

The Cartel

The Apprentice Volume 1

A Twelve Systems Chronicle

E G Manetti

The Twelve Systems Chronicles

The Cartel - The Apprentice Volume 1

Bright Star - The Apprentice Volume 2

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Transgressions - The Apprentice Volume 3

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Dedication

For Carolyn,
'Thank you' does not begin to cover it.

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Prologue

I am the sum of my ancestors. The trowel slices the moist soil. *I am the foundation of my family.* Lilian rips the weeds from the loosened soil. *Honor is my blade and shield.* The trowel slashes, the weeds are decimated. Again and again, Lilian tears into the soil, clearing space for her plantings. Above her, the walls of the garden rise on three sides. On the north side, the house rises four storeys to complete the enclosure.

The ancient house has stood for five centuries. It is in desperate need of repairs that have been too long postponed. It does not matter. It only needs to stand for three more years. Three years. *Honor endures.*

"Lilian, what do you?" The familiar voice pulls Lilian from her violent assault on the weeds that have run rampant in the herb garden.

Dean Joseph, Lilian's mentor, considers the dirty, sweaty young woman with a combination of affection and concern. "You have cleared twice the space you will be able to cultivate."

Sitting back on her heels, Lilian turns her face to her mentor. "Once I enter the Cartel, I will not own my bells. I must clear this sufficiently that the weeds will not encroach."

Joseph offers Lilian his hand up as he asks, "Have you questions?"

Taking the hand, Lilian rises as she ponders her response. She has endless questions. She voices her concern, "Will he hurt me?"

As Lilian finds her feet in the herb garden, Dean Joseph replies, "Hurt you Lilian? Adhere to the strictures and Monsignor Lucius will have no cause to correct you."

Corporal punishment is the least of Joseph's fears for the lovely twenty-four year old. It is a common enough practice and, public opinion notwithstanding, Lilian is not a coward.

Shaking her head, Lilian finds she cannot voice the source of her fear. Something in her face or stance enlightens her mentor. "As to that, it will be different from what you have known. You must not expect monsignor to be considerate of your pleasure. I cannot imagine he will hurt you."

Chapter 1: The Cartel

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

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

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

Sevenday 1, Day 1

I am the sum of my ancestors. I am the foundation of my family. Honor is my blade and shield. The public transport shudders to a stop, Lilian poised at the forefront eager to reach the pavement. *Honor knows not fear. Honor endures.* The comforting words of the Warriors’ Litany stiffened Lilian’s spine as she steps from the transport and walks the two blocks to Serengeti Group headquarters. Consumed by her thoughts, Lilian does not notice the glances that followed her, a few admiring but most scornful.

The black suit of a Blooded Dagger apprentice is a familiar sight in the area. The face of Remus Gariten’s disgraced heir has been media fodder for almost two months as all the Twelve Systems witnessed the destruction of Remus Gariten and the ruin of his family. That Lilian did not follow her father to the Final Draught and end her own life in contrition for her corrupt genetics has branded the young woman a coward as well as a criminal.

With a slight shiver, Lilian passes into the shadow of Serengeti Headquarters, a massive structure that encompasses an entire city block. *Honor acts as duty commands.* Shoulders squared, face expressionless, Lilian presents her credentials to a frowning guard at the Blooded Dagger entrance. “If you please, what level for Mistress Marieth?”

Snorting, the dour man rakes Lilian with his eyes. “Thirty-fifth storey. Use the risers at the far end of the lobby.”

Far end of the lobby? *May the Five Warriors aid me!* Chafing at the apprentice strictures that forbid racing within the Cartel, Lilian lengthens her stride and quickens her

step, dodging slower moving associates as she weaves among boutiques, cafes and lounges that fill the lobby. Frustration turns to aggravation as four carriages pass before she finally gains a place. She dare not be late. What she thought was more than ample time for early arrival is rapidly eroding.

I am the sum of my ancestors, Lilian presses into a corner. Jostled by myriad elbows and shoulders, Lilian resolutely ignores the malicious whispers of 'shadeless scum' and 'tainted doxy' as the riser moves up the seemingly endless structure slowed by the numerous stops to disgorge passengers.

I am the foundation of my family, Lilian is painfully aware that moments are ticking by quickly. As the carriage passes the twentieth storey only a handful of passengers remain, all crowded as far from Lilian as the tight confines allow.

Honor is my blade and shield. There are only two more stops before the final storey. Lilian will be in time. By the thirty-fifth storey, Lilian is the only passenger. Springing from the riser, Lilian scans the area discovering only sealed chambers that offer no hint of their purpose. In the crowded hive the Cartel, the area is ominously empty.

A tuneless whistle cuts the heavy silence. Lilian whirls, her hand reaching for her absent blade. Coming toward her is a small man in the sand livery of a Serengeti servitor, a heavy tool belt across his chest. There is naught in his demeanor but curiosity. Dropping her hand, Lilian hopes the instinctive gesture went unnoticed. The man is no threat and may be of aid. "If you please mister, where will I find Mistress Marieth?"

"Mistress Marieth, you say?" the servitor cocks his head.

"Yes Mister," Lilian confirms eagerly.

"You want Monsignor Lucius' suite," the servitor waives down the long corridor. Following the gesture, Lilian looks back to the servitor, "Mister, how far down the corridor?"

"All the way, you be at the wrong end of the building," the servitor gestures again.

Adelaide protect me! The time is nearly gone and Lilian is in the wrong place. Throwing thanks over her shoulder, mentally cursing the entrance guard for sending her the long way round, Lilian darts away, striding down the long corridor as rapidly as stricture and her modest heels permitted. This day.

The entrance to Monsignor Lucius' commerce chambers is unmistakable. The great black enameled double doors are topped with the Blooded Dagger Cartouche, two hands high and worked in poured gold. Hesitating on the threshold, Lilian quickly scans the reception area ignoring the luxury of gleaming dark wood floors covered with elaborately woven rugs, the plush furnishing and crystal light fixtures. All Lilian can see is the scarlet enamel door that marks the entry to Monsignor Lucius Mercio's office. *Lack wit. Focus*. He will not be within at this early bell.

The only occupant of the reception chamber is an older woman enthroned in a worksite of carved cherry, gleaming in the morning light. The woman matches the polished splendor of the worksite with her elegantly bound silver hair, patrician features, and stylish garb. This must be Mistress Marieth, Monsignor Lucius' executive servitor.

Pleased that guard's maliciousness has not made her late, Lilian steps into the reception area, her light footfalls a soft staccato on the hardwood floors. The immaculate figure behind the cherry wood console watches silently as Lilian covers the short distance.

"Well met Mistress Marieth, I am Lilian, apprentice to Monsignor Lucius..." Lilian trails off as a single silver eyebrow rises in disapproval. Suddenly, Lilian is all too aware of the light perspiration beading her lip and moistened her arms and legs.

"Were you addressed?" Marieth asks sharply.

I am the sum of my ancestors. I have erred. "No, Mistress Marieth."

"Given permission to speak?" Marieth continues, the eyebrow lowering as her lips tighten in censure.

I am the foundation of my family. This is ill. "No, Mistress Marieth."

Marieth eyes flicker over Lilian, her expression conveying that she finds the apprentice lacking, "Did you even read your apprentice contract?"

"Yes, Mistress Marieth," Lilian acknowledges. *For all the benefit it provided.* The strictures and protocols are wildly contradictory.

"Then you would do well to abide by it," Marieth instructs.

Abide by it? How? It makes no sense. In fewer than five minutes Lilian's worst fears have been realized. She has erred, albeit unintentionally, and has no notion how to avoid erring in the future. To avoid the Final Draught, Lilian accepted the lesser penalty of Trial by Ordeal. If she fails to meet the requirements of her three year apprentice bond, her life is forfeit. After two sevendays of study, Lilian has been unable to sift the contradictory rules that govern the bonded. Lilian had hoped that the executive servitor would provide some insight. It is now clear that Lilian will find no aid here.

The woman is waiting, the eyebrow starts to rise. There is only one possible response, "Yes, Mistress Marieth."

"Very well," Marieth turns to her techno console and taps quickly. "Your timely arrival is acknowledged. You are due in the Associates' Hall by eighth bell. Return here at midday to attend Monsignor Lucius."

"Yes, Mistress Marieth," Lilian responds obediently. *Honor is my blade and shield.* Steeling herself against further rebuke, Lilian asks, "If you please, where is the Associates' Hall?"

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Without turning from the console Marieth replies, "Second storey, use the nearest riser bank."

"Thank you," Lilian returns politely, relieved by the servitor's lack of censure.

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The amphitheater that is the Associates' Hall is an archaic remnant of the founding days of the Cartel when armed servitors gathered for battle training. Known for its reverence of tradition and strict adherence to protocol, the Serengeti Group's commitment to ancient formality also serves as a reminder that in these modern civilized times, commerce remains conflict. Serengeti associates are expected to excel in all forms of commercial warfare.

Lilian enters warily as the thirty or so occupants focus on her. *Honor acts as duty commands.*

A handful associates arrayed in the finest of commerce couture are seated in the first of the tiered rows designed to accommodate five hundred. The protégés. Two months gone Lilian expected to have an honored place in this elite group. Instead, the elegant crowd greets her with sneers, "Coward. Shadeless twist. Demon shit. Doxy."

In the middle rows, twenty or so associates garbed by the better merchants join in the hostility, the murmurs swelling in volume as she passes. Chin high, eyes forward, refusing to hurry, turn her head, or otherwise acknowledge the insult, Lilian continues on. She should be accustomed to insult and able to ignore it by now. This day. There is only this day.

The highest row, furthest from the podium holds five associates in the same inexpensive suits as Lilian's. Two in the mufti of the Serengeti Cartel apprentice. One in the pale gray-blue of the Iron Hammer apprentice, one in the olive of Grey Spear and one in the severe black of Blooded Dagger. All remain silent as Lilian takes the empty place next to the other Blooded Dagger apprentice.

"I am Chrys, apprentice to Seigneur Rachele," the young man offers the formal clasped hand salute of the commoners. His medium complexion, sandy hair and light brown eyes are washed to monochromatic beige by the Blooded Dagger black.

Carefully repeating the unfamiliar motion, Lilian warily returns the greeting, "I am Lilian, apprentice to Monsignor Lucius."

The politely neutral expression of an experienced apprentice yields no hint of recognition. "Well met Mistress Lilian."

"Well met indeed, Master Chrys," Lilian completes the formal greeting to sound of chimes.

With the chimes Associate Master Straus mounts the podium as the associates silently rise to their feet. The Associate Master's remarks were dry and predictable.

“Well come associates of Serengeti. This ancient house...”

As the Associate Master drones on about the great history of Serengeti, Lilian steals a side-long glance at her companion. Upon rising, Chrys proved tall, his length of leg offsetting his boxy torso. Lilian cannot help wondering how a man fulfills the duty of the bond. If Lilian fails to find monsignor appealing, she need only be compliant. For Chrys to please his seigneur he must be a good deal more than compliant. Mayhap –

Do not. Do not. Lilian forces her wayward thoughts to order and her attention to the Associate Master.

“Your slate has been provided by your cartouche and encrypted to its security-privilege. Instructions on your worksite location, schedule and immediate assignments are all contained in your slate. Lose your slate and you compromise the security and honor of Serengeti.

“Protégés, you will proceed to your mentors immediately after collecting your satchels. Other associates, you will remain for further instruction.

“Come forward.”



At the twenty-eighth storey, Lilian and Chrys exit the risers into a sea of identical gray worksites differentiated only by corridor markers in Blooded Dagger scarlet and gold. In response to a few quick taps, their Cartel issued slates map a route through the labyrinth to their worksites.

Intent on acquiring what she needs without displaying a dangerous level of ignorance, Lilian pays little heed to the surroundings. *Think.* Courtesy. We are two protégés on First Day.

“Master Chrys, may I inquire as to your area of excellence?” Lilian attempts a casual tone, her well-modulated tone and accent revealing both her exemplary education and her warrior upbringing.

“Technologistics. Research and Development in particular. Seigneur Rachelle leads R&D for Serengeti. I am very fortunate to be her apprentice,” Chrys returns, a faint burr, almost eradicated by years of training, suggests origins in an agrarian community.

“Seigneur Rachelle is quite expert, then?” Lilian asks, well aware of the R&D Seigneur’s expertise but determined to keep the other apprentice speaking.

“Yes, Mistress Lilian. May I inquire as to your area of excellence?” Chrys returns.

“Analytics and Problematics,” Lilian replies, “With emphasis in financials, risk analysis and complexity modeling.”

Keep the conversation going, keep him talking, “Have you been on Metricelli Prime long, Master Chrys?”

Abruptly Chrys halts, turning to stare down at Lilian, examining her face as if searching for coded messages.

I am the sum of my ancestors. Have I somehow offended him? Shoulders square, face impassive, Lilian meets the searching gaze.

After a moment Chrys nods, "Mistress Lilian, I have been on Metricelli Prime for two years studying at the Institute in the Western Continent. That is not what you truly wish to know, is it? I beg pardon, but this is farcical. I am well aware of who you are; the scandal, the change of status, all the comment and gossip, the vicious despite."

As Lilian opens her mouth to speak, Chrys shakes her off to continue, "I do not know why you chose this path over the Final Draught. I care not. Ask what you will of me. I will render assistance, or not, as I am able."

I am the foundation of my family. Unsurprised by Chrys' awareness of the scandal and her ruin, Lilian is far more concerned that he had seen through her ruse to her desperation. In the two sevendays since Lilian sealed her apprentice contract she has been maddened by the inconsistent and contradictory strictures and legalistics of the Apprentice Protocol. Without guidance, she has no hope of proving her bond.

As heir to a cartouche, Lilian was accustomed to being courted and favored for her rank. Now she must ask for more than she can offer. It is alien and bitter and it matters not. Knowing she must have Chrys' aid to survive, Lilian is forced to risk her trust. "Master Chrys, I thank you for your graciousness and I beg pardon for my clumsiness. As you have rightly determined, I am poorly equipped to prove my bond."

Chrys' neutral countenance does not alter with her admission. *Honor is my blade and shield.* If she has erred, it will be revealed soon enough. "It matters not why I chose this path, only that I must learn to walk it and quickly."

Honor knows not fear. With a deep breath, Lilian exposes her vulnerability, "I have read the contract, studied the protocols and strictures. It is not enough. I lack the experience to sort the contradictions and meet the expectations."

For five painful heartbeats the technologist's neutral expression holds. He will not aid her. As Lilian battles despair Chrys' gentle smile dissolves his neutrality

Thank the Shades of the Five Warriors. He will aid her.

Shaking his head slightly, Chrys explains, "Mistress Lilian, I cannot transfer the skills and knowledge acquired through eight years of advanced studies and ten years of apprenticeship in ten minutes. I will offer what I am able."

At Lilian's encouraging nod, Chrys instructs, "Always address your bond holder as 'milord', or 'milady' in my case. I do not believe it possible to overuse the honorific. Never refer to monsignor except as milord or monsignor."

At Lilian's open bewilderment, Chrys expanded, "Do not voice, 'if you please milord.'"

The correct phrase is, 'if milord pleases.' The word 'you' is a term of equality or intimacy. You may not employ it with your bond holder."

"We must always refer to the ranked as either seigneur or monsignor, never as he or she." Lilian quickly grasped the concept.

"Yes, well done," Chrys confirms. "Even in your mind, address monsignor only as milord. Think of monsignor only as monsignor, never by name. It might slip out and that will go ill for you.

"It is wise to avoid questions. If you can acquire the information from another source, it is better not to ask. An inquiring mind is an asset in a protégé and an annoyance in an apprentice. In the end, the protocols, all those strictures, they are but one instruction, 'Discover a Means.' Do not ask, do not complain, discover a means."

At Chrys' explanation, the contradictory information that has bedeviled Lilian for two sevendays reconciles. It is not rational. It is another form of trial. "My thanks, Master Chrys."

Before Chrys can offer more, their slates sounded warningly, "Come, we should hasten. Late arrival is treated with severity."



I am the sum of my ancestors. I am the foundation of my family. Honor is my blade and shield. Honor knows not fear. Honor endures. Honor acts as duty commands. I am the sum of my ancestors...

Unconsciously, Lilian crosses and re-crosses her ankles, the comforting words of the Warriors' Litany no more able to ease her anxiety than the comfortably plush bench in opulent reception area of Monsignor Lucius' commerce suite.

Do not dwell on it. Do not dwell on it. Do not dwell on the fact that within the next period she will yield her body to a man she has not met. A man with an intimidating reputation.

At the impossibly young age of thirty-eight, upon the untimely death of his father, Lucius Mercio succeeded to the Preeminence of the Blooded Dagger Cartouche and Serengeti Group. No one expected him to hold the Cartel.

Severe economic crisis throughout the Twelve Systems battered the Cartel's standing. Piracy and mayhem along the major supply routes further undermined Cartouche and Cartel. Competitors and would be competitors moved against any vulnerable aspect of operations. It was predicted that Cartel Preeminence would fall to the wily and experienced Monsignor Sebastian Mehta of the Grey Spear Cartouche.

In the end, Lucius Mercio proved difficult to defeat. In his first two years as Preeminence, through a series of bold and unprecedented actions, he succeeded in stabilizing the positions of Cartouche and Cartel. In the six years since, he has lead both

Cartouche and Cartel to heretofore unreached heights of success positioning it to advance from fourth to third among the cartels. It is the first measurable shift in the relative rank of the ten largest cartels in over a century.

Lucius Mercio's stunning success and ability to outmaneuver opponents is so profound that the envious and superstitious speculate that his '*Luck of the First Warrior*' derives from supernatural means. It is rumored that Lucius Mercio has sold his soul to the Shade of the First Warrior, Socraide Omsted. It is to this man that Lilian's three year indentured-servitude contract has been sold.

I am the sum of my ancestors. The midday chimes.

I am the foundation of my family. Stand Up.

Honor is my blade and shield. Walk through the door. Remember to breathe.

The expansive chamber has two glazed walls meeting in a corner to offer a spectacular view of the Garden Center and city skyline. The glossy wood floors are scattered with luxuriously woven silk rugs. As Lilian steps into the chamber, there is the quiet swish of the door sealing behind her.

The chamber appears empty. Lilian has an overall impression of luxury as she scans the space for its occupant, her mid-section tight with anxiety. Lilian registers a massive black enamel desk with an impressive techno array and a large scarlet leather chair.

Her gaze finds the long scarlet leather couch facing a wall-sized reviewer and the remainder of the sumptuous furnishings fade into the ether. *Honor knows not fear. Honor endures. Honor...*

A hitherto hidden door recesses and a man walks through. His arresting, aquiline features have a dark olive cast. They sit on a tall, powerful form which moves with the confident grace of someone well familiar with the training facilities. Lucius Mercio is a tall man. Somehow Lilian had not realized he would be so tall.

Tall for a woman, in her low heels she fits under his chin. Without shoes she will barely reach his shoulders. Dark, deep-set eyes under heavy lids travel slowly over Lilian, measuring and assessing.

His tunic shirt clings to a well-defined torso, jacket missing. The Cartouche Preeminence signet dangles from his belt. Worked in platinum and rubies, the elongated oval is the length of Lilian's thumb. *Honor acts as duty commands.*

"You are Lilian." The statement is made in cool, clipped tones as the long frame folds into a chair by the chrome and crystal conference table. He leans back with elbows resting on the chair arms, the long fingers steepled. Legs spread.

"Yes, milord," The ancient courtesy comes to Lilian's lips more easily than she expected.

There is silence as His Preeminence examines her from beneath hooded lids. The strong

features are impassive, intimidating.

It is too disturbing to look at his face. Look over his head at the Five Warriors print on the far wall.

Lucius examines his apprentice seeking and finding changes. The tightly contained woman stands ramrod stiff and stares straight ahead. The strain of the past six sevendays is apparent in the tightness of her countenance and the shadows under her deep set gray eyes. This day, the creamy skin tones are pale, lacking the slightest hint of pink. Her features are more cleanly defined. The high cheek bones and determined chin more pronounced. Her athletic form is willowy. Lilian has dropped weight, at least half a stone.

Gone is the fleeting, quiet smile from the visuals provided by Dean Joseph. Also gone are the soft waves of dark red hair, replaced by the tightly bound tail of her warrior queue that turns the locks nearly black. The small gold ear posts are as inexpensive and austere as her tailored black suit. Long, elegantly muscled legs are revealed by her suit skirt. Forcing aside his fascination with Lilian's legs, Lucius continues to evaluate the lovely young woman, confirming his design.

Lilian has lost her cartouche, her father, her honor and her status as a warrior. She is all but destitute. Lilian is not guilty of Remus Gariten's crimes, only of carrying the foul criminal's blood. It is an offense she can redeem with a three year trial by ordeal. She will not regain all she has lost. Lilian will never again be a warrior. She will retain her life and the right of every inhabitant of the Twelve Systems to forge advancement in commerce through skill, determination, hard work and ruthlessness.

This is not the arrangement Lucius initially anticipated, it will serve. Lucius has what he wants, and that is what matters.

"I will expect you at the eighth bell each morning to report status and receive instruction." Terse, quiet tones express milord's will, the expectation of complete obedience.

"Yes, milord," Lilian acknowledges.

"You will discuss your work only with me, Master Nickolas, and the Associate Master. Only those assignments received from the Associate Master are to be discussed with the Associate Master."

Master Nickolas? Lilian scans her memory, seeking a name. Protégé. Monsignor's protégé. "Yes, milord."

"All that occurs in this chamber is sealed to my security-privilege." Lucius Mercio will have naught of his affairs revealed without his expressed consent.

"Yes, milord." He has yet to touch her. In Lilian's peripheral vision, the scarlet couch looms large.

"All that remains of your family are your mother and sister living here in the city." It is a statement, although a question is implied.

The abrupt change in topic unbalances Lilian. It causes her to catch her breath and drop her eyes to her interrogator's face. Her concern with the couch dissipates under the weight of greater concern.

"Yes, milord." Did he notice the brief delay in her response? Focus on the Five Warriors.

"In your sister's house. How did you manage to retain it?" Curiosity underlies the clipped tones.

Respond to the question. Do not volunteer. Breathe. "The house is of my mother's family. While the trust was administered by the Grey Gyre Cartouche, it was never part of the property. The benefit of the trust passed to my sister on her tenth birth anniversary. The property was the required two degrees removed from taint and was not forfeited with the Grey Gyre holdings."

"Have you doubt of your father's guilt? Hold you any fanciful notion of cleansing the Gariten name and regaining warrior status?" The words are harsh.

Stunned by the question and its implications, Lilian again drops her gaze to milord wondering if she has handed herself over to the deranged. *What a ludicrous notion. No, do not voice that.*

Milord's gaze is unwavering, commanding. He requires something, what? An acknowledgement. Piracy, fraud, decadents dealing, illegal servitude, lotteries; the list of crimes that sentenced Gariten to the Final Draught and Lilian to three years indentured servitude is long, ugly and undeniable.

"There is no doubt, milord. Remus Gariten was guilty of every transgression of which he was convicted." *And a great deal more.*

"Come here, Lilian." At the quiet command, Lilian's heart lurches.

Here, where here? Walk toward the seated man. Where to stop?

In the end Lilian is unable to force a step past the invisible plane defined by the edge of milord's knees. Shifting, milord reaches out with one hand to grip her waist and tug her closer until her knees press against the edge of the chair, his legs on either side of her thighs.

He will instruct you.

Milord leans in. The hand not holding Lilian moves languidly to trace her left hip, her waist. One long finger slides in between the waistband of her skirt and the silk of her blouse, tracing a pattern across her suddenly tautened mid-section.

"Lilian, Dean Joseph attested that you have known two men." The tone is casual, expressing mild interest.

“Yes, milord,” Lilian acknowledges, at a loss as to the purpose of the inquiry.

“Both men were of appropriate lineage?” Milord is not looking at her face. He is involved with his physical explorations.

Keep your wits, ignore that finger. Respond to the question.

“Yes milord,” Lilian responds, bewildered by the inquiry. Her lineage is tainted. What matters the lineage of her former lovers? *Do not. Do not.*

“How long did these entanglements endure?” Milord’s gaze lifts, pinning her.

“This first, eight months, milord. The second, four.” Milord must know this. Dean Joseph would have yielded all.

Lucius considers Lilian’s responses. Her stoic countenance reveals little. Her tension at his touch reveals a great deal. Lucius rises and tightens his hand on Lilian’s waist. He pulls her close, forcing Lilian to arch backwards to meet his gaze. The gray eyes are wide with trepidation, her lips slightly parted. She trembles in his embrace. A brief trial is in order.

As milord rises, Lilian locks her knees. This was inevitable.

“So, until now, you have only been touched with love?” Milord inquires softly.

“Yes, milord.” The leisurely back and forth of that single digit along her abdomen causes tiny muscle tremors up and down her torso while Lilian’s eyes fixate on the sensual lips moving toward her.

And his mouth is on hers. Carnal. Lips slant across hers. Demanding.

Open your mouth, lack wit.

Milord’s tongue sweeps in; challenging, taking. Large, strong hands mold her against his length. Her breasts are pressed against milord’s chest, her thighs to his. As her senses swim, Lilian feels a stirring in the bulge at milord’s groin.

The kiss ends as suddenly as it began. Those strong hands stand her up and set her on her feet.

Set her on her feet?

One large hand cups the back of Lilian’s head as milord compels her to meet his forceful gaze. “Who may touch you?”

Bemused by her intense response to milord’s embrace, mind struggling, Lilian ponders, *what was the question?* Involuntarily, she blinks rapidly to counter the dark, penetrating eyes.

“Only milord,” Lilian recites, her wits finally reordering. As milord’s apprentice, carnal knowledge of her belongs to him and him alone.

"You will attend me this evening at the seventh bell. Mistress Marieth will instruct you on arrangements for transport." The disconcerting scrutiny lightens. Milord's mind is moving on to other matters.

"Yes, milord." The hand cupping her head travels down the warrior queue, testing its weight.

"Lilian, wear your hair unbound." The slightly distracted tone does not mislead, Lilian. It is a command.

"Yes, milord," at Lilian's words, milord releases her hair.

"You may leave me."

Upon exiting the scarlet door Lilian's gaze quickly assesses the reception area. No one notes her presence or the brevity of her interview with milord. Lilian cannot quite believe she is not intimately engaged on the scarlet couch. Licking lips swollen by milord's kiss, Lilian wonders at his intent. Monsignor Lucius is as unpredictable as he is intimidating. Taking a moment to gather her wits, Lilian grapples with the morning's events as she attempts to brace herself for remainder of the day and the coming evening.

With a deep breath, Lilian leaves the shelter of scarlet enamel door that guards the entrance to milord's office. Milord has expressed his will. Lilian must obey. Engrossed in her console, Mistress Marieth does not look up at Lilian's quiet approach. Has the servitor failed to note her or is Marieth deliberately ignoring Lilian? After the morning's censure, Lilian is reluctant to speak. *I am the sum of my ancestors.* Lilian lightly clears her throat.

Turning at the soft sound, Marieth's eyes widen and her lips part in surprise at the sight of Lilian. Apparently Lilian was not alone in her expectation of milord's midday will. Surprise quickly covered with dispassionate courtesy, Marieth asks, "How may I assist you Mistress Lilian?"

Mindful of protocol and Chrys' brief lesson, Lilian diligently constructs a proper response, "Monsignor requires that I attend monsignor this evening at the seventh bell."

"Of course, I have your transport and access tokens here. Attend while I demonstrate," the elegant servitor replies.

Lilian is well pleased. She can do this. She was polite, unemotional, and correctly referred to her bond holder in the third person. Mistress Marieth's eyebrow did not even twitch. Lilian owes Chrys a boon.

Chapter 2: The Penthouse

The Apprentice Protocol

1. The bonded will submit to and execute the bondholder's will in all matters.
2. The bonded will address the bondholder with deference and submission.
3. The bonded will defend the bondholder's estate, life and honor by any method necessary unto the death of the bonded.
4. The bonded will permit only the bondholder carnal access to the bonded.
5. The bonded will engage in any and all carnal activities the bondholder requires.
6. The bonded will not presume to know the bondholder's will.
7. The bonded will adhere to the letter and the spirit of the governing protocols.
8. The bonded will not bear arms in the presence of the bondholder.
9. The bonded will not speak unless addressed.
10. The bonded will answer truly to any inquiry.
11. The bonded will flank the bondholder at all times.
12. The bonded will defer to and honor all of greater rank.

Sevenday 1, Day 1

Following the path defined by her slate, Lilian passes the entrance to milord's commerce suite. The double width black enameled doors and with Blooded Dagger cartouche in worked gold over the lintel draw Lilian's eyes and fire recall of milord's kiss. For the two bells since Lilian has buried herself in training interrogatives to avoid thinking about her unsettling interview with Lucius Mercio and his equally unsettling kiss. *Milord! He is milord.*

Pushing aside the compulsion to dwell on milord Lilian mentally reviews her notes on milord's protégé. Within the ranks of the Cartel Associates, protégés are second only to the Master Associates. Monsignor Lucius' protégé outranks all the others. Highly ranked simply by his position as protégé, Master Nickolas Cyncad also bears the red and gold seal of conservatorship.

Only the most trusted of blood and commerce kin are honored with conservatorship. Under the protocols, conservators are milord's vessels. In the administration of the entrusted property, the conservator's will is treated as milord's. Misused, conservatorship ruins estates. As Conservator of Desperation Mine and Refinery Nickolas is high in milord's favor. Even a minor Vistrite holding is of immense value.

Lilian has a great deal to learn. Much of it will be from Master Nickolas. After milord and Master Straus, the protégé will have the greatest impact on her advancement and success.

As Lilian traverses the route to Master Nickolas' office she notes that the thirty-fifth storey has the same gray with scarlet and gold décor the rest of Blooded Dagger territory which extends down eleven storeys. Beneath Blooded Dagger are Grey Spear's seven storeys and then Iron Hammer's five. The bottom ten storeys are devoted to the common areas; The Archives, Communications Central, Training Facilities, Serengeti

Militia and Control Center, Medical Facilities, Conference Chambers, Research Facilities and Laboratories.

Unlike the associate and servitor levels, here the carpeting is thicker and the use of scarlet and gold more extensive. The worksites banks are four times the size of Lilian's and constructed of cherry wood rather than fabricated materials. The paucity of doors along the exterior walls suggests sizable offices.

A rough shove from a passing associate alerts Lilian that that in her fascination with the décor, she has slowed almost to a halt. Knowing that being late to attend Master Nickolas will be no more acceptable than late attendance upon milord, Lilian hurries along the path set by her slate.

Master Nickolas' office is a luxurious as the rest of the level. A fraction of the size of Monsignor Lucius' domain, it boasts a window and a small conference table in addition to the expansive black enamel desk and impressive techno center. Unlike the offices of the seigneurs, the offices of the unranked are designed with a glazed wall fronting the corridor. None but the ranked are permitted complete privacy.

Taking her place at attention in front of the desk and the man seated behind it, Lilian awaits instruction.

"Do you recall me, Mistress Lilian?" The question holds polite curiosity.

Blinking, Lilian looks into the handsome, almost pretty face. Ornamented with green eyes, and framed with burnished copper locks held back in a loose queue, Master Nickolas is enough to turn heads. Certain she would recall prior acquaintance Lilian begins to shake her head in negation. A quirk of his lips triggers an old memory.

Warm, dappled sunshine filters through heavy summer foliage. There is the tangy scent of the sea on a light breeze, the sound of laughter. Three children of around ten-years stalk lizards along a creek bank. The intrepid hunters carry crudely devised snares.

An older boy, a youth, strolls around the bend, his day's catch in a satchel, his pole resting on his shoulder. One of the hunters looks up, calls 'Nickolas' and races towards the youth. He is followed by a girl and a boy. Nickolas is their hero and the first boy's brother.

"We are hunting Nickolas, we are catching salamanders," the first boy cries out.

"And how many have you caught?" The lad smiles indulgently as he tousles his brother's hair.

"I have got one. Ezra has three. Lilian does not have any," the boy discloses. His disgrace at losing to Ezra is eased by his triumph over Lilian.

Shamed in front of their hero, little Lilian scuffs a bare toe in the ground and looks down.

"Why is that, Miss Lilian?" a gentle finger lifts her chin as the youth crouches before her.

"I chase them, but they run too fast," Lilian gazes hopefully at Nickolas.

"Ah, Miss Lilian, there is your error," the hero speaks. "Do not chase them. Be patient. Let them come

close enough to grab and then, act quickly."

"I caught five salamanders that day, the most of any of us." Lilian acknowledges the old memory, her tight countenance lightening with recall.

"It is dead now, you know," Nickolas' cold, cutting tones shred Lilian's recollection.

Dead? The salamander? The words make no sense. From the protégé's tone and expression, Lilian has erred. The brief light disappears from her face as her shoulders tighten.

"Master Nickolas, I do not take your meaning," Lilian replies carefully, assessing the man's intent.

"That life. It is dead. It is gone as though it never existed. For all practical purposes, your life starts today," Nickolas' eyes are as cold and cutting as his voice.

"Yes, Master Nickolas, I understand." The message could not be plainer. *You are nothing but a doxy. Forget you were ever anything else.* The beautiful man at the desk wishes he did not know Remus Gariten's tainted offspring. He regrets ever having been kind to her.

"Good, let us begin."



Lack wit. You have known men. It is a pleasant enough diversion, Lilian chides herself as she reaches the freshening closet. In her slate satchel is a set of freshener packets. Not as effective as a shower, the magic little puffs are a wonder in preparing for an encounter or erasing the results of one. Lilian began the day with an unopened package of six. One is gone, used prior to her midday encounter with Monsignor Lucius. Another is about to serve its purpose.

After period of instruction from Master Nickolas, Lilian wholeheartedly embraced the distraction of her increased assignments. Now, as she prepares to attend the penthouse, the memory of milord's embrace assails her. Recall tightens delicate muscles below her navel, the exciting sensation offsetting fear.

"May the Five Warriors take it! Don't these people have commerce to conduct?" The violently frustrated tone and words are at odds with the sweet loveliness of the woman splashing water on her face as she addresses the mirror.

Lilian recognizes one of the new Cartel apprentices from the morning. Curiosity overcoming her start at the other woman's outburst, Lilian inquires, "Is aught amiss? May I be of assistance?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I didn't realize anyone was there," the woman responds, turning from the mirror.

"You're Lillian, I'm Rebecca," Rebecca introduces herself casually, tension leaving her as she recognizes a fellow apprentice. Rebecca is truly beautiful with her smooth blonde hair, blue eyes, delicate features and lightly sun kissed skin. Of average height, she is shorter than Lillian, and more curvaceous. The Cartel apprentice's fashionable heels bring her to Lillian's level.

Pushing back the blonde locks that have come loose from her chignon, Rebecca continues, "I didn't mean anyone to hear that, venting a bit of ire is all."

Curiosity unabated, Lillian repeats, "Is aught amiss?"

At Lillian's bewildered aspect Rebecca shrugs and explains. "I brought a full package of fresheners this morning and now I'm out. I expected to be well occupied, the newness and all. But this is one of the most powerful cartels in the Twelve Systems. These seigneurs should have full schedules."

Lillian blinks. She is aware that Cartel apprentices are sexually available to the ranked members of the Cartel. Until this moment, she had not understood exactly how that might execute. What to respond? You have had six encounters this day? *Do not voice that.*

"It is the day's end. May you not retire to your quarters?" Lillian is proud of her response. It is pleasant, polite and not intrusive.

"Not yet, I need to get started on Master Straus' interrogative exercises. I didn't get any real work done today and I can't plan on tomorrow being any better. I don't suppose you have a spare freshener packet?" Rebecca persists.

Refusing to yield to her shock, Lillian reaches into her satchel and produces a small, pale green cube, "Yes, I have one to spare."

Snatching the object, Rebecca offers heartfelt thanks and the comment, "At least now I can smell like myself while I work. I'll return the favor the when I am able, Mistress Lillian."

»◊◀

Settled into the sumptuous leather upholstery of the Serengeti transport, Lillian barely notices as Mr. George efficiently navigates the complex traffic patterns of the city. Entering the lobby, Lillian expected to find a servitor displaying the Blooded Dagger cartouche on a signal plaque.

Mr. George required no plaque. In the redwood brown of Blooded Dagger's common servitor, Mr. George could not be overlooked. He made Lillian think of the 'tree-trolls' of children's fables; a massive block of wood capable of rapid movement and stunning strength. Completing the illusion is a face deeply pitted and weathered to the color of walnut.

Prize fighter. The thought splashed across Lillian's thoughts as she approached the

driver. So strong were her impressions, the gentle courtesy and low voice with which Lilian was greeted startled her to a brief stop.

“Good Evening, Mistress Lilian. I am Mister George. I am here to carry you to Monsignor Lucius. Allow me to take your satchel. If it would please you, take my arm. The walkways are slippery from the rain.”

It rained? It would have been one of the sudden thunder showers that appear and disappear in a matter of moments during the early days of the dry season. In the interior section where Lilian’s worksite is located, weather changes commonly pass unnoticed.

“My thanks, Mr. George,” Lilian replied as she tightened her grip on the slate satchel. “I will retain the satchel.”

As to accepting the driver’s assistance, Lilian wondered if she is permitted to take the driver’s hand under the rigid stricture that only milord should touch her. As if reading her mind, Mr. George extended his right hand, palm down displaying light cloth gloves despite the warm weather.

Consumed with thoughts of milord and the coming interlude, Lilian notes neither direction nor distance as the transport moves toward the penthouse. *You enjoyed his kiss. He will not hurt you. You can do this. Think about -*

“Mistress Lilian, we’re here. You should go on up.” The quiet rumble of Mr. George’s voice resonates through Lilian’s thoughts. It brings her to the realization that the big man is standing on the pavement, waiting to assist her from the transport. The brief transit is ended. She is handed out on to the pavement with the same care that settled her into the transport.

“I’ll be waiting to carry you home Mistress Lilian,” Mr. George informs her.

Mouth suddenly dry, the best Lilian can offer is a polite nod of acknowledgement. *I am the sum of my ancestors.*

A coolly austere doorman validates her access token and bows her through to the lobby. The gold lozenge is the size Lilian’s thumbnail and not a great deal thicker. Stamped with the Blooded Dagger Cartouche, it offers a small blue light indicative of Vistrite controls.

I am the foundation of my family.

An equally austere concierge directs her to a discretely placed riser.

Honor is my blade and shield.

The token is in the slot and the riser carriage starts to ascend.

Honor knows not fear. Honor -- needs to unbind her hair!

Lilian pulls frantically at the carefully woven nape ties designed to keep her wavy hair

E.G. Manetti

tight to her scalp and in a disciplined fall down her back. Fumbling fingers stuff them in her satchel. No mirror. No time. Flip forward at the waist. Shake her hair free and fluff it with her fingers. A chime sounds as the riser stops and the door opens. Snap upright and toss it back. Step forward.

Where is he?

Scanning the area, Lilian finds she is in a shallow foyer that opens into a large, high-ceilinged reception salon. It is striped with light and shadows from the fading sun. Inlaid wood floors spread out from the entry. The gleaming wood is broken by finely woven wool and silk rugs. Unable to process details, Lilian has an impression of equally fine furniture and art.

Where is he?

By the two-storey window that serves as a wall, a shadow moves. It coalesces into a man. *Milord!*

His tunic shirt is open revealing a wide expanse of well-muscled, dark olive skin. Milord's trousers are unbelted, his feet bare. Milord holds a glass in one hand.

"Lilian, you are in time to enjoy the last rays of sunshine. Come, join me." With his words, milord gestures her toward him.

Walking forward, depositing her slate bag on a small table, Lilian halts within milord's reach. Milord glances down, and then reaches out with one hand to stroke her hair, rubbing a lock between two fingers. "Very nice, but a less disheveled arrangement will please me more."

"Yes, milord," barely managing to repress her relief, Lilian yields the politely obedient response.

The hand in her hair drops to her shoulder, glides across her shoulder blade to rest at the small of her back. Pulling her along, milord walks to the two-storey window. Lilian's breath leaves her as the sight before her presents the illusion that she is but one step away from falling into an abyss.

Lucius Mercio's penthouse overlooks the Great Crevasse at the base of the city. As the last of the day touches the cityscape to the north, directly ahead and to the south, the horizon is black where the thirty mile deep crevasse drops toward the planet's core. Within the Crevasse, the twinkling lights of the constant Vistrite mining appear as the sunlight that dimmed them through the day fades.

The hand at the small of her back circles her waist, pulling Lilian against milord's chest, her face to the dizzying view.

"Vertigo, Lilian?" Curiosity and mild amusement are blended in milord's inquiry.

"Yes, milord."

“Do you fear heights?” Milord’s lips whisper against her temple with the question.

Distracted from her vertigo by the caress, Lilian answers, “I had not thought so, milord. I was startled.”

The arm not steadying her against milord’s chest appears in front of her holding a glass of pale, sparkling liquid. “A little wine will steady your nerves.”

“My thanks, milord,” Lilian responds, reaching out to take the glass. The glass is halfway to her lips when she recalls her circumstances. Hesitating, she says, “I have not eaten much today, it may make me tipsy.”

“I will not object. Drink your wine. All of it.” The words are casual. It is a command.

Anchored by milord’s arm, sipping her wine, Lilian watches the sun descend and the stars reveal. Milord does not speak or move. Slowly, the sharp edge of Lilian’s anxiety fades. This quiet encounter is far from the abrupt use Lilian anticipated. Milord’s will is inexplicable. It is also welcome.

The horizon disappears as the stars meet the twinkling lights of the Crevasse and become a single expanse. The nightscape solidifies the sense that Lilian is standing on the precipice of the void.

With the total fall of night, milord stirs. Collecting the empty glass from her hand, he sets it aside as he releases Lilian from his support. She totters, and then steadies.

“You remain dizzy?” Milord inquires.

“A little, milord. The wine I think, not the drop,” Lilian explains. She is not precisely tipsy. The wine has blunted her concern.

“Come then,” taking her hand milord leads her away from the window. As they progress the length of the great chamber, soft lights shimmer on. After a few yards, a door silently recesses.

The bedchamber is vast. In the far corner, the floor to ceiling windows meet as one, displaying the sparkling void completely devoid of cityscape. Located in the glazed corner are a large, comfortable chair and reading stand. Between the chair and the entrance, centered between the clear corner walls, facing the vista is the bed on a raised dais.

There are other furnishings within the chamber. All Lilian sees is the great bed as she is lead toward it. *Now.* Milord will have her now.

Lucius stops midway between the bed and his chair and drops Lilian’s hand. Lucius has every intention of enjoying the next few bells. It remains to be seen how his apprentice will react. Moving away from Lilian, he seats himself in the chair facing the bed. The slender figure stands motionless where he left her. The wide gray eyes appear black in the dim light.

She is waiting for instruction. This is promising. Lucius' groin tightens in anticipation as he holds his expression impassive. Lucius speaks one word. "Disrobe."

As milord settles into the chair, Lillian considers her feet. She cannot tolerate the view and milord is only slightly less intimidating. Mouth dry, Lillian nods her acquiescence to the command she disrobe. This is it. In a few moments she will earn the title doxy. Milord's pleasure toy. The thought sends an unexpected thrill to Lillian's core, leavening her distress.

He will not hurt you. It is pleasant to be with a man.

Slipping off her suit jacket, Lillian casts around for a place to lay her garb. She settles on a small console table near the edge of the dais. It is at a right angle to the chair where milord sits, parallel to the length of the dais and bed. Carefully folding the jacket, she lays it on the table. Stepping out of her shoes, Lillian nudges them under the table with one foot while her hands move to the fasteners of her blouse.

"Face me."

The quiet command reverberates along Lillian's spine. Turning, Lillian continues to work the fasteners of her blouse.

"The skirt first," milord's tone is instructing, patient.

There are no comforting Five Warriors now. There is nowhere to settle her gaze but the intimidating vastness of the void or the slightly less intimidating person of milord. In the dim light milord's expression is unreadable, his form unmoving. His voice holds the cool, even timbre of midday.

Trembling fingers find the fastenings of the skirt and shimmy it off her hips. The skirt slips through Lillian's fingers and hits the floor. Picking it up, it follows the jacket onto the console table.

Turning, Lillian stands in her white silk briefs. The high quality silk is modestly cut at the leg and covers her to just below her navel. Delicate pink accents trail across the line of her hips and decorate the edges.

Milord shifts slightly. He does not speak. A small spark of excitement ignites in Lillian's center.

The blouse is easier. Only one of three fasteners remains. She slides it from her shoulders and into one hand to place it crumpled on the table. The bra matches the briefs, fine quality, pink and white; her best.

Milord yields naught. Lillian swallows hard and continues. The spark is growing. Her hands slip inside her panties to slide them off her hips.

"The bra first," milord corrects her.

The small spark fades. *It is a game.* No matter what she had chosen, milord would

have commanded the opposite.

Lilian's hands move up, behind her back, grappling with the suddenly soldered clasp. Finally, it releases and the bra slides off to join its companions on the table. Lilian's breasts are modest in size but well-proportioned to her torso. Elegant and creamy, they slope to deep rose aureoles.

Milord's heated gaze is as palpable as a caress. Lilian swallows hard as her nipples tighten and her center contracts in response. The spark is expanding once again. Taking a deep breath, she slides down the briefs. A small patch of curls, surprisingly bright red-gold, guard her sex.

"Await me on the bed." Milord's voice has acquired a husky tone that turns the spark into a small flame.

Walking backwards, Lilian's calves bump the dais and she stumbles. The response she experienced under milord's gaze dissipates in embarrassment at her awkwardness.

Lucius' annoyance at Lilian's sudden clumsiness is abated by his delight in her loss of composure. He has never cared for the practiced artifice of whores. "You may look where you are going."

Relief floods Lilian at milord's grace. She gladly turns from the intimidating regard as she mounts the dais and climbs onto the bed. In the middle of the bed Lilian curls her legs under her and waits. No power in the Twelve Systems can compel her to be so vulnerable as to lie down. She longs to cross her arms over her breasts, but dares not.

Milord stands and shrugs off the tunic shirt. A hand moves to the closings of his trousers, they drop away and he steps out of them. The physical power Lilian suspected at midday is now clearly displayed. Strongly muscled arms and legs, a hard muscled stomach and chest, his sex is dark and stiffening. He is stunning, virile.

Anticipation leavens trepidation. The small flame of desire begins to surge. *Breathe ...*

Thought scatters as milord strides toward the bed. Following Lilian's path he mounts the dais and the bed, meeting her in its center. On his knees, milord reaches for her and drags her length of his body. Her breasts then belly graze his swelling manhood as he pulls her into another deeply carnal kiss.

Mind starting to swim, Lilian is lowered backwards into the center of the bed. Milord follows. Strong, clever hands trace her torso, stopping to dwell on her breasts. Milord's thumbs stroke the tips to aching peaks and send echoing sensations throughout Lilian's belly and limbs and into the sensitive spot between her legs.

Those hands continue their voyage of exploration, teasing sensation and desire as they move down her flanks, around her thighs. A finger strokes between her legs, starting at the bottom edge of her opening and moving upwards to that tight bud where a woman's pleasure is centered.

In response, Lillian's center tightens, her hips shift and buck. Milord repeats the intimate stroking of her sex, again and again. Lillian surges against the determined caress, wishing more.

Milord's warm lips and hot wet tongue follow the path the clever hands have mapped. They wring even more sensation out of already engorged nipples, contract taut stomach muscles further, encourage already open thighs to loosen and widen. Milord's tongue strokes and teeth nip across sensitive nether lips. Lillian's hands convulse in milord's hair as his teeth gently scrape the swollen bud of her sex. The exquisite feeling pulls a moan from Lillian and causes her to arch toward milord.

Milord's hands grasp her wrists and pull her hands from his hair as he rises above her. Releasing her hands, milord grasps her hips, lifting, tilting her until her opening is angled towards the rod standing straight, dark and swollen. Her back arched, Lillian gazes up the length of her prone body to the strong torso above her and erection about to enter her. The head strokes across her opening, taunting. As the teasing contact convulses Lillian's core, she emits a small, involuntary sound.

The dark length enters her slowly. She is wet and ready, her sex swollen with need. Her abdomen contracts, her channel tightens as the full length of milord slides into her. It is wondrous.

Milord's dark olive skin contrasts starkly with her paleness as he pulls back and slides forward again. Fascinated, Lillian watches the slow, rhythmic movement of milord's sex in and out of her body. Heavy, blissful heat unfurls within Lillian with each thrust.

A shift in position, a change in rhythm and Lillian's hips are back on the bed. Milord is stretched out over her, his sex stroking over a spot inside her she had not known was there. Her legs rise, tightening around milord's waist seeking to bring him closer. Faster now, milord is driving into her with the force of storm. *Please, harder, faster, more*, her mind cries as her eyes flutter shut.

"Open your eyes. Look at me."

Milord's face is flushed dark and rigid with passion. His eyes lock with hers as milord responds to her mental cries, driving them both to the peak and over it.

Lillian's limbs are liquid. Milord's weight rests half on her and half on the bed. The long, silken length of him, still mostly hard, is inside her. Lillian tentatively contracts the walls of her chamber, rocking her hips ever so slightly, feeling him, exploring him, adjusting to the strangeness of him.

"Lillian, what do you?" Milord's voice rumbles through his chest and against her breasts.

The words bring about abrupt and absolute stillness in Lillian. *Five Warriors take me, what was I thinking?* "I beg pardon, milord, I was not thinking."

"I did not inquire what you were not doing. I wish to know what you were doing. In the

future, do not force me to repeat myself.” Milord is impatient, harsh.

Caught. Caught. Caught. Milord’s ceiling is far above and shadowed. Into that dim space Lilian yields her mortified admission, “Feeling milord.”

Milord’s muscles relax, and Lilian has the odd sense he may be smiling. “What you feel, does it please you?”

“Yes milord,” Lilian admits, closing her eyes against her embarrassment.

Moments pass as the stars turn over head and their skin cools. Eventually milord loses his stiffness and moves completely off Lilian. Rising, he passes through a discretely recessed door.

The freshening closet. I will require it soon.

The vast, coldly sparkling darkness presses heavily against the clear chamber walls. Suddenly vulnerable, Lilian disentangles the sheet that was once so smoothly laid and pulls it over her. The sheet offers the comforting illusion that it can shield her from the overwhelming vista and, by association, the overwhelming events of the evening and the day.

“Are you chilled, Lilian?” The voice comes from the now open door as milord returns. He is garbed in a soft knit robe of the Cartouche’s trademark scarlet.

“Yes, milord,” Lilian replies as she shifts to a sitting position. Is it sufficient? Milord has entered the chamber. Stricture dictates she come to attention.

“I will increase the chamber temperature. In the future, do not cover yourself without permission.” Milord collects his slate as he speaks.

“Yes, milord,” Lilian acknowledges as she releases the fragile shield of soft linen. “I beg pardon, milord. May I retire for a few moments?”

“Yes, Lilian. Take a hot shower to warm yourself.” Milord dismisses her, his attention on his slate.

“My thanks, milord,” Lilian offers as she scrambles from the bed and into the refuge of the freshening closet.

Sumptuous, no other word suffices for lavishly appointed chamber of glass, tile, stone and chrome. Hot water from a dozen jets comforts, eases and warms Lilian as she sits on the black marble bench mindlessly tracing the scarlet and gold veins that wander through the stone.

You cannot remain here. Milord is waiting. Get Up.

The towels are heavy and plush. Lilian regrets she cannot retain one. The bedchamber is dimmer than the freshening closet. Lilian stands briefly backlit, allowing her eyes to adjust. Milord reclines on the bed, slate in hand, fingers moving rapidly, engrossed. Lilian goes to the console table, sifting her garments, searching. Damp added to the

dishevelment of her hair is going to make it impossible to manage in the morning.

"What do you, Lilian?" The quiet tones are curious. Milord does not sound displeased by the distraction of her movements.

"Searching for my slate bag, milord," Lilian explains. "There is a brush within. I believe I left it in the salon. May I retrieve it?"

"There are a dozen brushes in the freshening closet. Discover one that suits," milord instructs.

At his words, Lilian abandons her search and turns toward the closet. As the door recesses, Milord speaks again, "Lilian."

"Yes, milord?" Lilian responds, her mind on a brush.

"Do not tarry. Choose a brush and return," milord has yielded all the grace he intends to this night.

Brush in hand, Lilian returns quickly. After a moment's hesitation, she settles on the side of the bed to the left of milord. Her feet on the floor, back to milord, Lilian leans forward and collects her hair into a fall she can gather in her hands and work.

"You have a lovely ass, Lilian," milord speaks softly. "Nonetheless, I prefer you to sit at the foot of the bed, facing me."

He did not voice that! Do not. Do not. Obey milord's will. I am the sum of my ancestors.

"Yes, milord," Lilian murmurs obediently as she settles in the bottom corner of the bed. Keeping her eyes lowered, Lilian gathers her legs beneath her and begins to work her hair.

I am the foundation of my family. Ignore it. It matters naught. You have been naked with a man before. Not like this. Honor is my blade and shield. Lilian forces her inner dialog to silence, submerging the riot of emotion with the control of her discipline.

The chamber is quiet except for the soft tapping of milord's slate. The working of her hair is soothing and familiar. After a half period of diligent effort the tangles and snarls are subdued into glossy waves. Shaking her hair back behind her shoulders Lilian returns to the freshening closet to check her work and replace the brush. Milord remains engrossed in the workings of his slate.

Returning to the bedchamber Lilian discovers that both milord's slate and robe are gone.

"Face the headboard and grip the carving," milord moves to the foot of the bed as he issues his instruction.

The elaborately carved headboard with its fantastic beasts and foliage offers a number of possible grips. The pillows have been pushed to one side. After a moment's

reflection Lilian kneels in the space vacated by the pillows and reaches for a hand hold below shoulder height.

The bed shifts as milord moves behind her. His hands glide down her back, through the recently groomed tresses, across her ribs, and down to her hips. The caress causes Lilian's breath to catch and her hips to sway. An ache forms between her legs.

Milord's knees spread hers, his hands tilt her hips, and suddenly her torso and arms are stretched uncomfortably. Milord's hands cover hers, the length of his torso against her back. Milord's sex stirs against her buttocks. Warm breath whispers along her neck, against her cheek. Her hands are lifted and redirected to different grips. Now her weight is easily distributed between her legs and arms.

Milord's hands release hers and move to caress her breasts. The clever fingers tease and arouse her nipples, bringing them to aching peaks while his warm mouth nibbles delightfully along her neck. Milord's hands voyage lower to her abdomen where one lingers to pull her tightly against him.

Milord's rapidly hardening shaft rubs urgently between her buttocks. The other hand moves lower. Those clever fingers are rubbing, probing, taunting the nubbin of flesh at the core of her sex and then stroking downwards, inwards. Her sex swells and moistens as Lilian moves against the tormenting hand and fingers. Milord's fingers play ruthlessly along her sex, driving her to arch her back and press, writhing, against milord's erection.

Another shift, Lilian's arms stretch as her hips are moved to accommodate the coming penetration. There is no slow rhythmic glide this time. It is a hard drive up and into her well slicked opening. No build of momentum. Instead an immediate strong, thrusting rhythm that causes Lilian to tighten and buck.

Lilian wishes milord deeper, faster. Once again responding to her unspoken urging, or perhaps his own driving desire, milord pounds into her hot and throbbing channel pushing her once again to the brink and then over it. As Lilian begins to shudder in release, milord grips her hips to hold her convulsing core still for one final, wild thrust.

Somehow Lilian is lying on her face, a slow pleasant throb between her legs. Somewhere inside, she is shocked by her abandon. It is remote sensibility. Mostly she is stunned by the pleasure of milord's attentions. *I had no notion.* Nothing in Lilian's experience has prepared her for such overwhelming sensations. Being milord's plaything may have its advantages.

Milord?

A sound, a movement and her attention is drawn to the table where her garments rest. Milord is standing there, once again robed, her lingerie in his hands. A frown darkens milord's features.

"These do not please me, Lilian. Do not use them again." Milord's harshness matches his expression.

"Yes, milord," Lilian acknowledges. Her pleasant languor evaporates in the face of milord's displeasure. *Everything else is the same or similar. What will please him?*

Something of her thoughts may have shown on her face. Or maybe it is that uncanny prescience that had taken to him preeminence at an early age and kept him there.

"They are all like this are they not?" Milord's gaze is intent.

"Yes, milord," Lilian admits, gathering her knees under her. *He is not pleased.*

"No matter, I will have what pleases me delivered to your worksite tomorrow. Until then, do without," milord's countenance eases as he speaks.

"Yes, milord," Lilian responds as she cringes inwardly. She is familiar with the vulgar styles of lingerie appropriate for a doxy. It is heavy on strings and light on fabric. She has not tested it, but it appears uncomfortable.

"When you have gathered yourself and dressed, you may go." Milord dons his robe once again as he settles back on the bed.

Lucius watches Lilian's exit with certain satisfaction. This exceptional situation offers serious challenges, but the benefits are proving to be much greater than he anticipated.