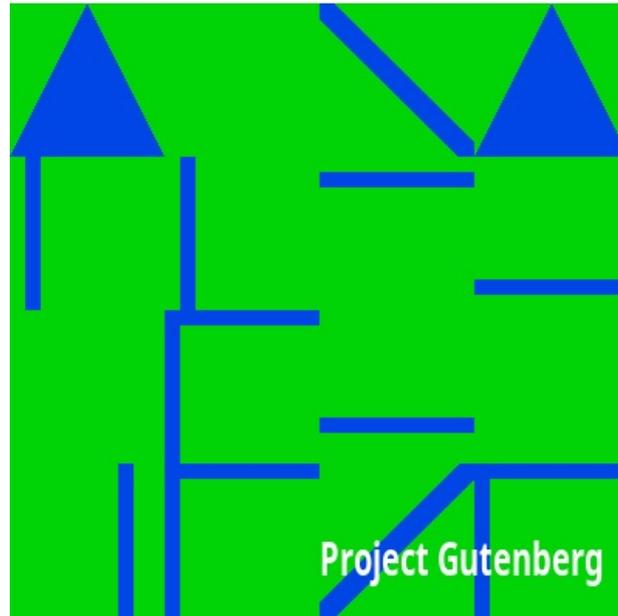

A Matter of Honor

A Terran Empire novel

Ann Wilson



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A Terran Empire novel

by Ann Wilson

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I

Irschcha, 2569 CE

Chaos take those Imperial schools anyway!

It was all their fault, Thark growled to himself, increasing his pace as the sleek lines of his ship came into view. Not even the prospect of flying the Prowler lightened his mood this time. The Chaos-loving schools had done too much! They were fine for the unTalented, like humans and now Traiti, but they had probably precipitated a disaster here on Irschcha. Their damnable stress on Imperial rather than planetary allegiance was to blame; it had deprived him of the strongest Talent to appear in many years, Corina Losinj—and it would cost Corina her life soon, if it hadn't already.

He was practically running toward his small ship now, dignity forgotten in the need for haste. "Dammit all to hell!" he burst out, the human curse seeming oddly appropriate under the circumstances. If the Terran Empire hadn't discovered Irschcha for another century, or if Chear hadn't chosen to affiliate with it, none of this would have had to happen.

As Thark neared the ship, he forced his thoughts and emotions under control, away from such useless speculations. He was High Adept of the White Order now, not Chear, and it was up to him to correct Chear's error. His calm voice did not betray his feelings when he returned the salute of the gray-kilted Sanctioner standing at the foot of the boarding ramp.

"Greetings, Master Thark," the Sanctioner said.

"Greetings, Underofficer Jamar. What is Prowler's status?"

"Senior Adepts Valla and Kainor are already on board, as is the rest of my squad. The ship is ready for takeoff."

"Excellent," Thark said. "Then we leave immediately. We have no time to waste." He hurried up the ramp into the ship.

Jamar followed, stopping to raise the ramp and close the lock. Thark went on to the cockpit and secured himself in the pilot's seat, scanning his instrumentation. He was an accomplished pilot, and rather to his surprise he found that the pre-liftoff routine did ease his mood, even under such unpleasant circumstances.

His ears went forward in satisfaction. Jamar had surpassed himself; the only thing left was to alert his crew and passengers for immediate takeoff. He did so, then fed full power to the null-gravs. There was no need to wait for clearance; this was a private field, one of his prerogatives as High Adept, and the Prowler, as his ship, had an automatic clearance superseding any other in this system save an Imperial Navy ship.

As soon as they were a safe ten diameters out from Irschcha he activated the hyperdrive, then unstrapped himself and rose. Prowler's course to Rendavi, the Crusade leaders' rendezvous, had been fed into the navigation computer several days ago and been updated automatically every hour since.

He started to leave the cockpit. Once the transition into hyperspace had been made, there was no need for a pilot until it was time to out-transition and land.

Still—at the moment, he really didn't feel like talking to his lieutenants. He returned to the controls and sat down, staring into the blank viewscreen and visualizing the morning's unexpected, perhaps disastrous, developments. Perhaps if he had handled things differently...

He had spent most of the week arranging things so he would be free all day today, knowing such things would not be possible for much longer. The weather had cooperated almost as if it were intelligent and sensed the importance of this meeting. Although it was still early spring, the day was a brilliant one, the temperature a comfortable fifteen degrees. He had taken advantage of that, deciding to have Corina's final lesson out on the sundeck.

He took several seating cushions outside and arranged them so the sun would warm them, yet not glare into his or Corina's eyes. Then he leaned back on one set of the cushions to wait for her. Relaxing almost totally, he watched a small cloud drifting in the clear green sky. The sun's gentle warmth on his fur was thoroughly enjoyable. It was indeed a pleasant change, he mused, to be able to relish such a day with no duties to interfere. His position as High Adept made such luxuries all too rare.

Corina's lessons were a self-imposed duty, one he was pleased he had assumed. He was looking forward to her initiation into the White Order, and the fact that he had trained her himself would make that doubly enjoyable.

It was fortunate that Corina was available to the Order at all. Her Talent had been deeply latent, not developing until quite late. Because of that, she had been missed by the Order's usual pre-school testing. That, Thark thought, still bitter, was one of the few things the Empire's very presence had not changed. Although the examiner had believed she had sensed something, Corina had been unable to receive even the simplest thoughts, and had not had even a trace of mental screen.

She had been seventeen, close to eighteen years old by the new Imperial Standard measure, when she had found herself beginning to pick up thoughts. She had gone, naturally enough, to a local Order chapter for help and possible training. The chapter had reported it to him, knowing he would be interested; when Talent appeared so late it was almost always minimal, usually only telepathy and a weak mind-screen, and the tester had been astonished at Corina's strength.

Thark had been surprised himself when he scanned her. It was then that he had decided to take her as his private student. Four years' training had brought out her potential, the power he had sensed she should be able to control, when they met. It would be formally recognized soon, when she was initiated; then Thark could bring her into the Prime Chapter, where the Order could make full use of her Talents. He had no intention whatever of letting them go to waste. Senior Adept Corina of the White Order, he thought—yes, it had a pleasant ring. He and the others of the Prime Chapter already thought of her that way, used her last name only when formality required it.

He caught sight of her then, and watched her come up the rubberoid walk to his raised sundeck. As usual, she was precisely on time. And she certainly wasn't difficult to spot; all her kilts were bright, but the red-and-gold one she favored and was wearing today was positively gaudy. Urr, perhaps her taste would improve as she matured. He looked down at his own kilt, a conservative dark blue that went well with the tawny shade of his fur. That, with its sporran, was one of the few human innovations he appreciated.

Corina purred softly in pleasure when she saw Thark out on the sundeck. Truly, this weather was too good to waste any of it indoors, especially at this time of year. He stood as she approached.

"Good day, Master Thark," she said with a slight bow, her hands open and raised to shoulder level.

Thark returned the formal bow. "Good day, Student Losinj. Be welcome."

Formalities were certainly briefer since Irschcha had joined the Empire, Thark thought. He wasn't sure yet whether he approved of that or not. They had been time-consuming, but they had also given life a certain grace that now seemed lacking, and had provided a social lubricant that Irschchans, in his opinion, needed. He could be wrong, though, he thought as he returned to his cushions.

Corina sat facing him. "What is today's lesson, Master?"

"At this stage, it is up to you to tell me. Further training will be directed to any area in which you feel deficient."

Her mind-shield was down, so he could sense, as well as hear, her surprise. "I do not understand."

"The only thing you truly require now is more confidence in yourself. Otherwise you are fully ready for initiation, and I would like to see that take place as soon as possible."

Corina shook her head slowly. "I do not feel ready to take on such responsibilities, Master. I have not had the psychological preparation of those who have attended Order schools."

"Your feelings are understandable," Thark said sympathetically. "You know, however, that you already have as

much power and control as any Senior in the Prime Chapter."

"Urrr..." She hesitated. "You may be correct. I did stalemate Senior Valla in our last practice session."

"Yes, she told me about it. She was quite pleased. She and Kainor agree with me that you are ready, and if you are willing, they have asked to stand as your sponsors."

"I would be most honored to have them as sponsors," Corina said, inclining her head. "What do you plan for me after initiation?"

"I want to bring you into the Prime Chapter, where one with your amount of Talent belongs. As for a specific job, we think such Talent, in conjunction with your other abilities, can best be utilized as a roving supervisor in Valla's Intelligence Division."

Corina considered that. It would be a most interesting job, she had no doubt. The Intelligence Division got the most difficult cases the Sanctioners had to cope with, and since they were Irschcha's military, as well as its police, the variety of such cases was truly remarkable. It was tempting, though she questioned whether she would be able to do well at it. "I have not yet finished school," she objected.

"I have not forgotten. Until you graduate, you will work as Valla's assistant after class. She will train you for the job."

"Yes, Master, I believe I would like that. But the Prime Chapter..."

"You will not be expected to participate fully until you do graduate, Corina. By that time you should be sure enough of yourself to function properly as a Senior."

"Under those conditions, I can honorably agree."

"Excellent!" Thark let his pleasure show. "As part of your further development, I would like you to do some teaching. Through teaching others, you will learn more yourself—and more of yourself."

"That I will do gladly. I do not feel as fully qualified as I should be."

"Perhaps not, but your Talent is truly remarkable." Thark purred. By the time he was ready to step down, she should be capable of taking over leadership of the Order. By then, if his Crusade were successful, it would have taken over rule of the Empire from the unTalented humans. The end of the Traiti War made that a probability in the near future.

Humans weren't stupid, he thought. In fact, some were quite intelligent. And the Empire was, as far as it went, a fairly good basis for government. It was simply that those with Talent had superior abilities, thus were better qualified to rule. And to rule, the Order must rebel.

He had not been fully shielded, he realized when he saw the look on Corina's face. "What Crusade?" she asked curiously.

Thark felt her probing for more information, and reinforced his shield. "Do not concern yourself with that," he advised. "You should know nothing about it until after your initiation."

"Why not?"

"Because it is Order business, and you are not yet sworn to the Order."

"Oh." She seemed to accept that, but Thark was familiar with her curiosity, and it would be no surprise to him if she kept trying to find out. He would have to be careful to keep his shield up.

"All I can tell you now," he said, hoping to ease that curiosity, "is that it will bring proper symmetry to the Cosmos."

That statement served only to make Corina even more curious. Thark had seemed preoccupied for the last half year, and so had the other Seniors she knew. It was clear that something was going on; she had sensed it for some time. She had asked nothing about what she felt, knowing that Thark was reluctant to discuss it. Now, though, it appeared that whatever this "Crusade" was, it concerned her own future. That fact, she felt, gave her the right to know about it.

She probed at Thark's shield again, but he was too strong for her to penetrate it. All she knew was what she had overheard, and even then she had gotten little information. Only the term "Crusade," the fact that she was somehow involved, and a mixed feeling of obligation and impending triumph. But what kind of triumph, and over what? Or... who?

"Is it something that will affect the Empire?" she asked.

"Something that will improve it," Thark replied. "You must admit it is not perfect—"

He was interrupted by a mindcall from Valla, head of the Sanctioners and his chief lieutenant. *What is it, Thark? I felt your disturbance—*

Not now, Valla!

Her thought cut off, but too late; the momentary distraction had enabled Corina to break through his lowered shield. He could see, as well as feel, her reaction, and it was what he had feared.

Corina was both shocked and angry. Shocked that Thark would even plan such a rebellion, and angry that he had expected her to participate. Thark had not been raised as an Imperial citizen; she had, and could not understand his desire for change. Yet she liked him as a friend as well as respecting him as a teacher—she did not want to believe he would actually go through with such a thing.

Her thoughts were a turmoil of conflicting loyalties. The Empire, she had been taught and firmly believed, was what kept the peace between planets and systems, while allowing maximum freedom on-planet through the ruling nobility. Thark retained his title of High Adept, though he could have claimed the title of Planetary Baron, and was virtually as powerful as he would have been before the Empire.

Why, then, did he want change? Perhaps that should not concern her as much as the mere fact that he did. She was due for initiation; in honor, could she oppose him? Or was it her duty as an Imperial citizen to do so? She was bound by no oaths, and so free to choose. Blades! she thought angrily. Why did Thark put her in such a position?

Perhaps if she got more information she would know what to do. Keeping her voice steady, she asked, "Is such a rebellion not simple treason, Master Thark? Will it not destroy the Empire, rather than improve it?"

Thark looked closely at his student. It was natural for her to be concerned; he himself was not particularly fond of the idea of the bloodshed that now appeared necessary. At the very minimum, the Emperor, Rangers, and nobility would have to be eliminated, and he knew full well that there would be others.

"It might be so construed, but it is something that cannot be helped," he said calmly. "You should be able to understand that for yourself. Look at the peace and balance that rule by the Order has brought Irschcha since it was founded, then look at the constant unrest and controversy elsewhere in the Empire. Which is better?"

Corina shifted uncomfortably. "Peace, of course." She hesitated, then said, "But rebellion is no way to bring true peace. And there is a great difference between ruling one race on one planet and ruling an Empire of thousands of worlds."

"Less than you might think," Thark replied, pleased at her composure. A difference of opinion need not be disorderly, and her temper at times like this was uncertain. "We need only replace key people with our own most strongly Talented initiates. The bureaucracy and computers will, as they do now, handle day-to-day operations."

"And because you possess the strongest Talent, naturally you will become Emperor?" There was a distinct trace of sarcasm in that question.

"Of course," Thark said, mildly surprised and ignoring the tone of her voice. "It is not something I particularly want to do—" He broke off, looked at her sharply. "It is indeed unfortunate that you did not attend an Order school."

He probed gently. She was angry, of course; he could tell that even through her shield, but she seemed to be keeping her emotions under tight control. Good. She might still be amenable to reason.

"I have told you many times," he said patiently, "that possession of Talent carries with it a certain responsibility. We of the Order are able to use our Talent to govern better than do those who lack it. Honor demands that we do so. We cannot avoid our duty."

He could feel her rejection of that argument even before she spoke. "That may apply to Irschcha, but it is obviously not true of humans. They did quite well before MacLeod found us, despite their lack of Talent. You must agree that things have improved for Irschcha since we joined the Empire."

"Some things, yes," Thark admitted. "We have hyperships now, like my Prowler; we are benefitting from trade with other systems; we are starting out-system colonies ourselves; we have people in the Imperial Services—"

"And in the Emperor's own Palace Guard!" Corina interrupted.

"But that is not enough!"

"Is that not considerable progress since they found us only forty-three Standard years ago? Can you truly expect more so soon? We are only a small part of the Empire."

"I cannot accept that," Thark growled. "We are being humiliated! We must even use human units of measurement. Standard years? Terran years is what you mean!"

"Still—"

"We have no one in the nobility except for myself," Thark continued, ignoring her attempted protest. "No Irschchan is a Ranger, none command major military ships or bases. Does that seem equitable to you?"

"It does not seem inequitable, simply on the basis of numbers," Corina pointed out. "Humans occupy thousands of worlds, the Traitri hundreds, while we occupy only this one completely. And it is possible they have talents or abilities we lack."

Thark groaned inwardly. This was not going well, but she was too valuable to lose; he would have to keep trying.

"They do not," he told her. "I have scanned a large number of humans, tourists and administrative officials alike. They have no indication of Talent or anything else unusual, except perhaps an occasional trace of screen. They are exactly what they seem. All they have is a very sophisticated technology."

"Perhaps that is their talent," Corina said. "It was they who found us; we did not find them. Or perhaps their special ability is even rarer with them than Talent is with us."

"If that is the case," Thark replied, "it would seem they either cannot use it to govern properly, or refuse to do so. In either case, our duty is clear."

He was silent then, perceiving her need to think.

Corina was deeply disturbed. Thark's arguments were plausible, at least on the surface, but she found them unsatisfying. Tourists and administrative officials were not the Empire's best examples, especially the tourists. Thark claimed his motive was unselfish—duty—and she knew him well enough to believe he truly thought so. But what if he was wrong?

Chaos take it! Peace was important, and she could see it as a result—perhaps—of Thark's rebellion. But first there would be much death and destruction. With the Traitri War barely over, what Thark planned might as easily trigger a disaster as lead to the peace he expected.

It was a difficult decision; no matter what she did, people would be killed. Yet Thark himself had taught her that her responsibility to Irschcha ought to be paramount, and that meant she had no choice but to support the Empire that had done so much for it. In honor, that was the only way she could decide. Irschcha had made more progress in its forty-three years since joining the Empire than in any span ten times that long under the Order.

Once her decision was made, she did not hesitate. She stood, then said with a return to strict formality, "I can regard your Crusade as nothing but treason, Thark. I can no longer call you Master."

Thark also rose, nodding his acceptance. At least, he thought, she was acting as he had taught her, with honor and decorum. "Then we are enemies. I truly regret that, necessary as it is. Will you at least give me your word that you will not go to the Imperial authorities?" He knew the answer even as he asked the question, but it was a propriety he had to observe.

"I cannot do that," Corina said. "You have taught me too well. Failing to act now, on what I am positive is right, would be as dishonorable as treason itself."

"It would indeed," Thark replied with regret. "You leave me no choice. I cannot kill a guest in my home; to do that would bring only shame. However, I cannot let you live to reach the Imperials with this information, either. And I most certainly will not allow you to aid their cause."

Fear almost weakened Corina's resolve. She did not want to die, but death seemed unavoidable. If she thought about it too much, though, she might give in, and that would be worse. "I must try," she said steadily. "What of my family?"

"The decision was yours, not theirs," Thark replied. "It will not be held against them. If you wish, I will give them your soul-blade."

"I am not yet dead," Corina said, caressing the dagger's hilt. She turned and left.

"No," Thark said softly, watching her leave. "Not yet." As soon as she was out of sight, he mindcalled his lieutenant. *Valla? I have a job for you.*

Yes? came the calm reply.

Corina Losinj must be eliminated. She broke through my shield when your call distracted me, and discovered the Crusade. She has just left, and is going to report to the Imperials.

Corina! Valla's thought was surprised. *But I thought—* She hesitated. *Are you sure, Master? Why would she ___*

Apparently her lack of Order schooling. I cannot fault her; it is simply that her loyalties lie with the Empire rather than with us. Still, she is a danger which must be eliminated.

Understood, Master. She was a good friend, and most Talented. Valla had felt the regret in Thark's mental touch, and shared it, but there was no time for emotion now. *This is an unfortunate happening. I will take care of it.*

With your usual efficiency, of course. But not personally. Arrange it. Tell the Sanctioners she is wearing that red-and-gold kilt. Then bring Kainor and meet me at my ship. She is forcing me to speed up the timetable; the Prime Chapter and other Crusade leaders are to gather as soon as possible on Rendavi. Inform your people.

How do you wish her to die?

She has betrayed her Talent; let her be destroyed by Talent. Tell your executioner to use darlas. Thark regretted that, in a way; death by telepathic attack was exquisitely painful. But it was just, and it was honorable.

What of her family?

They are oathbound. Disregard them.

Yes, Master Thark. Are there further instructions?

No.

Thark broke the contact, then made three more briefer ones before his general broadcast to the off-planet Crusade leaders. Once they had been informed of the accelerated schedule, he was free to leave for his private spacefield and the Prowler.

Thark's attention focused again on his immediate surroundings, the Prowler's control room. In retrospect, he was as sure of Corina's thoughts as if he had read them. He laid his ears back in a frown. No, he could see no way he might have changed the morning's events. It was most regrettable, both the loss of such a Talent and Corina's death. He was still quite fond of her.

But enough of these useless memories, Thark told himself sternly. What had happened could not be changed. He should join his passengers. He rose, giving his instrument panel an automatic scan as he rose. Urrr— the proximity alarm! He'd forgotten to turn it on, a mistake he'd not have made but for Corina's defection. He sat back down and corrected his error, wondering if there were any others he'd made in his chagrin over Corina's betrayal.

Corina was thinking in rapid, frightened bursts as she left Thark's home. She was certain he would lose no time in sending the executioners after her, probably Sanctioners. She was not particularly optimistic about making it safely to the Planetary Palace and the Imperial authorities.

Thark's home was ten kilometers north of the capital city, MacLeod's Landing. It would be a long, time-consuming walk, but what choice did she have? With Sanctioners on her trail, using her identification to call for public transportation at one of the hailing posts would be a fatal mistake.

The occasional clumps of bushes bordering the street's short-cropped grass gave her an idea. She was fairly conspicuous; there were few pedestrians this far from the city, and as Thark had told her often enough, she did dress rather gaudily. She made her way into one of the clumps, took off her kilt, turned it inside-out, and put it back on. It was a youngling's trick, but... She surveyed the results. Not good, she decided. Still, it might help; at least the solid maroon lining was a little less gaudy than red and gold plaid.

She returned to the street, glad for the soft grass that had replaced pavement when null-grav craft came into common use, and resumed her walk toward the city. As small as MacLeod's Landing was by human standards, it was already large by Irschchan, and still growing. If she made it that far, there was at least a chance she could avoid the Sanctioners in the crowds, and reach the Palace.

She had been walking for perhaps five minutes when a Sanctioner patrol cruiser sped past her, toward Thark's home. The wind of its passage ruffled her fur as well as her kilt, but they seemed to pay no attention to her, for which she was grateful.

Still, it was what she had hoped. If she were obvious enough, the Sanctioners should think she had nothing to hide. Between that and her kilt-flipping, unless she ran into a Sanctioner who knew her well enough to identify her by the pattern of her mind-shield, she might make it.

Bare minutes later, though, her hopes fell as she heard the patrol cruiser approaching again. It stopped in front of her and three gray-kilted Sanctioners got out.

Besides the usual sporran and soul-blade everyone carried, the Sanctioners wore their collars of office, gleaming gold bands snug at their throats. And their blasters, normally worn on belt clips, were all pointed in her direction. Pitting around the muzzles showed Corina, as if she had needed the confirmation, that the weapons had all seen use.

She made her body relax. These Sanctioners were big, and they were treating her as cautiously as they would a dangerous criminal. From the Order's point of view, though, that was now an accurate description.

"All right, Losinj," the oldest one said. "Hands on your head, and do not move."

Corina obeyed, moving slowly to give herself time to think. These three would have tight mind-shields, and anyway, the most she had been able to handle in practice was two—which Thark, of course knew. She was in no position to fight. Her only chance was to get them to relax, drop their shields voluntarily. Unless they were simply going to kill her here...

Which they were apparently not going to do. Two stood back, perhaps three meters from her and an equal distance from each other, their blasters steady on target. The leader, staying carefully out of their lines of fire, approached her. He unclipped the soul-blade, sheath and all, from her belt and attached it to his own.

"It will be returned intact to your family for their Hall of Memories after your execution, as Senior Valla has ordered," he told her.

"My thanks to Senior Valla," Corina said, her voice shaky. So Thark had turned her case over to Valla. That wasn't good news at all. She knew Valla well, had in fact gotten much training from her, and they were friends, though not close ones. But Valla didn't let friendship interfere with her work, and she had a well-earned reputation for thoroughness and efficiency. At least, Corina thought, Valla did not dishonor her by ordering her blade broken.

The Sanctioner moved behind her. "Put your hands down, behind your back."

She obeyed, felt cool metallic bands close around her wrists. The Sanctioner took hold of her arm just above the elbow.

"Into the cruiser, youngling."

She got in, was seated between him and another Sanctioner, both with blasters aimed at her. The third took his place at the controls, heading them toward MacLeod's Landing and Sanctioner headquarters. She put her sort-of-a-plan into action; as uncertain as it was, she had been unable to think of anything else.

Huddling up, she let her mind-shield relax slightly. As the cruiser picked up speed, she felt one of the Sanctioners try a probe. Don't fight it, she told herself, use it. Sanctioners were Talented, of course, but they didn't have the training or control she had gotten from Thark. They shouldn't be able to detect her attempt at deception.

She shivered, letting the shield drop even further and allowing her fear, only partially falsified, to seep through. If she could convince them she was terrified, too paralyzed with panic to be a danger, she might have a chance.

The Sanctioner leader looked at her for a moment, then said, with some sympathy, "You seem harmless enough, hardly a dangerous criminal. Why does Senior Valla want you dead, youngling?"

"I do not know," Corina lied, projecting more fright. "I mean... I have done nothing..." She let her voice trail off.

"Urrr, there is no need to worry," the officer said, apparently trying to reassure her. "The executioner here is good. He will give you a swift death, and it will be one with honor; she has ordered you killed with *darlas*."

It didn't reassure Corina, and she let that show in her expression. She looked up at the Sanctioner leader, shivering again. "But... I don't want to die! I have done nothing to die for!"

"Youngling, it is not for me to question Senior Valla's orders, but I admit I do not like this assignment. My own girl-child is about your age."

"Then—" Sudden hope dawned.

"No, youngling." The Sanctioner's voice was full of pity, but remained firm. "My honor lies in my duty, and that duty requires me to take you in."

Corina slumped, fear and a sense of hopelessness seeming worse after that surge of false hope. Her shield was almost all the way down. She dared not probe at the Sanctioners to see if they believed her; somehow that did not seem to be the sort of thing a frightened prisoner would do. She could only hope her plan was working, but the closer they got to the city and Sanctioner headquarters, the less confidence she had in it.

The trip ended in deep silence. By the time they pulled up in front of the large stone building that housed the capital's Sanctioners, Corina was on the ragged edge of desperation. It must have appeared more like sheer terror to the officer beside her, because he dismissed the other two. "Go on in. She will give me no trouble; she is too afraid."

They obeyed. As they entered the building, the leader climbed out of the cruiser, clipped his blaster to his belt, and extended a hand to help his trembling prisoner.

That was when Corina struck. He had relaxed his shield slightly, thinking her powerless, and she had no trouble stunning him with darlas. Awkwardly, hampered by the way her hands were fastened and by her need for haste, she dug through his sporran for the handcuff key and fumbled it into the lock. The cuffs opened after what seemed hours, but could have been only seconds. Then she retrieved her soul-blade from his belt, half tempted to use it on him. She refrained; he had pitied her, and the killing would not be justified. Self-defense was commendable, but she could not kill one who was unable to defend himself. She did, however, increase the mental pressure on him enough to insure he would remain unconscious for at least an hour. Then she sensed one of the other Sanctioners returning, wondering idly what was keeping Garal and the prisoner.

She straightened and left at a fast walk, was around the corner and out of sight before he spotted Garal's unconscious form. She tightened her shield, feeling probes as the Sanctioner alerted the others. Although she knew it would make her conspicuous, she broke into a run. She had to reach the park that encircled the Planetary Palace before the Sanctioners caught her again. That was Imperial territory; Irschchan jurisdiction ended at the park's edge. She just hoped that legality would stop the Sanctioner.

The park was in sight, less than a hundred meters away, but the Sanctioner who had found Garal was fast closing the distance between them. Corina risked a quick glance back, saw him stop, crouch, and draw his blaster. She increased her speed somehow and started dodging. It might take her a few seconds longer to reach the park, but she would be harder to hit.

She heard the frying noise of the blaster, felt heat as the bolt singed fur on her right arm. A second shot missed completely as she dove into the park and rolled into a stand of purple-leafed bushes. A third bolt went overhead, then the Sanctioner returned the blaster to his belt and called to her.

"You have made it to Imperial territory, Losinj, but you are not safe yet! Even if you manage to get past Entos and into the Palace, we can have you extradited as a common criminal, for assaulting a Sanctioner. Think about that!"

"Thank you for the information," Corina called back, shaken but not, she hoped, letting it show in her voice. Entos! Valla must have anticipated her escape from the Sanctioners, Corina thought, if she had sent her best killer to attempt an intercept in the park itself.

Then she realized that wasn't necessarily the case; more likely it was only Valla's thoroughness, her reluctance to leave anything she thought important to only one group. Still, using Entos against a student showed her how seriously Valla regarded this; it was rather like using a blaster to eliminate an annoying insect.

There was no point in being particularly cautious, she knew, so she hurried directly toward the Palace. She had met Entos several times, often enough that he knew her both by sight and by mind pattern, even when she was shielded.

She was almost at her objective—in sight of the main entrance, in fact—when the anticipated attack came. It started with a savage mental thrust, powerful enough to penetrate her shield and drive her to her knees. It didn't last; only Thark or another member of the Prime Chapter, which Entos wasn't, could maintain that level of intensity for long. But by the time she had recovered enough to stand, shaking her head to clear it, Entos was behind her. She sensed a physical threat, lunged to her left just in time to feel his dagger brush her fur rather than bury itself in her back.

She scrambled to her feet, drawing her own blade and attempting a mental counterattack. It slowed Entos' next slash, but had no other effect. She stabbed at his upper arm, trying to cripple him, but he parried skillfully.

"You fight well, youngling, even now," he said, then tried another intense mental thrust. It was less powerful than the first had been, and Corina managed to block it, though she was less successful parrying his simultaneous dagger thrust at her throat. She did avoid most, but it was enough to draw blood; she felt warmth seeping into the fur at the base of her neck.

Corina didn't reply, saving her breath for the fight. They were circling now, both looking for openings, when she saw a flicker of motion from the direction of the Palace entrance. She risked a quick glance, saw it was the Imperial Marine guards running toward them and drawing sidearms.

Entos obviously saw them as well, because he snarled and struck for her again. She was starting to parry when the

Marines fired, and both Irschchans fell.

Thark finally came to the conclusion that if he had made any other errors in his chagrin, he couldn't remember them. And Prowler didn't need him, while it would probably be wise to brief his chief aides fully on Corina's defection, even though it was a strong probability she was dead by this time. He made his way to the ship's lounge, thinking about the mistakes he had made with her—mistakes that would have to be avoided in the future with others who had been taught in Imperial schools.

The lounge was small—Kanchatka-class vessels had originally been intended as couriers, not yachts—but it was quite comfortable, with deep-pile carpeting, and a large viewscreen now displaying a sunset landscape Valla was fond of. She and Kainor started to rise as Thark entered, but settled back at his gesture.

He paused at the service panel to dial three glasses of koril, the fermented milk Irschchans drank as humans drank wine. Carrying them, he joined his aides, seating himself on the third pile of cushions at the lounge's low table.

After the first silent, companionable sips, Thark began filling the other two in. It wasn't easy for any of them, though an outsider would have thought them discussing abstractions. Only Thark himself had been truly close to Corina, but Kainor and Valla had known and liked her for the four years since her Talent was discovered; her betrayal hurt.

When Thark was finished, Valla detailed the steps she'd taken to insure the traitor's death, for Kainor's benefit. That brought a trace of amusement to his voice. "Three Sanctioners, Valla? And Entos? I should think either more than adequate to deal with her."

"Either should be," Valla agreed, "but you know I like to take precautions, especially when it is so little trouble. Should she by some stroke of luck escape the Sanctioners, she will not escape Entos."

"True," Thark said. It was unfortunate, he thought, that it had seemed desirable to impose a communications blackout, including telepathy, except in a major emergency or by messenger, but at present security was more important than convenience—however good it would be to be able to make definite, rather than tentative, plans. Facts must be accepted, though; they had insufficient data, so they simply had to make do with what they did have. "Even so, we do not yet have confirmation. I think we must plan for the possibility, remote as it is, that she did escape both and make it to the Palace. If the Imperials are informed of even as little as she got from me, it could hinder us."

"If you plan for that," Kainor said, "you will also have to assume a Ranger will be involved within minutes, or at most hours."

"What—" "A Ranger!" Valla and Thark exclaimed as one.

"Yes. Ranger James Medart arrived yesterday aboard the battle cruiser Emperor Chang, and took a lander down to the Colvis Reserve."

"Why was I not informed?" Thark asked, forcing his voice to remain steady. A Ranger's interference, especially this early, could be disastrous!

"Ranger Medart's orders, Master. He is on convalescent leave, recuperating from the injuries he sustained just prior to the end of the war. He did not wish to be bothered by official functions."

"If he is injured," Thark said thoughtfully, "he should be no problem to eliminate."

"I said he is recuperating," Kainor corrected. "I understand he is still weak, but otherwise he is healthy enough. It is unlikely to affect him except to slow him in personal combat."

"And Rangers do not fight unless it cannot be avoided," Valla said. "Does he have anyone with him?"

"I was not told, but most probably he does. Since this is a peaceful world and the Reserve is a resort area, I would assume him to be accompanied by a token bodyguard—perhaps two to four Marines, not enough to stop a determined killer."

"True," Valla agreed. "Entos again, then, with four Sanctioners. The Sanctioners have enough Talent to take out two Marines each, so even if our estimate is low, they should have no difficulty. And whether Medart fights or not, Entos will be able to give him a swift death."

Kainor nodded. "After all, it is not their combat abilities that make them so valuable to the Empire, even though Menshikov is the Empire's greatest strategist. It is their personalities and the way they think."

"Yes," Thark said. "That much everyone knows. But exactly what is it about their personalities and thinking? What is so unusual about them that there are only ten Rangers, and none of those Irschchans?"

"Nine, since Tarlac's assassination," Kainor reminded him. His ears went back in a slight frown. "Despite my investigations since the Crusade was decided on, I have not been able to discover the actual selection criteria. All I can tell you is what I have been able to deduce from studying them and their accomplishments, and that certainly cannot be taken as conclusive."

"Go ahead," Thark told him. "I know you dislike making incomplete evaluations, but there is no more time to complete that project. An incomplete evaluation is better than none at all, you must agree."

"I do—but keep in mind that it is incomplete." Kainor shifted on his cushions, then continued.

"First, their selection is based on a combination of factors, not a single isolated characteristic. Genius-level intelligence is of course part of it, along with a generalist's wide range of interests and abilities, and greater adaptability than normally appears even in spacers. They are also able to analyze situations, develop a solution that seems improbable or impossible, and make it work—usually if not always to the Empire's benefit."

"I have had little opportunity to study them," Valla said. "Could you be more specific?"

"Easily," Kainor replied. "And Medart is a classic example, so I will use him. Among his other accomplishments, he was responsible for both the successful human-Irschchan settlement of Ondrian and the end of the Sandeman Incursion in Sector Five, which resulted in Subsector Sandeman's joining the Empire."

"Which in turn led to a high percentage of their warriors in the Imperial military or serving as contract police forces on various worlds," Thark said. "Extremely loyal military or police—but they are Elnar's problem. Continue."

"Yes, Master. Valla, do you remember anything about either incident?"

"Almost nothing," Valla admitted. "Until recently, I had very little interest in Imperial news."

"And I would appreciate hearing about both with the information you have that Imperial newscasts probably left out because humans would take it as a given," Thark said.

Kainor sighed, something a number of Irschchans had picked up since meeting humans. "Very well. The Ondrian situation, then. During the second year of the joint colony's existence, an Irschchan youngling was exploring in the mountains alone, contrary to all colony rules. He vanished, and search parties found no trace of him. He was presumed dead after a standard week, due to the bitterly cold weather.

"It surprised everyone, to put it mildly, when he showed up in excellent health a month after the search was abandoned. That was not all. He had one of the mountain cloudcats with him, and thanks to his Talent—so minimal the Order had not accepted him, but there—he had managed to establish communications with her. Very rudimentary ones, to be sure, but quite adequate to establish their intelligence.

"That was a severe blow to the colony. With the cloudcats proven to be intelligent, Imperial law required that the colony be abandoned. However, it is the only place that so-called 'miracle weed' can be grown successfully. It could not be obtained by trading, because the cloudcats have no hands and no interest in farming. Since miracle-weed is the only source of several valuable pharmaceuticals including rapid-heal, the Emperor sent Medart in to see if anything could be salvaged.

"He somehow got the idea that the cloudcats originated in a warmer climate than Ondrian's. Nobody believed it, of course; geological studies done when it was first discovered showed Ondrian's climate had never varied enough to produce such an evolutionary difference. And with their lack of hands, they could not possibly have built spaceships to bring them from another planet.

"It turned out, of course, that Medart was absolutely correct. The cloudcats—or perhaps I should say our young explorer's friend Starflower—had learned to understand English, and could indicate a yes or no answer to questions. Medart talked to Starflower for several days, and found out that they were in fact not only from a different planet, but from a different system entirely.

"They had been transported to Ondrian more than ten thousand years ago by beings they called simply the Others, who had discovered the cloudcats' sun was about to go nova. The cats elected to stay in the same stellar neighborhood, but according to them the Others were preparing to embark on a racial expedition of their own, one of considerable magnitude. From what Starflower told Medart, it seems they left this galaxy entirely.

"Medart went back into the mountains with Starflower, remaining there for two weeks. When he returned, he had somehow gotten the cloudcats to agree to let the colonists have free run of the equatorial zone, though they must stay out of the mountains unless they are invited. In return, he gave the cats the right to travel on Imperial Navy ships at any time. So the Empire got its pharmaceuticals, and the cloudcats seem more than pleased with the opportunity to indulge their curiosity. A most economical solution, though I regret he did not see fit to release the details of his negotiations."

Kainor rose and went to the service panel, returning with more koril for each of them. He handed out the glasses,

sat back down, and took a deep swallow before continuing. "It is possible someone else could have accomplished the same thing, as it is possible someone else could have accomplished most things Rangers have. They are mortals, after all. With one of them, however, if a problem is soluble, it will be solved."

"And solved, as you say, to the Empire's benefit," Thark said. "But you give Medart credit for ending the Sandeman Incursion; I understood it took five Rangers."

Kainor's ears twitched in amusement. "Five were there, yes—but the other four were part of Medart's solution, to give the Sandemans an honorable reason to stop fighting rather than be annihilated. Much of this episode is either public record or not difficult to discover, though parts are still obscure.

"Medart was not sent in until the Duke of Sector Five admitted her inability to stop the Sandemans and requested Imperial assistance. Medart took a fleet to the one world the Sandemans had made a protectorate rather than conquering, stopping long enough en route to capture several for study." Kainor paused briefly. "You do know about the genetic engineering that was done to create the Sandemans, particularly their warriors?"

Both his listeners nodded.

"Good—but at the time, no one except the Sandemans themselves knew, and they had no intention of divulging that information, especially the weakness the engineers had intended as a control mechanism. They refused to cooperate, preferring to die of that weakness rather than reveal to the enemy the ways they needed to use to live with it.

"One did in fact die, and others were succumbing when Medart was able to deduce—a point I cannot make too strongly—that they were engineered to fight, both physically and psychologically, and that less than a week without some form of combat or lovemaking was enough to make them ill, then kill them. He took steps to prevent further deterioration in those who could still be helped, then granted a swift death to two who could not be.

"When he arrived at the protectorate—an obscure world called Mjollnir—he mindprobed a warrior who had sworn fealty to the Baron there, then defeated in single combat the Warleader who wanted to take the world, obliging him to protect it instead. That probe verified Medart's deductions and gave him enough more information on the Sandeman culture that he persuaded the Baron to declare Mjollnir a neutral zone, invited the Sandeman leaders to a conference—and called in the other four Rangers, also with battle fleets, to provide a show of force.

"He made no threats, simply had the leaders given tours of the fleets, and let them realize the alternatives: they could continue fighting, in which case the Empire would have no choice but to destroy them, or they could accept Imperial citizenship, in which case they would have to pay for the damage they had caused, but there would be no other penalty since they were doing what Terran engineers had created them to do. Instead, they would be offered a chance for combat for the Empire, using the ships and weapons they would otherwise have to fight. Being as intelligent as they are combat-loving, the Sandemans chose the second alternative.

"Again, you see, an economical solution of considerable benefit to the Empire. The brief use of four other Rangers and a total of five battle fleets saved months if not years of fighting, along with millions of lives."

"And gained them the willing service of the most dangerous fighters in the known universe," Thark added. "All right, those examples demonstrate the intelligence, adaptability, and problem-solving—but surely such qualities are not as rare as the low number of Rangers indicates!"

"In themselves, no," Kainor admitted. "But those are only the most obvious of the qualifications. Another is that they must have no close personal ties, including family; that eliminates many possible candidates. All have applied for and been accepted by the main Imperial Military Academy at the Palace Complex, though none has remained there much beyond Test Week. And all, needless to say, are intensely loyal." His ears twitched, this time in irritation. "I am positive there are other qualifications; as I said, I have been unable to discover the actual criteria, which are known perhaps only to the Sovereign and Rangers themselves."

Thark held back a growl. "I understand that—still, can you deduce from what data you do have why there are no Irschchan Rangers?"

Kainor shook his head slowly. "Not with any degree of confidence," he said. "The only possibility I find marginally sound is that Irschchans who have the requisite abilities also have Talent, meaning they join the Order rather than entering Imperial service."

"I suppose that is possible," Thark said thoughtfully. "If you are correct, the lack of Irschchan Rangers will soon be rectified. You will have to find out all the requirements as soon as possible, however. Important as Talent is to one in such a position, they will need the other, lesser, talents as well."

II

Corina woke with a splitting headache, the characteristic aftereffect of being hit with a neural stunner. Groaning, she opened her eyes and found herself in what, except for the straps holding her in place, was a fairly comfortable, if too large, armchair. A Terran in Marine black service dress uniform sat behind a large metal desk, holding a blaster aimed casually in her direction. Her soul-blade lay beside his left hand.

She suppressed the rage she dared not show at that sight. It had been bad enough earlier, when the Sanctioner had taken her blade, but at least he had been an Irschchan and understood its significance. To a Terran, it was nothing but a simple dagger, with no more personal meaning than a kitchen knife.

Not that they could understand, she thought, forcing herself to calm. They had no Talent, no way to sense the owner's mind-pattern, impressed on the blade at an Irschchan's coming-of-age ceremony.

She could retrieve it telekinetically—that part of her Talent was weak, but the blade was hers—then decided quickly against that idea. The man holding the blaster did not look like the type to tolerate any misbehavior from his prisoner, and she had no desire to test her estimate of his character.

He gave her a few seconds to evaluate the situation before he spoke. "Okay, you're awake. Now tell me what the hell that was all about."

"He was trying to kill me," Corina replied.

"We guessed that much," the Terran said. "I want to know why."

"May I know who you are?"

"Yeah, you people like formality, don't you?" The man shrugged. "Why not? I'm Major Patrick Dawson, Security Division of the Imperial Marines, on temporary duty from the Emperor Chang. You?"

Corina managed as much of a polite bow as she could. "Greetings, Major Dawson. I am Corina Losinj, until today a student of High Adept Thark. Entos was trying to kill me before I could report treason against the Empire, in the form of a rebellion by the White Order. Thark is leading it himself."

Dawson's expression looked to Corina like a combination of astonishment and disbelief. "Rebellion? The White Order against the whole Empire? That's impossible."

"I assure you, Major, it is quite possible. Or Thark believes it is, which is effectively the same thing."

"Um." Dawson was silent for a few seconds, then said, "Well, it sounds crazy to me, but it isn't something we can risk not checking out." He holstered the blaster. "The other one, Entos—is he in the Order?" When Corina nodded, he punched a number on the desk intercom.

"Interrogation, Captain Daley." Corina couldn't see the screen, but it sounded like a human female. "Oh, hi, Pat. What can I do for you?"

"You could run a mindprobe on the other Irschchan who was brought in. The one I'm interviewing claims the reason he was trying to kill her was that he's involved in a treason plot."

"You got it," the woman said grimly. "Do you want yours probed too?" Dawson thought for a moment, then shook his head. "By the time you're done, Ranger Medart should be here, and he can make that decision—she was the one being attacked, so the odds are she's innocent. If that's wrong, or if the Ranger wants her probed for more information, it can be done once he's here."

"I copy. I'll let you know what I find out."

"Appreciate it." Dawson broke that connection, immediately punched in another number.

"Communications, Commspec First Carlson, sir," came the reply.

"This is Major Dawson. Can you get me Ranger Medart, Security priority?"

"It'll take a couple of minutes, sir. I'll have to patch through the Chang to his lander."

"That's fine—just do your best."

Ranger James Medart was stretched out on a lawn lounger, basking in the warmth of Irschcha's sun only meters from the lander that was now serving him as a vacation cabin. Convalescent leave had its good points, he thought

drowsily. He hadn't been this relaxed since before the war—and not often then. Laying here in swim trunks, it was hard to believe he'd been damn near torn in half not much more than two months ago.

But he had been, trying to help one of the then-enemy, a gray-skinned Traiti. Oh, well. The war was over, thanks to Steve Tarlac, and the Traiti were Imperial citizens, while he was supposed to be concentrating on recovering his strength. He stood, called to the lander. "I'm going for a swim."

A blond head looked around the edge of the lander's open hatch. "Right, sir. I just got my suit on; I'll play lifeguard."

"Whatever you say, Nevan." Medart sketched a salute, grinning at the young Sandeman warrior who was one of his bodyguard. Then he turned, taking a running dive into the Colvis Reserve's main attraction for humans, Clear Lake.

He swam straight out, with a leisurely sidestroke that took him in the direction of the resort across the lake. He had no intention of going that far, or of seeing anyone except his bodyguards; a week in a tank of rapid-heal, followed by over a month of therapy and constant attention, left him with a strong desire for some privacy.

He'd been swimming for perhaps half an hour, enjoying himself thoroughly, when he heard Nevan calling him. The warrior wouldn't interrupt his swim without good reason; he waved acknowledgement and headed for shore, wondering what was up.

Nevan didn't look too happy, the Ranger thought as he waded out of the lake, and that was a bad sign. "What is it?"

"A call from the Planetary Palace, sir, security priority. Major Dawson is on the screen."

"Damn. All right." Security priority was never good news; Medart wondered just how bad it was this time. He accepted the towel Nevan was holding out, began drying himself as he went to the lander and climbed in. Then he dropped the towel, grabbed his uniform shirt from a hanger by the door, and put it on before going to the lander's comscreen. "What's up, Major?"

Dawson repeated what Corina had told him, adding, "Sergeant Orloff said she was definitely the one being attacked, sir. I asked for a mindprobe to be run on the attacker."

Well, Medart thought with brief regret, there went his leave. Couldn't be helped, though. "Good work. Hold off on Losinj; I'd rather not probe someone trying to help us unless there's no other choice." He grinned, wolflike. "If somebody thinks she's worth killing to keep her from us, she's got to be valuable—I'll be there in about two hours, and I'll stop by Interrogation before I join you. Medart out."

Dawson switched off, looked at Corina. "I'm curious about one thing. Why didn't you call instead of coming in? If you're right, we'd have gotten the information sooner, and you'd have been safer; I could have sent a squad of Marines to escort you here for protection. You'd have been in no danger."

"I am afraid that is not the case, Major. In the first place, there was no place I could call from. In the second, if the Order wishes me dead, there is no safety for me anywhere on Irschcha."

"I don't know," Dawson said skeptically. "All I've really heard about the White Order is that they rule this planet with some sort of strange power they refuse to talk about. I think you're underestimating the Marines."

"Talent is not discussed outside the Order, except with potential initiates," Corina said. "At least it has not been until now; I must inform you of what they can do. It is you who underestimate them."

Dawson shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. Either way, I don't have the authority to deal with a major rebellion; you might as well wait till Ranger Medart gets here, and tell him."

Corina nodded, and Dawson went back to the report he'd evidently been studying when she was brought in. She tried a probe of him, finding a weak, almost-nonexistent mind-screen. It was not a real barrier, and her reasons were compelling, so she probed deeper. Human mind patterns were too murky to make this sort of thing a pleasure, but she scanned anyway, for information about this Ranger Medart. She knew, as did everyone, about Rangers in general—that they were the Sovereign's representatives, wielding Imperial authority at need—but she had to know about this specific one.

Dawson, unfortunately, knew little. Although he did serve aboard Medart's cruiser, he was not very familiar with the Command Crew or Ranger. All she could get was his feeling of respect, bordering on awe—much, she thought, the way she had felt about Thark until this morning.

Dawson did not expect any trouble from the Order here inside the Palace, she noted, and found herself agreeing. Thark was not likely to risk compromising the Crusade by a frontal attack now. There would probably be an attempt, though, to have her returned as a criminal, as the Sanctioner had threatened.

Perhaps an hour passed before the intercom chimed. Dawson answered, and Corina overheard Captain Daley's report.

"Just finished that mind-probe you asked for, Pat. He was trying to kill Losinj, all right. His orders came from Senior Valla; she told him Losinj was betraying the Order. He also knows about the existence of a Crusade, which is what they call this rebellion. I couldn't get any details, though. And when he woke up, he somehow managed to knock out a couple of my technicians without even touching them. I had to hit him with another stunner, and I'm going to keep him under until I get orders to the contrary."

"Uh-huh, that confirms what she told me. He probably doesn't have enough rank to know any details. Was he the only one?"

There was a grim laugh from the intercom. "Hardly! From what I got, every Order member on Irschcha is either out to kill her themselves or report her whereabouts to the Sanctioners so one of them can do it."

"Thanks, Joanie, that's a big help." Dawson switched off the intercom and turned to Corina. "That exonerates you, Ms. Losinj. There's no more need to confine you." He touched a switch on the desk, and the restraining straps retracted into the armchair.

"Since I am proven innocent, may I have my blade back?" Corina couldn't keep a note of pleading out of her voice.

Dawson looked at her sharply. "It means that much to you? Well, I don't see why not; take it."

"I thank you." Corina retrieved the blade, ran her fingers gently along it before returning it to its sheath, and resumed her seat. She sensed the Marine's puzzlement, and decided she should try to explain. "It is a part of me, in a way. Having it in someone else's possession makes me quite uncomfortable."

Dawson shook his head. "I don't understand. I know it means you're an adult, but it's just a knife."

"It is more," Corina said, her ears twitching. "My mind pattern—" She broke off at Dawson's blank look. "It is an Irschchan thing," she said apologetically. "I fear I cannot explain it well."

"Or I don't have the background to understand." Dawson gave her a lopsided smile. "Ranger Medart will; whether or not I do isn't really important." He turned his attention back to his report.

Corina took that opportunity to think. She was, she had to admit to herself, still more than a little frightened. It was less fear for her life now, as it had been when the Sanctioners captured her; it was more nervous apprehension about her future. She could not remain on Irschcha, she knew. If she did, as she had told Dawson, she would be killed.

But then where could she go? What could she do? Her peaceful life had not prepared her for this kind of situation, suddenly caught in the midst of a rebellion. Things were happening too fast, overwhelming her. She wasn't sure what to expect from the Ranger, either. He'd said she had to be valuable; what had he meant?

Urr... there was nothing she could do now but wait, as patiently as she could, until he arrived.

The next hour went slowly. Corina's patience, not one of her strongest points at best, was almost exhausted when the door behind her slid open. Dawson stood, coming to attention; Corina turned, to see if she should stand as well. She hadn't quite made it around when a calm voice said, "As you were."

She sat back as Dawson resumed his seat. The newcomer was Ranger Medart; he propped himself on one corner of the desk, crossing his arms, and the two studied each other. Medart was good-looking for a human, Corina thought, though not really outstanding in any way but one: he moved with almost Irschchan grace, something unusual in a human male, especially considering this one's 180-cm height.

She'd seen pictures of him, of course; one Ranger or another was usually in the news. So his appearance was familiar: medium build, youthful-looking thanks to anti-agathics despite graying hair at the temples and an age—about 75, if she remembered correctly—when an Irschchan would be preparing for death. The plain forest-green uniform was familiar too, with pants bloused over black boots and the wide pouched gun-and-equipment belt, its only decoration the platinum star-in-circle badge of his rank.

He was more impressive in person than on the holos, Corina decided. His cool blue eyes seemed almost able to see into her, and even without trying, she could sense him; he seemed to radiate an aura of quiet competence like nothing she'd felt before. It surprised her momentarily, then she twitched an ear, amused at herself. He was a Ranger, after all, not an ordinary human. Her curiosity aroused, she tried a quick probe—to be stopped by a mind-shield that was clearly both unconscious and well above novice level. An unusual human indeed, she thought, intrigued.

Medart allowed her scrutiny, studying her at the same time. Despite their upright stance and lack of tails, Irschchans invariably reminded him of the Siamese cats he'd raised when he was a youngster in Texas. This one was no

exception. Tawny fur, thick and soft, covered everything except her palms and the soles of her feet, though it was marred now by slight scorching on her right arm and a bloodstained area just below her throat. Her alert, pointed ears only increased her resemblance to the remembered Siamese, but he knew the brain which lay between those ears was fully equal to a human one. While it was hard to read Irschchan expressions, Medart liked the steady look in this one's jade-green eyes.

He did think they looked faintly ridiculous in kilt and sporran, but that had become the Irschchan mode of dress almost as soon as MacLeod, a man aggressively proud of his Scots heritage, appeared in one at the official welcoming ceremony. Too bad; it not only detracted from their graceful appearance, in his opinion, but it made telling male and female apart almost impossible. For humans, at least, he thought with a silent laugh. The Irschchans themselves seemed to have no difficulty.

Well, time for business, he decided. But he'd take it as easy on her as he could; she'd had a rough time. "How about some more information on this rebellion?" he asked, keeping his tone casual.

"I have already told Major Dawson what I am certain about," Corina said quietly.

"And the mind-probe of Entos confirmed all of it. But can you tell me why it's happening?"

"Thark is convinced that the White Order can rule the Empire much more effectively than you unTalented humans have been doing. They have, after all, ruled Irschcha for over five millennia, and according to Thark, brought about peace and order for most of it. He feels honor-bound to do the same for the rest of the galaxy."

"Looks to me more like stagnation," Medart commented. "You've had space travel for more than—what, two of those millennia?—but when MacLeod found you, you were still system-bound. Sorry for the interruption; go on."

"I could not agree with him, and came here," Corina said. "I have no physical proof, however, of anything I have said. I learned what I have reported when I broke through Thark's mind-shield this morning."

"Physical proof isn't necessary," Medart told her. "Your report, backed up by the probe of Entos, is enough. Learn anything else?"

"Not really. The whole Order is not taking part, of course, but those who are not active in the Crusade will also not actively oppose it."

"Oh? Why not?"

"They cannot honorably do so," Corina replied, surprised. "The oath of the Order forbids such opposition to its leaders, though of course it cannot compel any to follow orders which would lead them to death, as the Crusade will."

"You're not actually a member of the Order, then?"

"No. I was to be initiated soon; however, for now I am bound by no oaths. I am still free to follow my own paths."

"Uh-huh," Medart agreed. "Good thing for the Empire." Not as free as she believed, he thought but didn't say. She had chosen sides, and it was up to him to make use of that choice. Then he went on. "I still need your help. As secretive as the Order is, we don't know much of anything about this Talent you say they have, much less how to combat it."

The intercom chimed before he could go further. Dawson answered, and Medart joined him, looking into the screen.

"Lieutenant Edmonds, Duty Officer of the Watch," the caller identified herself. "The head of the district Sanctioners is here. He has extradition papers for Ms. Losinj, who is accused of assaulting a Sanctioner officer. He also demands we release Entos."

"Send him in," Medart said, the casualness he'd assumed for Corina's benefit vanishing. "I'll handle this myself."

"Yes, sir." The viewscreen went blank.

Medart turned to Corina. "Did you assault a Sanctioner officer?"

"That is a matter of interpretation," she replied. "I was on my way here when they stopped me. They were taking me to Headquarters for execution; I had to use Talent to knock one of them out so I could escape."

"Self-defense, then, since you were trying to prevent a crime by escaping." Medart took Dawson's place behind the desk, and the Marine took position slightly behind and to the Ranger's right, standing at parade rest. All three waited silently until the door slid open again, to admit the Sanctioner chief. He wasted no time getting to the point.

"You have no right to interfere in purely planetary matters," he said. "I must require the return of Losinj and Entos."

"You're wrong on two counts," Medart said coldly. "As a Ranger, it is not only my right to interfere, as you put it, anywhere and anywhen I see a threat to the Empire, it is my duty. Rebellion against the Empire is such a threat, not a 'planetary matter'; Losinj was acting properly in defending herself to report that treason. She is guilty of no crimes, which is not true of the ones who obstructed her."

"I am not particularly concerned about the ones who arrested her," he continued. "They were obeying what they considered lawful orders from their Baron, on his world, so punishing them would be unjust. Entos, however, is guilty of attempted murder on Imperial territory. I have both eyewitness and mind-probe evidence, so there is no doubt of his guilt; he will be executed."

"But she betrayed the Order!" the Sanctioner chief objected. "For that, if nothing else, she deserves to die. Entos was acting properly."

"Not under Imperial law," Medart said. "The sentence stands. And I advise you not to get more deeply involved. Just carry out your peace-keeping functions."

"But—"

"No buts," Medart said coldly. "Losinj lives, Entos dies. If you interfere further, I will have to assume you are part of this Crusade, and take appropriate measures. Is that understood?"

The chief's ears twitched. "Yes, Ranger."

"Good. You may leave."

Corina watched the subdued Sanctioner chief do so, then she turned back to the Ranger, intrigued. His sudden change of manner had caught her by surprise, and it might have been frightening—except that he had defended her,

even as he condemned Entos to death. Knowing what he was and seeing him in action were very different things. There was something decidedly attractive about this human, more than just his appearance—a something she was beginning to appreciate.

"I must ask asylum," she said quietly. "If I leave the Palace... urrr. You know what will happen. Most in the Order will feel as he does."

"But you say you're not a member of the Order," Dawson objected. "If you're not oath-bound, how can you betray them?"

"They do not see it that way," Corina said. "They expect anyone with Talent to feel bound to the Order even before formal initiation. It is—or was—inconceivable that anyone with any useful degree of Talent would refuse to join the Order. It is natural that they would see my opposition as betrayal. I would probably feel the same way myself if I had spent my childhood being indoctrinated in Order schools."

"That's all very interesting," Medart interrupted, "but not right now. Ms. Losinj, there's no asylum involved; I've said I need your help, so you'll be coming aboard the Emperor Chang with me."

"I have no desire to be killed, and you certainly need to know about Talent. I will give you what help I can."

Medart was careful to hide his amusement at that response; she'd made her choice already. But he couldn't help feeling a little regret at tearing her away from her home world, even though it meant saving her life; home meant a lot to most people, and losing it usually meant a serious blow. But at this point neither of them had much choice left. "Shall we leave, then? We do have a rebellion to stop."

III

Corina didn't pay much attention to her surroundings as the three went to the Palace roof where Medart's lander waited. Reaction had set in, now that she was safe, and for the moment she was numb.

It wasn't until they were inside the boxy little vehicle that she paid full attention again. Small as it was, this was a space-going vessel of the Imperial Navy, something she'd thought lost to her forever when her Talent made its belated appearance. Her ears went forward attentively; she didn't want to miss anything.

Medart noticed, and smiled. "Your first time aboard a spacecraft, Ms. Losinj?"

"Yes, Ranger."

"Take the right-hand seat forward, then. No co-pilot's necessary on a surface-to-orbit hop, and you'll get a good view from there." He turned to his bodyguard, who was also the lander's pilot. "Nevan, would you help Ms. Losinj strap in, please?"

"Aye, sir." Nevan, now in Marine black, bent over the young Irschchan. "Here... this goes across your lap, and these two over your shoulders, all to the same buckle. It's a quick-release type; to get out, just slap this button."

"Thank you." Corina accepted the help, though she didn't really need it. Her pre-Talent hopes of attending the Naval Academy had led her to study anything she could find about the Fleets, including such minor details as how to secure flight restraints.

She had given up those hopes, forced herself to repress them and think about her future in the Order instead. To suddenly have them back—once she'd given the Ranger what help she could, of course—was almost too much to believe. And to be making her first trip off-planet aboard a Navy craft, with a Ranger, was something beyond her wildest dreams.

It was truly no dream, though, she assured herself, and as they lifted off she was determined not to look foolish. That was easy at first; she had seen enough holoshows to be familiar with the green sky's darkening, becoming black as they left atmosphere. Soon she could see stars, now hard bright points of light rather than the soft twinkling she was used to.

One began showing a sunlit disk, and she realized that had to be Ranger Medart's ship. Tiny-seeming at first, it grew rapidly, filling the lander's window and continuing to grow.

Corina's determination faltered. She had seen innumerable pictures of such vessels, knew their immensity—a Sovereign-class battle cruiser was approximately spherical, a kilometer in diameter, and massed on the close order of eight hundred million tons. But pictures and statistics couldn't convey the emotional impact of actually seeing one at

close range for the first time. Corina swallowed an exclamation of awe, trying to remain calm, but she could feel Medart's gaze, and felt certain he knew how the ship affected her.

The lander surged slightly as it was gripped by a tractor beam from one of the Chang's equatorial hangars. Nevan released the controls, allowing the beam operator to settle the lander to the deck while hangar doors closed behind them. As soon as his gauges showed Terra-normal atmosphere, he opened the airlock and the group disembarked, with Medart in the lead and Corina trailing behind.

The hangar deck was large, much bigger than necessary for the lander it now held, yet Corina had a feeling of things closing in on her. Precognition was no part of her Talent, though, so she attributed the sensation to her surroundings, familiar from pictures but strange in reality. She felt like a young, unbladed child again, everything around her seeming odd and alien in spite of her studies.

But this was her new reality, here aboard the Chang. She had no way to know how she would fit in yet, but she did know she would have to. This ship was going to be home for however long the Ranger wanted her help; she would have to adapt.

When they left the hangar, they were met by a stocky officer in Navy working khaki; from the eagle on his collar, Corina knew he was the ship's captain. There were several others, with different rank insignia, but it was the first man who saluted Medart.

The Ranger returned the salute, then introduced them. "Captain David Hobison, this is Ms. Corina Losinj. She will be accompanying us on this trip as my special assistant. She won't have any formal Navy rank, but I want her quartered in a senior officer's cabin, preferably near mine. Have someone see to that, bring the ship to Condition Yellow, then meet me in Briefing Room One. I have to call the Emperor, and I don't want to have to go through everything twice."

He started to leave, then turned to Corina. "Before I go, what's your ident code?"

"ISCCJ-1643-2048," she replied.

"Got it." Medart strode past the group and entered an intra-ship shuttle, one of several, partway down the passage.

Hobison gave Corina a thoughtful look, then turned to one of the officers standing nearby. "Ensign Yamata?"

A young female with a gold bar for collar insigne answered. "Yes, sir?"

"You're assigned to Ms. Losinj until further notice. Get her a cabin and anything else she needs. You're relieved of regular watch standing."

"Yes, sir!" Yamata said with a wide smile. "If you'll come with me, Ms. Losinj?"

Corina inclined her head. "I appear to be in your hands, Ensign."

"You might as well call me Sunbeam," Yamata said as they left the group. "Everyone else does, even Ranger Medart, except on watch. And you heard the Captain, I'm not standing watches any more, thanks to you. I really do mean thanks—I was supposed to go on rotating shifts tomorrow, instead of staying on first watch, and now I don't have to." She smiled again, even more widely.

Corina's ears twitched in surprise at the flood of words, but Sunbeam didn't seem to notice. "All right, Sunbeam. What do we do first?"

That was something else she would have to get used to, Corina told herself. Humans were, by Irschchan standards, quite informal, sometimes to the point of appearing rude. But they did not intend offense, and she really ought to adapt to their ways, so she added, "You may call me Corina."

"Great! We find you a cabin, that's first, then we can eat, if you're as hungry as I am. C'mon, let's get a shuttle."

That reminded Corina that she hadn't eaten since the previous night. "I am hungry," she agreed, as they entered one of the elevator-like cubicles that provided intra-ship transport. "But what if Ranger Medart wants me for something?"

"That's right, he called you his special assistant. Don't worry about it, Chang handles the intra-ship communications." The young Ensign spoke into thin air. "Emperor Chang?"

A pleasant baritone voice replied. "Yes, Ensign Yamata?"

"We have a VIP guest, Ms. Corina Losinj of Irschcha. Ranger Medart wants her assigned a cabin near his. What's available?"

"There is one next to his," the ship-comp replied. "3N-2-1-8 is free."

"Great! Take us there, will you?"

"Affirmative. Is there anything else?"

"No, thanks."

"Chang out."

The shuttle began to move, and Sunbeam turned to Corina. "You'll have to memorize those coordinates, I'm afraid. You're not a member of the ship's crew, so until Ranger Medart or Captain Hobison say otherwise, that and comm patches are the only commands of yours the Chang will obey, once you get its attention by using its full name. Security, you know."

"I understand," Corina said. "Deck Three North, Ring Two, Segment One, Cabin B."

"Very good!" Sunbeam exclaimed. "If this was the Academy, I'd make you explain the system."

"If I am fortunate, I will go to the Academy when this is over. May I practice?"

Sunbeam assumed a mock-fierce expression. "All right, plebe. Recite!"

A stern-looking Sunbeam Yamata seemed so incongruous, even on short acquaintance, that Corina purred briefly in amusement. "We came in on Deck Zero, known as the Equator. Other decks are numbered away from that, south being toward the drive pod, north toward the bow. The Bridge is at the center of Deck Zero, fully protected. The rings are numbered outward, toward the hull. There are twelve segments, numbered clockwise from an arbitrary beginning, and compartments in each segment are given alphabetic designations."

When she finished, Sunbeam was grinning again. "Not quite by the book, but you're close, and you've got all the facts right. Are you a Navy fan, or something?"

The shuttle door opened, and the two stepped out into a cool-looking green corridor before Corina replied. "I would not use that term, but you could say so."

"D... C... here we are." Sunbeam motioned Corina into the cabin. "So was I. It makes a lot of the first year easier. But don't get used to this—cadet quarters aren't anywhere near this nice, and neither are junior officers' quarters. Which you probably already know."

"Yes." Corina looked around. It was more like a small apartment than a cabin, with the part they were in both lounge and office. A panel labeled "Ship's Services" covered one wall above a table which had an L-shaped extension housing a computer terminal and viewscreen. Storage and display cabinets lined two other walls. The fourth was a translucent screen with a curtained-off opening.

She brushed past the curtain into the sleeping area. A standard bed covered in glimmercloth was the only furniture here; the clothing storage and fabricator were both built into the wall across from the bed. A door in the wall opposite the divider proved to lead to a small but well-designed 'fresher room—though Corina remembered that aboard Navy ships, for some obscure reason, they were called "heads".

She returned to the lounge area, testing one of the two armchairs it held—yes, as soft as it looked—glad that if she was to spend some appreciable amount of time on this ship, it would be in such pleasant surroundings. A yellow light flashing on a panel beside the door caught her attention, and she pointed to it. "What is—oh, I remember."

"Ship's status, right," Sunbeam said. "We're in Condition Yellow; what's General Quarters?"

"Red, with a wavering buzz. I do not have a battle station, so I would remain here unless told otherwise by a senior officer."

"Right again!" Sunbeam looked around. "I think that's all here. So unless you need something else..." Her voice trailed off, and she pointed to Corina's neck. "Is that blood?"

"Oh." Corina reached up and touched the spot. "I forgot, and I have had no chance to wash it off before now. Excuse me for a moment, please." She left, returning with her throat fur damp but clean, to face a thorough scrutiny by the young Ensign.

Sunbeam nodded at last. "And that's a blaster burn—"

Corina felt a curiosity as strong as her own, and hastened to say, "I do not think I should discuss it until Ranger Medart tells me I may."

Sunbeam looked dissatisfied, and Corina didn't really blame her. "You must be something pretty special," the

Ensign said. "He comes back from convalescent leave early, brings you along—wounded—as his special assistant, puts the ship on Condition Yellow... and I bet you can't talk about any of that, either. Uh, do they hurt? I can take you to sickbay if they do."

"You cover many things at once," Corina said with amusement. "No, I cannot talk about it, but no, they do not hurt. The burn just singed my fur a little. It looks bad, but it is not a problem; I need no medical attention."

Sunbeam frowned briefly. "Whatever's going on must be big! But okay, I know about security. If you're sure you're all right, and there's nothing else, what say we go eat? You could have a meal right here, of course," she indicated the service panel, "but it's more fun to eat with others. I usually go to Mess Three; the food's the same everywhere, but Three's where junior officers mostly eat, Ensigns and Lieutenants, and it's usually lively. Want to?"

"You are the guide," Corina said, wondering how, if she always talked this much, Sunbeam managed to eat. Apparently she didn't manage much; she was quite slender.

Medart did some serious thinking about the young Irschchan while he waited in the briefing room for Hobison. Like most Rangers, he'd learned to follow his occasional hunches, and one had hit him on the way up to the Chang. Corina Losinj was important, both to the Empire and—on a very personal basis—to a certain James Medart. His hunches were seldom specific, so he didn't have any idea how or why she was important, but he was certain she was. That was part of the reason he'd called her his special assistant, and had her assigned quarters near his own.

He looked up as Hobison entered. "Everything set, Dave?"

"Yes, sir," Hobison replied. "And I had Communications call the Palace, your personal code. We should be getting a reply any time, and it'll be patched through to here."

"Thanks." Medart was appreciative, though he hadn't expected any less from the man who'd captained his ship for the past twenty years. "This is something I'm not looking forward to telling His Majesty."

The briefing room screen flickered blue, then cleared to show a lean, gray-haired man wearing a Ranger's uniform with the Imperial Seal in place of the badge. Both men on the Chang stood and saluted.

Emperor Charles Davis returned the salute. "What is it, Jim? You wouldn't be back on duty if it weren't critical."

"Rebellion, sir." Medart reported all he had learned, both from the probe of Entos and from Corina, watching the Emperor's expression become grim. And he reported his hunch.

Davis nodded. "Follow it up. Learn all you can about their Talent, too. The White Order's never given us any trouble before, so they were entitled to their privacy, but that's over now. We can't afford to keep depending on stories and rumors."

"She's agreed to give any help she can, sir, as I said, and that includes briefing me on Talent."

"Good. I'll alert the nobility, have them take extra precautions since they're bound to be targets. You're on-scene; do you think I should have a fleet cordon off Irschcha itself?"

"No, sir," Medart replied. "Thark's smart, we know that. If he and his people haven't left the planet already, they'll damn sure be gone by the time a cordon fleet could get here."

"All right. But I will have Earl Suitland take over planetary administration, and I'll send some extra troops to stand by in case she needs them." Davis scowled. "This isn't going to look good, especially to the Trait. I promised them they'd keep their own government so they could stop fighting and join the Empire, and the White Order ruling Irschcha was one of the convincers. Only their Lords know how they'll react to this—they've only been part of the Empire for six weeks."

"It's touchy, all right," Medart agreed. "Having to take over one of the only two non-human governments—they may see it as evidence we don't really consider non-humans as equals."

"We'll have to convince them otherwise." Davis paused briefly. "Jim, do you think your hunch that Ms. Losinj is important could mean she's Ranger material?"

"No way to know yet, sir. She's got the loyalty, she's proven that, and she certainly acts intelligent enough, but I'll have to find out about the rest. Check her records, talk to her, see how she thinks— maybe give her the pre-Academy tests. I haven't noticed anything negative so far, but I haven't seen much of her, either."

"I know. Just keep me informed; we need a non-human Ranger. But even if she doesn't qualify, I think she deserves a title for having the courage and loyalty to warn us."

"Agreed, sir. A Life Nobility?"

Davis smiled slightly. "She deserves it, but I'm going to reserve that pleasure for myself—here at the Palace, in a full Grand Audience. Give her a knighthood for now."

"Yes, sir. I'll hold a Tribunal tomorrow morning."

"That's it, then. I've got to get moving on this mess. Out." The Emperor's image flickered blue, then disappeared.

Hobison gave the Ranger a long, silent look before he spoke. "Rebellion, hmm? From the timing, I'd say this Thark's just been waiting for the war to end. That doesn't strike me as typical behavior for a rebel."

"Same here," Medart said. "He's not typical at all, from what Losinj told me. Most rebels are greedy, out for nothing but power—according to her, Thark's convinced the Order can rule better than we poor unTalented can, so it's his duty to take over. Naturally, I don't agree."

Hobison snorted. "Good intentions don't make up for treason. What's next?"

"That depends on what we learn from Losinj," Medart replied. "At the moment, I just don't know enough to make realistic plans. Too much depends on how powerful this Talent of the Order's is."

Hobison nodded. "That makes sense. But would you really ask her to join the Rangers? She's so tiny, so..."

"Pettable?" Medart came close to smiling. "She looks it, yes, but you heard what she had to do to reach us. And you know size doesn't have anything to do with it. Sure I'll ask her, if I find she's qualified, even if I hate to wish this responsibility on anyone. His Majesty's right, we need a non-human Ranger badly. Especially now that we're integrating the Traitii."

"Uh-huh. Good politics, if nothing else."

Medart nodded. "Since that damn Firster backshot Steve in the Palace and Hovan took him, there's been sentiment growing for non-humans. It's a good thing, and it makes this an ideal time for that breakthrough. It'd probably tickle Steve to know that she'd take his place. I'm just sorry this means no shore leave for Chang's crew."

"So am I," Hobison agreed. "I could use a bit of vacation about now. It can't be helped, though."

"No." Medart sighed, changed the subject. "She might as well brief all of us at once; can you have the Command Crew here in, say, an hour?"

"Yes, sir. Do you want me to have her paged?"

"Don't bother." Medart grinned. "If I know our Sunbeam, she's found Losinj a cabin and taken her to Mess Three. I could use something to eat myself, so I'll go get her."

Medart spotted Yamata and his new assistant almost as soon as he entered Mess Three. Spotted where they must be sitting, rather; that noisy group on the far side of the room. He punched in his order— coffee and an egg salad sandwich—and when it slid from the dispenser, took it over to stand on the outskirts of the group.

"—like it's something you'd do every day before lunch!" a young Marine Lieutenant was saying. "Dig out a plot, escape from three cops, fight an assassin, then say it was nothing. That's incredible!"

So they'd succeeded in worming part of the story out of her, Medart thought. Just the basics, most likely, so they'd let her eat, and there was no harm in that; everyone would find out soon enough.

"You can't shrug it off that lightly, 'Rina," someone else said. "That'd get one of us a medal. Should get you a knighthood, maybe a Life Nobility."

Then Sunbeam spoke up, almost laughing. "Take it easy! Can't you see you're embarrassing her terribly?"

"Well, she should," the other retorted. "If I had enough rank, I'd call a Tribunal right now, and knight her."

Not a bad idea at all, Medart thought. It probably would be best, considering Greggson's attitude, for her to have that formal status when she met with the Command Crew. The man's competence as Security Chief couldn't be questioned, but Medart wondered at times how he'd ever passed the psych tests to become an Imperial officer, with his near-xenophobia. Hmm, this was getting interesting—the anonymous young officer was going through with it, speaking the formula of knighthood as solemnly as if this were indeed a real Tribunal. All Medart could see of the Irschchan was her eartips, erect and quivering as her admirer finished on a note of triumph: "—and do name you, Corina Losinj of Irschcha, a Knight of the Empire!"

"Confirmed," Medart said, pitching his voice so the entire group would hear.

"Wha—" The officer turned, flushing, as the group noticed the Ranger for the first time.

Medart smiled. "I said 'confirmed', Ensign; you did that well enough I don't see any need to repeat the ceremony. Now may I join my assistant?"

"Uh... yes, sir. Of course."

Corina stared from Ranger to Ensign and back, confused. This was far too informal, even by human standards, to mean what it seemed to—and yet the Ranger was perfectly serious, no trace of humor in voice or aura. "I do not understand," she said at last. "I have done only my duty; I deserve no special recognition for that."

"His Majesty doesn't agree, Sir Corina," Medart said, stressing the title slightly, as he took a seat. "If you'd care to argue it with him—?"

Corina looked disbelievingly at the Ranger, who was smiling at her with one eyebrow raised. Was this what humans called "teasing"? She supposed it had to be; he couldn't seriously expect her to argue with the Emperor! "No, Ranger. If His Majesty wishes to so honor me, I must accept."

Typical exaggerated Irschchan respect for authority, Medart thought, but if she stayed around humans long, she'd get over that! "You'd best finish your lunch, Sir Corina. And get used to the title; I've called a Command Crew meeting for 1400, so you can brief them."

"Yes, Ranger." Corina turned her attention back to her meal, the milk and medium-rare steak Sunbeam had recommended.

The meeting began on schedule, in Briefing Room One, with Hobison introducing his senior officers. Corina took the opportunity to make a quick evaluation of each. There was no dishonor; she was not probing deeply enough to intrude.

Hobison himself was shielded, well enough she could read nothing of him . . . as he should be in his position, though it was surprising.

"My Executive Officer, Commander Sonia Pappas." She was a short brunette, four or five kilos overweight but not fat. No mind screen; Corina felt an aura of competence from her.

"Marine Lieutenant Colonel Jeff Greggson, Chief of Security." Tall and muscular, he wore Marine black with silver oak leaf rank insignie. Despite his strong mind shield, Corina sensed hostility.

"Commander Marie Sherman, Chief Medical Officer." A tall blonde who seemed uncomfortable outside her own medical center. No screen, but she wasn't radiating any particular emotion, either.

"And finally Commander Carl Jensen, Chief Engineer." Small and studious looking, he didn't really stand out. Like Sherman, he was unshielded and wanted nothing more than to return to his own domain.

Medart took over the meeting at that point, describing what little he knew of the White Order. "We're here to find out exactly how much of a threat the Order actually is to the Empire," he concluded. "Sir Corina has agreed to help us, so she's next."

Corina stood. "I do not know precisely what information you wish. Perhaps it would be best if you asked questions."

"All right. Just what can the Order do? Specifically, what is this Talent we hear stories about? I need facts, not rumors."

"You mean the individual members?"

"For a start, yes."

"Urrr... telepathy, of course, and—"

"Reliable telepathy?" Sherman broke in skeptically. "That's never been proven."

"Then I must do so, at least to your satisfaction." Corina turned to the Ranger. "If I may do so without dishonor?"

"There's no dishonor involved; that's what you're here for. Go ahead."

Corina turned back, probed gently into the Medical Officer's unshielded mind. "You are familiar with the Rhine

reports some four centuries before the Empire?"

"Yes, but they're no more proof of telepathy than your guessing I'd read them."

"They should have convinced you. Since they do not, I must probe more deeply. I do not wish to distress you, but belief is essential. I have been aboard only a short time, not long enough to learn anything about you in the so-called 'normal' way. Would you agree?"

Sherman nodded.

"Very well. Your middle name is Jean. Your hobby is pre-Empire science fiction." Corina paused, contemplating. "That appears interesting; I shall have to look into it. To continue, your favorite stories are the Lensman series, and your only regret is that—"

"That's enough!" Sherman interrupted in a near shout. "I'm convinced. You don't have to go on."

Corina, satisfied that she had made her point, continued to the entire group. "Telepathy is the most common aspect of Talent, and by far the easiest to develop; all of the Order has it, in varying degrees. A mind screen or shield is almost as common; it seems to go with the telepathy, in all but rare cases." She noticed a slightly raised hand. "Yes, Colonel Greggson?"

"That mind screen—does it occur without telepathy? It could be very useful, in my field."

"Not in Irschchans, but it apparently does in humans. I noticed earlier that you, Ranger Medart, and Captain Hobison all have excellent ones, among the best I have felt."

Greggson smiled grimly. "Thanks. That's good to know." He went on more softly, muttering to himself, but Corina's hearing made his words clearly audible. "All the most sensitive positions. Damn lucky... if the kitty's not lying."

Corina's ears flattened slightly at that uncalled-for slur, but she forced herself to say nothing about it, responding instead to the Chief Engineer's slight gesture. "You wish to ask something, Commander Jensen?"

"Please. Can a mind screen like that be generated electronically?"

"To the best of my knowledge, Commander, such a thing has never been attempted. There are those who would consider the electronic imitation of Talent an obscenity, and they have much influence."

"What else?" Medart asked.

"Direction sense would be included for humans, I believe," Corina said. "The Order does not consider it a true aspect of Talent, since it is something all Irschchans have, but I understand that is not true for you. Otherwise, aside from what I have already mentioned, there is anything one can imagine being done by mind power rather than physical means, though few people have more than one such aspect, and no one has been reported with more than three. The rarest is precognition; I have not heard of anyone having that in over fifty years. I myself am capable of weak telekinesis, finding, and darlas." She saw puzzled looks, and explained. "Finding is the ability to locate concealed—or simply misplaced—objects, and darlas is a form of telepathic attack."

"What's telekinesis?" Greggson asked.

"Moving objects by mind power alone." When the Security Chief looked doubtful, Corina decided she had best demonstrate that as well. But the conference table was bare, and she did not want to use anything of her own.

"Ranger Medart, do you have anything I could use to show the Colonel what I mean? It had best be light; as I said, that aspect of my Talent is not particularly powerful."

"I think so," Medart replied. He reached into a pouch on his belt, pulled out a small notepad. "Is this okay?"

"It is fine. Would you put it on the table, please?"

He did as she asked. She stared hard at it for perhaps five seconds, concentrating, then the pad rose from the table. Apparently on its own, it circled the room, then settled gently back to its starting place in front of the Ranger.

For long seconds, nobody spoke. Then Medart said softly, "If the Order can do all that, I'd say we have a bit worse of a problem than I thought."

"Not all can do everything," Corina reminded him, "any more than I can. Still, their abilities do combine to make a formidable power. The problem is a serious one."

"This Talent of yours is all very well," Greggson put in, "but I doubt if it would be any good against armed, trained

Security Division Marines. I'd bet on my men any day."

"You would lose," Corina told him, then she looked at Medart. "It seems I must demonstrate this as well, since Colonel Greggson appears unable to accept my word. Although there are many who equal or surpass me, my Talent is above average; I can give you some idea of the opposition you will have to face."

Medart nodded. "Good suggestion. Greggson, get half a decade of your best troops together in the main gym as soon as you can."

"Yes, sir." Greggson left, scowling at Corina as he passed her. She wondered what she could have done to arouse the man's hostility; after all, she had barely met him.

"Give him a few minutes to get them together," Medart said, "then we can meet them in the gym. Do you really think you can defeat five top SecuDiv Marines?"

"I do not know," Corina replied quietly. "It has been some time since I worked with unTalented people, and last time I tried, I could defeat only two, neither of whom had a shield. On the other hand, I have been training with Thark and Valla. But defeating them is not as important as convincing Colonel Greggson of the danger he and his Marines face."

"Truthfully, I don't think you can do it," Hobison said. "All his people are top caliber, or they wouldn't be on this ship—and one of them, Ranger Medart's bodyguard, is a Sandeman warrior."

"Any selected for this vessel's Marine contingent would be formidable, I know," Corina said, "particularly one of that race's warriors. But I still believe the demonstration necessary; if one who is yet a student can make a respectable showing against such, then you will take more seriously those who are long-experienced in the use of their greater Talent."

"Can't argue that," Hobison said. "But I don't envy you the demonstration, Sir Corina."

All except the Ranger agreed aloud. He agreed privately as well, but wanted to give her the best chance possible, which meant not discouraging her before she even got started. And she was right; the demonstration, whatever its outcome, would be valuable. "Greggson's had time to call his people together," he said at last. "Let's get to the gym."

Medart spent the shuttle trip unobtrusively studying the young Irschchan. She'd certainly been handed a rough deal, he thought sympathetically. He might not share her telepathic Talent, but he could make an educated guess about how she felt. Betrayed by her teacher, attacked and almost killed, then drafted and hauled into a whole new kind of life... she couldn't be exactly comfortable about the whole thing, but she was reacting better than he could've expected—well enough that he'd rate her adaptability level the equal of a Ranger's, which was a promising sign. She'd make out all right, whether she met Ranger standards all the way or not.

Corina's self-evaluation was less optimistic. She was managing to keep up a good front somehow, she thought, since she didn't care to let strangers know just how overwhelmed she felt by the day's happenings. At the moment she was going strictly on stubbornness, and was just hoping that would last long enough for her to adapt to this totally unfamiliar existence.

IV

By the time they got to the gym, it had been set up for the demonstration; it held a translucent-walled structure that Corina recognized from descriptions as a combat practice module, its walls opaque from the inside. To her dismay, there was an audience; off-duty crewmembers lined the gym walls. An audience, she thought, was the last thing she needed now—but there was no help for it; she would simply have to do her best in spite of them.

Then she saw Greggson and five others in Marine black standing slightly apart from the spectators. She recognized Dawson, and three of the others were as big—but the fifth, little taller than Corina herself and seemingly as slight of build, she recognized as by far the most dangerous. The pale-eyed, dark-skinned blonds from Subsector Sandeman were the product of major genetic engineering, particularly their warriors. They had a number of advantages over standard humans, but the only ones she needed to worry about right now were their greater strength and speed. Maybe Greggson was right after all. Talent was important, but it certainly was not the only factor; she knew better than to underestimate Imperial Marines, and when one of them was a Sandeman warrior—

She broke off that line of thought abruptly. If she kept it up, the Marines would have no need to defeat her; she would do it to herself. Calm and control, as Valla and Thark had told her repeatedly, were the keys to victory. She and Medart joined the waiting group.

"My men have been briefed, Ranger," Greggson said. "And they have stunners, not blasters, so... Sir Corina... won't be hurt." He turned to her. "Unless, of course, you'd rather call it off."

Corina's self-doubt was turning into determination under his scorn. "No, thank you," she said quietly. "I will continue."

Medart smiled briefly at her, then turned to Greggson. "Get off her back, Colonel," he said. "You can join the spectators; I'll set up the situation for them."

Greggson obeyed silently, and Medart turned to the team leader. "This may be a demonstration, Major Dawson, but I want you to treat it exactly as you would a real security alert. You've just gotten word of an intruder, probably armed, and you're checking the ship." He turned to Corina, touching a control beside the module's entrance. When the walls turned opaque, he said, "You're the intruder, of course. Go on in the module and pick yourself a spot. I'll give you time for that, then send them in and turn the walls back to one-way."

"Yes, Ranger." Corina did as she was told, picking a spot near the far end, a location that had several connecting corridors. If what she'd read about search procedures held true, the team would split into two pairs, with the fifth person keeping several meters behind to back up whoever needed it. Her best bet, if they separated widely enough, was to take out one pair and the backup, then the remaining pair. If not, it would probably be best to try for the standard humans first—assuming, as seemed most logical, the Sandeman was backup—which would leave all her attention free for him.

She closed her eyes, taking her soul-blade and its sheath from her belt, and scanned for other presences as she would if she were entering hostile territory. Despite the distractions of the crowd, she quickly sensed her five opponents—and got an unpleasant shock. Three were totally unshielded, and Dawson's screen was so weak it would offer him no protection—but the fifth had a shield as tight as any she'd ever felt. She shook her head in brief amazement. Four shielded humans in the perhaps three hundred she had mind-touched since coming aboard, and Thark insisted he had met no Talented humans? But then the Emperor-class cruisers did have elite crews, and three of the four were Command level—that must be significant, somehow.

But this was no time to worry about theory. She had been almost right about her opponents' formation; two were coming down secondary passages, the fifth—the shielded one, and she learned from Dawson that he was the Sandeman—was coming down the main corridor. There was no way she could defeat them conventionally, but she had known that from the beginning—and this was to be a demonstration of the Order's potential; her Talent, not her blade-work, was necessary. So she should try for the standard humans first, with darlas.

In training she'd always been able to see, as well as sense, her opponents; although she had been told her Talent, like Thark's, was strong enough to make visual contact unnecessary, she wasn't sure she could concentrate well enough without it. Considering the circumstances, however, it was worth trying; she chose Dawson, focusing her Talent on him with what felt like the right degree of intensity to knock him out for roughly an hour.

To her surprise and satisfaction, her attack was just as effective and noticeably less difficult than in her practice sessions; she sensed the flash of Dawson's pain, then his loss of consciousness. It was easy to repeat the process with the unshielded three, and it was good to know that her training had been so effective—but she knew her most dangerous opponent remained. And even Thark's darlas couldn't penetrate a shield that strong, which left TK, weak as hers was, her only real weapon.

She waited tensely, a meter back from the main passageway, as he approached. He was quiet, his steps barely audible, but she didn't need that to place his relative position. He stopped just short of the cross corridor, then entered swiftly, in a crouch, his stunner ready to fire—but he was looking to his left, away from her, and that gave her the time she needed to push the stunner's powerpack release and, as it fell, spring at him with her sheathed blade coming to rest at the angle of his jaw, close under his ear.

To her surprise he grinned at her, raising his hands. "I'd call that conclusive advantage, Sir Corina," he said. "With abilities and reflexes like that, you should've been born Sandeman—I'm Lieutenant Nevan DarLeras. Welcome aboard."

Corina replaced the soul-blade at her belt and stepped back, returning his courtesy with a bow. She'd read about Sandeman ethnocentrism, and knew he meant his words as a compliment, so she said, "You do me honor, warrior. I am pleased to meet you; I hope my victory has not dishonored you or your fellows in the eyes of your shipmates."

The Sandeman chuckled. "Hardly, with powers that were only legend until you proved them. The others are all right?"

"They are unconscious and they will have painful headaches when they wake, but other than that, they are fine."

"Only because it was an exercise, I'd say." Nevan picked up the powerpack, replaced it in the stunner, and holstered his weapon. "May I ask a tactical question?"

"Of course."

"In that case, why did you knock them out and simply remove the power-pack from my stunner? I would have expected you to use your strongest ability against me."

Both looked toward the entrance as they heard footsteps, and saw Ranger Medart approaching. When he joined them, he said, "I'd like the answer to that one myself."

"I did," Corina replied. "Although it would be more precise to say that I used the strongest of my powers he was vulnerable to. His shield is strong enough to protect him from an attack directly against his mind; were it weaker and this not an exercise, I could break through, injuring or killing him. However, even the best shield does not protect from physical effects, so I was able to use TK against him. Had this been actual combat, I would have attacked him instead of his weapon, but a ruptured blood vessel in the brain is too permanent for a simple demonstration."

"It is that," Medart agreed, pleased and a little surprised at what sounded like she might be attempting mild humor. "If this were real, then, you're saying all five would be dead."

"Yes. Although had the warrior Nevan entered the corridor facing right instead of left, the result would have been different."

"But he wasn't." Medart nodded to the Sandeman. "You can go back to whatever you were doing, Lieutenant; I know you're not on watch right now."

"Thank you, sir." Nevan bowed to Corina, then left.

Medart gave Corina his full attention. If he hadn't just watched her do it, he would have found it almost impossible to believe one small, delicate-looking student could defeat five Marines at all, much less do it so quickly and with so little apparent effort. Her demonstration didn't make the actual threat any worse, of course; it just made the magnitude of that threat a lot more apparent. The White Order was a small group compared to the rest of the Empire, but with that type of power, it wouldn't take many of them to cause a major disruption. Especially if they selected their targets carefully, which Medart had no doubt would be the case.

He'd better find out her potential as soon as he could, he decided. If she wasn't Ranger material, best to know it right away and go from there; if she was, she should be wearing the badge. It was a demanding job, but he enjoyed the challenges, and so would she if she had what it took—which he found himself hoping she did. "That was a very impressive demonstration, Sir Corina," he said then. "I think you and I need to have a serious talk. Let's go to my quarters, where we won't be disturbed."

Corina settled into the armchair Medart indicated, her legs curled under her, and accepted the glass of milk he offered. He had sounded quite somber when he had mentioned the demonstration, and had been silent on the way here, but there was something in his attitude that gave her the impression of hope, as well.

His first question startled her. "Have you given any thought to what you're going to do with your life, now that you've gone against the White Order?"

All she could do for a moment was look at him. Finally she said, "I have hardly had time to think about that, Ranger. I suppose I will return to my original ambition, which was to attend the Imperial Military Academy; being a naval officer appears to be the most practical way for me to explore the Empire while being of service to it."

That was promising, Medart thought—very promising. "I don't mean to rush you," he told her. "I have a couple of ideas on that line myself, so I'm naturally curious, but I don't need to know right this second. You're welcome to stay aboard the Chang until you make up your mind, either as my assistant or simply as a guest."

Corina was puzzled—what ideas could he possibly have about her future?—but all she said was, "I thank you for your kindness; I do need time to adjust."

"Probably less than you think, from what I've seen." Medart seated himself, taking a sip of coffee. "Tell me about yourself."

Corina made a gesture of dismissal. "There is little to tell, I fear. Until my Talent was accidentally discovered four years ago, I led a normal, quiet life. Afterward, I received training in how to use it, as well as going to tertiary school. Though my Talent was late in developing, it was strong enough for Thark to take an interest in me and supervise my training until he took it over completely. Otherwise there is nothing notable."

"That isn't exactly what I meant," Medart said. "I was thinking more about things like how you get along with your family, how you feel about other people, that sort of thing."

"Again, there is nothing truly unusual. I moved to MacLeod's Landing when my Talent was discovered, to make my studies under Thark possible. The Order, as is customary, was supporting me until my initiation, as well as providing tuition for my advanced schooling. I remain grateful for that, despite what I now know of them. My parents

and I get along well enough, though we are not close. We simply have very little in common. The same is true for my other relatives, including my siblings."

"What about other people?"

She laid her ears back in what Medart recognized as a frown. "That is difficult to explain. It is not that I have trouble associating with others, because I do not. More and more, however, I find myself reacting as an observer rather than as a participant, especially in purely social gatherings. That disturbs me."

Better and better, Medart thought; that was a pretty good description of the detachment a Ranger needed to maintain impartiality. "Don't let it," he advised. "I feel the same way most of the time myself; it's nothing to worry about. You said you'd planned to go to the Academy; do they do pre-testing here?"

"Yes." Corina allowed herself a brief purr. "I did well enough to receive conditional acceptance by the main Academy on Terra."

Medart raised an eyebrow. "Not bad, though I wouldn't wish Test Week on my worst enemy. Emperor Chang, query the local comps for those records, please, and send me a hard copy."

"Yes, Ranger," the ship replied. "It may take some time, however."

"By morning will be fine. Medart out."

Corina stared at him, then decided she had to ask. "Why are you so interested in me?"

"Isn't it obvious? You're my assistant, at least for now, and I need to know a lot more about you than your name."

Corina wished she could probe him, but his shield made that impossible. His interest, she was certain, was greater than normal about a simple assistant—especially when he had mentioned having a couple of ideas about her life-plans. But she had been raised to trust Rangers; if that was all he thought it wise to say, it would be best not to persist.

Medart grinned at her. "You want more, but you won't ask. That's good, since I don't have the answers just yet. Why not let me call Sunbeam up here, get her to take you to supper, then both of you relax for the evening? We can talk more once I've gone through your records, and I expect to have a war conference after that, when you'll have to evaluate whatever you know about Thark for us."

Medart had been too keyed up by the young Irschchan's demonstration to even try sleeping normally. Two hours on the sleep machine gave him the equivalent of a good eight hours' rest, though, and by 0100 he was keying the service panel in his cabin for a cup of coffee, strong and black, plenty of sugar.

He gulped half the cup, scalding his tongue in the process, then sipped at the rest, thinking about her and making plans for the day. First thing to do was check her records, then report his findings to the Emperor. From what he knew of her already, he fully expected those reports to be favorable.

He finished the first cup of coffee, then checked his delivery slot, finding Chang had accomplished its mission; the slot held a hard copy of Corina's records, complete with summary. He got a second cup of coffee, taking it and the printout over to his work area.

Several hours passed as he studied those records with growing satisfaction. The more he read, the more promising Corina Losinj looked. The only flaw he could find was in her psych profile; it showed a lack of self-confidence. Medart wondered at that, because she certainly didn't lack ability. Still, self-evaluations were notoriously inaccurate—and for his current purpose, too little confidence was better than too much.

Finally he stood and stretched, easing muscles cramped from sitting in one position too long. His next step, he decided with some amusement, would have to be getting rid of that coffee!

That accomplished, he returned to his work area and switched his display screen to communications mode. It was 0800 by ship and Palace time; the Emperor would be in his office by now, so Medart accessed the Imperial priority band, then the Emperor's private comset.

The response was prompt; Davis' face appeared within five seconds. "Morning, Jim. What have you found out?"

"She looks promising, sir. Very promising. I talked to her a bit last night, and I've just finished going over her records. They're damn good. IQ in the top tenth percent, personality profile stable Class I. School grades above average but not spectacular—her teachers attribute it to boredom from lack of challenge, even in the advanced classes—and she's a generalist. Independent work is widespread and good; she did one paper on Imperial administration that should be turned into a handbook. And she's already taken the pre-Academy tests. Top level, of course; she qualified for the Academy at the Complex. Which is where she plans to go, now that she's not committed to the White Order any

longer."

"Typical pattern for a Ranger, all right," the Emperor said with a smile. Then he turned serious. "How many potential Rangers are we missing? The gods know we need every one we can find! Anything else?"

"She's lacking self-confidence, but that's the only negative thing I saw. As for missing others, there can't be too many we would miss, even on Irschcha. Anyone with the right personality pattern is certain to try for the Academy, and that degree of ability will get them to Terra—unless they're stopped by something, like the White Order pre-empting anyone with Talent."

"Mm." The Emperor looked dissatisfied. "Not much we can do about that, though. You're satisfied that Sir Corina is fully qualified?"

"No question in my mind. Yes, sir, she is—maybe more so than the rest of us, with her extra Talent abilities. She demonstrated them very convincingly yesterday afternoon." Medart described the previous day's exercise in full detail, then shook his head. "It was almost unbelievable. Five Marines, with one of them a Sandeman warrior."

"And you saw it," Davis said. "If Chang made a tape, I'd like a copy."

"We didn't expect much, so I didn't order one, but somebody else might have. Emperor Chang?"

"Colonel Greggson has all such exercises taped for analysis, Ranger. I will send His Majesty a copy."

"Thank you. Medart out."

There was a brief silence while the ship sent the tape and Emperor Davis watched it. When his attention returned to Medart, he echoed the Ranger's headshake. "I see what you mean, Jim. It's a good thing she's with us, instead of the Order. Do you think you can get her to join?"

"With that lack of self-confidence, I doubt it."

"Considering the rest of what you've just told me, she'll get over that. Ask her to think it over, at least. It's possible that just knowing we think she's suitable will do the trick."

"At any rate, I want a conference with you, her, and Chang's Command Crew later today. We need to get more information from her, and we also have to do some planning. How about 1600? If you can't talk her into it by then, Rick and I will give it a try."

Medart nodded. "That sounds good, sir. Considering the time zone she lived in, she's probably still asleep; that'll give me a chance to go over her records again, maybe find a good talking point."

"Good enough. I'll talk to you again at 1600, then. Out."

The screen went blank, and Medart picked up the printout, carried it to his favorite armchair, and sat half reading it and half sunk in thought. Her lack of self-confidence was the real problem, all right; it was hard enough convincing someone who had a normal amount, and not always successful at that.

V

It was 0900 Standard, 0600 at the MacLeod's Landing time she was accustomed to, when Corina was awakened by her doorchime. "Who is there?" she called, stretching herself out of bed.

"It's just me, Sunbeam," came from the door speaker.

"Come in," Corina called back, taking her kilt from the autocloset. She slipped into it, then stuck her head around the partition. "Can you wait a few minutes while I brush myself?"

"Sure thing," Sunbeam replied. "I'm yours to command, Sir Corina; remember Captain Hobison assigned me to you yesterday?"

"I remember," Corina said. "I do not wish to inconvenience you, however. I will be with you soon." The closet, she was glad to see, had cleaned her kilt; otherwise it would be looking rather bedraggled by midday. She went through her morning routine, then walked into the living area ready to face the new day.

"What do you want to do this morning?" Sunbeam asked.

"That is hard to say," Corina replied thoughtfully. "It all depends on what Ranger Medart has planned for me. Right now, though, I would like a glass of milk." She started toward the service panel, but Sunbeam was already there.

"I'll get it for you," Sunbeam said. "I could use a glass myself."

"Thank you." Corina wasn't used to having others do things for her, but she sensed that Sunbeam was agitated about something and wanted to move around, so she sat in one of the armchairs, tucking her feet under herself.

She took the glass Sunbeam brought, enjoyed a deep swallow, then said, "What is disturbing you, Sunbeam? Can I help?"

"Well..." Sunbeam hesitated, then blurted, "It's that demonstration you gave yesterday. Stars above! The whole ship's talking about how you put down five top Marines with no more trouble than I'd have, oh, swatting a fly! I'm about half scared to be in the same room with you!"

"You should not be," Corina said, projecting amusement to try and calm the human Ensign. "I am the same person you met yesterday, and I certainly had no intention of frightening anybody."

Sunbeam ventured a half smile. "Maybe not, but you did a great job without meaning to, then."

"Are the Marines all right?"

"They're fine, from what I hear," was the slightly steadier reply. "Except for their pride; that was pretty badly battered." Sunbeam paused, then grinned. "Four of them, anyway. That cute Sandeman keeps saying how pretty you are, and what a warrior you'd be if you'd been lucky enough to be born on Sandeman. If I didn't know better, I'd say he has a crush on you."

"I am quite content being Irschchan," Corina said, no longer needing to pretend her amusement. "Though I must admit his compliments are flattering... I do regret causing the others distress, though the demonstration was necessary. Nor was there any dishonor in their defeat; they did as well as possible for those who lack Talent."

Sunbeam looked more cheerful. "Maybe it would help if you told them so."

"I will, then, at the first opportunity."

"And you should see Colonel Greggson!" Sunbeam barely managed to suppress a giggle. "He's grumping around the ship like an old bear, snapping at everyone. I don't think he's too fond of you. Maybe I shouldn't say it, but he keeps talking about an oversized kitten making monkeys out of his men."

"He seemed to dislike me even before that," Corina said.

"Probably. He isn't too fond of non-humans, and he doesn't even like many of us. Sometimes I don't think he even likes himself. But there aren't many of that kind aboard Chang; most of our people are really nice. You'll like them."

There was another chime at the door. Without bothering to find out who it was, Corina called out, "Come in."

Medart entered, and she and Sunbeam stood.

"I'd like to talk to Sir Corina alone," he told Sunbeam. "Can you find something to keep yourself occupied till we're done?"

"Can I ever!" Sunbeam exclaimed happily. "I've been trying to finish that new xenology tape for days!"

Medart shook his head slowly, watching her leave with a lopsided grin. Then he seated himself in the other armchair and gazed intently at Corina for several seconds. She returned the look with equal intensity, wishing she could get through this unusual human's mind screen.

Finally he spoke. "I have to ask you something very important, Sir Corina. I don't want you to answer me now; I just want you to think about it for awhile. Will you do that?"

"Of course," she replied, puzzled by his strangely hesitant manner.

"I was talking to the Emperor again earlier today. I spent most of the morning studying your records, then told him what I'd found. We were both quite impressed." Medart paused, seeming unsure of himself, then hurried on. "We need more Rangers, especially non-human ones, and you more than qualify. We're—I'm asking you to consider joining us."

Corina's first reaction was to wonder about Medart's mental stability. He couldn't possibly be serious!

No, from the look on his face, he was serious. "I cannot," she protested, shaking her head. "I have not even finished school—I am to graduate this summer, and Thark did not insist I join the Prime Chapter until then—I am only twenty-

two, Standard, I could not possibly—"

"Hold it," Medart interrupted mildly. "You said you'd think about it before you answered. I'm keeping you to that."

"Urr... all right." Corina nodded reluctantly. She would not be graduating, or joining the Prime Chapter, or... She forced those thoughts from her mind. The past was past; she had to go on. "I did say that. But I will not change my mind."

"Don't be too sure," Medart said. "At least three of us said the same thing, and they're part of the group now."

Both were silent for almost a minute, with Corina trying to think of some way to change the subject, and at last she succeeded. "I have an idea I would like to try, Ranger, if you have no objection."

"That depends on the idea. What is it?"

It wasn't really a strong conviction, more of a feeling, but Corina said, "Unlike Thark, I believe that humans, at least some, do have Talent and simply do not know how to use it. Were you an Irschchan, with a mind shield as strong as the one you certainly possess, I would be sure that your other Talents were equally strong. What I would like to do, if I can get past your screen, is to find out if that is the case. If it is, I would then teach you to use your Talent."

Medart sat in silent shock. Esper ability? Him? The psych people kept trying to find real espers, but until Corina revealed her Talent— despite what she'd said about the Rhine experiments, he didn't consider them either complete or conclusive—he'd heard of nothing he found convincing. If he weren't adaptable, though, he wouldn't be a Ranger; after a few seconds, he said, "You really think there's a chance of that?"

"A chance—that is all I am certain of, but yes, I think there is."

"Let's try for it, then."

"One caution," she said. "Even if you have the potential I think possible from your shield, I have never trained anyone before."

"That's all right. I'm willing to take the chance if you are."

"Very well. You will have to let down your screen, however, before we can accomplish anything. It would be best if you can drop it willingly, though since you were unaware of its existence, that may not be possible. If not, perhaps we can weaken it by inducing a relaxed emotional state. I will not attempt to break through with darlas, though I am sure I could, because it would be extremely painful at best, and it would probably damage or destroy your mind. Nor, most certainly, will I do what was done during the struggles to establish the Order."

Omnivorous curiosity was part of a Ranger's job description; Medart indulged his. "What was that?"

Corina's ears went back in distaste. "The infliction of systematic pain, weakening both the will and the ability to resist."

"I wouldn't want that," Medart agreed. "We try the voluntary part first, right? You'll have to tell me how to do it, though; until you said something about it yesterday, I never even considered the possibility of having one. And which is it—shield or screen?"

"The terms are used interchangeably, though technically a screen is less powerful than a shield. I will try to be more precise henceforth. Yours is a shield, and I am not sure I can tell you in words how to let it down; you may have to work that out. It can be described as a sort of mental force field, with your mind as generator and field both. You have to relax, deactivate the generator as it were."

Medart closed his eyes, leaned back in the chair, and relaxed all his muscles. Corina concentrated on his shield, ready to slip through the smallest opening, watching his face as he tried something totally beyond his experience.

A sort of mental force field, Medart thought. He knew how to turn off a standard field; all that took was touching a control. This was a lot more nebulous. He didn't have any switches to throw or dials to turn, he had to deactivate part of himself. Relax, she'd said. What were a couple of those tricks Jasmine had tried to teach him?

Deep breathing, he remembered. That was supposed to help, as long as you didn't overdo and hyperventilate. In and hold, then out and hold was the pattern. He began the exercise, doing the best he could to relax—though he couldn't help wondering how he'd know if he succeeded.

After what seemed like an hour, he opened his eyes. "How'm I doing?"

"I noticed no reduction in field strength," Corina said. "You are too—it is difficult to put properly. Defensive, perhaps, or suspicious. If this is to work, you must trust me." She thought for a minute, then took the dagger from her

belt and held it out to the Ranger, hiding a wince of anticipation at his touch. "Perhaps it will be easier if I am not armed."

Medart took the soul-blade, too surprised not to. Unlike Dawson, he knew the blade's significance, and could appreciate Corina's action. She had to be really determined about this working, he thought. Thark's betrayal must have hurt even more than he'd gathered earlier. "Let's give it another try, then. But it isn't easy turning off something you never knew was on."

"True." Corina was surprised to find his touch on her blade didn't bring discomfort. That was highly unusual, but she was becoming accustomed to unusual things around this human. "Again, try to relax. I will continue to check your progress."

"Right." For the second time, Medart closed his eyes and began the deep-breathing routine. In and hold... body relaxed... out and hold... cat-clean scent... in and hold... cat-and-mouse... oh, hell!

"What is it, Ranger?" There had been a flash, an instant of touch too fast for her to grasp and expand, then nothing.

"This isn't going to work, and I think I know what the problem is. Every time I try to relax, I see those four Marines stunned on the deck and the other one with your knife at his throat."

"So your undermind considers me dangerous, is trying to protect you from that. Yes, that is reasonable." Corina thought for a moment. "I seemed to get the impression of memory-smell, though I cannot be sure. And perhaps of a small feline. When MacLeod discovered Irschcha, he thought of us at first as 'overgrown pussycats', and other humans seemed to agree. Perhaps if you thought of me as some sort of domestic pet?"

Medart considered that idea, then chuckled. "I used to raise Siamese cats, and you Irschchans do remind me of them. It's worth a try."

Kimi and Saren, his first pair. Not Saren, who'd been on the blocky side for a Siamese; young Losinj was more like Kimi, slender and incredibly graceful. She'd climb up on his lap, butt his chin with her head to demand that he scratch behind her ears...

Corina, observing carefully, felt his shield start to weaken. That continued until she was able to catch a mental picture of herself, with parts of her fur more deeply colored, curled up on the Ranger's lap and purring with contentment while he gently scratched behind her ears.

She echoed his amusement silently, then began examining his mind pattern. She was careful not to let him realize what she was doing, though she was reasonably sure he could not feel her check. That was both quick and thorough, his mental "atmosphere" far less murky than the other humans she had touched—and his patterns were clear as well, easy to read and work with. His Talent was unmistakable—his potential Talent, she corrected herself; he might not be able to learn its use.

She could at least try activating his latent telepathic ability. That might be somewhat delicate, given his humanity, but with such clear patterns, it should not be particularly difficult. She knew the theory, and Thark had done the same for her; it was merely a matter of redirecting the mental impulses of communication from the speech center to the TP center, something she ought to be able to do without him even realizing the change was being made.

That is a little better, she thought at him while pretending to speak aloud. *Perhaps if we combine what you are doing now with a discussion of something else for awhile, it will be more effective.*

"Yeah, maybe." Excellent, Corina thought. He could definitely receive, then—a very good sign. "What do you want to talk about?"

It does not really matter. Something you like, a memory you find relaxing or humorous. She felt her ears twitch nervously, hoped he did not notice. The redirection she was attempting was indeed simple, but delicate with the human-different patterns however clear they were, and she needed no extra complications.

"There aren't too many of those in a Ranger's life," Medart said slowly. It was rather like listening to a simultaneous echo, Corina thought as she very cautiously nudged the flow of impulses. "It's a damn good life, don't get me wrong, but it doesn't have many laughs, and the most satisfying parts are usually the result of a lot of work, and sometimes pain." He chuckled, ruefully. "Exactly what I shouldn't be telling someone I'm trying to get to join us, I guess—but if you pay attention to Imperial news, you picked up on that for yourself. As someone said a lot of years ago, Rangers and active Life Nobles tend to get into 'dangerously interesting situations'."

It seemed like a good enough subject, as well as having a strong bearing on the offer he had just made her, so Corina pursued it. *True. I find it difficult to believe, however, that individuals of such value are permitted to place their lives at serious risk so frequently.*

Medart chuckled. "We're perfectly aware of our value, believe me, and we're just as fond of life as anyone else—maybe more so, since we're at risk so often. But there're some things worth the risk—a feeling you share, or you wouldn't be here."

Also true, Corina conceded. *The Empire has given my people much; saving it for them, and others, is something I think well worth the risk I took. But I am a private individual; no one may forbid me to take whatever risks I judge necessary.*

Medart grew thoughtful, making it easier for Corina to establish the mental pathway she was working at. He was still speaking aloud, though. "We aren't, but that evaluation is still up to us; if we think the situation's worth risking a Ranger, or if it needs our abilities, we go in ourselves. If not, we send in someone else—and that's a hell of a lot harder, I'll tell you right now."

Thinking of one's own life objectively is difficult, Corina agreed. *I believe I would find it difficult to think of my life as having more value than another person's.*

Or a group's, Medart said, speech now echoing telepathy. *You learn eventually, but it is hard, especially at first. We've all made at least one bad call, usually going in when we should've sent someone. That hasn't been fatal so far, and doesn't even always mean getting hurt—but Steve Tarlac's first solo mission came within an hour or so of being his last.*

I believe I have heard about that incident, Corina sent, *but would you mind refreshing my memory?*

It got made into a holoshow, so I'd be surprised if you hadn't—but okay, why not? He got captured by a group of rebels—a lot smaller scale than this rebellion, just one system—who beat him with a whip they'd soaked in a particularly nasty poison. He'd refused a comm implant for reasons he never explained, so I can't argue them, but it meant he couldn't call for help. If it hadn't been for a young camper who rescued him, and one of the rebels who decided to call the Marines when a Ranger got hurt, he'd have died of stingweed poisoning. The rebel was killed by his former colleagues before Marines could get to him to protect him, but the youngster earned a Life Dukedom.

I believe I do remember, Corina sent. Medart's voice had kept getting softer, and by the time he finished, he was using only telepathy. The redirection was successful, the new pathway now established. Still, Corina hoped he would

not realize it right away, would instead remain intent on the conversation for at least a few minutes more to strengthen the new pattern. *The young man was David Scanlon, was he not? And he cared for Ranger Tarlac in a cave, was in the middle of a gun battle with the rebels when the Marines arrived. I have wondered if that part was the holo director's dramatic license, or if it actually happened that way.*

That was how it happened, Medart assured her. *Scanlon wasn't about to give up, either, according to the Marines' testimony. He insisted that one of them come into the cave to prove @'s identity before he'd give up his blaster—and when he did, he only had one half-exhausted powerpack, and a knife for a backup. That was one brave and determined young man.*

I must agree. Ranger Tarlac was most fortunate he and the unusual rebel were in the area.

Right, but the Trait'll tell you it was the Circle of Lords looking after him. Speaking of which, how do you feel about religion?

I know it is a subject both important and sensitive to humans, so I normally hesitate discuss it. To most Irschchans, religion is a rather peculiar aberration; while a deity or deities may exist, they are unnecessary and none have shown any proof of themselves. I prefer to regard them as interesting possibilities. May I ask you the same question?

I was raised Omnist, and it stuck; I believe in one Creator and a wide assortment of secondary gods. I have no more proof than you do, but since that's how I was raised and I can't disprove their existence, I accept them, though I'm not what you'd call devout. Most of us are either Omnist or agnostics, like you, and the rest aren't dogmatic about their beliefs being the only truth. He chuckled. *Naturally, since the Empire doesn't promote any given religion or lack thereof.*

Quite understandable, from what I have read of human history. Corina was no longer pretending vocal speech, though she wasn't being obvious about her silence; he was doing well enough that he deserved a fair chance to discover how he was "speaking" to her.

At that thought, he gave her a sharp look. "How I'm doing what?"

You have been using telepathy alone for the last few minutes, Corina sent with a purr. *And you have surpassed your teacher; it was some weeks before I could receive thoughts not specifically directed at me.*

Medart rose and stalked to where she sat still purring with satisfaction, and glared at her, fists on his hips. "You tricked me!" Then he gave her one of his lopsided grins. *But I guess you had to, didn't you?*

I am afraid so, Corina agreed, pleased but not surprised by the Ranger's rapid grasp of the situation. "It was the only way I could get past your shield."

"How long?"

"Since that mental picture you had of me curled up in your lap. It relaxed and amused you enough that you dropped your shield to the point where I could get past."

"Well, I'll... be... damned," Medart said, half in admiration and half in wonder. "I never felt a thing."

"You were not supposed to," Corina said calmly. "If you had, the procedure would have been a failure."

"Can I work it on humans? Did you find anything else?"

"I know of no reason you could not. In fact, you should find it easier with other humans than with me, because the basic mind pattern ought to be more similar. As for your other question, you do have much potential; it remains to be seen if you can develop it. Your mind shield can be made stronger with practice, and there is unusually powerful darlas latent. I sensed no traces of the other usual Talents."

She paused, then continued, puzzled. "There is also something else, but I cannot be sure what it is. I have never before sensed such an aspect of Talent. Even describing it vaguely is difficult." She paused again, laying her ears back in a frown. "The closest I can come would be to call it a sort of darlas in reverse, but that is almost pathetically inadequate."

Medart could feel her puzzlement changing to amusement, echoed it with some of his own when she sent, *And Thark believes humans are unTalented! Undeveloped and untrained, most certainly, but hardly unTalented. You have not bred for it, even as indirectly as we have, so the percentage of Talented humans is probably much lower than it is for Irschchans, but—*

—we're hardly the total incompetents he thinks we are, Medart finished.

"True. However, he does not know that and would not be convinced merely by being told, even if we knew his location and were able to communicate with him; his beliefs, once established, require overwhelming proof to be changed." Her ears twitched. "I have thought about contacting him telepathically, but even if he were to accept my mind-touch, which I am certain he would not, he no longer trusts me enough to believe my unsupported word."

"I'm afraid you're right," Medart agreed. "There's not going to be any easy way to end this Crusade of his. I'm just hoping the information you've already given us, and the help you're still going to give, will let us stop it without too much bloodshed."

"I hope so, as well," Corina said, her tone as serious as his. "Irschchan culture was quite chaotic and warlike at one time, but the Order was a civilizing influence, and the idea of unnecessary bloodshed has become quite unpleasant."

"Civilizing influence? I suppose so," Medart said with less than total agreement. "It did cut down on warfare, which is a major benefit—but I still say it caused stagnation, too. Your progress slowed from faster than ours to almost nothing after the Order took over, in the name of stability. Even slower than the Trait, and for them gradual progress is the norm. It took you fifteen hundred years to go from a crude aircraft to just a system-capable spacecraft—it took Terra less than a hundred."

"That was fortunate for you," Corina said with a touch of pique. "Otherwise Terra would be an Irschchan subject world rather than the center of a growing Empire." Then her tone grew softer. "But I was raised an Imperial citizen, and I am glad of it. If the Academy accepts me, I will be able to travel, always finding out new things... meeting people of all races and species..."

Her voice trailed off, and Medart was struck by the sudden enthusiasm and warmth replacing her normal controlled formality. No, he mused, she'd never be happy in a society as static as Irschcha's, even as a member of its ruling elite.

She was quiet now, gazing wide-eyed into nowhere, and Medart decided to try his new ability. He sent a faint, wordlessly-questing thought at her, and was rewarded with a mental image she had of herself. She was clad in Imperial Navy service blue with an ensign's stripe, standing on the bridge of a ship. The vessel appeared to be much smaller than the Chang, and it was highly imaginative—didn't correspond to any actual class—but he got the feeling it might be a courier or perhaps a scout.

He withdrew, letting the picture fade from his mind. So that was her dream. She could achieve it easily with her ability, of course, and more... yet what a waste it would be. Anything short of the Rangers would be a waste as far as she was concerned, but he knew he couldn't force her into that decision. There were compensations, sure, but it was still a tough job, one that had to be taken on willingly. He could and would use all his powers of persuasion; he could not and would not use any form of coercion.

He'd been turned down once before, which had been disappointing—but Corina's refusal would be worse. He wanted to make her accept the Empire's need of her, its desperate urgency to make the best possible use of such outstanding minds—especially, now, a non-human's. Linda Ellman might have found it easier to persuade the young Irschchan, he thought. She'd said Steve Tarlac had had a similar lack of self-confidence when she'd recruited him. But that was nothing but idle dreaming; this was up to him, not to Linda.

He shrugged, then said, "Sir Corina?"

She shivered slightly, returning to reality. "Yes, Ranger?"

"It's almost noon. Why don't I call Sunbeam, then you two have lunch and get her to show you the ship? I have some work to do, and if you're planning on going to the Academy you'll want to know all you can about the Navy."

"Yes, I think I should. Personal experience is far superior to mere study. But you need to rest, give your undermind a chance to adjust to the idea of telepathy. Your overmind accepts it now; the undermind is normally slower to accept change."

"I can't really rest," Medart said slowly. "I don't have the time. I can work on something that won't take too much thinking, though. Good enough?"

"I suppose it will have to be, though true rest is better." While Medart called Sunbeam, Corina thought. Her former teacher meant well, she was sure, had turned traitor out of conviction that it was necessary and not for gain... yet the thing which had made him think the humans unfit for rule, their lack of Talent, was not the case. How would he take it when he could finally be convinced of his error? Would he do as honor demanded, or would he continue his treason?

"We'll find out when it comes to that, won't we?" Medart responded. "This works between us; I'd like to try it on Sunbeam, make sure it really does work for me with humans."

Fascinating that he could read her undirected thoughts while doing something totally unconnected, Corina mused. She could prevent that by shielding, of course, but it was her first experience with it, and she preferred not to. Such contact was not unusual between Talented family members or extremely close friends, but Medart was neither, and she

had not found herself reading him that way.

"Maybe you know you shouldn't be able to, so you can't, but I don't, so I can?"

Corina purred, wishing she could laugh. "That is as reasonable an explanation as we are likely to get, I would say. But I am not sure I can approve of you attempting to read Sunbeam. It is honorable to probe the unTalented only when truly necessary, since they cannot defend themselves—and you do not know your own strength; if you should accidentally use darlas against her, she could be seriously hurt."

"I don't want to hurt her, of course," Medart said, "but I think this is necessary. I need to know all I can about Talent, especially yours and mine—and so far you're the only one I've read."

"That is true." Corina thought for a moment, then nodded. "I can monitor, and if you should begin using darlas, protect her. It is a risk, but in this case justifiable."

The door signal chimed, and Corina called, "Come in, Sunbeam."

"Ready for lunch, Sir Corina?" the small ensign asked as she entered. "I sure am!"

"In a moment, Sunbeam," Corina replied. *Try now, Ranger, while I speak to her.*

You can talk and still monitor?

If you can read me while thinking of something else, why not?

 Corina continued aloud, to Sunbeam. "Did you get to finish your xenology tape?"

"I sure did," was the enthusiastic reply. "It was fascinating, too—I may take a full course on it, and who knows? I may decide to switch to Sciences instead of staying a Line officer. I just wish there were some way I could do both—there's so much to learn, and so much to do!"

Corina purred. "Perhaps there is, or could be. I do not see the two desires as exclusive; perhaps Ranger Medart can investigate a combined Line/Science section."

"Not a bad idea," Medart said. "I'll have the Navy look into it, and if there aren't any major problems, ask His Majesty to implement it."

"Great!" Sunbeam exclaimed. "Would you like to borrow the tape, Sir Corina? I think you'd enjoy it, and if you're going to the Academy it might help you pick one of your specialties."

"I would appreciate that. I do expect some difficulty in choosing those; I have found so few things that do not interest me that I will probably need considerable help finding three or four to concentrate on."

Then Corina felt the Ranger's thought. *No trouble, she's not even screened. But it seemed somehow harder with her than with you, not easier. Any idea why?*

Not immediately, no, Corina replied, puzzled. *As I said earlier, it should be the other way around. Let me think about it, please.*

Okay. Medart continued aloud, to both. "Well, why not go eat? Then give her the grand tour, Sunbeam, anything she wants to see. Just have her at Briefing Room One by 1600."

"Yes, sir."

VI

Lunch was good, and the tour was interesting, if tiring. The ship had more machinery of more differing types than Corina had ever seen in one place before, and they covered a lot of territory. Despite extensive use of the intraship shuttles, that meant a lot of walking. Normally that would have caused Corina no problems, but hard metal decks instead of grass or rubberoid sidewalks made her feet hurt. That made their arrival at the Security section a relief, since Sunbeam had promised it would be their last stop.

It was obvious to Corina that Colonel Greggson wasn't particularly glad to see them, but he was polite, clearly on his best behavior—until Major Dawson entered.

"Good afternoon, Sir Corina," Dawson said with a grin. "That's quite a wallop you pack—almost like getting hit by

a Trait. I don't suppose you could teach me how to do it?"

"I am afraid not," Corina replied, remembering their earlier meetings and his weak screen. "You simply do not have the right mental pattern."

"Oh." Dawson looked disappointed for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, I never could sing, either."

"I am sorry. But at least Lieutenant DarLeras told me you would not be shamed by what happened in the exercise."

"Not at all," Dawson said cheerfully. "We got a little teasing, of course, but that's no problem any more. I just reminded a couple of the more persistent kidders why we'd been picked for SecuDiv in the first place."

"Oh? May I ask how?" Corina could have probed, but satisfying her curiosity wasn't a valid reason for using Talent against one who had none.

"Telepathy's part of your Talent; why not take a look?"

"Thank you." Invited, there was no breach of honor, so Corina scanned him. From his point of view, she saw him working out in a gym with a couple of his kidders. Either of the two, from their relative sizes, should have been able to defeat Dawson—but that wasn't the case. Using close-combat techniques distilled from the most effective of Terra's many martial arts, he had both "disabled" or "killed" in less than thirty seconds.

"Elegant!" she said in real admiration. "I should get you to teach me instead."

"Telepathy?" Sunbeam asked in amazement. "I heard, but I didn't really believe—"

"Yes, dammit, telepathy!" Greggson snapped. "That's how she managed to humiliate my men!"

"I do not understand your anger," Corina said quietly. "It was simply a demonstration of Talent, the way it can be used against the unTalented, as Thark plans to do. I did not intend to humiliate anyone, and they have said they do not feel humiliated."

"Damn your intentions!" Greggson rasped. "No oversized kitty is going to make fools of my men and get away with it!"

"Hey, Colonel," Dawson said, "it's okay, we—"

Greggson glared at him. "Keep out of this, Major. Get back to your post. And keep your mouth shut."

"As the Colonel orders," Dawson said with icy correctness, and left.

"That goes for you, too, Ensign. Wait outside."

"But I'm supposed to—" Sunbeam objected.

"Wait outside."

Sunbeam hesitated, looked at Corina. "Sir Corina—"

"Go ahead. I will be fine."

The young ensign left, but her hesitation seemed to inflame Greggson still further. "You don't give orders aboard this ship, Sir Corina," he said coldly. "Not even if you are Ranger Medart's special assistant. You have no military authority."

"I merely reassured Ensign Yamata of my welfare," Corina retorted, controlling her own anger. "Ranger Medart did assign her to me; from what I have read, that places her under my command, despite my lack of military rank. She is a most conscientious officer, and—"

She fell silent when Greggson stepped toward her, his right hand closing into a fist. Surely he would not strike her... but he was angry, and a Marine, and shielded— Her hand, seemingly of its own volition, went to the hilt of her soul-blade as she felt a surge of fear.

"No." Greggson shook his head, backed off a step with visible reluctance. "I won't give you the satisfaction, you little—"

Corina interrupted, fear suddenly overcome by exasperation. "It is not your men's pride that concerns you, Colonel; they felt no shame, as they should not. It is your own. You ought to be pleased to have accurate knowledge of your enemy's abilities. Should I have let your men defeat me, merely to save your pride, then allow them to go against Thark believing him to be as easy a target? I merely stunned them; he will be trying to kill them."

She turned and stalked out under Greggson's furious glare, shaking inwardly at her defiance of him despite its necessity. What was it about her that made him loathe her so? She was not human, granted, but that seemed too minor a reason for such disturbance. It was out of proportion for him to take offense at her very existence. That made his presence discomfiting, and it was a definite relief to walk through the door and rejoin Sunbeam.

"He really hates you, Sir Corina," Sunbeam said as they left the Security area. "It isn't just not liking you any more. He's awfully proud of his work—I think it's all he has—and it looks like he took your demonstration personally." The young ensign was clearly worried. "He may try to cause you serious trouble. I ought to tell Ranger Medart."

"I see no need to bother him with it," Corina said. "I appreciate your concern, but I believe you worry too much. Colonel Greggson knows my status here; he will not harm me."

She didn't have to probe to feel Sunbeam's doubt, but all her escort said was, "You're probably right." Then Sunbeam glanced at her chrono. "Uh-oh, better get you to the briefing room; it's 1545 already!"

They arrived at Briefing Room One with a few minutes to spare, and Sunbeam left while Corina entered. She was looking forward to the meeting, if only for the chance to sit down and rest her feet.

The briefing room, she saw at once, had been completely rearranged. The standard conference table and the holo stage were gone, replaced by a semi-circular table. Its flat side had been put against the wall, just under a screen that was normally used to display graphic aids. Chairs lined the curved edge, already occupied by the officers who had been at the earlier meeting. Greggson had somehow arrived before her, and was seated two places to Medart's left. The Ranger was in the middle of the semi-circle, one empty chair at his right. He motioned Corina to it, then stood and called the group to attention as the screen flickered with scrambler blue, and cleared.

Corina recognized both men on the screen at once, from innumerable photos and holograms. The one on the right, in civilian clothes, was Emperor Charles Davis. He looked rather tired, she thought, but between the Traiti War and Thark's Crusade, she thought, he had every reason to be fatigued.

The one on the left, in Ranger uniform, was Crown Prince Rick Forrest. He didn't look quite as tired, she thought, but there was still strain on his face.

"As you were," the Emperor said. The conferees sat, and Davis continued. "This is a war council, not an Audience, so we'll skip the ceremony and get to work. Sir Corina, you have the Empire's thanks for your courageous and timely warning. Can you give us any further idea of when this rebellion will start, or where?"

Corina took a deep mental breath, feeling badly out of her depth. "Not with any degree of certainty, Your Majesty."

"Any guesses?" Forrest asked.

"Guesses? Yes, sir. If Thark reacts as usual, I would expect the Order to strike as soon as possible, perhaps within five or ten days. He tends, as he admits, to be somewhat impatient, and that will be even more true since his treason has been revealed before he was ready. The location is more difficult, since the Order will undoubtedly have multiple targets. He himself will take the center of power, of course—"

"He'd try for the Palace?" Davis interrupted. "He'd know better than that. It's much too heavily defended, especially after Tarlac's assassination."

Blades! Corina thought nervously. How to contradict the Emperor? Not easily, not if you were a youngling with a strong desire to crawl under the table and hide! Being teased about arguing with him was one thing, actually having to do it something far different. She had no choice, though. "Its guards, however numerous, are humans and unTalented Irschchans, perhaps a few Traiti. They will be little or no defense against Thark and the Seniors of the Prime Chapter, even if some few have mind-screens or shields. Nor can you count on mechanical defenses; they are operated by your Palace Guard, which renders them as vulnerable as the guards themselves. If compelling a Guardswen is not possible, controls can be operated by TK."

Davis frowned, while Medart sent her encouragement. *Good going. He won't bite you. And don't think about hiding under the table; you're doing fine.*

I think otherwise, she sent back, though she was grateful for his support. *I am frightened!*

So? Medart replied. *You're functioning just fine anyway.*

"Aren't you perhaps overestimating their abilities?" the Emperor asked quietly.

"No, sir, she's not," Medart answered for her. "You saw the tape of yesterday's demonstration; if a young student could take out this ship's top five Security people, including a mind-shielded Sandeman warrior, I find it very easy to believe that a group, all of whom have the degree of experienced Talent she describes, could take even the Palace. She says her Talent is above average, but so are theirs."

"How would you rate them by comparison, Sir Corina?" Forrest asked.

"Thark is stronger, of course; the High Adept, by definition, has the strongest Talent in the Order. The Seniors have approximately my strength, but are better trained since they were raised in Order schools and I was not. They also have far more experience than I do, as Ranger Medart pointed out."

"You're the only expert we have on the Order," Davis said. "How would you recommend we defend the Palace?"

"As it stands, Your Majesty, the Palace cannot be defended from such an attack." Corina hesitated, unwilling to go on.

Finish it, Medart urged her.

They will not like it, Corina thought nervously, but she said, "My recommendation, under these circumstances, is that Your Majesty and Prince Forrest leave Terra in a ship crewed fully by humans, its destination unknown to anyone not aboard, and remain there until Thark and the Order are no longer a threat."

A murmur around the conference table was disapproving.

"I don't like the idea of running," the Emperor said, "but I can't deny it's the logical thing to do. Ranger Medart?"

"How sure are you that it'll be Thark himself and the Prime Chapter after the Palace?" Medart asked Corina.

"I am positive," she said. "He will not risk failure by using less than the best against his most important target."

Medart nodded, then returned his attention to the screen. "In that case, I'd say to follow her recommendation, sir. Your safety's a lot more important than the Palace Complex—and if he does move against the Palace itself, we'll have unarguable proof of his and the Order's treason."

"Very well." Davis didn't look happy, Corina thought, but he did look decisive. "We will leave on the Empress Lindner as soon as this conference is over, then. Kennard and Menshikov are here; I'll leave them in charge. Anything else?"

"Leaving them will place them at hazard, sire," Corina ventured.

"I'm aware of that," Davis said. "I'd prefer not to, but there are other things I have to consider. The Sovereign is prohibited from risking @'s life if there's any choice, and the Successor should not except in a critical emergency when no other Ranger is available, so Rick and I are expected to think of our own safety first. But—give me your opinion as an ordinary citizen, Sir Corina. How would you feel if all four of us fled to safety, leaving the Palace Guards to face a rebellion alone?"

Corina thought about that, then inclined her head. "I see, Your Majesty. While it would be the sensible thing to do, it would give the impression of not caring about those who serve you."

"Which is precisely why they'll be staying. Ranger Medart, you look like you have something on your mind."

"Yes, sir." Medart looked up, at nothing in particular. "Unless they're intercepted and destroyed, which isn't very likely," he said quietly, "someone is going to have to face Thark and the Seniors. Sir Corina says the Guards won't have a chance, and Kennard and Menshikov are no more qualified to do it than I am."

Corina suddenly felt completely exposed and completely alone. At his words, everyone except Medart himself had turned to stare at her.

"No!" She shook her head, keeping herself from yowling by sheer force of will. "I cannot—I am not good enough ___"

"Wrong," Davis said. "I'd hoped Ranger Medart could persuade you, but he obviously hasn't been able to; may I ask why?"

"I have just said, sire. I will do everything I can to help—I am doing it—but I am not qualified for that."

Davis shook his head. "You're the only one who has even a chance against Thark, and you're as qualified as any of the rest of us to be a Ranger—maybe more so, as Ranger Medart told me, with that Talent of yours. None of us asked for this job, and none of us felt capable of handling it at first. You can do what we cannot. Will you face Thark for us, as a Ranger?"

Corina remained silent, overwhelmed by his intensity.

"Let me," Medart said quietly. "Corina, you came to us originally because your honor—the part of it we call loyalty—demanded it. It wouldn't let you permit Thark to destroy the Empire. Right?"

"Yes." Her answer was almost inaudible.

"Will that same honor let you stop now, when you know you're the only chance the Empire has?" That might be putting it a bit strongly, Medart thought—but after her demonstration, it might also be the precise truth.

She stared down at the table for what seemed like eons before she was able to answer. "No."

Looking up, she continued. "You are correct. I will face Thark. But I see no need to do so as a Ranger."

Tension built in the silent room as Corina thought. It wasn't fair, she felt. They were trying to... perhaps force was not the right word, but urge her into something she did not feel capable of. It was almost impossible for her to accept the idea that feeling unqualified was part of what made her qualified. It did not seem reasonable. And it was just too much!

Medart answered her unspoken thoughts. "No, it isn't fair. And the reasoning may not be obvious, but from our experience, it is logical."

"This is just as much a war as the one we fought with the Trait," Forrest added, with a curious glance at Medart. "Even though the Empire tries to be fair, Sir Corina, we can't always manage, especially in this kind of emergency."

"Take some more time, Sir Corina," Emperor Davis said suddenly, sounding sympathetic. Forrest threw him a quick glance, so Davis continued. "It was a hard enough decision for us. She's already had to go through one drastic change; we can't expect her to accept the idea of an even more drastic one so easily or quickly."

Corina felt a flood of relief. "Thank you, Your Majesty!"

"So the little kitten can't take it," came a familiar voice.

Corina was shocked by the venom in the Security Chief's tone. So were others; everyone, from the Emperor on down, stared at the defiant Greggson.

"That was totally uncalled-for, Colonel," Davis said coldly. "One more such outburst and you will be replaced. You will apologize to Sir Corina at once."

Corina thought for a moment that Greggson would refuse, but he finally said, "Please forgive me, Sir Corina." His tone was full of distaste, but it was an apology; the Emperor looked unsatisfied, but said nothing. Corina wondered why.

He doesn't want to have to relieve him, especially at this point, Medart sent. *I don't know how he made it past the psych tests with what I'd class as xenophobia and paranoia, but he did, and he's one of the best Security Chiefs in the Fleet. Still, it looks to me like he's gone over the edge this time; once this rebellion's over, I'm going to have him retested.*

She glanced at him and nodded. Davis saw it, traded glances with Forrest, then said, "That seems to conclude the council as such, Captain Hobison. You and your people are dismissed; please return to your stations, and set course for Terra. Ranger Medart, Sir Corina, I would like you to remain."

All rose, Hobison and the Command Crew bowing before they left. The Emperor and Crown Prince reseated themselves, and Davis motioned the two aboard Chang to do the same. Then he leaned forward, looking at them intently. "It's obvious the two of you are holding something back, something important. Tell us about it."

You tell them, Medart sent. *It's your field of expertise, after all, not mine.*

Yes, Ranger. At least, Corina thought, she had no reason to be nervous about this. "I have discovered that Ranger Medart has a high degree of Talent, sire. I have begun training him in its use, and we have been `speaking'—primarily, he has been reassuring me— telepathically throughout the conference."

"Controlled, reliable telepathy?" Davis asked, his expression intent.

"Fully, sire. He also has the potential for strong darlas, and another Talent aspect we have not yet been able to identify."

"Does that mean he'll be able to help you against Thark?" Forrest asked.

"It is barely possible," Corina replied, "if we have the time to develop them. Telepathy is by far the easiest and fastest part of Talent to train. I would estimate it will take at least eight to twelve days before he will be able to use his other abilities with even a novice's degree of skill and reliability."

Davis frowned. "Will that be enough to help at all?"

"Any assistance against Thark will be of help, Your Majesty," Corina said.

"That's cutting it pretty fine, though," Forrest said. "You only give Thark five to ten days before he attacks."

"They'll just have to do the best they can," Davis said, then turned to Corina. "Can you teach that to anyone else?"

"I can if the latent ability is present, sire. And although I have no really firm grounds to base it on, I am beginning to suspect, from what I am learning from Ranger Medart, that most if not all Rangers do have such ability latent. There may be others as well; it appears that humans do use what you call paranormal powers, hunches for example, though not consciously and very weakly."

"When things get back to normal, I'd like you to check on that, and train any who do have it. For now, though, unless you have any more stunbursts for us, we'd better finish up here and get back to work."

"That's all we have, sir," Medart replied. He signalled Corina and the two stood, bowing. The men on the screen returned the courtesy, and the screen cleared.

"I'm sorry, Corina," Medart said. "It was a dirty trick to pull on you, making you agree to face Thark the way I did, but can you accept the fact that I had to do it?"

"I should be the one to apologize," she replied, continuing when she sensed his surprise. "It should not have been necessary for you to point out what honor requires of me. I suppose I knew, but was unwilling to face it."

"Don't let that bother you. It's not going to be either easy or fun, and none of us blame you for being reluctant."

"No, it will not be either," she agreed. "Thark is quite powerful. It is entirely possible that he will kill both of us."

"What're the odds?"

"Not good. I estimate I have perhaps one chance in five of defeating him, perhaps less."

Medart whistled. "That's bad. It doesn't change things, though; I'd have done the same thing even if I'd known the odds earlier."

"Having been in your mind, I am sure of that." Corina attempted a purr, with little success. "Nor would I expect otherwise from one in your position. You may phrase it differently, but honor compels you, also."

VII

As soon as they left the briefing room and were going toward one of the intraship shuttles, Medart said, "I'd like to start that other training you mentioned as soon as possible. When can we do it, and is there anything special you need?"

Once they were inside the shuttle, Corina answered. "We can begin as soon as you like. We need quiet at first, as relaxation will speed your learning of the basic techniques. Afterward, you will need volunteers for practice. I do not like the idea of using unTalented for that, but I see no choice; I can teach you only so much with myself as your target. The techniques are not difficult; you should be able to learn them in an hour or less. It is the practice, for control and power, which will take most of your training time."

"Right. Emperor Chang, take us to Sherwood Forest, please."

"Yes, Ranger," the ship replied, and the shuttle began moving.

Medart turned back to his assistant. "Since you say relaxation's so important, at least for basic training, we're going to what I think is the most soothing part of the ship. I like trees."

"So do I, but what is Sherwood Forest? I do not remember seeing any trees when Sunbeam was showing me the ship."

"Not likely you would, with her for a guide," Medart said, grinning. "She's a city girl, all the way through. Except for orientation, I don't think she's ever been there. If she thinks of trees at all, it's probably just as potential furniture."

"It seems strange," Corina said, "that you, a Ranger, would take such an interest in a young ensign."

"Not this one," Medart replied. "It isn't just that she's impossible to ignore, either. I first heard about her when she was in her third year at the Academy. Her teachers were predicting that she'd end up either getting herself kicked out of

the Navy in disgrace, or as Chief of Naval Operations, and I'd tend to agree. She doesn't know it, but I asked to have her assigned to my ship to give her the best chance at the second; if anyone can keep her on the right heading without breaking her spirit, it's David Hobison." He laughed. "As if just running the Chang wasn't enough of a headache for him!"

The shuttle door slid open and they stepped out into a pleasant, open-wooded area which, from all appearances, was on the surface of a planet rather than inside the hull of a warship. It was impossible, Corina knew, but it certainly looked like the parkland was lit by a brilliant yellow sun, while clouds drifted slowly across a blue sky. Except for the odd sky color, it reminded her, with a sudden pang of homesickness, of a small glade she used to visit almost daily. Only the fountain was missing.

She managed to bring her voice under control before speaking. "It is beautiful! But how is it done? And why?"

"It is, isn't it?" Medart agreed. "The sky is simply glowpanels. Clouds are Type II holograms, the sun's a Type IV. If you want the technical details, I'll have to refer you to Engineering; it's something I've never had the occasion to go into deeply.

"As for why—Sovereign-class cruisers are the long-tour ones, sometimes staying away from their home ports for years. Even near a planet, only a small part of the crew can be allowed shore leave at any one time. If everyone were city-bred, like Sunbeam, that wouldn't be a problem, but most aren't. We had some pretty serious morale problems until Ranger Ellman suggested this idea about five years ago. It's proven quite effective, well worth the investment in power and space. Chang, Lindner, and Yasunon are the only ones with them so far, though. The rest'll get them as soon as they go into Luna Base for a major refit."

They had been walking while he talked, and came to a halt beneath a wide-spreading, though not very tall, tree. Corina didn't recognize the species, but liked its smell.

"Is this all right?" Medart asked.

"Fine," Corina said approvingly. She glanced around, saw several off-duty crewmembers strolling around, either singly or in pairs. "If you are certain we will not be disturbed, that is."

"I'm sure," Medart said with a chuckle. He sat cross-legged, his back against the tree trunk. Corina also sat, facing him.

"You had best practice defense first," she said. "If you cannot protect yourself, nothing else I can teach you will be of any use."

Medart nodded, and she tried a gentle probe. *You are wide open, Ranger,* she told him. *You will have to bring your shield under voluntary control. An automatic shield is adequate under most circumstances; if you intend to attempt stopping Thark as you said at the conference, it is not.*

I understand that, but how?

If you can remember the way you felt, your mind pattern when we worked this morning— She caught a sudden picture of herself holding the sheathed blade at DarLeras' throat, then nothing. "Very good, you have it. Now down again."

Seconds passed, then, *How's that?*

Excellent, she complimented him. *You learn quickly. Now I must test you, to find your shield's present strength. Prepare yourself.*

Right. Medart's shield went back up, and Corina began probing, gradually increasing the strength and intensity of her attack while the Ranger fought to hold his shield. His eyes closed, his fists clenched with his effort. He was starting to break out in a sweat when Corina felt the shield waver and instantly released her pressure.

"Are you all right, Ranger?"

"I think so," Medart said, shaking his head experimentally. "That was . . . it was like nothing I've ever felt, ever even imagined." He took several deep breaths, relaxing, then asked, "Just how much force were you using?"

"About half my maximum."

"How's that compare to Thark?"

"That is difficult to say." Corina's ears went back slowly, a thoughtful frown. "I would estimate he has half again my strength, so that would be perhaps a third of his maximum."

The Ranger looked grim. "One chance in five? Looks to me more like one in fifty."

"You forget he trained me. I know his patterns, can anticipate how and where he is most likely to strike me, and strengthen my shield accordingly. There is the added factor that this practice will benefit me almost as much as it will you. My estimate remains one in five."

"You know more about it than I do." Despite his words, Medart was doubtful. "Do we try that again, or what?"

"That would be unwise now; it is more of a strain than you realize. No more than two, or at most three brief sessions like that per day, until you gain strength. It would be as well to begin teaching you to use darlas, however. It means going much faster than is usual for this type of training, but our time is limited."

"It is that," Medart agreed. "How do I go about darlas?"

"It is similar to telepathy, which you already know, but is projected directly rather than through the TP center, and is much more powerful. You must try to force a feeling of pressure, of constriction, on your opponent."

She raised her shield, holding it at half strength so she could feel any success he might have. "All right, go ahead."

She waited patiently, but felt nothing, so she lowered her shield slightly. Still nothing. She dropped it even further, finally managed to detect an extremely faint, almost nonexistent, touch.

Even that faded, and Medart looked at her with a frown. "That didn't seem to be working too well, did it? What am I doing wrong?"

"It was indeed weak," Corina admitted, "but with my shield at minimum I was able to detect something. Each individual is different, even among Irschchans, and though it is far clearer than most, your pattern remains human. You will simply have to keep trying until you find what works for you. The potential is there."

"Okay, let's try it again." Medart closed his eyes, and Corina set her shield at about a third of its full strength.

After perhaps a minute, she felt a faint tingle. It got stronger for a moment, peaking at what felt like a gentle nudge before fading again. She studied the Ranger's expression of concentration, and decided to keep her shield up at the same intensity. She would give him another five minutes; that should not strain him unduly, and then she would end the session.

The next thing she knew, she was flat on her back in the grass, looking up at Medart's worried face. "Are you all right, Sir Corina?" he demanded.

She struggled to sit up, dazed, and felt him supporting her.

"Are you all right?" he asked again.

She took a quick self-inventory, decided she was well if uncomfortable, and reassured him. "I am unharmed, though I will have a headache for some time. What did you do?"

He hesitated for a moment, looking her over carefully. "I'm not certain. Nothing seemed to be working, so I tried picturing a giant anaconda—that's a Terran snake—wrapped around you, contracting. I finally got it good and clear, and you collapsed. Are you sure you're all right?"

Corina growled softly, disgusted at herself. "Blades! I should have thought of that. Unless you concentrate on words, I keep getting pictures from you. I should have realized your primary orientation was visual, and guided you—"

"Oh, no, you don't," Medart interrupted. "If there's any chewing out to be done around here, I'll take care of it. You said it yourself: everyone's different, and you're not that familiar with human patterns. And you've never taught before. You can't be expected to anticipate everything at once."

He gave her a quizzical look that reminded her of their first meeting. "I hadn't realized how different in some ways, and how similar in others, Irschchans and humans are until your shield fell. I seemed to almost be you for a couple of seconds, just before you blacked out. I glimpsed a lot of things, but I couldn't understand more than half of them."

Corina was sitting unsupported now, with Medart squatting on his heels facing her. She stared at him, then started searching intensively through her memories of the last few minutes. Her shield was still down, and Medart followed her thoughts with no difficulty.

Eyes closed... five minutes, then... picture... What's he— Then an image of herself tangled in an exaggeration of Medart's visualization, a confused jumble that reminded the Ranger of multi-colored spaghetti. She started probing at it, using his actual visualization to guide her as she finally tugged at what appeared to be a key strand. That made the

`spaghetti' disappear, releasing a flood of concept/imagery/experience into her mind, understandable only in fragments that seemed to flow past and through her.

"Pattern rapport," she breathed in wonder.

"Right, I got that much," Medart said. "But what is it? I'm not sure I understand anything about it but its name."

"It is an extremely unusual stress phenomenon," Corina said, picking her words with care. "It occurs when two very similar mind patterns are in close physical proximity and under considerable stress. Something—the Order is not sure what, but the most respected theory is both underminds acting as one—apparently `decides' to relieve the stress by combining whatever memories can be used to accomplish that purpose."

"But aren't human and Irschchan patterns too different for that to happen?" Medart objected. "That's what you seemed to think earlier, at least."

"I believed so, yes," Corina said slowly. "Yet the Order's millennia of experience cannot be totally wrong. It had to be pattern rapport."

"Then either human and Irschchan patterns are closer than anyone's ever suspected..."

"Or it is our own two basic patterns which are in phase."

"Uh-huh, that could— Hey! Remember, I told you I had more trouble reading Sunbeam than I did reading you?"

"That must be the case, then, but I would like to know—" Corina cut that thought off before it could go somewhere she didn't want to follow.

Medart, though he wasn't about to broadcast it, had a pretty good idea what the pattern rapport might mean. He wasn't at all familiar yet with Talent, granted, but he did know what his problem was. Apparently so did what she called her undermind, and it agreed with him. "I'd suggest a hearty meal and a good night's sleep," he said. "That was a shock to both of us, and we'll solve our problems better in the morning, when we've rested and steadied down."

Corina nodded agreement. "That sounds most reasonable. We do both need time to integrate the... new experiences. I would say you in particular; I at least knew of the possibility, though I never thought it would happen to me."

Medart chuckled. "Don't be too sure who needs it more. I've been through something similar—you studied the Sandeman Annexation, of course."

"Of course," Corina agreed, puzzled.

"I needed to learn as much as I could about them, as quickly as possible, and Gaelan DarShona, who had sworn personal fealty to Baron Klaes, agreed to a mind-probe. You know about those?"

"I have heard of them," Corina said. "An artificial form of telepathy the Order considers repugnant."

"Close enough. At any rate, I had Gaelan given a deep, full-experience probe, with myself hooked up as the receiver. So I've already `been' one other person. You haven't."

"That may indeed make a difference," Corina agreed. "I wonder if I will experience that part, or if it was bypassed as unnecessary."

"I imagine you'll find out. If you do, I'm sure you'll find it both interesting and different. For now, though, let's go eat."

Corina followed him to the shuttle, conscientiously trying not to think about the rapport, but with only moderate success. It was less the contents of the transfer that concerned her, than the reason for it. Her undermind must be trying to tell her something, but what? And . . . did she really want to know?

The shuttle, at Medart's instructions, took them to Mess Three. "With Sunbeam assigned to you, she's probably staying on the day-shift schedule, so she'd be going to eat about now. She should be able to keep our minds off anything too serious, as long as we don't start talking shop."

"Do you eat there often?" Corina asked, glad of the change of subject.

"Fairly often," Medart replied. "I like the relaxed atmosphere, even if it is a bit on the noisy side occasionally. It was stiff the first few times, right after I took over Chang, until they adapted. It wouldn't be quite acceptable for me to join in the horseplay, but nobody minds as long as I just watch and listen."

Sunbeam was indeed in the mess, standing at the row of autochefs with Major Dawson. Medart and Corina got in

line behind them and, when Sunbeam turned around, were invited to join the pair. They agreed; it was, after all, what they had hoped for. Corina decided on hellbeast steak again; it was becoming one of her staples, since Sunbeam had introduced her to it. Besides that, she ordered two things she hadn't yet tried—a taco and tapioca pudding—and her usual milk.

Medart looked at her tray. "That's quite an assortment you've got there. What're you trying to do, sample everything on board?"

"Not quite, though I am trying a number of things. It appears I will be aboard for some time, and I prefer variety. The tastes are strange, but some are quite good."

They were carrying their orders to the table when Medart noticed something seemed to be missing. "No coffee?"

Corina shook her head. "No. I cannot understand how you can drink something so corrosive, much less appear to enjoy it."

"It's an acquired taste," the Ranger agreed. They sat down as he continued, "But the Navy seems to run on it, and I'll admit to drinking more than I should."

"Drink what?" Sunbeam asked, having missed the first part of the conversation.

"Coffee," Medart replied. "Sir Corina thinks we're crazy to drink it."

Sunbeam giggled. "If she thinks coffee's bad, she should try tea!"

"I did!" Corina said emphatically, trying to imitate Sunbeam's gaiety. "The things you humans ingest and claim to enjoy, it is a wonder that you survive at all."

"It's not that bad," Sunbeam said, still amazing Corina with her ability to eat and talk simultaneously—and neatly. "You remember Major Dawson, don't you, Sir Corina? His name's Pat; we got to talking while you were hassling with Colonel Greggson. He's going to coach me in unarmed combat—he's the ship's men's champion, since Lieutenant DarLeras says it wouldn't be proper for him to compete with non-warriors—and he thinks I may have a chance at the women's championship next month."

"You must be quite good, then," Corina said.

"What hassle with Greggson?" Medart demanded.

"It was nothing serious," Corina said, and summarized the incident for him. "I was nervous, but not badly upset."

"That's good," Medart said, then continued silently. *Maybe it doesn't bother you, but it does me. I'll let it go for now, since His Majesty's already warned him and I have a feeling we may need his shield, but if he tries anything else, I want to know about it right away.*

Corina was impressed by his seriousness. *Yes, Ranger.*

The spoken conversation continued on a light tone, with Sunbeam as usual carrying most of it. Corina was almost silent, content merely to absorb the alien atmosphere and continue accustoming herself to it. She felt occasional twinges of familiarity which she knew must come from the Medart-pattern that was becoming a part of her mind. Most of the integration, of course, would be done by her undermind while she slept that night—but she could feel it beginning already.

As she had known it would be, Corina's sleep that night was restless, disturbed by her undermind's attempt to fit those alien memories into a pattern that would allow her to grasp and use them. She might never fully understand them, but when the process was complete, she would have more feeling for humans than was possible for an Irschchan who hadn't experienced pattern rapport with one.

The integration process worked mostly in the form of dreams, some fragmentary, some less so. She/Jim was laying in a bed with bars, a huge pink face framed in white looking down at her/him and radiating a feeling of peace.

Then Corina-as-Jim was sitting beside a wicker basket, stroking a Siamese cat who was giving birth to her first litter of kittens and wouldn't let him leave. There were three already, tiny white-furred things blindly nursing. The mother stared up at him, butting his hand with her head, and purred as only a Siamese could, seeming to be proud of her accomplishment.

A nude swim in a warm blue sea—the memory a pleasant one for the human, but one that made Corina's sleeping body tremble with distaste.

But it was Jim's invitation to the Rangers that claimed most of her attention, from Perry appearing in his room after the Test Week results were posted, through his first meeting with the Emperor soon after—it had been Yasunon then, not Davis, who was still Crown Prince—to his brief visit home before starting his new duties.

For details of Medart's invitation, see [SELECT](#)

Working with other Rangers, then alone: the massive flood that almost wiped out the Yonar colony, and proved to be sabotage. Taking over the Chang when Rick was elected Successor, and renewing his acquaintance with Dave when Captain Hobison took command. The Ondrian affair, with his new friend Star-flower playing a large part, and a wry thought that he kept getting involved with cats in one form or another.

The crisis in Sector Five when Sandeman erupted, conquering half that Sector before its Duke realized she couldn't handle them and called for Imperial help. The mind-probe of Gaelan, giving her a new insight into the small warriors, and added respect for their integrity and ability. Glimpses of many planets, from space and surface. That one spotting of a huge white ship that disappeared into hyperspace and couldn't be traced.

The memory of his sorrow at Yasunon's death was enough to make Corina toss restlessly in bed. She seemed to see the funeral from two viewpoints at once: her own, the film in history class, and Jim's being there. Then came the Conclave that elected Forrest as Crown Prince when Davis became Emperor.

Then war struck. Fragmentary memories of battle flickered by, then came a chance to capture a Trait ship. Ray Kennard had come up with an idea that might keep imprisoned Trait alive, at least long enough to be questioned before they succumbed to the prisoner psychosis that so inevitably killed the ones who could be kept from suicide.

He'd gone with the boarding party despite Hobison's objections. He'd seen his first live Trait then, with its leathery gray skin and sharklike face. Not attractive at all to Medart's way of thinking— then—but the big male was hurt and in obvious pain; he'd knelt, intending to help, only to be torn almost in two by the Trait's claws and teeth.

And, he found out when he was allowed to regain consciousness after that week of immersion in rapid-heal, it had been for nothing. The two prisoners the boarding party did manage to take had lived to reach Terra before the psychosis set in, no longer.

It was a memory that reeked of failure and self-accusation. He should've expected that trick; although it wasn't common, it was known. His carelessness and stupidity could have cost them the ship, cost the Empire a Ranger it could ill afford to lose, wasted even more lives.

Corina shifted, unable to accept that even in a dream. He was a Ranger, he had been doing the only thing honor would allow...

Then came the interrupted recovery leave on Irschcha, and his meeting with the young Losinj. In Medart's memory, Corina watched herself defeat the Marines, studied her own records, discussed them with the Emperor. Again came the invitation to join the Rangers, but from his side this time, and the intensity of his emotion was enough to bring her awake shivering.

She rose and automatically went through her morning routine, then went to the service panel and got a glass of milk. She sat at the desk, then, taking occasional sips and thinking. Did she still have a choice, or did the Empire's need of her make this a matter of honor? Jim—no, Ranger Medart, though it was now difficult to think of him that way— would, she knew, leave that question to her. And she was terribly afraid she knew how she would eventually have to answer.

VIII

Medart's night was equally disturbed, though since Corina was younger and had had a more peaceful life, his dreams were less troubling.

He saw/was Corina, about seven years old Standard, receiving her soul-blade from an elderly Order initiate in a ritual as old as the Order itself. He was impressing her mind pattern on the blade with a specialized form of darlas, and her acceptance of it would signify technical adulthood, though she would stay with her parents for some time yet. The dagger, ideally, should never leave her while she lived, and now he felt the reason as well as knowing it. The pattern-imprinting made the blade literally a part of her.

Scattered memory-bits of school and family, nothing particularly significant until her discovery of her Talent, accidentally made while she was basking in the sun beside her favorite fountain. Although she'd said it had been weeks before she'd learned to read thoughts not specifically directed at her, Medart realized that she must have been

subconsciously blocking them, because that was how she'd made her accidental discovery.

For details of Corina's discovery, see [TALENT](#)

Medart shifted his position in bed, her memory-feelings enough to push him out of that dream but not waken him. He soon slid into another one, rather patchy at first. Her first meeting with Thark, High Adept of the White Order, who was impressed and pleased by a Talent she wasn't sure she was happy to have since it had cost her the future she dreamed of. There were later memories of them together; after she had forced her regret into the background, they had developed a profound regard and respect for each other, though much of it was hidden by their formal teacher-student relationship.

Then came their breakup, in full detail. Medart experienced it all, from the friendly greeting and Thark's comments on her ability, through her discovery of the Crusade and her rejection of it, to their declaration of mutual enmity. Outwardly quiet though that had been, it had enough of an emotional charge to awaken the Ranger.

A glance at his chrono showed 0405. Too late, the way he felt, to go back to sleep, so he rose, showered, and dressed. Then he sent a tentative inquiry. *You awake?*

Yes. Hopefully, *Would you care to join me?*

You bet. I'll be right there.

He was soon seated in one of the armchairs in her cabin, balancing a steaming cup of coffee on its arm. Corina still sat at the desk, sipping at her second glass of milk.

"That was quite an experience," Medart finally said. "Especially that last meeting with Thark."

"And your feelings when His Majesty pinned your badge on. It is strange, is it not, how a small piece of metal can mean so much?"

She was skirting the subject, and both knew it, but Medart went along. Patience now, he felt, would pay off later.

"There's an ancient Terran proverb," he said, "that clothes make the man. It isn't literally true, of course, and the badge certainly doesn't have any intrinsic power, but humans are very strongly affected by symbols. This one," he tapped the badge on his chest, "can trace its history back to before the Empire, even back before atomic energy. It's meant official authority in one form or another since at least the second century pre-atomic, and for centuries before that—maybe longer—it was believed to be a particularly powerful magical symbol."

Corina nodded, appreciating his intent as well as his explanation. "I think I understand, though clothes are relatively new to us, and symbols of that sort affect us far less strongly." She smoothed her kilt. "What you wear affects the way others act toward you, but does it not also affect your own feelings?"

Medart nodded, but remained silent as he sensed her growing comprehension.

"That, then, is why you and the others wish me to face Thark as a Ranger. The added psychological advantage."

"Yes, partly," Medart said. "You do have the ability—compare yourself to me when I was tapped, if you still have doubts—and the uniform and badge will give you the extra edge of confidence you need to use that ability fully. The other part is the way seeing you as a Ranger will affect Thark, since his main grievance—aside from our supposed lack of Talent—is the real lack of high-ranking Irschschan Imperial officers."

"The second is certainly true. The first..." Corina fell silent, retracing her borrowed memories to Medart's first meeting with Perry. She ignored the surface this time through, digging for the deeper memories, and those confirmed Medart's words. Their specific abilities differed, but the general level was approximately the same. And despite mistakes he thought of as idiotic—she winced at the recurring thought of that Traitit deception—he had done well.

"None of us is perfect," he said mildly. "We're mortals, not gods, and we've all made mistakes."

"Yes, I see that," she said at last. "Your memories are most convincing." She paused, took a deep breath, then nodded. "Very well, Ranger Medart. I accept the burden."

Medart seemed to relax all over, though he hadn't seemed particularly tense. "As Arlene said, none of us asked for this job. Anyone who did would be the sort we wouldn't want. And it does have compensations, you know, both social and financial; you'll learn about those as you go. And remember we're not the only ones with a lot of confidence in your ability; Thark knew you could handle being a member of the Prime Chapter, though he had his aims for you set too low. Okay, let's make it official. Emperor Chang?"

"Yes, Ranger Medart?"

"Formal voiceprint confirmation for Empire Net ident and security input. This is Ranger James Kieran Medart, ident code RJT-6743-5197."

There was a brief pause, then the ship-comp said, "Voiceprint confirmed. Awaiting input."

"Change ident code ISCCJ-1643-2048 to RCJ-1643-2048. Delete all security restrictions from the individual identified by that code, and relay to any peripherals that Corina Losinj of Irschcha has been selected as a Ranger."

"Acknowledged. Request formal voiceprint from Ranger Losinj."

Medart nodded to Corina, smiling. "Go ahead, Rina."

Corina glanced at him, then decided she liked both the nickname and his use of it. "Thank you, Jim. Empire Net, this is Ranger Corina Losinj, ident code RCJ-1643-2048."

"Thank you, Rangers. Is there anything else?"

"No," Medart said, then looked at Corina, smiling. "Welcome to Imperial service, Ranger Losinj. Now that the formalities are over, you might want to get into uniform; we should call His Majesty with the good news, then have breakfast."

"That would seem proper," Corina agreed, "though I would prefer something other than your style. A kilt is nice, with a cloak for bad weather, and the sporran is useful—but I do not think I would be comfortable with fitted garments all over, such as yours."

"Good point," Medart said. "Since uniforms are supposed to be both convenient and a form of easy identification, there's no reason you shouldn't use a kilt the right shade of green; along with the badge, it should serve the purpose. And once we have time, you might want to recommend similar uniform changes for the Irschchan members of other Imperial services."

"Should we survive, I will do so." Corina went into her sleeping area and ordered a complete uniform, though with kilt instead of shirt and trousers, from the fabricator.

"Thark? There's him, of course," Medart called. "But there's no point in worrying about him right now. Make your preparations, get everything as ready as you can—then worry; it might let you find something you've overlooked."

"I will try." Corina shook her head, but Jim was right; she did tend to concern herself with problems that never arose, and that did waste time.

Medart heard the fabricator's delivery bell ping, then sounds of rustling cloth as Corina changed. The pattern rapport had made a big difference in her manner, he thought, and for the better. She was much more relaxed around him, even a little less formal. And she seemed more sure of herself, which would help.

Corina felt strange, changing out of her accustomed bright garb into the functional, if in her opinion unnecessarily drab, forest green. The fabricator had included an ankle-length cloak with heavy silver embroidery and the Imperial Seal; she considered that for a moment, settled it over her shoulders long enough to admire it in the mirror, and removed it. That was for formal ceremonies in which she used her military rank and title, not for every day. There was a visored hat, as well, but she didn't try it on; such headgear did not take Irschchan ear structure into account, so she planned to avoid wearing it. And possibly suggest another uniform change.

She stood holding the badge for a moment, still hesitating to take the final step and pin it on. It was only a small piece of platinum, a star in a circle, but it meant almost total independence and authority, subject only to the Sovereign, anywhere in Imperial space. It was odd, she thought, but this particular symbol affected her more than it should. Either Irschchans were more symbol-conscious than she had been taught, or this was a side effect of pattern rapport with a human.

She told herself to get on with it. She had accepted the job, why not its symbol? But it did not seem appropriate, after Jim's memories, to pin it on herself—not the first time. She returned to the living area, held it out to Medart. "Would you mind?"

"Not at all. I'd be honored." Medart took the badge and pinned it to the holder the fabricator had provided on her equipment belt.

To Corina's surprise—and Medart's satisfaction—her emotions when he did so were a duplicate of his fifty-seven years earlier. Pride, determination—and the confidence that others' belief in you could create.

Yes, Corina sent. *I have heard of such boosts, but had never quite believed in them. It is strange... I had always thought myself unaffected by others' opinions, but it is clear I was wrong.*

Sometimes it depends on who the others are, Medart replied. *Someone you don't care about can't have more than a surface impact, pro or con; someone you do care about can have a disproportionate one. This is the wrong time for philosophy, though. Is that knife the only weapon you plan to carry? You might want to think about something with a little more range.*

"I think not," Corina said aloud. "I am not familiar with distance weapons, since I am not a Sanctioner; my darlas should be adequate for anyone I cannot reach physically—after this mission, at least." She indicated the weapon at his belt. "Nor, I would say, am I the only one to prefer unconventional weapons; that does not appear to be a blaster."

"It isn't," Medart said, drawing the weapon with a chuckle. "It's just as effective, though, maybe more so. It's a replica of a Browning Hi-Power 9mm automatic—a slugthrower. I had it made not long after I was tapped, and I have a standing order for fresh ammunition; it goes bad after a few years, even under shipboard conditions. It holds thirteen rounds in the clip—" which slid out as he pressed the release button, "and one in the chamber when I expect trouble. I can always carry more clips if I expect a lot of trouble." He worked the action, then handed her the empty weapon.

Corina examined it carefully. It was too large for her hand, which she expected because it seemed to fit Jim's perfectly. She was impressed by the precise workmanship, too; it made the gun, deadly as it was, a thing of great beauty.

"Why a slugthrower instead of a blaster?" she asked curiously.

"Personal preference," Medart replied. "For one thing, I happen to like slugthrowers—and computers with keyboards, and paper books. For another, more practical reason, it has stopping power a blaster can't match, and it's noisy. A snap shot, if I'm surprised, will give me time enough to get in a second, well-aimed round. That's saved my life a couple of times."

Corina handed it back, watched him reload and holster it. "It seems to be an excellent weapon, but I prefer to rely on my blade and darlas."

Medart shrugged. "No arguing preference. And it's about time we get to work, so—" He called the Comm Center, told them to set up a scrambler call to the Emperor either at the Palace or aboard the Empress Lindner. "And have it put through to my quarters," he added. Then he turned to Corina. "We'll have to have your quarters rigged for priority communications, but until the techs can get to it, you'll have to use mine or go to Briefing Room One. And my quarters are right next door. I'd also recommend a comm implant, but that can wait if you don't want to spend a couple of hours in sick bay; a wrist-com will do everything you need for now."

"A wrist-com, then, until we complete this mission."

The screen was flickering blue even as they entered the human Ranger's cabin, then it cleared to show a sleepy-looking Davis. "Morning, Jim. What's up?"

"Sorry to wake you, sir, but for a change it's good news. We have another Ranger."

Davis smiled. "Losinj? That's the kind of news I don't mind getting out of bed for. How did you manage to convince her?"

"I didn't, sir, at least not in any conventional way. We had a training accident." Medart briefly described the pattern rapport and memory exchange, then went on, "I'm putting her in charge of this mission and going on backup."

"Right," the Emperor said. "That's what I'd do; Thark's her problem anyway. I'll pass on the good news to Rick and the others." He turned his attention to the young Irschchan. "I'm glad to have you with us all the way, Ranger Losinj."

"Thank you, sir." Corina hadn't expected to be put in complete charge, but she wasn't totally surprised; it was logical, given the circumstances, and Jim's memories did indicate that Ranger training— what there was of it—had a tendency to be rather abrupt.

"Before we get to serious planning," the Emperor said, "have you given any thought to the arms you want?"

"Arms? No, sir." It was traditional, Corina knew, for a new Ranger to use the arms of one who had died—but that tradition had not even occurred to her.

"May I make a suggestion, then?"

"Of course, Your Majesty."

"I think Steve Tarlac's would be appropriate. Hovan told me Clan Ch'kara's Speaker for the Lords said our next Ranger would be his spiritual heir—and now that we've found you, that seems reasonable."

Corina bowed. "I would be honored to bear the Peacelord's arms, sir, though I do not know if I can live up to his example."

"It won't be easy, but then neither are any of our jobs." Davis grew sober. "Back to our present situation. So you can plan, Rick and I are in space now, as you suggested, outside Sol System. Only the ship's captain and navigator know our location. I've ordered the defense satellites not to fire on any Irschchan ships. Since you're sure Thark will be leading the attack, we'll be using Jim's plan: I want Thark to land and take action against the Palace itself, and to prevent unnecessary damage, I'm making it as easy for him as I can. As a ruling noble, he'll have no trouble getting through the Complex's weather dome, and he'll find the Palace's security screen has somehow been left off. The Guards have orders not to fire until he takes hostile action."

"I understand, sir. I may not be able to take him alive for a Tribunal, though. I may not be able to take him at all."

"It's not necessary to take him alive," Davis replied after a moment's thought. "A Tribunal isn't essential, it's the evidence that is. If you can't take him at all—" He was silent for a moment, then said, "All right. How long will it take if you can handle him?"

"Less than half an hour, certainly; probably no more than fifteen minutes."

"Considering the size of the Palace," Davis pointed out, "it could take you longer than that just to find him." He thought for a moment. "Signal Defsat Five when you land. They'll have their orders, and if they don't receive a second signal from you within an hour, they'll blast the Palace and everything for ten kilometers around it. I don't want that to happen—it'd mean losing four Rangers, as well as a couple of hundred thousand people, and probably destroy the Complex—but even that is better than a rebellion that would cost millions or billions of lives throughout the Empire."

"I will do my best to avoid that, Your Majesty."

"I know you will," Davis said. "Still, for the first time, I'm grateful that politics forced Chang to have the Palace built in Antarctica. A strike like that almost anywhere else would kill a hell of a lot more people."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't hesitate to call me if you have to. But unless there's anything else, I'll sign off now and let you get back to work."

"I have nothing more, sir," Corina answered, and the screen went blue momentarily before it shut off.

She was unfamiliar with Terran geography, but everyone knew about the fabulous Imperial Palace. Isolated in the heart of a frozen continent, it was the center of the Palace Complex, a hundred-kilometer-diameter circle of parklike city. She didn't understand the physics of the modified defense screen that allowed it to exist in spite of Antarctica's climate, but the politics Davis had mentioned were clear enough.

The Solar Federation's capital had been in Ceres, but when Nannstein's discovery of hyperdrive had triggered the necessary change from Federation to Empire, that had been abandoned. The Empire needed a center on Terra itself as a symbol of unity, yet squabbling about its location among the planetary powers had made that unity a mockery until Emperor Chang stepped in.

It was his decision that, since the Empire was not concerned with local politics—it couldn't be and still govern the Empire as a whole properly—the Palace would not be located on any individual nation's territory. That made Antarctica the only possible place. Covered by multinational treaties and with no permanent inhabitants, it had no national identity.

And she would be going there, going to the Palace itself... as a Ranger. What would her parents think? Corina hoped they would be proud—

Medart interrupted her musing. "How about breakfast? I don't know about you, but I'm hungry."

"So am I," Corina agreed. "And we have plans to make."

"Correction," Medart said. "You have plans to make. All I'm going to do is listen and critique."

They took an intraship shuttle to Mess One, intended for senior officers and at this hour quite empty, unlike the always-busy Mess Three. They got their meals and ate silently while Corina decided on her plans.

"The first thing, I think," she finally said, "is to find anyone else aboard with mind shields, to make a combat group. I have met surprisingly many—four out of perhaps three hundred—yet five of us will accomplish little against Thark and the Seniors of the Prime Chapter."

"Right," Medart agreed, "since unshielded ones wouldn't last long. Who else have you found?"

"Besides yourself, there is Colonel Greggson, as you know from the conference. Also Captain Hobison, and the small Marine from the demonstration, Lieutenant DarLeras."

"That one somehow doesn't surprise me," Medart commented.

Corina purred briefly. "He is the first Sandeman warrior I have met, but from my reading and your memories of the warrior Gaelan, I am also not surprised. An enthusiastic fighter, of course, and even shielded, I sense great potential in him."

"He's got that, all right," Medart agreed. "First in last summer's graduating class at the Academy in the Complex, and if he'd fit the psych profile better, he would've been approached about the Rangers. But he can't help thinking of combat as a preferred option rather than a last resort." Medart paused. "It might interest you, and supports your theory, that Captain Hobison was asked. He refused, but that doesn't change his abilities."

"Four out of the first five either Rangers or Ranger-level," Corina said thoughtfully. "Colonel Greggson is not?"

"What do you think? No—too inflexible, not enough regard for others, too narrow an orientation. He's at the top of his field or he wouldn't be on an IBC, but he's definitely not Ranger material. Go on."

"Once we have found any shielded people, we must develop your Talent, in particular your shield and darlas. You do have the ability, but it will be of little use without better control than you have yet achieved. And greater power, as well. Admittedly, you did knock me out yesterday; that, however, was in part because I had partially lowered my own shield, trying to feel any trace of your darlas. That is one mistake I do not plan to repeat."

"I should hope not!" Medart said emphatically. "You gave me quite a scare, and I'd rather not 'be' any more people than I have to."

"It is imperative that we find out about the aspect of your Talent I have, for lack of a better term, called reverse darlas. A thing not understood may be a help or a hindrance. We must discover which this is, and if it is a help, how best to use it."

"Yeah, and if it's a hindrance, how not to use it. What about timing?"

"I am concerned about that," Corina admitted. "I hope to have the week to ten days you need for even minimal training, but I must plan on less. I am almost positive of another four days, though, which will help."

"So what are you going to do with the ship in the meantime? Our Terra ETA is 0330 tomorrow. Chang's too big to land, and we'd be pretty conspicuous in orbit."

"Urrr." Corina hadn't thought about that. "Does that system not have a band of debris? Between the fourth and fifth planets, I believe."

Medart nodded. "The asteroid belt."

"Then instead of going into orbit, we stay there. I will give the defense satellites instructions to call us when Thark lands. The delay between our getting that message and our arrival in orbit, plus the time to land, should take perhaps twenty minutes, from the theory I remember. That will allow him to attack the Palace and provide the evidence His Majesty wishes."

"You're assuming Chang's navigator can plot that short a hyperspace flight with a lot of precision."

"Yes. I believe it a valid assumption, or he would not be conning a Ranger's chosen ship."

"Logical reasoning, and very true. All three of our navigators are every bit that exact. It sounds good; now we just hope it works. One of our ancient poets wrote, 'The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft a-gley,' and he was right."

"That was Robert Burns," Corina said. "One of your early scientists put the same idea another way: 'Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.'" She felt Medart's surprise at the identification and quote. "I was not probing; Terran poetry interests me, particularly Burns, Service, and Kipling. Except for ancient war chants, Irschcha has little that can be called poetry."

"Nice to know you have interests that don't show up on your records," Medart said.

"What do you mean?"

"As I said earlier, it's not so much what you know as how your mind works that counts, as long as you have the basics. You can always find out any facts you need. But being interested in a variety of things is essential; you never know what's going to come in handy. Poetry doesn't seem particularly promising, but on the other hand, as I said, you never know."

The mess was starting to fill as the senior officers trickled in for breakfast. By the time the two Rangers finished eating, all but Captain Hobison and Commander Jensen were there.

Until they stood to leave, nobody paid any particular attention to Corina; it wasn't surprising that Medart's special assistant should join him at a meal. When they did stand, however, Commander Pappas gave an exclamation of surprise, and the room grew silent. That didn't last long; the murmur of conversation resumed, but now, from what Corina could hear, with herself as the subject. The tone was more awed than surprised after that first exclamation, and Corina assumed that word of the previous day's war council was no longer restricted to the Command Crew.

Jim must have picked that up, she thought, or possibly he was just anticipating her reaction. "It's impossible to keep rumors from circulating aboard ship," he said, "especially about something as rare as a potential Ranger. The word was probably all over Chang within fifteen minutes after His Majesty dismissed the Command Crew. There's no harm in it."

They entered a shuttle, and Medart ordered it to the Bridge. "We'll meet Captain Hobison there, so he'll get the news directly, not second-hand. He normally has breakfast in his cabin, and goes straight to the Bridge."

Corina nodded. "And I must tell him my plans, as well. But what about those rumors? What if I had continued to refuse?"

"You're starting to sound like Sunbeam," Medart laughed. "The rumors would have tapered off eventually, after giving the crew something a bit different to talk about for awhile."

The shuttle slowed to a stop, its door sliding open. The Bridge, as the ship's nerve center, was of course always fully crewed; Chief Engineer Jensen, on duty as Senior Officer of the Watch, was seated in the Command chair. He swung the chair around to face them as they entered, saying, "You're early, Cap— Huh?" He stood and saluted, his

exclamation attracting the attention of the rest of the Bridge crew. They also started to stand.

"As you were," Medart said, returning Jensen's salute. The Bridge returned to near-normal, though with more than the usual amount of non-duty conversation.

Corina saw Jensen's hand move toward the chair's comm controls, and spoke. "No, Commander. There is no need to disturb Captain Hobison; I understand he will be here shortly."

"Uh, yes, sir."

They waited in silence, both Rangers moving to stand at the left of the Command chair. The shuttle door finally slid open again and Hobison emerged. He raised one eyebrow in surprise at the sight of Corina's badge, but went through the routine of relieving Jensen before he said anything. Change of watch completed, he seated himself in the Command chair and turned to face the pair. "He talked you into it, did he, Ranger Losinj?" The words were neutral, but the tone was warm. "Knowing Rangers, I suppose he's put you in charge of this mission."

"Yes, Captain, to both. I would like to tell you my plans as soon as you have the time."

"I've got it now, Ranger. Here or in the briefing room?"

"It might as well be here. The whole crew will need to know." Corina braced herself mentally. This was real; she was giving orders to the Captain of an Imperial Battle Cruiser, certain they would be obeyed. "When we arrive in the Terran system, take station in the asteroid belt. Then call Defense Satellite Five and have them inform us of any Irschschan ship landing near the Palace. When you receive that word, start for Terra and call me. As soon as you have Chang in orbit, Ranger Medart and I, along with any crew members who have mind shields and are willing to volunteer, will take a lander down and attempt to take Thark in the act of invading the Palace."

"After your demonstration," Hobison said, "I can understand why you want people with mind shields, but everyone aboard this ship is already a volunteer. You don't need to ask them again."

"I realize that, Captain, but in this case I would prefer to. Defsat Five has orders to blast the Palace and its immediate surroundings unless I can defeat Thark within an hour of our landing. As I told Ranger Medart, the assault team will have at best a twenty percent chance of survival."

Hobison nodded. "Right. Am I shielded?"

"Yes."

"Then you have one volunteer. Anyone else in the Command Crew eligible?"

"There is Colonel Greggson. Only one of the others I have scanned so far has a usable shield, and I plan to speak to him shortly. That is why the whole crew must be informed of those facts. Ranger Medart and I will have to check everyone. Be sure to emphasize, please, that we will be checking only for shields; their private lives will remain their own."

"Jim?" Hobison looked startled. "What's this all about? You mean you've got Talent like hers?"

"Uh-huh." Medart was purposely informal, trying to ease Hobison's obvious shock. "You'd already left when I told His Majesty. There's no sense in trying to keep it a secret; she's trained me to be as good a telepath as she is, and she's teaching me darlas. I'll need volunteers, too, to practice on. They'll be in no danger, since she'll be monitoring everything I do until she's satisfied with my control."

"I'll make the announcement," Hobison said after a few moments' silence. "But I was definitely right—captaining a Ranger's ship is anything but boring."

"The same goes for being a Ranger," Medart said, smiling.

"I've noticed. I'll get on it right away. Where do you want to start?"

"Sherwood Forest," Corina decided, "then work our way south. I can sense the presence of shields with a shipwide scan, but not the precise strength, location, or most important, who is shielded." Then she corrected herself. "No, that is not precisely correct. If I already know the person, I can tell identity from the shield pattern, but even then, not the location. The 'finding' aspect of my Talent, unfortunately, is limited to inanimate objects."

She turned to Medart. "We had best start now. Our time is limited."

IX

In the shuttle heading for Sherwood Forest, Medart said, "I agree that speed's important, so why not split up? We could cover the ship faster that way."

"I do not think that would be wise, Jim." Corina was a little uncomfortable with such familiarity, even in private and with the knowledge from his memory that it was now proper for her, but she felt she ought to accustom herself to it. "You cannot test a shield's strength without using darlas, and you do not yet have the control to do that safely." Getting brave, she chided herself. Making suggestions to the Emperor, giving orders to a battle cruiser's captain, and now telling a Ranger—a fellow Ranger, she reminded herself—there was a thing he could not do.

Medart sensed her feelings and smiled to himself. Yeah, she had the adaptability, all right. She'd definitely gained confidence since the pattern rapport, which was good, and she was already showing the self-possession it had taken him over a month to achieve, maybe from his memories. That, he thought, was even better; she'd need every edge she could get. "I can't argue," he said. "I certainly don't want a repeat of the accident with you."

"Nor do I. If you were to overestimate a shield's strength, or visualize too clearly, you could easily injure or kill its possessor. You will test them, yes, but only when I am standing by to protect them."

"That sounds reasonable."

They reached the ship's park a couple of minutes later, and encountered several crewmembers as they walked through it. None, unfortunately, had any trace of shield, which disappointed both Rangers. But Corina, despite her misgivings about the mission she'd assumed, found the forest eased her tension. She breathed deeply, savoring the smell of growing things—and startled herself with a sneeze. That was odd, she thought; she knew of no allergies. Perhaps it was the change of environment.

The forest's calming effect didn't last. Much as she liked such surroundings, she couldn't avoid the knowledge that it might be her last time to enjoy them. She kept that thought carefully shielded from the other Ranger; it wouldn't help for him to know just how much she dreaded the coming encounter with Thark, or her certainty that it would mean both their deaths.

Medart felt the shield and wondered at it, but decided to remain silent. She must have a reason for concealing whatever it was, he was certain, and although that pattern rapport had made them in some ways closer than any married couple, she did deserve her privacy. If she felt like sharing this later, she would.

He thought of a safe subject. "It almost slipped my mind, Rina. You're entitled to an aide if you want one; what about it?"

Corina turned to him in surprise. "What would I need an aide for?"

"To run errands for you, make appointments, take care of anything you don't want to or can't do yourself."

"I do not think I wish one. You seem to have no such need, and it appears to be a waste of a person who could accomplish more useful things elsewhere."

Medart nodded. "I've never used one for just those reasons. When we run into Sunbeam, then, I'll tell her she can go back to her regular duties."

"That will disappoint her, but she is much too able to be what I gather is no more than a personal servant."

"Right. Well, we don't seem to be finding too much here; let's go on."

The two worked their way through the next several decks with equal lack of result. There were a few screens here and there, but they found nothing approaching the strength of a true shield, and Medart was scowling.

Corina sensed beginning discouragement, and hastened to reassure him. "Jim, we already know that Talent is even rarer among humans than it is among Irschchans. We have encouraged and developed it for millennia, and even to a certain extent bred for it. Humans have not, so I am surprised to have found so many with even as limited a Talent as shields. This ship has a crew of approximately two thousand, does it not?"

"Just about. And no passengers this trip."

"Then assuming even half as many humans—in this picked group; the true number, from Thark's experience, is far less—as Irschchans are at all Talented, an assumption he would not credit, we can expect to find at most ten, in addition to the ones we already have. Fewer would not surprise me."

"And there are how many in the Prime Chapter?"

"Nine. The most dangerous are Thark, who is my problem, then Senior Adepts Valla and Kainor, who I am afraid will be yours and perhaps Colonel Greggson's, if his shield is as strong as I first thought."

"We should have some element of surprise with shields, shouldn't we? From what you said, they won't be expecting even that much."

"True, but even shields will give only a temporary advantage. They will adapt quickly, and they are powerful. You will have to use the few seconds the shields give you to stun or kill them. I will be no help there; Thark will be keeping me fully occupied. And I am sure there will be Sanctioners to deal with, as well as the Seniors."

"Yeah. Well, if we're going to have any chance at all, we'd better find ourselves that assault group. And it could take days, at this rate; this is a damn big ship." He thought for a moment. "You did say you can sense the presence of a shield. Isn't there any way you can use that to speed this up, find them all today?"

"There is one way," Corina admitted, "but I dislike using it. I could find shielded minds, then direct you to a nearby unscreened one to determine location. That, however, involves probing many who lack Talent."

"And I know how you feel about that. But you can't be absolutely sure you've guessed Thark's timing right, can you?"

Corina shook her head. "No, I cannot. You are correct, the necessity for speed is more important than my reluctance. Very well, but go no deeper than you must to determine location."

"Right."

No longer interested in a physical search, the two Rangers found an unoccupied passenger lounge and began the mental one. With Corina's Talent and Medart's knowledge of the ship, it went quickly; they found eleven, besides the known three, with enough shield to be worth further testing. Hobison's, they already knew, was adequate, and Corina was less than enthusiastic about meeting Greggson again, so they decided to check with the young Sandeman first. His shield was strong, she knew from the demonstration, and she knew his pattern from the combat demonstration, which made it a simple matter to touch him, find someone nearby, and let Medart identify his location. "Zero-gee gym," the human Ranger said. "I think you're going to like what you see."

When they reached the mid-level observation platform glassed off from the gym itself, Corina had to agree. Nevan was practicing flight-shooting, clad only in exercise trunks that set off his dark skin. Small and slender he might be, but there was no denying his strength or his grace as he pushed himself off one gym wall, drew his bow in a single smooth motion, and fired as he tumbled through the air.

"Beautiful," Corina said. "I have never seen a human move with such economy or precision. That is a combat bow, is it not?"

"Instead of a practice one? Right—no target sights, and it's a lot heavier. That one pulls close to seventy kilos. I can't even get the string back ten centis, and he makes it look like nothing."

Nevan hit the far wall feet-first. There was the solid sound of him kicking off again, the scream of a hollow pierced-shaft arrow, the thud of it hitting the small remote-controlled target less than a centimeter from the first. That was repeated half a decade times, with what appeared to be effortless ease.

"Does he ever miss?" Corina asked as the Sandeman continued to shoot.

"I've never heard of it happening, and I'm sure it'd be all over the ship in less than an hour if he did." Medart chuckled. "He spends half his free time in combat exercises of one sort or another, after all, not just the minimums for on-duty training. It's not as good as combat, to their way of thinking, but it's better than what we standard humans class as normal entertainment."

The two were silent then, for the couple of minutes it took Nevan to run out of arrows and signal the target controller to end the session. Then he dove for the floor, used a handhold to pull himself erect, and switched off the gravity neutralizer that isolated the gym from the ship's gravity field.

"Okay," Medart said. "That's it; let's get down to the dressing room and wait for him to get into uniform."

"You stressed the need for speed," Corina said as they left the observation platform. "Why do you not speak to him while he changes? I cannot, I know; having a female around would embarrass a human male."

"Or vice versa." Medart grinned. "And Sandemans are even worse than most that way. They don't even like to strip for a medical exam—which they hate in the first place. I'd embarrass him every bit as much as you would. I was worried about wasting days; we can spare a few minutes."

"I do not understand, but I would not wish to offend him. We do want his assistance."

Medart chuckled. "Don't worry, you'll get it. Just look at Gaelan's memories if you think there's any chance of a Sandeman warrior passing up any kind of honorable combat."

Corina did, and found herself amused at her doubt. "I see. But he should still have the opportunity to refuse, with the odds so greatly against the assault team."

It wasn't long before the dressing room door opened and Nevan emerged, his blond hair still damp from the shower. He'd caught a glimpse of the two Rangers watching his practice, so he wasn't really too surprised to find them waiting for him, but he was wondering what they wanted with a young First Lieutenant fresh out of the Academy. He came to perfect Guidebook attention, waited.

"At ease, Lieutenant." Corina purred briefly. This one, she thought, would truly be an asset. "I must ask if you would be willing to volunteer for a particularly hazardous mission, one from which it is entirely possible no survivors will emerge." She went on to explain about his mental defenses and the opposition the assault team would face. She wished she could read his thoughts, but after the first mention of fighting, she had no doubt of his answer; not even Marine discipline could make him hold back a smile, and his eagerness was evident in his steel-gray eyes. "I believe that is everything," she said at last. "The choice is yours, and you may refuse without prejudice."

For Nevan's opinion of this, see [NEVAN](#)

"No, sir. I'm volunteering."

"Excellent. I will call a briefing as soon as I have spoken to all those who have shields of adequate strength, and so are eligible for the assault team. In the meantime you are relieved of normal duty; relax, or do whatever you think best to prepare yourself."

"Yes, sir." Nevan came to attention again, waiting.

You'll have to dismiss him, Medart sent. *He's still Academy-stiff, hasn't relaxed to Fleet standards yet.*

Thank you. "Dismissed, Lieutenant." Corina watched him leave, purring softly in satisfaction that he, at least, was happy. Then her ears went back slightly, and she turned to Medart. "I can no longer put it off. We must speak to Colonel Greggson."

"I'll talk to him if you'd like, since he makes you uncomfortable."

"No, though I thank you for the offer. I have accepted this job, I will do what it requires. I will speak to him."

"Right." Good for her, Medart thought. She'd apparently gotten more from his memories than he'd realized; that sounded like something he'd said once, back in the early days of his own career. Or maybe they were just a lot alike.

Greggson, naturally, was in his office in the Security section. He stood and came to attention as the two Rangers entered, strictly by the book though his expression was cold. "Yes, sirs?"

Corina explained as she had to Nevan, seeing Greggson's expression become thoughtful as he analyzed the problem. It seemed Jim was right, she thought. This man was a professional, would do his job in spite of his personal opinions. And his shield was fractionally tighter than Hobison's or Nevan's, though not up to Jim's partially-trained one. "I believe, Colonel," she finished, "that you would be most useful on the team going after Thark, Valla, and Kainor, although that will mean working directly with me. Are you willing to do so?"

"Yes, sir." Emotion was seeping through, despite his shield, and Corina read two that conflicted strongly. One was a passionate dislike for her as an individual, but the other was more important to the Marine: his duty to the Empire, which she as a Ranger had the right to command.

That fact overrode his personal feelings. He would accompany the assault team not because she asked it, but because of his own conviction that it was part of his job as a Marine. In a flash of insight, Corina realized that Sunbeam had, perhaps without fully realizing it, given her a very accurate capsule description. Greggson's work was truly all he had: the Corps was his entire life, nothing outside had any meaning whatsoever. She found herself pitying him as she and Medart left with his agreement, on the way to speak with the rest of the shielded ones.

The group that finally came together in Briefing Room One shortly after noon to form the assault team was an unlikely one, but the only one that would have any chance at all. In addition to those they'd first spoken to, the Rangers had found a nurse, an engineer's assistant, the ship's junior navigator, and four other Marine officers.

There was noticeable tension in the room when Corina called the briefing to order. They already knew the basic situation; she could go directly to the assault itself. "I will be making assignments based solely on shield strength, as

that is the only factor which will slow the Seniors to any degree. Ranger Medart, Colonel Greggson, and I will attempt to trace and confront Thark and his two chief lieutenants. I would like the rest of you to spread throughout the Palace, to find and eliminate as many of the others as you can. We will remain in touch as necessary by wrist communicators, which will be issued as soon as we are finished here.

"I have ordered a disruptor mounted on the lander we will be using. Lieutenant DarLeras, Ranger Medart tells me you are a pilot; since we do not have such a specialist, I would like you to fill that position as well as the combat one you agreed to earlier. Will that cause you any problem?"

"No, sir. It just means I prep before we leave, rather than during the trip."

Medart sent Corina a mental wince. *Make sure your restraints are tight. He took it easy on the way up because it was your first trip; he wouldn't be concerned about comfort on a combat flight even if he weren't battleprepped. Since he will be, we're going to have a rough ride.*

He is still the only pilot we have, and it will be to our advantage for him to be prepped. He will have to take our limitations into consideration, however.

He will, since that's good tactics, but that doesn't mean he'll be gentle, especially if he has to do any dodging. Go on.

"Unfortunately, Prowler will have to be destroyed to prevent its weapons from being used against us. Since I expect the crew to remain aboard, that means they will be killed. The others, Seniors and Sanctioners, will be in the Palace, and we must expect immediate opposition when we land."

"What kind of armament does Prowler have?" Greggson asked.

"When I was last aboard, approximately a week ago, it had medium-power blasters. I believe its shields are standard for that class."

"Nothing a disruptor can't handle, then. It'd take more than a week to mount heavy weapons."

"He would depend more on speed and secrecy, even so," Corina said. "He wishes to take over; he will cause no more destruction than he must."

"What about personal weapons?" Nevan asked.

"The Seniors will depend on Talent. Sanctioners, however, have only limited Talent, as a rule just telepathy and shields, so they use and are quite familiar with distance weapons. Some have considerable skill, and those are the ones likeliest to be in Thark's group."

Greggson frowned. "No unTalented at all? I'd hoped we could supplement our few shielded people with a trained Security team, at least."

"I do not believe he would take that chance," Corina said. "This is far too important to him; his attack force will include only his best people. A Security team would have little chance against even a Sanctioner's simple telepathy; no action can be taken without at least a fraction of a second's forethought."

"Damn." Greggson's voice was flat. "That's out, then."

"Hold on," Hobison said. "Emperor Chang?"

"Yes, Captain Hobison?"

"Identify Prowler, Irschchan registry, and give crew/passenger capacity."

"Prowler, Irschchan registry One-Alpha. Kanchatka-class courier refitted as a yacht, crew of nine plus pilot. Maximum passenger capacity thirty humans. Further data?"

"Not required." Hobison turned his attention back to the others in the room. "Thirty human passengers, so call it about forty-five Irschchans. And there are twelve of us... not very good odds at all." He paused, frowned. "Worse, if the crew's Talented."

"They are not," Corina said. "They are all Navy veterans; until myself, Talented went into the Order instead as a matter of course. However, since Prowler must be destroyed to prevent the use of its weapons, I do not expect them to be a problem."

"Forty-five effectives, then," Hobison said. "I've faced better odds; looks like things could get interesting."

"We had best plan on forty-six," Corina corrected. "Thark seldom uses his assigned pilot; he prefers to do his own

flying." She laid her ears back. "There will be much death because of his Crusade; I would prefer that we cause as little of it as possible. Set your weapons for a two-hour stun. Under the circumstances, that should be quite sufficient; by the end of that time, either Thark will be defeated, the stunned ones still able to stand trial, or we will all be dead. Are there any questions?"

"I have one," Greggson said. "You can sense shields at a distance, so the Seniors can, too. What's to stop them from killing us with darlas as soon as they sense us?"

"Thark is the only one in the Prime Chapter, to the best of my knowledge, who is able to use darlas effectively without visual contact."

"You did it!" Greggson's tone was accusing.

"I am aware of that," Corina said. "I am surprised I was able to; I made the attempt only because I had more opponents than I had ever faced in training, and had nothing to lose by trying. The others will have to be able to see you before they can attack. If we are fortunate, your shields will all be strong enough to deflect such an attack for the two or three seconds necessary to stun them. And the danger from the Sanctioners, who cannot use darlas at all, is purely physical."

"That's encouraging," Nevan said.

Corina's ears twitched in appreciation of the attempt at humor. "I am glad you think so. Are there other questions?"

When there were none, she dismissed the meeting, and the two Rangers returned to Sherwood Forest to continue Medart's training. Corina began to think she must have an allergy after all, because she sneezed several times as soon as they entered the park, but she refused Medart's suggestion that they find a different location. "This area is most conducive to the proper frame of mind, especially for you. That is worth some minor irritation, and I see our tree is available; shall we take advantage of it?"

When they were seated, Medart came straight to the point. "The first thing, I think, is to find out about what you called reverse darlas."

"As I said, that is not a precise description." Corina's ears went back in frustration. "It is merely the best I can do in Imperial English. Or in Irschchan, for that matter."

"It's all we have to work with, though, so let's try to define it a bit more closely. I can't either practice or avoid something I can't identify."

"That is true enough. Very well, darlas is a form of attack. Its reverse would logically be some form of defense, yet that is not the feeling I get. And it would seem redundant, as well, since your shield is a more than adequate defense, even now, against all but the strongest conventional darlas."

"Let's go all the way to basics, then. An attack is hostility, intent to cause harm. The reverse of that is good will, intent to help. That sound any more promising?"

"Urrr... yes, somewhat, though I have never heard of such an application of Talent."

"Uh-huh, you said that." Medart leaned back against the tree trunk. "What you call Talent we call esper abilities, and if I remember right, one of those was healing. Emperor Chang?"

"Yes, Ranger Medart?"

"Scan records for healing as an aspect of ESP, report on verified incidents."

"Insufficient data to verify any given incident," the ship-comp reported after several seconds. "Most data are religious in origin, rather than scientific. Not subject to positive verification."

"Thank you. No further information required." Medart looked at the smaller Ranger. "Like telepathy was, until day before yesterday. Stories, but none of what Greggson likes to call cast-iron facts."

Corina sneezed again, and Medart frowned. "Sounds to me like you're coming down with something, Rina. Maybe you ought to go see Dr. Sherman—you need to be in top shape when you go against Thark."

"That is true, and it is more than the sneezing; I woke with a slight headache this morning, and I feel as if I have been exercising harder than I should. Your ship is warmer than I truly like, and I have been under some strain; I attributed those symptoms to that. It is possible, however that I am becoming ill." She paused, thinking. "If this aspect of your Talent is connected with health, perhaps you should see what you can discover about my condition before I go to Dr. Sherman."

"That sounds reasonable." Medart closed his eyes to concentrate better on sensing her.

Corina closed hers as well, dropping her shield completely to allow him unrestricted access to her feelings. His mental touch was gentle, even soothing, and she felt aching start to ease. Then there was a touch on her forehead that felt like both his hands, warmer than normal human body temperature, and all her symptoms faded to nothing in perhaps half a minute.

When she opened her eyes, it was to see Medart looking at her with an expression of pleased surprise. "I feel considerably better, Jim, and I thank you. It appears your deduction was correct."

"You're welcome," Medart said, still grinning. "And they said there'd never be a cure for the common cold! You were right too, Rina; the change in environment when you came aboard gave some viruses the chance they needed. You were in the early stages of a nasty respiratory infection."

"An unpleasantness that would have hampered me rather badly."

"That's the understatement of the year! Well, if you agree it won't be too useful, maybe we'd better drop it and get on with the darlas and shield training. I can always go into medicine later, when we aren't pushed for time."

"I must agree. Healing will probably be most valuable, but it is hardly something useful in combat. Fortunately, it is also not a hindrance."

"No, Jim, no! That was painful, too strong." Corina shook her head, half in reproof and half to clear her mind. It was getting late, the training session lasting well beyond what the Order considered reasonable, but both wanted to keep going as long as possible. Still, Corina thought, his control was getting worse rather than better; they should finish up soon, then eat and rest. "That snake image is far too powerful for a stun effect. You must visualize something else. And you must also visualize with more consistency, as the power you exert is directly proportional to the clarity of your image."

"I'm sorry, Rina," Medart apologized. "You were right, though. The technique was easy, but the control damn sure isn't. Do you think I'll ever get the hang of it?"

"Of course you will," she replied. "Remember, it took me four years to reach my present degree of control, but I was being trained by the traditional methods. It took me a quarter of a year to achieve what you have managed in two days, with this compressed training. You should be as pleased with your progress as I am, not discouraged."

"Three months, hmm? Then I guess I don't feel so bad."

"That is good. I only hope we have the four to eight days I estimated, even as quickly as you are learning. By then you should be able to consistently come close to the effect you intend, and can begin working with the volunteers."

"Yeah, me too. I have a lot to learn."

"Do not let it worry you. Despite my studies under Thark himself, I still do not have the control I should. Ideally I should be able to stun someone for a given length of time, plus or minus not more than a minute, regardless of the other's strength or mind pattern. I am not even close to that; plus or minus three minutes is the best I have been able to manage."

"That sounds good to me!"

"It is not bad," Corina agreed, "but it is not what I am supposed to be capable of. That is always the goal, working up to your own potential."

Medart nodded. "I can understand that. What next?"

"Next," Corina said, getting to her feet, "we eat and rest. Those are as important to your progress as the training itself."

X

Corina was awakened by the whooping of a siren, followed by a surprisingly calm voice on the ship's annunciator. "General Quarters— All hands to battle stations. General Quarters—man your battle stations. Rangers Medart and Losinj, Palace assault team, to the hangar bay, please."

Corina scrambled out of bed and into her kilt. "Emperor Chang!"

The ship-comp's voice was unchanged. "Yes, Ranger Losinj?"

"What time is it? What is happening?" The announcement left no doubt, but she wanted details.

"It is 0230, sir. The Prowler requested clearance for Sydney Spaceport, but is on course for the Palace Complex instead. Defsat Five estimates their arrival there in fifteen minutes."

"Blades!" Corina ignored the ship's "I beg your pardon, Ranger?", and sent a hurried thought. *Jim?*

On my way. We'll land about an hour and a quarter behind them. Another hour to orbit, then fifteen minutes to the Palace. Seems he was closer to ready than you guessed.

Let us hope not disastrously so.

Right. Anything you can do from this distance?

I do not think so, at least nothing useful. Once we are aboard the lander, however, I will attempt to read Thark; his shield will have to be down for him to work, and he may be distracted enough not to notice so light a touch.

If it's down, can't you hit him with darlas? You don't need to be in sight of him, from what you said.

I do not need to be in sight of someone without a shield, she returned. *That is all I am sure of. Should I attempt such an attack on Thark, it may have some effect, or it may simply alert him to our approach. I think it would be wiser to do no more than observe, if that is possible, and maintain the element of surprise. You have far more experience than I in such situations, however; I will defer to your judgement.*

I've got more experience in combat, less in Talent. We go with your judgement on this one. See you in a second.

It was a little longer than that, but less than a minute later the two were in a shuttle going to the lander bay. "No armor?" Medart asked.

"I do not know how to use it," Corina said. "But you are not wearing it either, and you must be familiar with its use. Why not?"

"From your demonstration, there'd be no point. Armor can protect against blasters, but not against Talent—and it has a lot of places where a touch of TK would be fatal. If anyone wants to wear it I won't argue, for the psychological help it can give, but I'm not going to burden myself with it."

They were the last to arrive; since their quarters were closest to the center of the ship, they had the furthest to come. When they got to the bay, most of the team was standing near the lander talking in low tones, about half in armor, but Nevan was off to one side, kneeling with upraised arms, chanting softly in a language she didn't recognize. Her Gaelan-memories let her recognize what he was doing, however; he was preparing for battle, inducing the psycho-physical conditioning that made Sandeman warriors the most dangerous fighters in the Empire.

"If I am going to provide information about Thark," she said, "we had best go aboard; it is almost time for him to land. It should be safe for you to link with me, if you wish to relay what is happening to the rest."

"That might not be a bad idea," Medart said.

They entered the lander and Corina strapped herself into a seat—tightly, remembering Medart's caution about Nevan's battleprepped piloting—then she made herself relax, closing her eyes, and reached tentatively for Thark's mind-pattern, ready to pull back at the first hint that he detected her touch.

They were nearing the Sentinel Mountains before Thark began slowing the Prowler. Yes, there it was: the circle of greenery and buildings surrounding the single huge structure that was his goal. The Imperial Palace.

The sight awed him, and he felt an instant of uncertainty. Could those responsible for such a tremendous feat of architecture be as incompetent to rule as he thought? It was too late for such doubts, though. They were through the weather screen, past the main Palace spaceport, and there was no barrier to a closer approach; there was no need to disable the Palace's defense screen. As he had planned, Thark set the Prowler down on the Emperor's private landing pad. Everything had gone smoothly so far, but now there was bound to be opposition.

And that lost no time showing up. The Prowler's touchdown was the signal Palace Guards had been waiting for; humans, Irschchans, and a Traiti, all in Imperial Marine dress blues, ran toward the ship, drawing and firing their sidearms. They were no real threat; handguns couldn't penetrate even a courier's shielding. The heavy disruptor cannon swinging to take aim at the little ship's main hatch was an entirely different matter, though. A small cannon of that type

could do serious damage, and one this size would simply separate ship and contents into their component atoms.

But that was something Thark could handle. He made a quick scan to locate the weapon's operator and any backup, finding to his relief that there was none. A swift thrust of darlas, and the cannon was no longer a threat, its operator dead. It was the first death at Thark's own hands... but it was not the only one for long. The defending Palace Guards began to drop as the Seniors used viewscreen images to pick and focus on their targets. Thark took the ones they couldn't see, the ones hidden by Prowler's hull.

With the first wave of opposition dead, Thark opened the hatch, extended the ramp, and led the Seniors and Sanctioners toward the pad's entrance to the Palace. They were almost there when more opposition arrived, perhaps a dozen Palace Guards—followed seconds later by a man in Ranger green.

There was no time to be neat; the Sanctioners used blasters, the Seniors darlas and soul-blades. Thark's fur was splattered with blood by the time he reached the Ranger. Menshikov's gun was coming to bear on him even as Thark used darlas to attack. A Ranger deserved that much of honor, to die with @'s body unmarked.

But—Menshikov was shielded, impossible as that was! An involuntary shield, though, however good, was no match for Thark's lifetime of training and experience. Menshikov's face twisted in agony, and he collapsed before he could scream.

Thark stared at the crumpled body for several seconds. The man's shield disturbed him more than he cared to admit, even to himself. It should not have existed! Still, he thought, perhaps in the final extremity, a rare human could show a trace of Talent; such things had been known to happen on Irschcha. He would check on it later, perhaps; for now, it made no difference.

Corina's attention returned to the lander, where she found herself and Medart the focus of the entire assault team's intense interest. *What do you expect?* Medart sent grimly. *That's the second Ranger murdered in the Palace in less than two months—maybe others elsewhere, depending on how widespread this Crusade is.*

Probably others elsewhere, Corina replied, equally grim. *He will not be content with one strike, and Rangers are essential targets for anyone who seeks to greatly alter or destroy the Empire. I fear for those who are not in space or otherwise out of the Order's reach.*

Me, too. He continued aloud. "Did he sense you?"

"No. As I thought, he is too intent on his task to notice a touch as light as I am using. Is there no way we can get there faster? If he continues at his present rate, everyone in the Palace may be dead by the time we arrive."

"No, dammit," Hobison said. "Hyperdrive is three lights per hour, period, and we're still most of an hour out."

"Perhaps a few minutes," Nevan said. "If Chang can make a sub-orbital pass, we can save the descent from orbit."

That brought the group's attention to him, and Corina was struck by the change in his bearing. Everything about him was taut, ready: his eyes held an eager gleam, and his smile was nothing like the happy one she'd seen when she offered him this duty; instead it was one of deadly anticipation, and he was seething with controlled violence. It was easy, seeing him this way, to believe stories that had been difficult to accept earlier. "Is that not quite dangerous?"

It was Medart who answered. "For a standard human, it's almost impossible. For a battleprepped warrior, it's not too bad; they did it quite a bit during the Incursion. It'd save probably ten minutes."

"We will do so, then," Corina decided. "Captain Hobison, would you give the necessary orders? And ask whoever is in temporary command to notify Defsat Five when we land, please; I believe we may be too busy to do it."

"Yes, sir." Hobison left, going to the lander's controls.

Corina took another look at Nevan, then sighed—a human mannerism, but one that seemed appropriate. "I suppose I should return to my observations."

"It would help to know what he's up to," Medart said. "First, though, I think you ought to check out Nevan's shield. It seems battleprep makes a difference in Talent strength, too."

Corina's ears went back briefly. "Such things do not normally change, but I will retest him." When she touched the Sandeman's mind, her ears went forward in amazement. His shield, respectably strong before, now had the density and chill feel of spacer-steel armor!

She nodded. "This means a personnel switch. Nevan now has a better chance against Thark than Colonel Greggson does; he will accompany us, and Colonel Greggson will assist with the other attackers."

Neither man raised any objection to the substitution, though Greggson's expression was not pleased. Nevan simply nodded, his eyes a bit brighter.

Thark had entered the Palace by the time she made contact again, and the slaughter was continuing. He, Valla, Kainor, and four Sanctioners were looking for the Emperor; the rest were spreading out to eliminate opposition elsewhere in the Palace.

There were adequate maps of the public areas, none of the private areas like this—but for one of Thark's Talent, that was a minor obstacle. It was a simple matter to extract whatever directions he wanted from the unshielded minds of staff and Guards before killing them. His first goal was the Emperor's working office; when that proved empty, he got directions to His Majesty's apartment on the top floor, and led his team there.

When that also proved to be empty, Thark began to worry. Something was definitely wrong, and it took longer to get around in the Palace than he had expected, even for a building so huge; it took a good five minutes simply to get from the bottom to the top floor or back. Then there was the time to find his objectives, made longer by having to eliminate opposition on the way—this was taking too long!

The assault team on the lander disagreed; anything that delayed Thark worked in their favor. "How long till launch?" someone asked Nevan.

"Eight minutes. Then about three to land."

Corina was aware of her team, so she heard the estimate, but her main attention was still on Thark. He and his people were on their way to the Throne Room, hoping to find the Emperor there with his staff. Others of the Crusade had been along parts of their route; they passed bodies, all marked by blaster fire, and added others, unmarked or knife-killed, of those who tried to block their way. Thark was not proud of the number of beings who had to die. He had to remind himself sternly—and repeatedly—that their sacrifice was necessary for the birth of a new and greater Empire.

The Throne Room, when they reached it, was also empty except for a handful of Guards. Thark grabbed one of them while Valla and Kainor killed the rest.

The man was a typical human, with no trace of screen, so Thark found it simple to probe his mind. And this time he went deep, digging for everything the man knew instead of only for directions. The results were bad, very bad. Thark let the Guard's body fall and broadcast a message to the entire attack group. *No more killing. I need prisoners now, high-ranking ones. Bring any you find to the Throne Room.*

As soon as he received acknowledgements, he called Valla and Kainor to him. "We have a serious problem. The Emperor and Crown Prince have left Terra, an option we did not consider, and this one," he indicated the body, "did not know why or for what destination. All he knew was that they were picked up by a lander from the Empress Lindner day before yesterday. We must find and eliminate them, else the Crusade is doomed."

"If they are aboard a battle cruiser," Valla objected, "how can we destroy them? You know how powerful and well-armed those ships are."

Thark nodded. "True. But our ships are no smaller than Traitit warcraft, and they destroyed several such cruisers without the advantage of Talent to tell them the humans' intentions. It will not be easy, but it can be done."

"It will cost us many lives."

Thark agreed, somberly. "I know. Yet we cannot stop now. We have gone too far to fail."

Movement at the Throne Room's great door attracted his attention. It was Underofficer Jamar and another of his Sanctioners, half carrying and half dragging a bound and bleeding prisoner toward him. Thark purred briefly, pleased. The prisoner was better than he had expected, a Ranger who would surely know the Emperor's location. From the man's condition, it was as well he had ordered the killing to stop when he had, else he might have lost this valuable prisoner.

Aboard the lander, Corina heard swearing—which was interrupted by Nevan's "Launch!" command. A pressor beam sent them out the airlock and through the cruiser's wake, the lander's engines screaming as its pilot fought it through maneuvers it hadn't been designed for. Corina felt a sudden lurch of fear—could he do it?

He's from Clan Leras and he's battleprepped, Medart assured her. *That part I'm not worried about—can you get anything else while we're going in?*

If his maneuvers do not become too violent. Corina re-established contact, to find Thark studying the youngest of the Rangers—she was the newest, but almost four standard years older than he—Ray Kennard. Medium height and build, he was a fair-skinned redhead who might have been handsome but for his injuries. He had clearly resisted till he could fight no more, yet despite his injuries and his obvious weakness—he could barely stand—he seemed to radiate an aura of quiet competence. Thark felt grudging respect. This human wasn't like the tourists and administrators he was all

too familiar with.

"How did you manage to capture him?" Thark asked the Sanctioners.

Jamar answered. "We found him in the Comm Section just as we received your message, Master. We attacked before he could get his weapon out. He fought well, as you can see, but he could not defeat two of us." The Sanctioner hesitated.

"Go on," Thark urged him.

"Master Thark—he is shielded! I could not read his intentions!"

"What!" Not another one, Thark denied to himself. He probed Kennard, only to find the Sanctioner was right. This man was shielded, at least as well as Menshikov had been. Could he, then, have been mistaken about the human lack of Talent?

No. He pushed that thought firmly aside, unable to accept it.

Kennard grinned at him, weak but triumphant. "I am, huh? Then Rina was right—Jim's not a fluke. You've blown it, traitor."

Corina lost contact as the lander lurched, making its firing pass over Prowler, and then made a fast landing. She was out of her seat almost as quickly as Nevan, though he beat her to the door. As soon as all were outside, she said, "Our countdown starts now. Go!"

She was badly disturbed by the bodies littering the landing pad. Even though she had watched him do it, she found it hard to believe the one who had taught her so much could be responsible for this. The Thark she had been so sure she knew would never have been capable of such slaughter!

She followed Medart's sudden movement toward the green-clad body halfway to the Palace entrance. He stopped, knelt to turn it over and close staring eyes, then he looked up at Corina. "Darlas. He never had a chance."

A taut, quiet voice interrupted. "There is a living one we can still help, sir."

Medart looked up into cold-steel eyes. "Right. Let's get to the Throne Room, then."

Hobison and Greggson had already led the rest of the assault group inside; Corina heard the Security Chief curse, then comment, "They'll be easy enough to find, Captain. Just follow the bodies."

"Yeah," Hobison agreed tonelessly. "Split up, then. You, Marshall and Eustazio secure Communications; the rest of us will search-and-silence. Double-check that your weapons are on stun, then go."

As soon as the rest were out of the way, Medart began leading the other two through the Palace's private section. Nevan would have been better at point, but he couldn't know this part of the Palace—

"Down!"

Medart dropped automatically, heard a stun-bolt go by overhead, and saw a gray-kilted Irschchan fall two corridors ahead. "You okay, Rina?"

"I am fine." Corina had also dropped at the warning; now both Rangers stood. She turned to the Sandeman. "How did you do that?"

Nevan gave a tiny shrug. "I heard @, probably. Or saw a flash of kilt, I can't be sure. Since I knew it wasn't one of our people, I fired."

Medart managed a chuckle, despite the circumstances. "They call it combat instinct, Rina—but I'm beginning to think it's an aspect of Talent."

"An aspect that works through a shield," Corina said. "That will have to be explored later—for now, we can only use it. How much further?"

"Not much." Medart began moving again, taking a straight line until he made an abrupt turn that took them into a corridor with several widely-spaced doors. "Our offices—this hall brings us out behind the Throne, but I have to check something. Wait a minute."

He went into one of the offices, emerged seconds later. "The security cameras are getting the whole thing—we've got plenty of evidence. Let's finish this up."

He led them through a door at the end of the corridor. It opened behind draperies; when the three stepped through

those, Corina found they were on the Throne's marble dais, two meters behind the plain, high-backed wooden chair. She moved forward, between it and one of the swirling-silver columns that flanked it.

The scene below her was sickening. Bodies scattered around were bad enough, but there was worse: Thark's calm, merciless beating of the helpless Kennard, while Valla and Kainor looked on in apparent approval. These couldn't be the gentle, affectionate people who had taught her with such patience over the last four years, now bloody and fearsome.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward to the edge of the dais and called, "Thark!"

He turned, startled, and looked up at her. "Corina!" he exclaimed. "What—" Then he noticed the drab green kilt, totally uncharacteristic of her. Now what? he wondered. He strode to meet her as she descended from the dais, drawing his bloody soul-blade as he went.

Corina unsheathed her own blade, the movement attracting Thark's attention to the bit of metal at her belt. A human would have paled in deep shock; Thark's only visible reaction was an agitated twitch of his ears.

"You? A Ranger?" It was too much for him to accept. First humans with shields—blades, with Talent!—and now Losinj a Ranger? "No!"

"It is true, Thark. I am placing you under arrest for treason against the Empire."

Thark started to answer, was interrupted by gunfire. The Sanctioner holding Kennard had let the human fall to go for his blaster; Nevan dropped him, Valla, and three others while Medart shot Kainor and the remaining Sanctioner. His demoralization was completed when the Sandeman said, "Good shooting, Ranger Medart. Do you want that last one, or may I take him?"

"Neither," Medart replied. "He's hers—give me a hand with Kennard."

"Yes, sir." Nevan holstered his blaster, and the two men went to kneel by the fallen Ranger.

Corina stopped in front of her former teacher. "You have seen and felt the truth, Thark. Will you continue to deny it and fight, or will you do as you taught me honor requires?"

Thark gestured at the carnage around them. "All this has been for nothing?"

"I would not say that," Corina said. "Your Crusade is the reason I was able to become a Ranger and to discover and train—or begin training— Ranger Medart's Talent." She gestured to where Nevan was now standing guard while Medart still knelt, his hands on Kennard's forehead and chest. "He is now using an aspect we never developed. This human is a healer, as well as having considerable darlas."

Thark shook his head. "I cannot dispute your word, but it is difficult to accept an idea that seemed impossible even an hour ago. May I have a demonstration of a human Talent I can understand?"

"If he is willing." Corina called to her fellow Ranger. "Jim!"

Medart looked up, anger plain in his face. "What is it?"

"Thark wishes proof of your Talent."

"He'll get it," Medart promised. Then Corina felt a blast of darlas against her own shield. Most of it, she knew, was directed at Thark, but Medart's lack of control let her feel the fringes. The power of that blast was immense, as if the Ranger was releasing years of pent-up energy at once, but it didn't last long; Thark was shaken, not hurt.

"That satisfy you?" Medart demanded.

"It does," Thark replied formally. "Such proof cannot be denied." He turned back to Corina, feeling empty. It had all come to nothing. All those lives wasted, all that blood on his hands—all for his mistakes. "I have committed grave dishonor as well as treason, Ranger. May I be permitted to salvage what I can of my honor before I pay the other penalty?"

Corina sheathed her dagger. This was her old master once again, it seemed. Even in his treason he had acted as he believed honor demanded; despite her fears to the contrary, it was clear he would not—he could not—refuse honor's demands now. "Halt the Crusade, Master. I will do what I can for those who followed you, if they surrender immediately."

Master, Thark thought. She had refused to call him that before, when she had named him traitor. He bowed his head, acknowledging her authority—but there was one thing he still had to find out. "You have taught the use of Talent, Ranger Losinj, which should have increased your own ability. May I test, to find if it has had the effect I believed it would?"

Corina inclined her head. "You may, Master—but my new position demands I take precautions. Lieutenant DarLeras."

"Yes, sir?"

"This is not a combat situation, but should I appear to be weakening, I may need your support. Your shield is powerful enough that you should be able to give it simply by wishing strongly to protect me. Will you?"

"Gladly, sir!"

Corina felt his shield reaching for her, and purred in amusement. "Not now, Lieutenant—only if I cannot protect myself. I believe I know what Master Thark has in mind, and it is important to Irschcha's future that the results not be

distorted."

Thark looked from her to the Sandeman, reached out gently, and touched the strongest shield he had ever felt. "You, too," he said in resignation. "Guard her well, warrior."

Nevan bowed. If Ranger Losinj called him Master and showed him a degree of respect, a junior officer could do no less. "You have a warrior's word on that, High Adept."

"That title is what I am testing." Thark's attention went back to Corina, and he struck with the full power of his darlas.

It hurt, but Corina was able to block any damage and strike back. To her astonishment, her blast penetrated Thark's shield and it was she who had to pull back to prevent injury.

Thark held up both hands. "Enough. You have done even better than I expected, which was to become my successor when I chose to retire. You have become stronger than I, which makes you High Adept by default. And it seems only fitting, now, that a Ranger of the Empire be head of the White Order." He broadcast a thought, seeming relieved at his capitulation. *Cease all resistance and surrender to the nearest Imperial officer. I have been wrong. The Crusade is truly simple treason, and as its leader I command its dissolution. Ranger Corina Losinj is now High Adept of the Order, to be obeyed as such.*

There were astonished objections from those still able, especially the ones not on Terra, but Thark overrode them. *Do as I have commanded. Honor cannot be denied.*

That brought acquiescence, sometimes grudging but real. Medart felt it and touched his throat, activating his comm implant. "Chang, relay to our assault team, then the appropriate parts to Imperial installations elsewhere—and make sure Defsat Five is included. Cease fire, the Order has surrendered. Bring any who are still conscious, and those of the stunned ones you can manage, to the Throne Room. Medart out."

Thark bowed to Corina, feeling only exhaustion and an odd sense of relief. It had been a noble dream, but it was now at an end, and he had only one thing left to do. "I will need a blaster."

Corina nodded. "Lieutenant DarLeras," she called.

Nevan joined her. "Yes, sir?"

"Give Thark your gun."

Nevan wanted to protest, but resisted the urge and handed the weapon over—with a warning. "Try to harm her, Master Thark, and you're the one who'll die."

Thark felt unexpected amusement. "I have committed enough dishonor, young warrior. I will not compound it by harming her. I wish only to destroy this blade, and so regain what I may of the honor I have lost." He held up the bloody dagger that had, so long ago, had his mind-pattern impressed on it.

Nevan bowed. "I meant no disrespect, only to assure her safety."

"As you should, and will." Thark switched the blaster to maximum power, placed his soul-blade on the floor, and fired.

Then he screamed, a long full-throated wowl of absolute, terrifying loss that subsided to broken whimpers as he collapsed beside the smoking metal that had been a blade.

"What—" Nevan exclaimed in astonishment.

"Psychic shock, Lieutenant," Corina said. "He will recover enough to stand trial and serve whatever sentence he is given, but he will never be whole again. He has destroyed an essential part of himself. Take him to the medical unit, please, and see that he is cared for while medteams find and treat the other survivors. Can you find it?"

"Yes, sir." Nevan pried his gun out of Thark's hand and holstered it, then picked the Irschchan up. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Three hours later, the Empress Lindner returned to Terra orbit, and shortly thereafter one of its landers touched down beside Chang's. Medart and Corina were waiting for the passengers in Emperor Davis' working office, as he had asked; they had given him a complete report during his trip back, and had in turn been given reports of what had happened elsewhere in the Empire during the shortest-lived revolt in its history. The next step was His Majesty's decision as to what was to be done about it.

The office showed no sign of the fighting just ended, and cleanup elsewhere was already under way. The Palace morgue was busy, the medical center only a little less so; Hobison was there, in critical condition, along with three less seriously wounded from the assault group. Greggson and one of the other Marines had been killed; the rest of the group was unhurt. Kennard's injuries had been serious, but thanks to Medart's help not fatal, and Senior Physician Zanivar had said he'd be released later that week.

The two stood and came to attention as the Emperor entered, followed by Crown Prince Forrest and a massive, gray-skinned Traiti in Marine service black. "As you were," Davis said, motioning the others to chairs and seating himself at his desk.

He turned to Corina. "You did a good job, Ranger. I didn't expect it to end so quickly."

"Had Thark been less honorable than he was, sir, it would not have."

"I'm aware of that, which is why he'll be sentenced to exile rather than death—though in his condition, I'm not sure which would be worse."

"To him," Corina said slowly, "it no longer matters. His body survives, but very little of Thark himself remains. He can go through the motions of life, that is all—and he has effectively wiped himself from Irschchan memory. His name and story will survive, of course, but it will be without the mind-pattern in his blade to give it substance."

"He can still serve as an example," Davis said. "The fact that he led a rebellion because he was convinced it would be beneficial to everyone doesn't excuse it—but the fact that he called it off and tried to atone when he found he was wrong justifies my giving him what will be seen as clemency by most people. And it'll have at least one side benefit." Davis indicated the Traiti. "Lieutenant Hovan spoke to his Clan Mother at my request, and got her consent. Thark's exile will be on Norvis, guarded and taken care of by Clan Ch'kara. That way he's visibly punished, in a way that demonstrates the Empire's trust in our newest citizens."

"An elegant solution," Corina agreed. She turned to Hovan, gave him a polite seated bow. "I saw the tapes of your rulers' Audience, Lieutenant. I am pleased to meet one who can react so swiftly and correctly."

Hovan returned the bow, his arms crossed over his chest. "You give me too much honor, ka'naya Ranger. When that man shot Ranger Tarlac, I reacted the only way I could, as a newly commissioned officer of the Empire."

"It was well done, nevertheless." Corina returned her attention to Davis. "I assume my next task, then, will be bringing Irschcha's government into conformity with the rest of the Empire?"

"That's right. You're head of the White Order now, so you'd have less trouble than anyone else. I'll give you a signed Confirmation of Suzerainty for whoever you pick as Baron; from now on that's going to be a hereditary position the way it is everywhere else outside Sector Traiti—though if you think it best, I'll add a stipulation that the Baron must have Talent."

"That would indeed be best, sir, at least at first."

"So be it, then. Do you have anyone in mind?"

"Not at the moment. I cannot even consider candidates until I know who is available—in other words, who did not participate in the Crusade. Then I will have to choose one who abstained because of loyalty to the Empire, not because of fear."

Davis nodded. "Do you have any idea how much of the Order will be left for you to choose from?"

Corina's ears went back in a frown. "That is difficult to say, sir, though probably less than a quarter. Those raised in Order schools are almost certain to share Thark's convictions, and therefore to have taken part. I simply hope there are enough to form a new government; I would prefer not to have to bring in unTalented, who would not be accepted because of it."

"As long as you can manage to avoid me having to send in an occupation force, I'll be satisfied. You'll have Jim along, of course; it'll be a year or so before I'll send you out solo, even if he didn't have a convalescent leave to finish."

"I am most grateful for that, Your Majesty. I have much to learn."

"Don't we all." Davis leaned back. "Now—have you been able to find out more about human Talent potential? Especially Rangers'?"

"Very little, I am afraid. I was reluctant to tamper with the shields of any of our assault group to check them further, but I did probe Ranger Kennard while he was being treated, since his shield was weakened by his injuries. He does have good potential, though somewhat less powerful than Jim's. Since Captain Hobison and Lieutenant DarLeras are both Ranger-level and shielded, as well, I would say that hypothesis is correct."

"What about Rick and myself?"

It hadn't occurred to Corina to check the Emperor or Crown Prince; now she did so. "Both shielded, Your Majesty."

"Good. Next time you're on Terra, you can train us; in the meantime you can work with Jim, and I'll send the others to you for training as I can spare them from other duties. We'll worry about lower-ranking ones with Talent later."

"Sir," Medart said.

"Yes, Jim?"

"What do you have planned for the rest of our assault group?"

Davis smiled. "I think you can guess, for a mission that valuable to the Empire that they didn't expect to come back from. Since they're military and risking their lives for the Empire is technically part of their jobs, I can't quite justify Life Nobilities—but I can damn sure give them Sovereign's Medals and merit promotions, plus choice of next assignment."

"That sounds good, except for Hobison," Medart said. "He's already refused promotion half a dozen times to keep command of the Chang."

"Considering his total career, that's one Life Nobility I can justify," Davis said. "And I think he will take promotion if it doesn't mean losing his ship."

"I think so too, sir," Medart grinned. "I like it—that'll make him the only ship captain whose position title is lower than his Navy rank."

Davis chuckled, then sobered. "That's it, then. I'll see you all at the Tribunal, gentles—in the meantime, we all have work to do." He stood.

The others rose and bowed, then left. Corina waited until she and Medart were on an elevator to the Rangers' apartment floor, then she said, "It is strange, Jim. I was afraid to take this job, and I am still not positive that I should have been offered it—but I find myself enjoying even the danger and the responsibility."

"Which," Medart said with a grin, "should prove to you that you are right for the job. It's one challenge after another, and you'll eventually run into one you won't get back out of—but in the meantime you can be damn sure you won't be bored."

AFTERWORD

(A basic overview of the general situation and what happens to the main characters between this story and the next one [either already written, or just planned] that they appear in.)

Although the White Order rebellion was the shortest in Imperial history, its active phase lasting only slightly over an hour, it was the most disruptive. Its purpose was to replace the nobility and key military/administrative personnel; the Order members who were to be those replacements, after killing their predecessors, were in place and ready to strike days or weeks before Thark set the time. In spite of Ranger Losinj's warning, many succeeded, either because their targets did not believe the seriousness of the threat, or because Talent was able to overcome the precautions that were taken.

When all the reports were in, Imperial losses were staggering. Three Rangers were dead, one seriously injured, and over a third of the ruling nobles, some with their heirs, had been killed—along with approximately a quarter of the top-ranking planet-based military and Admin Service officers.

Once the full extent of the disaster was assessed, Rangers Medart and Losinj were reassigned, to separate missions. Because of Losinj's familiarity, however brief, with Chang's crew, Medart decided to change ships rather than having her do so; he chose the Empress Lindner, formerly Ranger Tarlac's ship. Rangers Fenn and Scolacz were recalled from Sector Traiti, which was unaffected by the rebellion because the White Order had not had time since the War to infiltrate. Rangers Kennard and Forrest were also sent out on missions to help the recovery; only Ranger Wang was kept on her original mission, but with another sector added to her responsibilities.

In a brief meeting before Medart and Losinj left for Irschcha, Nevan asked Medart's [advice](#) on how best to prepare himself should Ranger Losinj accept his personal fealty once he felt he had enough experience to be a suitable thakur-

na. He acted on that advice, though it proved extremely difficult at times, and succeeded in a number of dangerous missions; one of those earned him a second Sovereign's Medal, and was followed within months by his second mission with Medart.

ADVICE

"Captain Nevan DarLeras to see Ranger Medart."

"He's expecting you, sir." The Palace Guard opened the door to Medart's office and stood aside to let the Sandeman pass.

Medart rose to greet his visitor, then gestured him to a chair and sat back down as Nevan took the seat. "Your note said you'd like to see me about a personal matter, to be discussed under warrior privacy. What's the problem?"

"It's not exactly a problem, sir, and I'm not quite sure how to approach it, even with a battle-companion. You're familiar with our custom of personal fealty."

That was a statement, not a question, but Medart nodded. "Very familiar; I'm also battle-companion to Lord Klaes' 'na, Gaelan-Frederick DarShona. Who are you planning on offering fealty to?" As if he couldn't guess, he thought.

Nevan was relieved at the Ranger's calm response. "I would like to serve Ranger Losinj, but she doesn't need an inexperienced young officer, even a warrior. Since I've been given my choice of assignments, I was hoping you'd help me pick one that will give me the kind of experience she's likely to need. I'll just have to hope she doesn't accept another 'na before I'm able to give her the kind of service she needs."

Medart studied the young Sandeman for several moments. "I can do that," he said at last. "But it's a type of work I think you'd find distasteful, given your honesty, and given some of your cultural conditioning, you could find the training for it intolerable. Your psych profile, though, says you're adaptable enough that you could accept both, given adequate motivation."

Nevan frowned. "I'm afraid I don't understand, sir. I don't know of any Imperial job I would find distasteful, much less intolerable."

Medart chuckled. "Sure you do—it's covered at the Academy, though not in great depth; the fact that you don't even like to think about it proves my point. But if you can manage the training, I think you'd make an outstanding field agent."

"Field agent!" Nevan couldn't help it; he grimaced in revulsion. "Those are—" he hesitated, then decided even one of High War Speech's worst insults wasn't too strong—"nekulturniy."

Medart grew serious. "Not at all, though I was sure you'd react that way. Nevan, field agents have as much integrity as anyone else in Imperial service, and they're necessary. Some investigations are impossible to carry out openly—trying to find the Melgarie pirates' base is a case in point. The only way it'll be found and destroyed, other than by sheer accident, is by infiltration. If it could be done openly, it's big enough it'd be a Ranger's job; since it can't, field agents go in. To succeed, an agent will have to convince the pirates @'s a criminal—probably have to take part in some crimes for that purpose—to be allowed onto the base at all. Then @'ll have to convince them @'s trustworthy enough to be allowed access to the base's defenses to determine their strength, and to communication facilities to call in a strong enough Navy force to take the base out... preferably coming out alive @self."

Medart paused. He wished he could read the Sandeman's mind, but Nevan's shield was definitely up. Still, revulsion seemed to have subsided to dislike, so he continued. "That's lying, probably theft, maybe murder. But it's the only way we know to eliminate what's become a major threat to inter-sector commerce, and is rapidly becoming worse. Let me see if I can put it another way. Field agents are people we can trust to act against the Empire's short-term interests when, and only when, that's necessary to protect its long-term ones. It's always a dangerous job, usually a nasty one, and the agents know very well that most people share your opinion of them. The only reason they put up with all that is because they know how necessary it is."

"I... never thought of it that way," Nevan said slowly. Sandeman custom said that any sort of deliberate falsehood or deception was wrong, a grave dishonor, and he believed that implicitly—but it sounded like Ranger Medart was telling him that in some cases it was not only honorable, it was praiseworthy! That was a difficult concept to absorb—yet a Ranger was as scrupulously honest as a warrior, unless the Empire's very existence depended on one being otherwise, and Nevan couldn't imagine a warrior's becoming a field agent was anywhere near that important.

Another strong consideration was just which Ranger was giving him that information and advice. James Medart

played a prominent role in Sandeman history, one of the few standard humans they accepted as being on a par with their warrior caste, and the one person they credited with making their entry into the Empire on an honorable basis possible; his words were to be given more than ordinary value.

After several moments' silence, Nevan nodded. "Since you name it both honorable and the best way to prepare for the service I hope to give Ranger Losinj, I will do my best to become such an agent." He paused, went on less formally. "If what you just told me—about field agents having a position of special trust—was known in Subsector Sandeman, any whose identity we knew would be honored, not scorned."

"And that's something I hadn't thought of," Medart said. "If you're willing to waive warrior privacy on that part of our discussion, I'll be happy to pass it along to your clan-chief, the Vader, and the Miklos."

"It is waived, but only on that part."

"Understood, warrior." Medart strongly hoped Nevan would make it through agent's training; outside of the unfortunate but inevitable warrior's tendency to consider combat a preferred option rather than a last resort, he had all the qualifications of a Ranger. Whether Rina accepted his offer of fealty or not, the Empire would have something it'd never managed before: a Ranger-class field agent. That would frighten some people if they ever found out about it, Medart thought, but he found it reassuring—especially since the prospective agent was a Sandeman warrior. "Would you like me to brief you on the training?"

Nevan thought for a moment, then shook his head. "I'd rather go in without preconceptions, since you say I'm likely to find parts... not intolerable, since I intend to tolerate them, but extremely difficult. The fewer details I know, the fewer contingency plans I'll automatically put together."

"That sounds reasonable," Medart agreed. Especially since a warrior's contingency plans tended to be violent... "Do you have any idea when you plan to offer fealty?"

"I was thinking of about five years," Nevan said. "I do want as much experience as I can get, and that's not a lot—but her people are allergic to the anti-agathics, so I don't dare wait too long."

"True. I'd say that was a reasonable compromise." Rina was a year younger than Nevan, but he was on anti-agathics and she couldn't tolerate them; if he didn't get himself killed on the way, he'd probably outlive her by close to two centuries. "Is there anything else?"

"No, sir." Nevan stood, bowed. "I thank you for your counsel, Ranger Medart. Gods permitting, I intend to follow it."

Medart rose and returned the bow. "May they grant you success in both your training and your offer."

Until next time...

[Preparer's note: This is the end of the main story. The material following this note is the supplementary material linked to from elsewhere in this file.]

SELECT

It was the end of Test Week at the Academy, almost time for the results to be posted outside the cadet-candidates' dining hall, and all of them were there waiting. The results determined the incoming cadets' initial standings, so James Medart was as eager—and as apprehensive—about them as any of the others.

Promptly at 1300, the display board lit, and Medart skimmed the list for the M's. He was confident he'd made it through the grueling tests—though even at this point, about a quarter didn't—and he was hoping for a good ranking. In the planet-wide testing, he'd rated #1. That was good enough to get him to the main Academy at the Palace Complex but everyone here had scored high on their home worlds; he wouldn't be too disappointed, he told himself, as long as he made the top quarter.

When he found his name, though, it was all he could do to hold back a whoop of delight. He'd made #1 again, even in this picked group! It was Cadet Medart now, no longer Cadet-Candidate, #1 of the Class of 2516! At least, he

cautioned himself, until regular academic rankings started coming out. Then he'd be working hard to keep his rating, with the rest working equally hard to take it over—but for today, coming through Test Week on top was plenty of grounds for satisfaction.

The new cadets spent some time congratulating each other and commiserating with those who'd be going to branch Academies instead, then the group broke up to pack. This afternoon was theoretically free time, but the new cadets were anxious to move to the Academy proper, the others to leave the scene of their disappointment, so within half an hour Medart was back in his room.

He packed automatically, his mind busy. He was relieved to have Test Week behind him, still excited by his ranking, and trying for what felt like the millionth time to decide on his third major when there was a knock on the door. He called, "Come in," expecting to see one of his classmates or an upperclassman, when he finished closing his carryall and turned around.

The woman standing in front of the again-closed door was neither, and Medart couldn't help staring at her in shock. Outside the Palace Complex no ordinary Imperial citizen, and very few nobles or officers, could reasonably expect to see one of these people in the flesh. He tried to regain control, but when the woman said, "Cadet Medart?" all he could manage was a nod.

The woman smiled. "I'm sorry for the shock, Cadet. I'm Ranger Arlene Perry. Do you have a few minutes to spare?"

This time Medart managed to find his voice, though it was a little shaky. "Yes, sir, of course." Dear gods, he thought numbly, an Imperial Ranger. There were only ten in the entire Terran Empire, and one had come looking for him. That was astonishing in itself—and if cadet rumor was right about the reason for such a visit, it was also intimidating.

To his surprise, Perry chuckled. That wasn't the sort of thing he'd expected from one of His Majesty's personal representatives—it was too ordinary. So was her grin when she said, "I gather from your reaction that you've heard the rumors about a post-Test Week visit from one of us."

Medart nodded. From Perry's tone and expression, she was trying to give him time to adjust, but he wasn't sure that would help.

"The rumor's absolutely true," Perry said. "What do you think?"

His first impulse was to say she must be either joking or crazy, but he knew better, and that kept him from answering right away. Of course he'd had the usual daydreams of himself in the forest green uniform and platinum badge, but he'd never seriously thought of himself as one of this premier elite. He didn't feel qualified, and the idea of taking on a Ranger's tremendous responsibilities terrified him. The authority and prerogatives were tempting—dear gods, who wouldn't want to be Imperial royalty, with unlimited money and power?—but it was the responsibilities that were his primary concern. A military officer's mistake could endanger a ship, maybe a fleet at the worst; a Ranger's mistake could endanger anything from a world or system all the way to the Empire itself. That was easily intimidating enough for him to want to turn Perry down flat. It wasn't at all the sort of thing he cared to have on his conscience.

After several minutes, he shook his head. "That's very flattering, sir, but you have the wrong person. I don't think I have what it takes to handle that kind of power."

Perry chuckled. "The classic answer. Jim, all your test results were fed into the Empire Net and analyzed. The comps saw you had the kind of profile we're interested in, so the Net kicked your records up to the closest Ranger, who happened to be me. I agreed, so I brought them to His Majesty's attention. He agreed, so I'm here. Care to argue that combination?"

Medart took a deep breath. "With all due respect, sir, I don't have any choice, since I can't agree. I think I know myself pretty well; I'd make a good Navy officer, maybe even captain of a battle cruiser—but not a Ranger."

Perry sat down on Medart's bed, next to the carryall. "Good. Believe it or not, Jim, that's exactly the response we were hoping for. If you did want the job, thought right away you could handle it, you'd be an arrogant fool—and you'd have disqualified yourself, even this late. I know it's hard to understand that feeling unqualified is part of what makes you qualified, but history proves that in most cases, people who want power are the last ones who should have it. There are a few exceptions, of course, but we're talking about the vast majority.

"What we want are people who have the necessary ability and a reasonable amount of ambition, but who aren't interested in power for the sake of power itself. It's a delicate balance, and we may miss some who qualify because we prefer to take no chances on power-hunger—but you can be positive that if you are tapped, you do qualify."

Medart hesitated, then nodded reluctantly. He knew as well as anyone that the Empire was chronically short of Rangers. There were never enough, even when there were more than the average of ten. It was also common knowledge that however few there were, the selection criteria—whatever those were—were never lowered. They might be, and

had been, raised; the opposite, never. So however unqualified he felt, he could be positive, as she said, that he was in fact fully qualified.

And he'd applied for the Academy because, as far back as he could remember, his goal in life had been to serve the Empire to the best of his ability. Until Perry had entered his life, he'd thought that meant the military, like the rest of his family. Now he was told there was a far more essential service the Empire wanted of him. That, he thought, had to take precedence over his fear of the responsibility—and they must have known he'd feel that way.

"In that case, sir—it scares me more than I want to admit, but if you and His Majesty want me for the job, I have to try." He hesitated, then said, "Which you probably knew, from my psych tests, before I did."

Perry's smile was relieved. "We hoped, and we thought the odds were good—but we didn't know. Good as the indicators are, we do have some refusals. Welcome to Imperial service, Ranger Medart."

Ranger Medart. The idea still scared him, but he had to admit he did like the way it sounded. "Thank you... uh, what do I call you now?"

"Arlene in private, Ranger Perry in public. And His Majesty is 'sir' to you now, not 'sire'." She grinned. "I think civvies would be more appropriate than probationary-cadet clothing, and I have a sidearm for you outside the door. His Majesty will give you your badge when we get to the Palace. Okay?"

"Uh, yes, of course. Isn't there some sort of oath or something?"

"You don't need it. There'll be a confirmation ceremony after your initial leave, emergencies permitting—but the fealty oath you'll take there is for the public, not for yourself."

Medart was a little disappointed that Perry's uniform was hidden by a cloak when he got changed and left his room, and that the trip to the Palace was in an unmarked car, but she explained that was simply to give him enough private time to notify his family of his selection personally before His Majesty made the official announcement. "Take advantage of privacy whenever you get the chance," she advised. "You won't get it often, especially at first—and you'll want to make arrangements for SecuDiv to protect your family from the more persistent newsies, at least until the novelty of your selection wears off."

"I hadn't thought about newsies," Medart admitted. "In fact, there's probably a lot I'm not thinking of right now."

"Very probably—and that's another reason for initial leave. Adaptable as we have to be, it's quite a shock going from cadet-candidate to Ranger; it'll take you a couple of days to get back to normal. So the routine is to meet the Sovereign, then go home until you're satisfied your family is taken care of and you're ready to face the media. Then you spend a year or two in OJT with another Ranger—me, in this case— and then you pick your ship and start your solo missions."

A year or two didn't sound like much, considering the variety of situations a Ranger got involved in, but Medart nodded. "I understand. And I'll have to do things like get a comm implant—take care of all that sort of detail before I go on duty officially."

"That's best," Perry agreed, "though if we were rushed, or you thought it best to go public right away, those could be handled later. If you want a comm implant, though, I can arrange for that as soon as your audience is over."

"I don't exactly want one, but I thought they were required."

Perry chuckled. "His Majesty leaves that up to us. The only surgery we're required to undergo is what's medically necessary. I think an implant is a good idea, and I'd strongly recommend it, but no, it's not required. There are a couple of us who chose not to have them."

"I think I'll take your recommendation," Medart said. "Though it may not be too much use outside the System, since I can't carry an ultrawave unit around with me."

"True, but it'll still provide you a direct link to your ship, or to any planetary comp or military base you're within radio range of, and if necessary you can link to the Empire Net through one of those— though it's usually easier, if you have to contact it, to just use the normal communicators. Want me to set up the implant for you?"

"Please."

They arrived at the Palace's private entrance not long after Perry finished making the arrangements, and she escorted Medart to Emperor Yasunon's working office, down a wide corridor to a door that was decorated with the Imperial Seal and flanked by two Palace Guard officers who came to attention as they approached. "Rangers Perry and Medart to see His Majesty," she told them.

"He's expecting you, sirs." The senior opened the door, and Perry, grinning, gestured Medart through first.

He had seen the Emperor's picture any number of times, on everything from holo-news to currency, so the chubby, balding man was no surprise—but His Majesty's obvious enthusiasm was. The Emperor came around his desk and grasped both of Medart's hands, smiling widely. "Ranger James Medart! You're the best thing that's happened to me in years."

"I'm flattered to hear that, Your Majesty." Almost as flattered as he was stunned by the unexpected greeting.

Yasunon released his hands and reached into a compartment on his belt—he was wearing a Ranger's uniform, with the Imperial Seal—and pinned the star-in-circle badge to Medart's tunic, then repeated Perry's greeting. "Welcome to Imperial service, Ranger Medart."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Medart felt a surge of deep emotions he couldn't identify, except for the determination to do everything in his power to justify their faith in him. He still had doubts of his ability to do that, but the badge's weight on his chest left him with no doubts that he'd try. "As soon as I make the arrangements for my family that Ranger Perry suggested, I'd like to start work."

"Since you're from Terra, that shouldn't be too long," Yasunon said. "I should start preparations for your confirmation, since there don't seem to be any situations nearing the critical point; how long would you like?"

"A week should be more than enough," Medart said, after a moment's thought. "I'll need a ride to the airport near my home, then I'll have to borrow a car to get the rest of the way."

"No problem," the Emperor said, a smile starting to grow. "The arrangements have already been made; a lander's waiting to take you to the airport, and a Texas Ranger car will be waiting for you there."

Medart was surprised for a second, then he chuckled. "I like Your Majesty's sense of humor."

"What can you expect when Emperor Chang set it up this way?" Yasunon was smiling widely. "It's one of the requirements."

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TALENT

She was eighteen Standard, not quite fifteen Irschchan years old, basking in the sun beside a fountain as she considered the merits of various young males as mate potential. She wasn't really interested in being tied down that way, and hoped to avoid it by going to the Academy, but on such a nice day, why not indulge her parents' more conventional desires?

Loren of the Order was probably the best match genetically, and socially of course a mate in the Order was desirable. Still, though he was nice enough, he simply wasn't very bright. Lovad Koversa might be all right; he was quite intelligent, if no more Talented than she—

Suddenly she heard him talking to himself about the Academy, though she hadn't heard him approach. "Lovad?" she called, sitting up and looking around. As soon as she did that, the voice disappeared. He was nowhere in sight, and she wondered with some irritation what kind of stunt he was up to now.

That was Lovad's worst point: he was a joker, and liked to use his knowledge of electronics to play tricks. It was never anything harmful, though, just annoying. She got up, deciding to see if she could turn it against him. None of the trees near the fountain had trunks large enough to hide behind, so she wandered around, looking up through the silvery-green foliage to find him. No trace; he must have come up with a long-distance gadget and was trying it out on her.

She'd get back at him somehow, but meanwhile this day was too nice to waste worrying about him. She returned to the fountain and stretched out again, relaxing to the sound of the falling water. She thought idly of her mother, who owned a moderately prosperous kilt shop. An indignant Mother: *Trade vegetables for kilts indeed! This is no back-country village—*

She sat up again suddenly, and again the voice disappeared as she tensed. This couldn't be one of Lovad's jokes, not with her mother involved. It had to be telepathy... and that meant she did have Talent... and that meant...

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NEVAN

As she explained, Nevan could feel himself beginning to smile. She was offering him a chance at real combat, at what he had trained for since his fifth birthday, and she thought he might refuse? He'd missed the war by less than two weeks, a disappointment made worse by his assignment to SecuDiv rather than the Combat Division. Now he would get to fight!

And he would be doing so beside one who had proven herself a warrior's equal, though her combat skills were of a different type. To his surprise, he found himself imagining as a real possibility something he'd thought of before only as a remote theoretical chance. It wasn't because of the demonstration, though the way she had defeated them had a bearing, and it wasn't because she'd become a Ranger. He couldn't pinpoint the reason; there was just something about this beautiful felinoid that convinced him she was worthy of the greatest service and gift a Sandeman warrior could offer.

The strength of that conviction would have made it easy for him to kneel to her and offer his personal fealty, but he wasn't sure he was the one who should do it. He was young and inexperienced, barely seven months out of the Academy; her thakur-na should be a veteran, with at least a few missions to his credit. Later, he might be qualified—but by then she might have another thakur-na. He could only wait, work, and hope.

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[Preparer's note: the RENDAVI material is placed here because it does not seem to be referenced from elsewhere in this file.]

REDAVI

Thark landed the Prowler at the rendezvous on Rendavi slightly over eighteen hours after leaving Irschcha. He was well rested and in a cheerful mood as he, Kainor, and Valla left the ship for the improvised conference hall.

No other ships were there yet. Unfortunate, Thark thought. That meant the meeting—more accurately, war council—would be delayed, possibly for several hours.

Inside the hall, the trio from the Prowler seated themselves on cushions at the head of the low conference table, talking about nothing in particular while they waited for the rest of the Seniors and Crusade leaders to gather.

Those were trickling in slowly when, a little over five hours after Prowler's arrival, an orange-kilted messenger appeared at the door and tried to attract Thark's attention. He waved her to his side, listened attentively to the message she murmured in his ear, then dismissed her.

The last group of Seniors arrived and seated themselves. Thark went through the brief formalities of convening the Prime Chapter, then said, "It is my unpleasant duty to report to you that this Crusade has been betrayed by a young pre-initiate who discovered its existence by accident, from me."

A ripple of disturbance moved through the assembled Irschchans. Most of what Thark could pick out were expressions of disbelief that anyone with Talent could do such a monstrous thing.

Valla's clear voice penetrated the disturbance, silencing the Seniors. "So Losinj escaped both the Sanctioners and

Entos."

There were more expressions of disbelief, stronger this time. Thark silenced them. "According to the message I just received, it is not only possible, it has happened, and worse. She made it past both, and into the Planetary Palace. Ranger Medart, who was unfortunately on Irschcha at the time, arrived two hours later. His lander, presumably with him and young Losinj aboard, left for his orbiting battle cruiser soon afterward."

He turned to his chief aide. "Valla—I am sorry to be the one to tell you this, but Medart also sentenced Entos to death for attempted murder on Imperial territory. The sentence has been carried out."

Valla growled with an intensity that should not have surprised him but did. "Entos was my best operative, and a friend. I claim Ranger James Medart as my personal prey."

"Granted," Thark agreed promptly. "But now to planning. With Losinj aboard Medart's ship, it is possible, even probable, that she will be helping him. Even if such is not the case, we must assume it is, and that means our first strike must be decisive. Valla, does this affect your plans for our assault on the Imperial Palace?"

"Possibly," his aide replied. "If Losinj is helping Medart, and they reach Terra in time, our assault team will be faced by a fairly strong Talent. She may be able to incapacitate one or more, and we need all our strength. Although there are enough Seniors to defeat her, she may introduce complications."

"Since she was my student, and it was my error which caused her to become a problem, she is my responsibility." Thark's ears went back briefly. He had seriously misjudged her; he could not honorably ask anyone else to correct his error, now that she was no longer his guest. But making that correction would not be a pleasant task.

He went on. "Kainor, what about your status report on the Rangers?"

"Crown Prince Forrest is at the Imperial Palace on Terra," Kainor said. "So are Kennard and Menshikov; all three are covered in Valla's assault plan. Fenn and Szolacz are in the new Traiti Sector, assisting in its integration; they must be disregarded for the present, since we have no Order members there. Ellman and Steinhauer are still in hospital, and my agents are in position to kill them as soon as the strike time is set. Wang has just been sent to Sector Twelve to take over its administration, since its Duke died with no heir; being aboard a battle cruiser, she is presently out of reach and will have to be dealt with later. Tarlac, of course, is already dead; we have all seen the tapes of his assassination. Medart is the only one in a position where he might be an immediate danger. If Losinj got this location when she probed you, Thark—"

"She did not," Thark assured him. "She did no real probing, in fact. She was far too upset by her simple discovery of the Crusade's existence to check any more deeply."

Kainor nodded. "Good. Despite that, our first strike will not only have to be decisive, it will have to be swift. The fact that a powerful Imperial officer has become aware of the Crusade means their forces will be mobilizing. We must act before they can be fully alerted and deployed. Even led by Rangers, that will take them a certain amount of time which we can put to good use."

Thark agreed. "Speed is certainly essential. I will adjourn this meeting shortly; I want the various operational group leaders to meet separately and determine exactly how soon you can be ready to move. Report to me as soon as you can. The Seniors will remain here with me. Are there any questions?"

"The Traiti, Master," a graying female said. "They have pledged loyalty to the Empire. What threat do they pose?"

"Little as yet," Thark replied. "Their casualties in the war were far heavier than the Empire's, and their military has barely begun the changeover to Imperial service; for the moment they are too disorganized to pose a true threat. Is there anything else?"

There was nothing. "One final detail before we adjourn," Thark said. "We will be operating on Palace Standard Time from this point on, so adjust your chronos accordingly. This meeting is adjourned until 1600 hours, that time."

By 1600, when the full council reconvened, Thark and the Seniors had received reports from all the operational groups and had finalized their plans. Thark rose and addressed the group.

"This is the most important turning point in both human and Irschchan history," he told them, trying to project his solemnity. "What we are planning here, what we will soon accomplish, will determine the course of civilization for centuries to come. We dare not fail, for if we do, the galaxy will continue under human rule, their lack of Talent causing them to stumble from crisis to crisis, a whisker's width from disaster and complete chaos at any moment. Worse, they will drag us along with them. It is symptomatic that except for Irschcha itself, our people have no voice in Imperial government.

"I am the highest Irschchan official, its Baron in their terms—the lowest of the Imperial nobility. All other nobles

outside the Traiti Sector are human. There has never been an Irschchan Ranger, so we cannot hope for an Irschchan Sovereign unless we succeed."

He paused and scanned the group lightly, sensing their approval of his words. "If we succeed, however—when we succeed—we will bring the Empire the same peace and stability the White Order has brought Irschcha since its triumph. The humans may find it difficult to accept at first—they seem to actually enjoy disorder—but they will soon come to realize the superiority of rule by the Talented. The change may in fact be difficult for our own people as well, but in the long range, things will be better for all three races."

He paused again, then spoke in a more matter-of-fact tone. "These are the final plans. The last operational group can be in position by 0145 two days from now. Allowing an hour for the inevitable delays, I am setting the strike for 0245. It is vitally important that no warnings be given. Since Losinj got no details of the Crusade from me, any alert that Medart puts out will have to be a general one. Losinj may be able to make some guesses, since she does know me, but the Empire will not dare depend on those. Except for the Palace itself, then, our objectives should be no more heavily defended than any others unless we ourselves attract attention to them in some way.

"The Seniors and I, together with thirty-six Sanctioners, will take Prowler to Terra, leaving here in time to attack the Palace in coordination with the rest of you, at 0245. I wish the assault force could be larger, but anything more would certainly be stopped by the primary defense satellites. Therefore, we must use the strongest Talents available, and those Sanctioners who are most proficient with weapons, to compensate for the greater number of Palace Guards."

An elderly Irschchan in a dark blue plaid kilt rose. "Will that be sufficient if Losinj is there and opposes you?"

"Yes," Thark replied without hesitation. "Admittedly she is strong, but she is only one person; she will, at worst, slow me somewhat."

He returned to the original subject. "Once we eliminate the Emperor and any Rangers there, we should have no major problems. We will have enough telepaths on hand to screen any humans in positions to cause trouble, and any of those who plan to do so we will kill. Afterward, we can replace the nobility with our own initiates, on the basis of strength of Talent. That is far more logical, and will insure far more stability, than the hereditary system now in use."

"One more question, if I may, Master?" That came from a young male in scarlet.

"Go ahead," Thark said. "We have time."

"I have heard rumors that some humans have developed Talent."

Thark projected amusement, was joined by several others. "It has been rumored indeed," he said. "Stories from long ago, before the Empire, do hint at some, but the strongest of those legendary humans would be about equivalent to a first-year student. There are not even rumors from more recent times."

"With respect, Master, what of the Narvonese Dragon-Kindred and their ability to project emotion?"

"An intriguing novelty," Thark acknowledged, "but hardly either Talent or useful, except in a very limited sense."

"Still, if there are any—"

"We can worry about hypothetical situations later," Thark said in mild reproof. He didn't blame the youngster for asking, but facts were facts: humans just were not Talented!

"Enough discussion," he said finally. "You all have your assignments and you know the schedule." He briefly considered dismissing them with the final lines of an old battle chant, but decided against it. It translated poorly, and few of the younger ones here used anything but Imperial English. He settled for, "Go, and fight well."

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