, Lucius will reveal the Synthetics endeavor to his fellow Cartel governors.

»◊«

The crowd gathered in the riser bay pulls back from the arriving carriage leaving a passage for Lucius and his party. At the sight of Lucius, the carriage empties. With a single tap Lucius sends the now private carriage on an uninterrupted journey from the eighth storey to the thirty-fifth.

“What think you, Rachelle? Will the Iron Hammer contender achieve the semi-finals?” Lucius turns the topic from the secret Synthetics to the annual Third System moon races. It matters not that they are alone except for their apprentices and that the risers should be sealed to Lucius’ security-privilege. In the risers where Blooded-Dagger territory intersects the Cartel, Trevelyan is routinely thwarted by the Cartel Security-Privilege Seigneur, Damocles of Grey Spear.

As the Cartel spymaster, Damocles is sworn to uphold the security-privilege of all three cartouche and the Cartel as a whole. In practice Damocles serves Lucius’ rival, Monsignor Sebastian Mehta of Grey Spear, before all others. Damocles routinely exploits his position to violate Blooded Dagger sovereignty at the vulnerable risers. It is another Grey Spear insult to Lucius’ preeminence. It is one he intends to answer within a year, no more than two.

“Kemeha’s protégé is daring,” Rachelle follows Lucius’ lead well aware that their conversation may be known to Grey Spear. “I think he might well achieve the semi-finals.”

The casual conversation is a pleasant one. It has been several years since the Serengeti Group fielded a competitor in the annual moon races and Iron Hammer’s Engineering Seigneur and his protégé are both well liked. As they approach Lucius’ commerce suite he remarks, “I will have Marieth reserve extra places on the observatory this year. If you are correct, demands on the Serengeti box will exceed its capacity.”

At the black enamel doors of Lucius’ commerce suite Rachelle turns away followed by Chrys. That it lacks a half period to midday matters naught. Apparently, Seigneur Rachelle’s response to commerce success is similar to milord’s.

Excitement tingling in her belly, her lips softening in recall of milord's earlier embrace, Lilian follows milord beneath the poured gold Blooded Dagger Cartouche that ornaments the lintel. It is only seven paces to the scarlet door, milord's office and milord's passion. Lilian's initial trepidation at yielding her body as part of her bond agreement dissolved in the wake of her wild and unprecedented response to milord. Lilian's limited experience had not prepared her for the intensity of milord's passion or the pleasure he can pull from her.

Mistress Marieth, milord's elegant silver-haired executive servitor smiles and nods as milord passes without acknowledgement. As Lilian comes abreast of the elegant cherry wood worksite Mistress Marieth drops her smile but returns Lilian's polite nod. The remote and inaccessible servitor treats Lilian with cool courtesy as she does all associates.

Crossing the scarlet threshold Lilian dismisses all thoughts of Mistress Marieth and thought in general. Lilian has barely discarded her jacket and slate satchel before she is in milord's embrace. Milord's kiss is searing, milord's hands are in her hair. Heat rushes along Lilian's extremities, pools in her center and causes the muscles below her navel to tighten and quiver.

"Raise your arms," milord commands against her parted lips, pulling her blouse from her skirt.

With a quick tug the blouse finds the floor while milord's mouth once again captures Lilian's. A flick of milord's fingers and the bra yields exposing tight rose peaks and modest, well-shaped, creamy breasts. Even as she wonders once again at her uninhibited response to milord, Lilian yields to it. Pinned against the back of the scarlet couch Lilian revels in the press of her bared breasts against milord's hard, warm chest, her nipples puckering at the delicate abrasion of milord's silk jacket.

Sighing with pleasure, Lilian sends one hand to the back of milord's neck as she tangles her tongue with milord's. Her other hand finds a shoulder-blade and uses the leverage to press closer to milord's chest. There is a slight tug on her warrior's queue and then the familiar sensation of her hair pulling loose. Milord's lips abandon Lilian's to travel along her throat as a large hard hand glides across her torso to discover and fondle one breast and then tug gently on the hardening tip. Gasping, Lilian arches into the demanding caress. She wishes for more intimate contact.

"Not yet, Lilian," milord rumbles against the curve of her throat and then steps away. Dark eyes hooded, milord states, "Your skirt does not please me."

Wordlessly Lilian releases the fasteners and steps free of her skirt. Her eyes never leave milord as Lilian carefully shakes the garment and places it on the back of the scarlet couch.

Milord glances sharply at her chest. Lilian adds her dangling bra to the skirt. She is clad in naught but the scrap of black satin and lace that hides a small thatch of surprisingly bright red curls. Sliding her hands to the lace border, Lilian prepares to

release her last garment.

“Not yet,” milord halts her motions. Milord’s dark gaze roams freely over her nudity as he deliberately removes his jacket. Milord moves lightly against Lilian, trousers whisper against her legs as milord’s silk tunic brushes her torso. The tantalizing contact raises shivers along her skin escalating her need for more a forceful touch. Lilian whimpers in anticipation and then in disappointment as milord steps away without deepening the contact, his jacket neatly draped on the back of the sofa. “Come.”

Milord’s desk is a massive structure of glossy ebony. Lilian knows from experience that it is wide enough to support her from hips to head. It was a startling experience that Lilian found a great deal more pleasant than she expected. Turning her gaze from the desk to milord, Lilian discovers a familiar glint of dark mischief. *Game time.*

As Lucius lifts Lilian to the edge of his desk, her gaze widens and nostrils flare in confirmation that she recalls the last occasion he bent her over his desk. Stepping between Lilian’s parted thighs Lucius cups the elegant globes of her breasts and uses his thumbs to stroke stiffened peaks to tight points.

“As I recall,” Lucius purrs, tugging on the darkening tips, “you referred to being bent over my desk as ‘*nice*.’”

“Yes milord,” Lilian replies, her sharply indrawn breath and dilated eyes echoing the arousal signaled by her peaked breasts.

“Do you recall my response?” Lucius demands. He knows that Lilian does, he wishes to hear her voice his promise.

Lilian’s tongue darts between her lips, moistening the surface swollen from his kisses, “Yes milord. Milord voiced that as I found the experience ‘*nice*,’ we would enjoy it again and,” once again the tongue briefly emerges.

The woman is unnerved. It is not readily accomplished. Lucius finds it remarkably enticing.

“And take a little more time,” Lilian completes.

“Very good, Lilian,” Lucius pushes Lilian gently onto her back, spreading the dark red locks so that they cascade over the far edge of desk. “That is exactly what we are going to do.”

Milord gently flicks her stiffened nipples and then sets lips, tongue and teeth to her breasts. Involuntarily, Lilian laces her hands in milord’s hair to encourage the delightful torment while she arches her pelvis against the weight of milord. Discovering a hard hip, she shifts her angle attempting to place pressure where she desires it most.

Grasping her hips, milord pushes them firmly to the desk, “Hold here, Lilian.”

Returning his mouth to Lilian’s torso, milord maps a meandering course along her ribcage, waist and abdomen. In response, the pleasant ache between Lilian’s legs

swells to an insistent throb even she savors the erotic contact. Milord's tongue slides along the hollow of her hip at the edge of the black lace barrier.

"Milord, please," Lilian gasps, writhing against the slick desk in response to the taunting exploration, her heated sex dampening with excitement.

With a small masculine chuckle milord slides the lacey barrier from Lilian's hips, down her thighs and free of her feet. Rising over Lilian, milord parts her thighs further, pausing to gaze at her as he discards his tunic. At the heat and promise in milord's regard Lilian's breathing catches, her cleft pulses as her hips widen and tilt in invitation. She knows she must appear a complete wanton. She cares not.

Lucius' groin tightens sharply at the sight of Lilian's abandon. Her arms are curled by her head, her legs spread and dangling over the edge of the desk. Moisture glistens on the delicate folds of her sex. A light flush suffuses her torso and face. The pale pink blush is a delectable contrast to the creamy skin which is striking against the ebony desk. Savoring the wanton display, Lucius discards his tunic. The pleasant aching in his loins intensifies to urgency as Lilian shifts slightly, tilting her pelvis. Offering herself. Bending over the prone woman Lucius grasps her ankles, pulling her feet to rest on the edge of the desk. The movement widens her hips and further tilts the delicate folds for access.

Milord's tongue strokes the length of Lilian's opening, escalating her arousal and pleasure and causing Lilian to cry out and shudder in delight. Her heels press hard to glassy surface to keep from slipping. She is as milord wills. She must not move. Her hands search wildly for purchase. The slick surface of the desk offers none.

Her hands reach once again for milord and find the heavy locks. Her open thighs loosen further as milord's tongue strokes and teeth nip across the sensitive flesh. Milord's tongue circles her inflamed jewel, taunting, teasing, and finally, lashing. Invisible cords extend from her tormented jewel tightening her abdomen, swelling her breasts, and jolting the tight peaks.

"Milord, please, milord," Lilian whimpers.

Placing his hands on Lilian's thighs, further immobilizing her, milord mercilessly flicks the swollen bud of her sex with his tongue and then scrapes it with his teeth. Keening quietly in desperation, Lilian's hands convulse in the heavy locks as the invisible cords twist, pulling her taut. Increasingly frantic in her rising need, Lilian implores, "Please milord, milord."

In response, milord pulls free of her hands and rises above her. One of milord's hands reaches for trouser fasteners as the other holds her hips firmly to the desk. At the sight of milord's sex, long and hard, Lilian moans. A predatory grin spreads across milord's face at the sound. The shaft moves eagerly. Milord grasps her hips, tilting her until her opening is angled towards the rod standing straight, dark and swollen.

Her back arched, Lilian gazes up the length of her prone body to the strong torso above her and erection about to enter her. The head strokes across her opening. The taunting caress draws an inarticulate sound from her. Lilian is wet and ready, her sex swollen with arousal. The dark length plunges into her. Her abdomen contracts, her channel tightens as milord fills her.

“Rise to me. Take me deep,” at milord’s command Lilian wraps her legs around milord’s waist, tilting her hips, taking the hard, hot length of milord deep into her body. It feels wondrous.

“Yes, Lilian, yes,” milord’s voice is harsh with passion as he drives into her, flattening her to the desk.

In moments milord is moving hard and fast within her, finding that perfect spot, the perfect rhythm that snaps the cords and sends Lilian soaring into a haze of pleasure.

As Lilian shudders in release, her chamber clenches on Lucius’ sex igniting answering spasms that fire from the base of his spine to spill him into a deep red well of ecstasy.

»♦«

“Milord, I beg pardon. I cannot locate my nape ties. Does milord discover them?” Lilian is standing, fully clothed, in the doorway of milord’s freshening closet. Her rumpled garments are steamed smooth, the musk of passion erased by a freshening packet.

With a brief glance around the chamber, milord shakes his head. “I discover them not. Do your best. We are expected within moments.”

Repressing her distress Lilian returns to the freshening closet to work her hair as best she is able. The inevitably casual arrangement will leave none in doubt as to how Lilian was employed for the last bell and a half. *I am the sum of my ancestors.*

Aware of Lilian’s brief discomfort and the cause, Lucius cannot fathom why she finds public knowledge of their carnal activities embarrassing. As is common within the Twelve Systems, Lucius does not confuse passion with love, attraction with affection. Desire is as natural as hunger or thirst. It can be indulged to the extent that one’s means and inclinations dictate.

Wedlock and children are serious commitments, not undertaken lightly. Among the warrior class, those who claim direct descent from the Five Warriors, a wedlock alliance is a carefully crafted mingling of genetics and wealth.

Lilian shares the common sensibility. Her discomfort arises from her deeply reserved nature that finds speculation about her carnal service to milord invasive and prurient. Her continued confusion at the power of her physical reaction to milord only increases her discomfort. Apprentices are expected to find their masters pleasing. Lilian’s eager response borders on the wayward.

Her complex reaction to milord is not the only source of Lilian's distress. Lilian's usual nape ties are inexpensive linen and steel, prone to knotting. This day's ties were a gift from Dean Joseph, her academic mentor and foster father. Accented with platinum, the supple black lizard skin is unique to Artesia where Lilian attended the University. Normally reserved for Shrine rituals, the ties were one of the few items of value Lilian managed to retain after her unlamented sire, Remus Gariten, brought them to ruin.

I am the foundation of my family. Setting aside her concern, Lilian focuses on braiding her wavy locks into a tail looped into a casual knot. Shades willing, it will stay off her face. *Honor is my blade and shield.*

Milord sets a rapid pace across the reception area to his large conference chamber making Lilian grateful for her modest heels that allow her to keep pace without stumbling. For a sevenday Lilian has speculated about this conference. The bitter rivalry between Blooded Dagger and Grey Spear spans a decade. An endeavor that requires the unified support of all three Cartel cartouche must own exceptional importance and it is not yet time to reveal the Synthetics.

Clustered around the conference table are the Iron Hammer Preeminence, Monsignor Elenora Odestil, her Engineering Seigneur, Kemeha, and his protégé Fletcher Detrenti along with milord's kinsman Seigneur Marco and milord's protégé, Nickolas. In marked contrast to the charming grin Fletcher sends toward Lilian as she takes her stance behind milord's left shoulder at the head of the table, Nickolas offers naught but a stiff nod and tight lips. The conventional protégé has not failed to note the casual arrangement of Lilian's hair or discern its cause.

A tall man with a strong build, Nickolas Cyncad has burnished copper locks held in a queue, green eyes and face so handsome it is almost pretty. As with most of the Twelve Systems, Nickolas holds Lilian in contempt although he is careful not to display it publicly lest it be considered a challenge to Monsignor Lucius' will.

Seated next to milord, Seigneur Marco says naught as he sends a pointed glance to the far end of the table where the Grey Spear contingent is notably absent. A short, compact man of sixty years with blunt features in a square jawed face, Marco favors the more dapper styles. Close kinsman to milord, Marco is trusted with commercial endeavors involving high risk and high return. His lack of involvement with the important and risky Synthetics is a mystery Lilian has yet to solve.

At the sound of the chimes Lilian's pulls her attention from the puzzle of Marco. Grey Spear remains absent. Were Lilian to arrive after the bell, even by only a moment or two, she could be belted. A protégé would be rebuked. Monsignor Sebastian Mehta's delay is a direct challenge to milord's preeminence.

"Marco," milord begins, to be interrupted by the opening of the door.

Monsignor Sebastian stalks in wearing his habitual frown followed by the adoring Seigneur Ayesha, a pretty woman in her early fifties. Lilian finds the eighty-year old

Grey Spear Preeminence reminiscent of a bad tempered bulldog with his roughly hewn features, stocky build, jaundiced complexion and muddy eyes. The conservative warrior is often a thorn in milord's side, intriguing against milord's interests and using every opportunity to undermine milord's preeminence. Grey Spear's protégé, Martin, every bit as unpleasant as his mentor, has tormented Lilian mercilessly since she entered the Cartel.

"Lucius," Sebastian acknowledges taking his seat, Ayesha to his right. The casual acknowledgement is as much an insult as the late arrival.

Lilian is amazed at the Grey Spear Preeminence's arrogance. Monsignor Sebastian Mehta is a powerful and dangerous warrior. She would not wish to find the wrong side of his will. He does not out rank milord. Surely he must know he is treading the edge of the Crevasse.

Amazement turns to shock when instead of issuing a rebuke to Grey Spear, milord says, "Lilian, sit with us, you are present as Conservator of the Desperation Mine and Refinery."

Lilian quickly pulls a chair from the table so that she is now seated behind milord's left shoulder. *I am the sum of my ancestors.* She is about to learn milord's true purpose in acquiring her bond and honoring her as conservator. The properties are central to the Synthetics venture, but that is insufficient cause for milord's action. Only the most trusted of blood or commerce kin are honored with conservatorship. In the administration of the entrusted property the conservator's will is treated as milord's. Misused, conservatorship ruins estates. Even a minor Vistrite holding is of immense value.

"Marco, if you please," Lucius addresses his seigneur.

Rising, Marco ignites the large wall reviewer as he begins to speak, "Monsignors, both the Matahorn Alliance and Leonardo Society are committed to Bright Star..."

Bright Star. Lilian can barely believe her eyes. Marco is discussing the formation of a consortium for perilous interstellar exploration and colonization. It is the substance of legends.

I am the foundation of my family. Lilian forces calm as she considers the repercussions milord's ambitions.

"... both our partners have reviewed the findings of the Serengeti IX Discoverer and concur that there are two inhabitable bodies in the region beyond the Fourth System ..." Marco continues his system rocking discourse on Serengeti's entrance into legend.

Stellar transit among the Twelve Systems is dependent on the passage markers known as beacons, beyond those boundaries stellar transit is perilous. Automated Stellar Discoverers routinely disappear without a trace. It has been two centuries since the last Stellar Explorer and its crew ventured from the Twelve Systems. To build a stellar exploration vessel is to accept almost unimaginable financial and physical risk.

Honor is my blade and shield. Unimaginable. Risk. Complexity. Lilian can barely hear past the rush of adrenaline that floods her. *Honor endures.* Milord knows. It is impossible. Even Dean Joseph does not know. *Honor knows not fear.* Milord cannot read your mind. It is a ridiculous tale.

Since childhood Lilian has experienced episodes of heightened intellect so intense that she can decipher that which should be undecipherable. Where no pattern should exist, Lilian can trace it and, upon occasion, correct *the wrongness* that distorts it.

Unpredictable and erratic, Lilian's '*insights*' revealed the counterfeiters, a traitor within the Cartel, and the potential to use the counterfeit technology to create Vistrite synthetics. Uncomfortable with her inability to control the occurrence of her insights and fearful that her episodes could be considered derangement, Lilian has carefully hidden the full extent of her abilities.

Honor acts as duty commands. If milord has not yet discovered what she would shield, it is likely he will. Her fate is in the hands of the Shades. With acceptance comes relief and Lilian is able to return her attention to Marco.

"... the Matahorn Alliance's financial empire provides access to capital," Marco presents the specifics of the partner arrangements. "The Leonardo Society holds the patents for the advanced stellar propulsion and atmospheric controls needed for transit through the beaconless expanse."

The mystery of Marco's absence from the Synthetics venture is resolved. Milord's kinsman has been fully engaged in designing Bright Star.

"As devised Serengeti will have the greatest share of Bright Star, controlling forty-three percent. Matahorn Group will have thirty-six percent and the Leonardo Society twenty-one percent. The delegations from our partners arrive in four sevendays to negotiate the Formation. Before then we must assemble Serengeti's contribution to Bright Star as well as prepare to negotiate for our partners' resources," Marco concludes.

On the surface no consortium partner dominates. In reality the Leonardo Society will not defy Serengeti without severe provocation. Serengeti and Lucius Mercio control Bright Star. *Remarkable, devious man,* Lilian sends an admiring glance at milord's shoulders.

Pausing a moment to give his audience time to consider the consortium details, Marco smiles at Lucius who smiles in return. Both men offer a brief nod of approbation to Nickolas who desperately attempts to appear modest.

At the byplay among the three warriors Lilian solve another riddle. Although Nickolas disdains her, before she was conservator Nickolas readily assigned her his duties for the Fisheries and Desperation. At the time it made no sense even though Lilian's achievements warranted it. Now it is clear, Nickolas required the extra bells to support this heroic endeavor.

"There is a great deal to accomplish and limited bells," Marco turns from visions of

legend to the reality of commerce. "We must all accept a fair burden."

The energy in the chamber takes on a new tone. Control of the Serengeti Discover's data is not sufficient to justify Serengeti's dominance of Bright Star. Vast wealth must be amassed to fund their share. Cartouche contributions will be the subject of intense negotiations. Under Lilian's riveted observation Sebastian Mehta's belligerent expression turns sly giving his features a repellant, serpentine aspect. The dangerous rivalry between Blooded Dagger and Grey Spear is about to escalate.