

Changing Priorities

A Swarm Story

By

Quantum Mechanic

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This work is intended for entertainment only, not education, and everything I've written is based on my imagination coupled with my interpretation of things I've read in reference materials, or popular myths. Just so you know, I'm not mafiosi. Neither am I Catholic, nor Italian. I'm an amateur, and I certainly don't intend to offend anyone. If I got something wrong, take it as an expression of my ignorance, and please, do not take offense.

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Chapter 1

The seemingly unending stream of penitents had finally dwindled to nothing, and Father Nicholas O'Donnell had just finished a personal prayer for strength. He was preparing to leave the confessional booth, when he heard the door open and shut again on the other side of the screen. Sighing quietly to himself, he reclaimed his seat and waited.

Presently, he heard a warm contralto begin, "Bless me father for I have sinned. It has been two years since my last confession..."

Twenty minutes later, a much shaken Father Nicholas still sat in the booth, once again alone with his thoughts, and his God.

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"How much can we trust this... information? Are we absolutely certain that this parish priest... Nicholas is his name?... isn't just breaking under the strain of his duties?" queried the aging Cardinal.

"We are as sure as we can be, under the circumstances and... he acted properly in seeking guidance before responding... we believe that he hoped for clear instructions from Rome," the Archbishop responded.

"It appears that he will get them. How many others know of this?"

“Nicholas swears he hasn’t spoken to anyone other than his Bishop. Of course, now, at least one more person at every level knows, up to and including yourself.”

“Even higher up than me. The Holy Father himself has become involved. In fact, it seems he has his own sources of information. He intervened even as we attempted to insulate him from it!”

“Really? You don’t suppose...”

“He didn’t say. He did, however, issue some *very* explicit instructions, and made it clear that any who opposed them would be excommunicated!”

“May I ask what those instructions were?”

“Read them for yourself. Some of them were for you,” the Cardinal said, pushing a file folder across the table.

Several minutes later, the Archbishop looked up at the Cardinal and said, “This is a complex and expensive response to what was a simple request. It has major security implications as well. There is also the consideration that some of the people involved are, technically, criminals.”

The Cardinal nodded, “Yes, but you know we have no choice. God chooses his own tools. It is not ours to criticize.”

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Father Nicholas was afraid, but having just ended three days of constant discussion and prayer with his Bishop, it was clear that he had no choice but to proceed as directed.

On entering the rectory, he unfurled a silk banner and hung it, facing outward, in the window that looked down on the street. The banner displayed an image of the Archangel Michael, sword raised high, preparing to decapitate Satan, represented as a dragon.

This should get the message across, he said to himself, silently. We didn’t have a prearranged signal, but she said they’d be watching.

It was a long day, broken only by the occasional confession of minor sins. When it was over, he was almost disappointed that the mysterious woman had failed to appear. As he walked slowly toward the rectory, wondering how long it would take to re-establish contact, he was approached by a familiar face from the neighborhood. It was a boy whom he had seen frequently, but not frequently enough, at mass.

When he reached Nicholas, the boy handed him an envelope, and said, "A man in a fancy suit told me to deliver this to you." The boy then ran off.

Curious, Nicholas opened the envelope as he continued to walk to the rectory. It was an invitation.

Father Nicholas:

My family and I would be pleased if you would honor us with your presence at dinner this evening. I have arranged for your transportation, and the car will arrive at the rectory at approximately 5:30 PM today.

I understand that this invitation is irregular, and given on short notice, but I am hoping you were expecting something like this. If I am mistaken, or if you are simply uncomfortable with these arrangements, please simply send our driver away, and accept our apology.

Sincerely looking forward to meeting and dining with you, I am

Jos. M. Fanelli.

As he finished reading, he opened the rectory door and glanced at the clock on the mantle. *It's five o'clock already!* He rushed to his quarters and hurried through a "whore's bath" in order to remove the worst of the day's sweat. Throwing on a clean robe, he practically ran down the stairs, reaching the bottom just as someone began to knock on the entry door.

He opened the door to find the biggest man he'd ever seen in his life, filling the door frame. No, not filling it, rather completely occluding it, because the guy would have had to turn sideways and duck, just to get through the door. He wore an expensive Italian suit, with some suspicious lumps under the coat. As if that weren't worrisome enough, when the man spoke he did so in a deep, booming voice.

"My name is Marco. I'm here for Father Nicholas," he announced.

"Th.. that would be me," Nicholas stuttered. "You must be pleased to have been named after an author of one of the gospels," he went on, lamely.

"Yes, sir. Are you ready to go sir?"

"As ready as I'm going to get," he responded, as Marco turned to lead him toward a huge black limousine. "My, my. There was no need to go to this much expense."

"It is nothing, Father," Marco said. "The limo belongs to my boss."

Nicholas nodded his head silently. It would not be unusual for someone in Joe Fanelli's position to own or have access to such equipment.

Grinning, Marco nodded and said, "Please fasten your seat belt Father."

"Why would a Mafia Don want to do this?"

Marco shook his head and replied, "Father, I am only an employee. I don't have all of the answers you seek. I might have some of them, but I don't have the boss' permission to share them with you. Please be patient, and I'm sure that he will satisfy your curiosity."

Father Nicholas fell silent, but although the limo was appointed well beyond luxurious, the ride became ever more uncomfortable as they left his parish and entered an industrialized area. It didn't help that they drove straight into a warehouse and that the warehouse doors closed behind them.

The car stopped near the door of an office enclosure, and Marco got out speaking to two others, who were just as physically impressive, standing near that door. Returning, he assisted Father Nicholas out of the car and walked over to the office door with him.

The office had a large glass window, looking out over the warehouse floor. Nicholas could see through the glass that there was a large conference table surrounded by chairs. *Odd place to hold a family dinner*, he observed. As they approached the door, he could see no other entrance to the room, but oddly, there appeared to be a circle of bright, silvery metal on the floor, just inside.

Stopping just outside the door, Marco turned to him and said, "Please enter the room Father, and take a seat on the far side of the table."

Nicholas nodded and turned back to the door. As he stepped through the door frame, he stepped directly onto the center of the silver disk, and for a moment, his world spun. When his vertigo ended, he looked around to find himself in a totally different room from the one he'd been about to enter! A strong hand grasped his arm and pulled him further into the room, and it was a good thing. A heartbeat later, Marco appeared in the middle of the silver disk.

On recovering his balance, Nicholas looked up to see that the hand, which had kept him from being steamrolled by Marco, belonged to a tall aristocratic-looking gentleman, who appeared to be in his late forties.

"Good evening, and welcome to our temporary home, Father Nicholas," the man intoned in a rich baritone voice. "I am Joseph Fanelli. Please come with me."

"What just happened? Where am I? How did I get here? I was just walking into an office on the warehouse floor, and now..."

"All will become clear at dinner," Joe interrupted. "Come, sit and let us have an apéritif first. I trust you had a comfortable journey?" he queried, leading

Nicholas into a nicely-appointed study.

“The limousine was very comfortable, of course,” Nicholas answered stiffly, “but the trip itself was rather unsettling.”

“My apologies,” Joe responded, “but it was necessary for security reasons.” After showing his guest to a comfortable chair, he collected two glasses from a tray on a nearby table. Delivering one of them to Nicholas, he said, “This is a very nice Vermouth.” Both men began to sip.

In between sips, Father Nicholas asked, “Shouldn’t we to begin discussing my reason for being here?”

“Not just now,” Joe said, waving him off that topic. “Dinner will be ready soon, and such talk goes much better on a full stomach. Instead, I will tell you that I’ve heard many good things about you, but I want you to tell me about yourself, in your own words. Would you like some olives?”

“Ah... no thank you. All right... from the beginning, then, I guess... I was born in Boston, to a family of Irish immigrants. As the youngest son in a large family, I learned early on about limited resources, and the need to make my own way in the world. I didn’t have the build or the personality to be a policeman or to dream of participating in varsity or, eventually professional sports.

“My family wasn’t impoverished, but we had very little extra money, and none for college. I was an average, but not exemplary student, academically, so financial assistance for education was not in the offing. I had the fortune to finish high school during a period of relative peace, for the United States, and even the armed forces were being picky about recruiting, so a military career was also unlikely.

“My family, being solidly Catholic, was very active in the Church, and I found that I enjoyed that environment. It was only natural that I gravitated to the clergy, after graduating from high school. Many people felt that I should have waited, and gained more life experience, but I haven’t missed it.

“My current service as parish priest is my fifth assignment in thirty years with the Church, and I have been here for ten years now.”

“Do you stay in touch with your natal family?” Joe queried.

“Not as much as I should,” Nicholas answered. “In truth, my parishioners seem to be more my family, than the one into which I was born. It seems that my own most frequent confession concerns failing to adequately honor my parents.”

“As it should be,” Joe declared. “Family is important. On the other hand, families grow and change, sometimes evolving into something we don’t always

recognize. Perhaps you shouldn't beat yourself up too much. Is there anything else you wish to share?"

"I can't think of anything at the moment. No glaring misdeeds or stupendous feats of strength, bravery, or cleverness. I'm a simple parish priest, shepherding my flock, hopefully to salvation.

"That's it for me. Perhaps you would like to tell me how you became *Don Giuseppe*?"

Joe paused thoughtfully. He couldn't identify any purpose in withholding the requested information.

"I am not Sicilian, but my birth certificate indicates that my mother was Italian. I was told by others that my father also was Italian, but was conscripted by the military and died in action before he could do the honorable thing. That was all that anyone would ever tell me about him.

"Shortly after I was born, my mother was killed while crossing a busy street, by a drunk driver. It fell to my aging and infirm maternal grandparents to care for me, and truthfully, they were not up to the job. My father's family, whoever they were, was either ignorant of or uninterested in my existence. The upshot was, I was placed in a Catholic orphanage, in Chicago. My grandparents died shortly thereafter. This is all a matter of public record.

"The orphanage staff easily fit the stereotypical hard-faced Catholic sisters; but they also genuinely cared for the children they were charged with nurturing. It was not always appreciated, but they gave me discipline, education, motivation, spiritual guidance, and yes, even love, for all of the years lived with them. I participated in ROTC while in high school, and entered the Army the day after I turned eighteen. I continued my education while I served, and eventually received my commission. I spent twenty years in the Army, and took retirement at age 39 as a Lieutenant Colonel. While serving, I acquired a BS in Military Science, and an MBA.

"Following my retirement, I moved back to Chicago, on the promise of a job from a friend of a friend. My rank, education, and experience qualified me as a member of upper management, but jobs were scarce, so the offer of a position as a group supervisor with a medium sized mercantile company was a good one, although it was pretty far down the food chain. I fared well in competition for advancement, though, and I got my first my promotion after being there only six months.

In my new job I was permitted to have my own secretary, but the person who *would* have been my secretary was an older woman, who she decided that she didn't really want to break in a new boss. Since she was eligible for retirement,

she decided to leave.

“Her retirement caused me some inconvenience, but when we advertised, there were numerous applicants for her job, and she agreed to stay on long enough to get her replacement up to speed. After interviewing some thirty or so candidates, and evaluating their qualifications, I selected a young lady who was very much overqualified, having recently graduated with a BA degree in Business. Her name was Maria DiCatania.

“Miss DiCatania only lasted about a year as my secretary, for two reasons: first, as I said, she was overqualified for the job, and it wasn't long before more lucrative opportunities arose for her elsewhere in the company. Secondly, she became my wife, so for obvious reasons, she could not remain my secretary.

“It was only after we married, and I learned that her father, Vincenzo, was a ranking board member and majority stockholder in the company I worked for, that I began to notice that *everyone* who worked there had an Italian surname.

“Eventually I became Chief Operating Officer for the company, and some would say that my rise in the company food chain was meteoric. It wasn't. The DiCatanias are totally intolerant of nepotism. That is not to say they didn't take care of family - they do! But they don't put you into a position of responsibility and authority based on how closely you are related to the boss. I earned every promotion I got, just as Maria earned every one of hers.

“Only after I proved myself, by successfully running the company for several years, was I considered for expanded authority in other family business interests.

“Maria only continued working at the company for a year or two, but eventually she bowed to family pressure to begin having babies. By then I was making pretty good money, and had never had any real debt, so that was fine by me. Toward the end of my tenure as COO, I came home one day to find her sobbing, and with some difficulty, I found out that her father had been diagnosed with a rare blood disorder, a myeloma that did not respond to any kind of treatment. His prognosis was terminal in three months.

“Maria was an only child, you see - no brothers to take over the reins of family power, once the father was gone. Unknown to me, when I married into the family, I became the heir apparent. My performance in the mercantile company reinforced that status, and the effective death sentence for my father-in-law greatly accelerated his plans for me - plans about which I had known nothing.

“He actually held on for nearly a year, much to the amazement of his doctors, and in that time he made certain that I learned the nature and scope of *every* aspect of the family's businesses - including those for which the authorities hold

some antipathy . He also used the time to introduce me to his captains and lieutenants, and to make certain that they knew I would be taking over his duties. Finally, he went to great lengths to reassure Maria of his love for her - he was the last of her natal family, her mother having preceded him in death several years before.

“ I can’t say he died happy - neuropathy was a constant companion, and no one can happily suffer that much pain - but I think he was satisfied that I would effectively carry out the business responsibilities that he left in my hands, and that I would take care of Maria and our children in every way. I think that it gave him the peace of mind he needed in order to let go. As I said family is important.

“As a last request, Vincenzo insisted that I take the family name - at least for conducting in-house business - so to the world at large, I am still Joseph Fanelli, but to the *cosca*, I became *Don Giuseppe DiCatania*. And now, our conversation has carried us into the dinner hour. Won’t you follow me to the dining room?”

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Nicholas hadn’t been paying much attention to his surroundings, concentrating instead on keeping up with his host. As a consequence, he was somewhat startled on entering the dining room. The room was large, and there seemed to be few straight lines. The ceiling wasn’t flat, either, starting high over the entry, and curving down to merge into the top of the far wall. That wall was nearly completely covered by some expensive-looking drapes, apparently concealing what had to be a large picture window.

The centerpiece of the room was a huge teak table, surrounded by at least a dozen matching chairs, few of which were empty. As they entered the room, everyone stood up. Joe moved to his place, at the head of the table, and indicated that Nicholas should take the place to his right.

“Father Nicholas, I would like you to meet my family,” Joe began. “The dark-eyed beauty you see standing at the far end of the table is my wife and my love, Maria.”

“*Benvenuto*, Father,” she greeted him, smiling. “Thank you for accepting our hospitality”

Nicholas recognized her voice, and gave Joe a quizzical look.

“Yes Father,” Joe smiled, “It was Maria who delivered our request to you. I might add, it was principally because of her *gentle urging* that we concluded we needed to make that request.”

Turning back to the table, Joe went on. “You’ve already met Marco.” Nicholas nodded to the giant seated to the right of Maria. “The equally large fellow on

Maria's left is Frank."

Nicholas gave Frank a salutary wave, and queried Joe, "I am curious. Is it customary for you to take your meals with your employees in attendance?"

Joe laughed. "Marco and Frank are *much* more than employees," he said. "I told you, this is a family dinner. They are family. In fact they are Maria's first cousins, on her mother's side."

Joe continued introducing family members, hop-scotching around the table in order to do so, finally ending with the two children seated to the right of Nicholas. "And these hooligans," Joe said, gesturing to the children, "are my offspring. Maria's, too, when she claims them." Maria stuck her tongue out at him. "Please meet my daughter, Rosa Maria." The little girl stood and curtsied to the priest. "And my son, Michael Vincenzo."

The older boy stood and offered his right hand, saying "Welcome to our table, Father." Nicholas was impressed with the manners displayed by the children, and willingly clasped the boy's hand in friendship.

"And now," Joe concluded, "Father Nicholas, would you be so kind as to say grace?" Everyone around the table linked hands with their neighbors, and bowed their heads expectantly.

Nicholas nodded, and offered up a heartfelt prayer of thanks, and a plea for blessings on the food. When he said the final *Amen*, everyone sat, and food was passed around the table. *It's just like any large family*, he marveled. *Just to look at them, you wouldn't know they were mafiosi!*

There was the usual Babel of conversation and laughter as the meal was consumed. At length the meal was done, and Maria stood and announced, "We are having ice cream for dessert! Everyone please keep your seats!"

She drafted Frank to help clear the dirty dishes, and the two of them disappeared for a moment. While they were gone, Joe called Michael over and whispered something to him.

Maria and Frank returned with trays of bowls containing the frozen confection. Moving down opposite sides of the table, they distributed their bounty, and finally took their own seats. As they did, Michael left his, and approached the wall behind his mother. In a surprise move, he drew open the drapes, exposing a very large picture window.

Nicholas didn't notice at first, but when he did, he felt as if his heart had stopped. He didn't remember it, but years later, others at the table would swear that he crossed himself and started muttering in Latin. The view was spectacular, with the harshness of the black sky and whites and grays of the lunar landscape

offset completely by the gentle blues, greens, and browns of the mother planet, fully centered in the window.

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When Nicolas regained his composure, somewhat, he looked to Joe for an explanation.

"After hearing what Maria told you, you didn't really expect to find us living on Earth, did you?" Joe asked, archly.

Nicholas took his time responding. "I still don't see how I could *be* here. I just got out of your limo and walked into an office..."

"Where you stepped onto a transporter terminus," Joe interrupted, "which immediately sent you *here*."

Looking out the window, Nicholas sighed and began again. "As difficult as it is to believe, I can see that we're on the Moon, but that just raises more questions."

"I understand," Joe responded. "Let me tell you a few things that may address some of those questions." He paused for a moment, then continued, "Part of what may be confusing you is where *here* is.

"You will recall that I welcomed you to our *temporary* home. It is temporary in the sense that my family doesn't actually live here, at least on any full time basis. We have homes in other places that we use most of the time. Those places are, however, much too far away to serve as a venue for this meeting.

"It is also temporary in that we are not in a building or fixed facility. We are aboard a spacecraft, and we will be moving very soon. There is far too much Confederacy activity in the space surrounding us to risk staying too long. I am uncomfortable with even staying the duration of our meeting, especially with my entire family aboard, but we have all agreed that the risk is necessary.

"And *that* will do as a segue into the real purpose of our inviting you here. Do you have a response to our request, or do we need to discuss it further?"

Nicholas nodded. "Yes to both. I have a response for you, and there are things... conditions... that we need to discuss."

"Conditions?" queried Joe. Looking at Maria, he said, "You, Marco, and Frank, with us, in the study." Maria nodded and rose to hustle the children and other relatives off to other parts. As she did that, Joe left his chair, and with a gesture, indicated that those named should follow him.

On reaching the study, Joe prepared and served a glass of Chianti for each

member of the group. Raising his glass, he saluted his family and their guest, and then indicated that everyone should take a seat, as he did so himself. Maria and Nicholas seated themselves, but Frank and Marco preferred to stand, one on each side of the door.

Old habits die hard, Nicholas mused. *These guys are always alert for trouble, even in the sanctity of their home!* Then he remembered that they weren't exactly in someone's house.

"So tell us about these *conditions*," Joe bid the priest, opening the discussion.

"I don't actually know about all of them," Nicholas replied glumly, extracting a large, sealed manila envelope from his robe and passing it to Joe. "I've been told of a *few* of the ones that apply directly to me. I *do* know that there are several more, and that they come directly from the Vatican."

Looking at the envelope, Joe was disappointed, but not crushed. "Frank," he said, handing him the envelope. "Please, take this and make sufficient copies for everyone in this room. Allow no one else to see it." Frank took the envelope and left to do the job.

Directing his attention back to Nicholas, Joe said, "I really didn't expect this level of involvement by the Church."

Nicholas shrugged, and replied "I couldn't just disappear. I have responsibilities that have to be met. Also, I am required to obtain the blessing of my bishop before moving to a new post. *He* felt that your request was important enough to escalate it even higher. Truthfully, though, I did *not* expect the Holy Father to get involved!"

Joe almost dropped his glass. "The Pope *himself* knows about us?" he almost shouted.

"Where did you think those *conditions* came from?" Nicholas asked, smiling. He went on, "Of course, I know that only because my bishop told me." He sat back, sipping his wine. Everyone else sat back and made small talk, sipping their wine, as Joe silently considered the possible ramifications of Nicholas' revelation. *This could easily get out of hand!*

Presently Frank returned with the requested copies, and passed them around to those present, giving the originals back to Joe.

"Let's not try to discuss this thing piecemeal. Instead let's read it completely, then spend some time discussing it," Joe said. Everyone nodded their agreement and started reading.

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The opening paragraphs of the document were actually a message to Joe from the Pope. Not by name, of course, since Father Nicholas hadn't known his name until today, but it was addressed to the leader of the *cosca* who had made the request for Nicholas to minister to them.

Reading the message, Joe was both worried and grateful. Grateful, that the Church was going to grant the request, but worried, because that grant was going to come with strings attached. It seemed that His Holiness had taken a *much* longer view of things than Joe had anticipated.

Because Joe was the leader of what would likely be the sole surviving splinter of humanity that still practiced religion, His Holiness assigned him personally responsibility for the ultimate survival of the Church. Father Nicholas was to be in charge of all things religious.

The plan called for some major changes in the structure of the church, as well as its customs and the way that the religion was to be practiced: changes that would likely meet some resistance from the more conservative members of the *cosca*, not to mention the clergy.

Two of the more likely sticking points all had to do with the institution and practice of marriage. He looked up to see Maria's eyes boring into him. He knew that she had just reached the same point in the text as he did, but he couldn't read her expression. That was worrisome.

Glancing around, his eyes settled on Father Nicholas, who had blanched and appeared to be trembling. Frank and Marco were relatively stoic.

Forcing his attention back to the immediate task, Joe noted that the plan also called on him, and the *cosca*, to participate in a significantly larger evacuation effort than he was presently prepared to undertake. Meeting those demands would be fraught with peril for the family.

He had to re-read several sections of the plan in order to reassure himself that he didn't misinterpret them, and by the time he finished and looked around, it was clear that everyone else was waiting for him to say something.

In answer to the questioning looks, he said "I don't think we can deal with this without some further thought. Father Nicholas, would you remain with us tonight, and meet with us again in the morning?" Seeing Nicholas nod his agreement, Joe continued, "Marco, please have the pilot take us to a safe zone for the next 24 hours. Frank, would you please show the Father to our guest room?" Without waiting for an answer, he rose, took Maria by the hand, and led her out of the room.

Chapter 2

Entering the stateroom he shared with Maria, Joe shed his coat and loosened his tie. He then poured two brandies and handed one to her.

It was a nice stateroom. Much nicer than one would expect on a spaceship. Not as large, perhaps, as even a child's bedroom in a normal home, but large by ship standards. It contained the equivalent of a full-sized bed, a wall-mounted video screen and communications system, a small table and two comfortable chairs.

"Lights, low," Joe said, as he allowed himself to fall into one of the chairs. The AI monitoring the room was not nearly as advanced as those of the Confederacy, but it was perfectly capable of recognizing speech, and turning down the lights.

Maria, sipping her drink, gracefully took the other chair, but didn't make any other moves to get more comfortable. Her poker face disturbed Joe. It was perhaps the first time in their relationship that he felt she wasn't being truly open with him.

"Well, *cuore mia*, tell me the truth," he said, simply.

"I am afraid," she replied, with downcast eyes. "When we do this, you may find another who will occupy your heart, and I will be lost."

"It is not *when*, but *if*," he declared. "I am not religious enough to be cowed, even by the Pope, and if we *were* to agree, none could ever displace you in my heart."

"No," she shook her head, "we have no choice. His plan is sound and based both on logic and faith. I believe he has divine guidance on this. If we abandon our faith, just to save ourselves, we will be no better than the animals of the Confederacy. Already our people are showing the signs."

"Perhaps we can negotiate a more acceptable solution."

"His Holiness will not negotiate. The solution is already acceptable, because it is mandatory, and it makes sense. We will learn to live with it. I will bear you more children. You will take other wives, and love them, and give them children as well. As long as I have your love and respect, I will be content."

Joe was floored. Maria's capitulation was totally unexpected. He had never considered the possibility of taking another wife, even in his wildest fantasy, and he had expected her to be livid at the suggestion, even if it *did* come from the Pope. Hearing her acquiesce so completely, to what he felt was a ludicrous idea, left him dumbfounded.

She rose and set her drink on the table, then walked over to him to sit on his lap. Wrapping her arms around his neck and burying her face in his shoulder, she said: "Just remember that *no* other woman can love you as much as I do. Treat me well, and I will faithfully continue to lead your household. I will be mother to all of your children *and* all of your wives."

His maverick mind betrayed him. He couldn't help but find humor in the situation. "What if I take one who is older than you? Will you still be her mother?"

"You'd better not!" she exclaimed, hitting him on the shoulder. "If she's much older than me, she's probably beyond having children, and your excuse for taking her is nonexistent. If she's close to my age, she'll want to run things, and I don't think you'll want to live with the resulting chaos! Better you should find *young* women who are willing to listen to those who are wiser. They will also give you a better chance for making babies."

"Never mind, dear. It was just a wild thought. You know how my mind works."

Their talk continued for hours, and Joe resisted as one would expect that a respectable man should, but Maria was adamant. In the end, he had no sensible argument that could stand against her logic and faith. He finally agreed to support the plan, then took her in his arms and made sweet love to her, before falling asleep, exhausted.

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Frank and Marco, being unmarried, had no ready source of female advice on the matter. That was not to say that they didn't enjoy (frequently!) female companionship. They were actually pretty popular with the young ladies of their acquaintance, and rarely had to spend a night alone, unless it was what they wanted.

The thing was, Joe had insisted that the plan stay secret, for the moment, preventing both them from asking for a female opinion on the plan. They were thus stuck with each other in trying to sort things out.

Being healthy, virile men, they didn't have any problems with the idea of sanctioned polygyny: it just wasn't something with which they'd had any experience. As cousins, their upbringing was similar to Maria's, and both knew that if either of their fathers had proposed such an arrangement, their mothers would have been serving his *heart* at the next meal!

For all their human failings however, both men were devout Catholics, and if the Pope said it was right, then it was right. The entire DiCatania clan would feel the same way, although reactions would be mixed because of the break with ingrained traditions. If Joe felt differently, the plan would fail, because of split

loyalties, and very likely the family would collapse.

After discussing it at length, they jointly decided to advise Joe to go with the plan, in order to preserve unity within the *cosca*. That decided, they began discussing how to implement other parts of the plan. Some aspects were risky, probably even plain dangerous, and most would be expensive to implement. Additional resources would have to be obtained, and a large number of people would have to be recruited. The family just didn't have enough of either to do the job on its own, in the required time.

...

Father Nicholas had *no one* to turn to for advice, but his God. When he left his bishop, he knew he would be leaving Earth behind, but the bishop had not mentioned *any* of the more radical aspects of the plan.

As primary liaison between the church and the *cosca*, he would be responsible in some way, for the lives and physical as well as spiritual well-being of many, many people. Ultimately, probably as many as the Pope himself. There were many complex issues to be settled, solutions to negotiate, details to see to. He knew he wouldn't be able to do it all himself. He was going to need help. Even with help, he was afraid that he would fail, and that didn't even take into account the shock that he'd sustained about the changes required in some basic institutions.

He prayed for hours, asking for strength and guidance, but he knew, short of direct intervention by God himself, he was locked in. It was going to happen. Eventually, he lay down to rest, but he laid awake half the night, waiting for a sign.

...

The next morning Nicholas enjoyed another meal with the family, before the smaller group adjourned once again to the study. Five very somber people silently shared a single carafe of coffee, until Joe, as de facto leader, called for the discussion to resume.

He picked up his copy of the documents under consideration, and said, "I presume that everyone has now had an opportunity to read, think about, and sleep on these demands." Everyone silently nodded in the affirmative.

Looking at Nicholas, he asked, "Did you know about the more... *extreme* parts of this plan?"

"No," Nicholas replied, obviously unhappily. "I was told only that I would be going with you. I spent much of the night in prayer though, as I expect His Holiness did before he formulated this plan. In the absence of some sign from God to the

contrary, I feel I am bound to comply with these requirements.”

Joe nodded his acknowledgement, and looked at Marco. Marco, for his part, had been watching Maria, was more worried about her reaction than anything Father Nicholas might have said. He knew his cousin, and her temper, well, but he was at a loss to figure out her position on matters, from the way her smoky gaze fixed on Joe. Feeling Joe’s eyes on him, he glanced at Frank, and got a nod.

“Frank and I have talked about this in great detail. It will be difficult to do much of this. We will need a great deal of help from people outside the *cosca*, in order to accomplish these goals. That or we will have to expand the *cosca* very quickly. If we don’t accept the plan, word of it gets out, it will divide us and the family will collapse. Our purpose for leaving the Earth will not be fulfilled. We believe that you should support the plan.” Frank nodded his agreement.

“It appears that I am alone in my hesitation,” Joe murmured, looking at his wife.

Maria left her chair and approached her husband. Taking both his hands in hers, she said, “No. We are all reluctant to accept the changes, but for different reasons, none of us feel that there is a real choice. The future of the DiCatania family is in your hands, my love. If we collapse, because we cannot agree on this, all our hopes for saving Earth are lost.”

Joe sighed. It was clear that she had the right of it. His only fear was that she might later doubt his love, and that jealousy would destroy his home. *I guess that’s a chance I’ll have to take.*

“All right,” he replied, shaking off his fears, “Father, can you stay with us for a few days? Do you need to go back, before we undertake this effort?”

“I can stay, for as long as necessary,” Nicholas replied, shakily, “but eventually I will need to report back to the Church.”

Joe stood and hugged his wife, then released her and shook himself to relieve some of the tension. “Marco,” he said, “have the pilot take us home. Frank set up a family meeting. Everyone fourteen and older... and bring in at least the *Capi* from the other colonies, as well as their wives. I want it to happen at the evening meal on the day following our return.”

...

Of course, not *everyone* could be there, but at least the off-world contingent was fully represented. Joe had to admit that it wouldn’t be practical to pull staff off Earth for the meeting, and leaks might be a problem if it had been. The attendees milled around, greeting each other as old friends do, waiting to find out why they’d been called in.

As the noise level subsided and people began to pay more attention to the front of the room, Joe looked out the windows at the world they'd come to regard as "home." In fact, that was what most of the people called it - *Home* - with a capital H. Joe had pitched for it to be called *Catania*, in honor of his late father-in-law's family name, and no one opposed it, but still it was *Home*, in everyday use.

Marco was with him, and a few minutes before the scheduled time, the rest of the party arrived - Maria, Father Nicholas, and Frank. The five had discussed how to approach the announcement at length, during the journey home, and had decided that the best approach would be to divide the parts up and have different people present them. As leader of the *cosca*, Joe would set the stage and introduce the speakers.

The time had come. Joe nodded to the other four, and began tapping his spoon on his water glass to get the crowd's attention. When it was mostly silent, he began to speak.

"We don't often come together, so many of us, in one place. When we do it is always a mixed blessing. We get to see friends and loved ones from whom we have long been separated. We hear of, and remember those who have passed on. We give away our daughters in marriage. We send our sons off to start families of their own. There are many reasons why we gather this way, but the events are still rare in our lives.

"Today we are gathered to receive and greet a new member of our extended family. Some of you may know him, or know of him. I have myself determined that he is a man of great character. To tell you a little more about him, and why we wish to invite him into our midst, I give you my beautiful wife, Maria."

Polite people everywhere will applaud any introduction, but Maria was truly loved by all of those present. It took some minutes for things to quiet enough for her to begin speaking.

"You all know that, for some time, I have been concerned for the spiritual well-being of our people. My dear husband shares in my concern, and agrees that we do not wish to become as soulless and self-serving as the heathens who have gone to the Confederacy.

"He took my case to you, some months ago, and you agreed to indulge my wish to find and recruit a shepherd for this flock. Our investigations were exhaustive, and the returns were meager, at first, but eventually we did find one man against whom nothing could be said. We found a man about whom everyone who knew him agreed was a good man. Many wanted to say that he was a Saint in the making.

"I approached this man, and asked him to be our shepherd, and I think the idea

shocked him a little.” Maria paused and gave the crowd a small smile. “I suppose it’s not every day that a confession contains a plea that you abandon Earth and go immediately into the heavens!” The crowd found that remark amusing, and it was a few minutes before the laughter subsided enough to go on.

“He couldn’t give me an answer immediately,” she continued, “and truthfully, it wouldn’t have been reasonable to expect one. He did promise to think about it and get back to us.

“Our simple request rose to heights unintended, in the Church, and His Holiness, the Pope himself, took an interest. The Pope’s clear vision was that some of the old traditions have no place in worlds that are not Earth. New environments demand new behavioral guidelines and standards of conduct.

“It was His Holiness that decided to grant the blessing for which we asked, and it was he who decided that there would be a new branch of the Church, and that this new branch needed its own Patriarch. He has also placed additional burdens on our shoulders, and has sent our new Patriarch to us with a message.

“Some of you knew him as Father Nicholas O’Donnell, a parish priest in the city that was our home on Earth. Those who did will remember him as a good man, always seeking to improve the lives of those around him. When I approached him, he was still Father Nicholas, and he tells me that he still prefers ‘Father’ to ‘Your Beatitude.’” She paused momentarily and looked over the crowd before continuing. “Personally, so do I.” The laughter again made her pause. “So without further ado, I give you His Beatitude, Patriarch of the Milky Way, Father Nicholas!”

As Maria took her seat, and Nicholas made his way to the podium, the applause thundered. Perhaps it was not an appropriate greeting for a clergyman, in the traditional sense, but it was clear that it was intended to honor both Maria and their new spiritual guide. At the podium he examined his notes and marveled at the love and respect these people willingly gave to their leaders. Eventually things quieted down again, and he was able to speak.

“Hello and good morning! With a birth name like O’Donnell, it’s pretty obvious I wasn’t born Italian, but to paraphrase Jimmy Buffett, I got here as quickly as I could. “The audience responded with a smattering of polite laughter.

“I appreciate the warm welcome, and I hope to meet as many of you as possible in the next few hours. I know that when you leave here, and disperse to your home worlds, it will be difficult to make personal contact again.

“In the coming weeks, I will ask Don Giuseppe to provide each of you with printed copies of the message I will be delivering, as well as selected portions of

the text of the assignment that I have been given by His Holiness.

“I am not here to tell you of the wholesale slaughter of thousands of years of Roman Catholic tradition, rather I am to tell you that, because we live in a different set of circumstances, *some few* of those traditions have been modified, or declared ‘not applicable.’

“As Maria observed, my elevation from lowly parish priest to Patriarch is evidence that His Holiness has established a plan that goes well beyond the request that you made. The plan calls not only for providing you with the guidance you requested, but for more rapid expansion of the ranks of the faithful than any of you envisioned, as well as formulae for accomplishing that expansion.

“It also calls for concurrent expansion of the priesthood, in order to continue to provide an adequate level of guidance to the growing population. Even without the requirement to expand our population, it is clear to me from Don Giuseppe’s description of your colonies, that one priest would not suffice. We would be growing the body of clergy, even if we weren’t considering a rapidly expanding population.

“Now before moving away from generalities and more toward specifics, I need to give you some insight into the Pope’s thinking.

“The Confederacy is working with humanity for its own reasons, not for our benefit. They have unilaterally decided that religious faith is irrelevant to their society, and therefore they have made no allowance any of Earth’s established religions or Christian denominations to field clergy with the volunteers or their concubines.

“That is not to say that religion isn’t tolerated, but it isn’t accommodated either. The Confederacy isn’t disposed to using evacuation resources to move and distribute clergy off-world. Clergymen can go, if their CAP scores are high enough to volunteer, or if a volunteer offers to take one as a concubine, but both of those options have issues.

“It is difficult for a clergyman who truly wants to function primarily as a clergyman, to achieve a CAP score high enough to volunteer, and if he did, he would be required to devote his duty hours to secular work. There is no Chaplain Corps in the Confederacy’s military structure. As a concubine, a clergyman would be able to function only insofar as his sponsor allowed it. That is *not* an acceptable situation.

“Without the clergy to help guide them, the faithful are more easily isolated, led astray, and lost. Without sufficient numbers of the faithful to support them, the clergy cannot be sustained in any practical way. These are the motivating

factors that the Holy Father has shared with me through his instructions.

“The early estimates given by the Confederacy for evacuation of Earth led us to believe that perhaps thirty percent of the population could be saved. It now appears that those estimates were much too optimistic. Some say the number could be as low as three percent. In any case, it isn’t enough, and the volunteer/concubine system doesn’t provide for survival of adequate numbers of the faithful *or* their clergy.

“To combat this situation, the plan establishes a goal of rapid population expansion for the *cosca*, or whatever you ultimately decide to call our society. That expansion is to be accomplished in several ways. First, the existing Papal mandate against use of artificial methods of contraception remains in effect.” As might be expected, this caused some groans from the crowd, but Nicholas raised his hand, and the complaints were silenced.

“Do you not see the reasoning? If it is desired to increase the population, it is senseless to engage in behaviors that are contrary to that goal! Contraception means fewer babies, when more babies are needed to grow our society! This is one lesson we should learn from the Confederacy.

“The remaining declarations are changes of position that apply only to off-world communicants.

“Second, whenever the balance of males and females in the populations permits, the new standard of matrimony is polygyny. To be more specific, His Holiness has declared that a man may have up to four wives at any one time, and that furthermore, he is duty-bound to marry and have children with as many as he can support, up to that limit.” That announcement caused a major uproar, as offended wives and prospective wives, and perhaps some older male members - probably the fathers of daughters - of the gathering, objected. Again Nicholas raised his hand and the crowd quieted.

“Use your minds,” he said, “and remember our objective. A woman can usually only have one baby at a time, with some exceptions for multiple births, but a man could sire children in a new woman nearly every day, if he can find a fertile one. If your objective is more births, polygyny makes more sense than monogamy. The Church already recognizes and accepts polygynous marriages in certain countries on Earth, for reasons of tradition. The expansion of human populations off-Earth is a much better reason.

“Third, you will note my use of the term ‘marriage’ in referring to the new standard of acceptable relationships. As far as the Church is concerned, the sponsor/concubine relationships promoted within the Confederacy are nothing more than chattel slavery, and are not sanctioned unions. His Holiness recognizes that, at present, the Confederacy is able to enforce these conditions,

and he has granted absolution to volunteers and their concubines, in order to make their lives easier; but it is not his intention that those relationships should ever be considered *normal*.

“Gentlemen, if you take more than one wife, *each* of those women will be your wife, not your property. You will *not* hold their lives in your hands, as do the Confederacy’s sponsors of concubines. *Each* of them will be an equal partner with you in the relationship, and with your other wives, and it will be your *duty* to provide an equal level of support, love, and attention to each of them.

“Fourth, *no adult* is exempt from the requirement to have and raise children, unless there is a physical limitation or fertility problem that precludes normal biological processes. This has two implications that are important: one is that on reaching adulthood, each person is expected to begin working toward establishing a marriage and providing a home for the children that will be born.

“In terms of expectations, I am instructed that the Church will consider individuals of at least fourteen years of age to be adults for purposes of marriage, *provided* that any such individual is medically certified to be capable of procreating, without risking either their life or their future health, *and* provided that no one is coerced into an unwanted union. Marriage petitions that do not meet these requirements will not be condoned.

“The other implication is that the priesthood is *not* exempted from the marriage requirement. Continence and celibacy are not compatible with the goal of expanding population.” Nicholas paused to allow the import of this to set in. The surprise and anxiety he saw on the faces in the audience echoed that he had experienced when he read the plan. He didn’t give them time to start talking, though.

“Yes gentlemen, it is true. The clergy will no longer be a convenient place for you to hide from the fair sex. Even your Patriarch will be required to do his level best to reproduce!

“The fifth element of the plan, and the last one I’ll be discussing today, was added in recognition of the fact that having babies alone won’t expand the population quickly enough, as babies won’t reach adulthood for many years. I’m told that very few of you presently have children in your households, and that fewer still have children between the ages of six and fourteen. This element will change that.

“The Church operates orphanages all over the world. In the United States alone, there are nearly three hundred such facilities, housing up to fifty thousand children. A large number of those children will never be placed, because people only want to adopt infants. The Confederacy has shown little interest in any children, other than the dependents of its volunteers and concubines.

“I am authorized to offer you the opportunity to save as many of those children as is possible, to provide them homes and futures that may outlast the Earth itself, and to use them to bolster your numbers and ensure the survival of our race and our faith.

“Finally, I know that I’ve given you a lot to think about, and possibly criticize, but keep in mind that I didn’t invent *any* of this plan - it came straight from the Vatican. When I first read it, it upset me as much as it has some of you, but I *know* where my purpose and loyalty lies, and so I have come to accept the burden. I expect no less from each of you.

“As you may have already ascertained, there are going to be many logistical problems with implementing this plan. I will leave finding the answers and solutions to those problems to those who know your organization better than I do. I *can* say that, however we proceed to fulfill this mandate, the Church on Earth will provide full support, to the limit of its personnel and its coffers - and now I give you two of your own, Frank and Marco DiLentini, to talk about solutions to those problems.”

Having delivered his message, Nicholas returned to his seat, next to Maria, and the audience sat in stunned silence as the Lentini cousins took over the meeting.

If one judged others by their appearances it was easy, some would say natural, to look at Frank and Marco and think “thug.” An experienced observer would have no difficulty determining that their coats probably concealed some heavy-duty hardware. From their usual places, standing near the entrance to a room, they kept watch on their surroundings the way a hawk examines the ground from his roost. It would be a common mistake to underrate their intelligence

They had served together in the Army, in a military law-enforcement capacity, and later on they cross-trained to enter the Quartermaster Corps. Both men graduated with honors from the Army Logistics Management College. In addition, Marco had an advanced degree in psychology, and Frank was a certified computer systems analyst. Not just your usual mafia “enforcers.”

Add to all of these qualifications that fact that these men were both family and *cosca*, and it was clear why Joe depended on them for advice on critical issues, more than anyone else, other than Maria, .

The two had spent almost the entire time in transit discussing the Vatican plan and researching its implications, and they had developed their own plan for implementation. It held a surprise or two, for everyone, including Joe.

Knowing better than to toss out all the details of their plan to the audience, like feed for chickens, they gave the barest sketch that they felt they could. Their presentation and the resulting questions, however, still ran over into the

scheduled mealtime. When allowed to do so, they reassumed their normal stations, and the crowd buzzed with talk as Joe took the podium.

“That concludes the presentation portion of this meeting. Since we’ve run significantly over our allotted time, I’m going to postpone the caucus portion until after our meal. I would ask that you gather near your *Capi*, and help them arrive at a consensus of reaction to these plans before the meal ends. Now I will ask our new Patriarch to bless this gathering.”

Nicholas hadn’t been expecting that, but he was able to draw on his experience to assemble an appropriate blessing for the gathering and for the meal. Satisfied that tradition had been upheld, the crowd found seats and began discussing the plans with their leaders.

As always, the meal took far too long to conclude, and it was well past the original scheduled adjournment before the crowd was once again settled into business meeting mode. Joe took the podium once again, and began calling on the *Capi* to share their findings.

There is always someone who feels that they can do the job better than the person in charge. Usually several some ones. Such is politics in any organization. Joe decided to deal with them head on, and called on his worst troublemaker.

“George!” he called. “What’s your reaction to all this?”

George didn’t hesitate. “Those of my group that are here unanimously support the plans,” he stated. “Of course, it’ll have to be ratified by the rest of the colony, but I don’t see that being a problem.”

Joe was stunned. He really expected some opposition from that quarter. He glanced over at Maria, and saw her trying to hide a smile. Obviously, his darling had been working behind the scenes, before the meeting. He sighed and went on to the next *Capo*. It was a near-repeat of George’s statement, as were the responses from every single group represented.

There were, of course, some minor complaints, but nothing in the way of real opposition was manifested. When the last *Capo* had spoken his piece, Joe pulled some note cards from his pocket and arranged them in order of use before he spoke again.

“All right then. I asked you to tell me your reaction, and you say that you support the plans. You tell me you won’t have any problem with the folks back home. I have to depend on your judgment about that. This is my decision then.

“Much, but not all, of the *cosca*’s industrial base is here on Catania. That is not surprising, since we are the largest of the colonies. Catania will support the

plan. The rest of you will return to your respective colonies, and validate your responses with your people. Take your time, but get me a dependable consensus for each of your colonies. I expect to hear confirmations from all of you within the month.

“I’m thinking, at this point, that if an entire colony decides to oppose the plan, we will consider that colony a competing *cosca*. If a colony is divided on the issue, then we will divide the colony and send the opposing faction to another colony to join, or to form, a competing *cosca*. If either or both of these things happens, we will maintain a *business-only* relationship with the new *cosca*. I don’t have to tell you what that means, do I?” He stopped and looked around, and seeing only negative head shakes, he continued.

“Catania will begin implementing immediately. The rest of you can begin as soon as you have a positive consensus from your colonies.

Chapter 3

Joe had been waiting for things to settle down, for the men, who were all top bosses in their *cosche*, to finish their posturing and one-upmanship. He'd also been waiting for his mobile phone - nothing more than a cheap, throwaway prepaid job - to ring. There was only one reason it would ring. It had been purchased just that morning for this purpose, and only one other person knew the number.

It rang. He was ready.

He stood and looked around the smoke-filled room. His own men stood guard at the corners, but Frank and Marco were conspicuous by the absence. The other bosses had only agreed to this, because he'd allowed them to have their own men in the outer offices.

The cigar smoke bothered him. He'd quit smoking many years before, and even then had only rarely smoked cigars. The other men in the room seemed to feel that no one would notice their importance without a stogie in their teeth. It was a holdover from the ancient history of the *cosche*.

The men weren't happy with him. They'd had to come to the room *clean*, i.e., no weapons. He had detectors on the entrances which were so sensitive, they could even detect the minimal metal present in the latest Glock productions. *Every single one* of them had tried to smuggle in a sidearm, and had been told, at gunpoint, to ditch it or leave. They'd all elected to stay, fearing that they'd be left out of something important if they hadn't. Of course, they would have been.

Joe cleared his throat, loudly, to get their attention. For the most part, it worked, but the two men at the far end of the table seemed to be ignoring him. They chatted on as if they were at a card game. Joe cleared his throat again, and waited for them to respond. He waited all of about ten seconds, then he pulled his sidearm - an old police revolver, in .38 special - and fired a shot in their direction.

It was a nice shot. He'd been practicing it for weeks, knowing that he'd need to do something dramatic in order to take control of the meeting. The report, of course, startled everyone in the room except the four guards. None were more startled, however, than the objects of his ire, the two at the far end of the table. The bullet actually clipped the end off of one man's stogie, and the burning plug of tobacco fell into his lap. He jumped up and hopped around the room cursing and brushing at the trousers of his expensive suit.

Still holding the smoking gun, Joe said quietly, "Shut up, sit down, and pay attention."

Not understanding why his men, and those of the other bosses, hadn't already

rushed into the room, the offending fellow complied immediately. Joe unhurriedly returned the gun to its shoulder holster. Turning his attention back to the rest of the table he spoke those words made famous many decades earlier.

"I'm making you an offer you can't refuse," he said. That got their attention. Nobody ever said that, unless he could back it up.

"Before I do, though, I need to tell you a story," he added. He went on to tell them, in general terms, that his *cosca* had achieved space flight and established colonies. Not all the details, of course, just enough so that they could follow the reasoning for what he intended to propose.

"You might have noticed that a number of our brethren are not here," he added. His audience looked around and nodded, assuming the worst.

"No, they are not dead," he said, "at least not those who were smart. Some of the really stupid ones tried to take on the Confederacy, and they lost." That prompted another round of nods.

"The others are alive and well, just not here on Earth." He paused to let that sink in. There was a general hubbub for awhile afterward, and he had to wait for that to subside before going on.

"So now I guess you want to know how that came to be. Well, I brought one of them back, just so he could tell you," he said, then he walked over and tapped lightly on the door. A moment later, another man, dressed much like the others, and well-known to them, came through the door.

"I give you our brother, Paul Napoli."

Walking over to stand by Joe, Napoli addressed the others. "Hi guys, long time no see! Since some of you probably took over much of my old turf, I suspect you thought I was dead." Murmurs of agreement ran through the crowd.

"As Mr. Twain once said, however, those rumors were greatly exaggerated - but let me explain what did happen.

"You've all heard of the Sa'arm, and what they're going to do to Earth. None of you has the chance of an ice cube in Hell of getting the Confederacy to take you off-planet. Well, Joe offered me, and several others of our brothers, an alternative to being turned into Sa'arm chow.

"You see, for a rather sizable fee, he offered to take me, my immediate family, and a few of my friends, along with our goods, to a place that wasn't likely to attract attention of the Sa'arm. Weighing the costs against the benefit of *not being dead*, and not having my children and/or grandchildren *eaten by the*

lizards, made it a no-brainer.

“The world we live on is nice enough, but has only traces of heavy metals. What’s there will support life, but not much more, so there’ll be no industrial development, ever. It’s a lot like living in Southeast Asia, maybe five hundred or a thousand years ago.

“There is another downside to the offer, though. We don’t ever get to go into space again, unless Joe needs us for something, like now. He brought me here to tell you what you can get out of dealing with him.”

“So what do you get for pitching him to us?” one of the other men demanded.

He grinned. “Pretty much the same as what he said to you, *an offer I couldn’t refuse*. That’s not to say it was a bad offer.”

“So what was it?” another man asked.

“I don’t want to go into too much detail. That would spoil the surprise,” he responded with obvious amusement. “I’ll tell you this, though. When I was getting ready to go with Joe, my youngest daughter who was fourteen at the time, decided she couldn’t bear to live the way we were going to have to live. She ran away.

“We couldn’t find her, and Joe had only a narrow window of opportunity to get my family off-planet. We had to leave her behind. It broke my heart, and my wife’s as well, to know that she would likely die when the Sa’arm arrive, but we have other children to consider, some of whom had children of their own. We have friends who depend upon us as well.

“Joe knew about my problem, obviously. For reasons that you will shortly learn, he decided it would be worth his while to locate my errant child and offer her another chance at life. In return for this... service... I agreed to come and tell you my tale.”

“So when do we hear this offer?” came from the back of the room.

“Whenever Joe makes it, I suppose,” he responded. “In advance, my advice is to accept! Now if there are no other questions, I need to go speak to my kid.” With that, he shook hands with Joe, and left the room.

After he left, Joe looked around the room again, and said, “There is one more person you need to hear from before I make my offer. Please welcome our newly appointed Patriarch, formerly Father Nicholas O’Donnell.”

Nicholas had been waiting just outside the door, and on hearing his name he entered the room in full regalia. Being nominally Catholic, all of the men stood

up. Joe bowed at the waist and kissed the ring.

Nicholas smiled and said, "Gentlemen, please be seated." They all did, except Joe, who moved away from the table.

"I know some of you," Nicholas began, "and you know me, from my days as a parish priest. They *were* fairly recent, after all." The men around the room nodded their agreement.

"You may wonder at the elevation of a poor parish priest to the rank of Patriarch. I tell you this. It was not done to honor me, but for the greater glory of God. It is my *geis*, laid upon me directly by His Holiness, is that I am responsible for the souls of the faithful, everywhere but on Earth itself." He paused to reflect a moment. "In the very near future, there will likely be a public announcement of this appointment, by the Vatican.

"I am here today at the request of and as the guest of your brother, Joe Fanelli. He has asked me to tell you of the changes that the Holy Father has mandated in some of the traditional institutions, for the sanctioned practice of Christianity off-Earth. When I am done here, I will be traveling to Rome, to make a progress report to His Holiness."

Nicholas then went on to give an abbreviated version of the address that he'd previously given to the people on Catania. He departed shortly thereafter, leaving behind a room full of men who were perhaps shocked, perhaps better educated, but most definitely, thoroughly confused. Most of them were thinking *What has this to do with me?*

It fell to Joe to answer that question for them, by explaining his need, and making his offer.

"You've heard from two people you should trust, about what I can do for you, and how the Church and my *cosca* will be different from the world you know. Paul told you how I moved him and his family to a new world..."

"So you gonna offer us the same deal? How much you want?" one of the audience interrupted.

Joe shook his head, "You're getting ahead of me. It's not *exactly* the same deal, because we don't need money anymore.'

"Whatta ya mean? *Everybody* needs money!" the same man interrupted. Joe grabbed him by the hair, then pulled out his gun and shoved it in the guy's mouth.

"DO YOU WANT TO SHUT UP AND LISTEN BEFORE OR AFTER I BLOW YOUR FUCKIN' HEAD OFF?" he shouted. The guy raised both hands in

surrender. Joe returned his gun to its holster.

He looked meaningfully around the room, and said, "There will be no more warnings. If any of you can't stay quiet and listen until I'm finished, your body will never be found. *Capisci?*"

By now the men were getting uneasy. They were supposed to have armed men standing just outside the door, but Joe wasn't acting at all like that worried him. They held their peace, though. It wouldn't be of much value to have armed men pouring into the room, if the guy they were supposed to protect was already dead.

"Now, to get back to business. You heard Paul, and you heard Father Nicholas. You know how things are going to be on our colony worlds, and on the ones Paul described.

"In order to meet the Pope's mandate my guys are going to have to support families with more than one wife. The bottom line: we don't have enough women to do the job." One of the other men looked like he was starting to say something, and Joe put his hand on his gun. The man closed his mouth so quickly that his teeth clicked.

"There are a lot of places we could find extra women. Trouble is, we're picky about who we marry. We want good Catholic, Italian brides for our men. Girls who were raised in the traditions of the *cosche*, and who, in turn, will raise their own children that way. Even on Earth the supply of such girls is short.

"Here is the offer: we give you, your wives, your male children, and your female children under fourteen a free ride to one of the planets like where Paul lives. You give us your unmarried daughters, sisters, and female cousins who are fourteen or over and willing to go with us. We're not looking to break up marriages

"The women you turn over to us will be treated with respect, and will be full partners with men of their own choosing, within the limits Father Nicholas described. Nobody will be forced to marry against her will, but if she's not having babies for one of my guys, she'll probably have to work at a job of some kind. We don't have resources to support a leisure class.

"If you want, we can even take any of your children who are under fourteen and want to go with us. You would have to explain to them that they are being adopted. We're not going to take the older boys, because their loyalties are already fixed. We don't have the time or energy to waste on trying to convert them. That's the offer. You can talk now"

Jumping in ahead of everyone else, one of the older men asked, "So what if we say no? You gonna kill us all?"

“Nope!” Joe responded. “I won’t have to. You and yours stay here, and eventually become lizard food.” On hearing that, there was a sudden increase in the volume of sound, as the men began talking among themselves, and trying to get Joe’s attention.

Finally, Joe shouted “QUIET!” and pointed to one of the men. “Jim, you got a question?”

“Uh.. Yeah,” Jim wasn’t the brightest bulb on the string. “Um... what’s to stop us from calling our guys in here, having them blow your ass away, and taking over your action?”

“That’s what I’ve always liked about you Jim!” Joe snickered. “You never beat around the bush. How about you just go over to the door and do that? I won’t even shoot you.”

Jim got up and headed for the door. He kept his eye on Joe the whole way, though. Not a very trusting soul.

He opened the door and looked around the outer office. He turned back around and addressed the entire group. “Guy’s... you gotta see this!”

The other men looked at Joe fearfully. He nodded, and they took that as permission. They left their chairs and went to see what was bothering Jim.

What they saw, as they all filed into the outer office, was Frank and Marco standing at the main door, with vintage Thompson submachine guns, their faces silently giving them the classic Dirty Harry message - *Go ahead! Make my day!*

Looking around the room, they saw what had happened to their men. All forty-four of them were still there, still breathing, and apparently unharmed. The problem was, they were all bound, gagged, and stacked almost like cordwood!

After a few minutes, Joe called out to the other bosses, “We don’t have much time guys. Come back in and sit down.” With no other acceptable alternative, they did as he asked.

When they were ready, he addressed them again. “When I opened up this meeting, I said I would make you an offer you can’t refuse. That wasn’t exactly true. Instead, I made you an offer that you can’t *reasonably* refuse, if you love your families. I don’t expect you to like my terms, but they *are* my terms. I’m *asking* for your unattached women. I’m *offering* to take your younger children as my own kids, and the sons and daughters of my men.

“In return, you get to save your worthless asses, and as many of your family as we can get on a ship. Life will be primitive, where you’re going, but it’ll be a helluva sight longer there than it would be here on Earth!

“This is not a group decision. It’s a personal decision for each of you. I need your answers before I leave here today. You can talk among yourselves if you wish, but remember your *individual* decisions will decide the fate of each of your families, and ultimately that responsibility is yours alone.

“I’m going to the office next door to await those decisions. When you are ready to talk, let one of my guys know, and someone will bring you to me.” With that, Joe turned and left the room.

In the conference room, the bosses sat and considered the offer, and the alternative. Some of them wanted to talk, but most stayed silent, alone with their thoughts.

Jim was the first to make up his mind. He signaled one of Joe’s guards, who spoke into a lapel mike. Minutes later, everyone in the room was surprised to see Maria enter. She strode up to Jim, and took his hand.

“Come with me,” she said. As she led him away, she noticed the odd looks he was giving her. “What’s the matter?” she queried.

“Um... I... I’m surprised to see you here, and I don’t understand why you’re going along with this,” Jim offered, by way of explanation.

Maria stopped and looked him directly in the eye. “I’m here precisely because I want you to know that I am aware of everything that’s going on; and that I am behind Joe one hundred percent! Everything I believe in and have faith in tells me that this is the right thing to do.”

That was not the last time she gave that speech on that day. Her confidence in the plan, and her solid support for Joe, along with the respect that she inherited through her father, probably changed some minds between the conference room and the office.

As they entered the office, Joe indicated that both of them should sit while they talked.

“Okay, Jim, what is your decision?” he asked.

Jim studied his hands for a moment, before responding.

“I know I’m not the smartest guy that was in that room,” he sighed. “I never been the smart one, in any group, so I made up for it by being tough. Tough won’t save my family, though, and none of the smart people can give me a better chance than you. I guess that’s my answer. I’m gonna hate sayin’ goodbye to my kids, though!”

The tears were streaming down his face, and Maria moved to comfort him. Joe

got up and walked around the desk. Laying his hand on Jim's shoulder, he squeezed gently.

"Don't worry, Jim," he said. "I'll take good care of them. Now let us take you home. I'll be in touch a little later on, to set things up."

Joe and Maria led him back to the outer office, where Frank and Marco had set up a transporter terminus. As Jim stepped onto the shimmering disk, he disappeared, only to reappear in the very warehouse where Father Nicholas had had *his* first encounter with the transporter system. Two more of Joe's more trusted "employees" were waiting there to catch him as he stumbled out of the terminus, there. They walked him out of the darkened office to a waiting limousine, which then conveyed him to his home.

Although most of them tried to negotiate a better deal, the process was similar for most of the remaining bosses, with two exceptions. One of them just flatly refused to have any part of the plan. As they were walking him to the transporter, Joe told him "The offer will be good for a short time. If you change your mind, get in touch with my guys, and we'll see what we can do."

"Bullshit," the man said, with a hateful glare, "You'll get to touch my girls only after they bury my cold, dead body!"

Joe nodded, and Frank and Marco each grabbed an arm, and shoved him onto the terminus. The guys on the other end had been warned, and were prepared to receive a hostile passenger. He made it home with only a few bumps and bruises.

Maria turned and asked Joe, "How can he be so stupid and selfish?"

"He's a thug," Joe answered, coolly. "He thinks he can bully his way out of any situation. Don't worry, we'll put out word of our offer among his people. In a little while, we'll negotiate with his successor. We'll get anybody worth saving."

The second exception was the last of the bosses to speak to Joe. Phil was the oldest boss present, actually the same age as Maria's dead father. He had kept silent during most of the meeting, preferring to wait for all of the facts before rendering any decisions.

As Maria walked with him into the office, Joe noted that he seemed to actually be leaning on her somewhat. When he sat down, he seemed a bit out of breath.

"Are you going to be okay, Phil?" Joe asked.

"No," he answered, smiling wryly. "But there's nothing you can do about it. Let's cut to the chase. I want to take your offer, but there are two more things I want."

“Phil, I’ll listen, but I don’t know how I can give you more than I’m offering everyone else,” Joe said.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Phil replied. “What I’m asking for isn’t likely to be seen as special treatment anyway.”

“Okay, so tell me exactly what these ‘not special treatment’ things you want are.”

“First, let me say that I accept your offer, including the part where you take our youngest children. It’ll be a bit of a hard sell with my family, but I’m sure I can justify it to their satisfaction.

“The first thing I want, is that my family be first in line. There are reasons for that, that I’ll go into in a minute, since they also apply to the second thing I want.

“The second thing I want, is for you to personally take Luisa as a junior wife.”

“WHAT??! Phil, weren’t you listening? Luisa is your wife! We aren’t going to break up marriages!”

Maria thought about it, as the men were arguing. Luisa was Phil’s second wife, younger, actually, than any of his children, except the one son that she bore for him. She was only a few years younger than Maria, herself. She would likely make a good second-wife-in-command, if Joe were to take on a couple of much younger girls.

Turning her attention back to the men, she heard Phil say: “Look, Joe, I’m dying. Without the nanites, that’s not going to change. If you take Luisa with you, you won’t have to wait very long before she’s a widow, then you won’t be breaking up a marriage. I’m afraid for her safety if you don’t take her.”

“Why?” Joe demanded.

“I told you, I’m dying. I have a whole host of respiratory problems that can’t be fixed, including advanced lung cancer. The question isn’t how I can be cured, it’s which illness is going to kill me first. The doctors say I only have a few weeks. I won’t even live to set foot on that colony world you want to take us to. You know who gets my job when I die...”

“Raul...”

“Yes, Raul. For the most part, he’s a good man and a good leader, but he *still* resents Luisa for marrying me. He feels that she seduced me into betraying the memory of his mother. It doesn’t matter that Rita had been dead for five years.

“I don’t want Luisa left in his care on a strange world. I don’t want her abandoned here on Earth either. You are the only man I would trust to treat her

right. She's young enough to have several more babies, if you want, and she'll do it if I ask her to."

Joe studied his hands and didn't say anything for a while, but then he looked up at Phil and said: "Your family will be first. Be ready to leave in two weeks. Frank will be in touch to give you instructions for getting ready.

"I'll have to think about Luisa. Maria may have an opinion on that as well. I need to talk to her about it in private. Luisa, too, if Maria thinks I should. I'll let you know my answer as soon as I can."

"That is what I hoped for," Phil said, trying to rise from the chair.

Joe and Maria helped him out to the outer office. Looking at Marco, he said, "We have a change in plan. Phil here isn't up to a transporter trip. Call the limo and have it meet us downstairs."

Frank nodded, shut down the terminus, and moved it out of the way. Marco called out for the limo on his mobile phone, as Joe, Phil, and Maria moved slowly off toward the elevator.

The office building they were using was nearly empty, so there were no stops between the 20th floor and ground level. Joe had picked it up as a tax deed, after the previous owners had gone bankrupt. Occupancy in this part of town had been declining for years, and there was simply too much empty office space available to support the rents they needed to receive, just to break even. By the time they reached the lobby, Joe had already decided that the building would be the departure point for the evacuating families.

After assisting the sick man into a limo, Joe and Maria returned to the 20th floor, where Frank and Marco waited with the retuned, active terminus. The Fanellis stepped onto the disk, and were transported immediately to their waiting ship.

Subsequently, Frank and Marco had to deal with forty-four irate men, who had been bound and gagged for several hours. Their solution was simple, yet elegant. The men had been bound with nylon wire ties, so after transporting all of their confiscated weapons to the ship, the cousins simply gassed each of those men with nitrous oxide, then cut their bonds with scissors. The rent-a-cop on duty on the ground floor had instructions to allow everyone to leave, unimpeded.

Leaving their charges snoozing, the cousins collected the terminus, boxed it up, and wheeled it to the elevator; and ultimately down to the loading dock. A plain white panel truck was waiting there, to take them to the warehouse.

...

Maria had already made up her mind.

When they got to the ship, Joe had a few last minute details to take care of, so he disappeared for a while. Maria, went straight to their stateroom, however, and began preparing her arguments.

First she located and laid out one of his favorite costumes - it consisted of a very sheer, lacy, white bra and panty set, with matching garter belt and hose. Alongside that she laid out her white peignoir, just as sheer, to wear over it. Having selected her weapons, she went about setting the rest of the stage.

No food tonight. Just brandy.

A quick shower, followed by light makeup and she was ready to dress for battle. She dimmed the lighting, and had the ship locate Joe and ask him to come to bed. By the time he arrived, she had already taken the high ground, and was stretched out languidly across the queen-sized bed, in full view of the door through which he had to come.

He knew he'd lost the battle when he opened the door, although he didn't even know what the battle was for. He surrendered his coat first, then his tie, followed closely by shoes, shirt and trousers. When he was down to his boxers, he paused for a moment to look at her.

She pointed to the table where she'd left his brandy. She already had hers.

You're supposed to *sip* brandy, and inhale its bouquet while you do. Joe wasn't into the finer points of liqueur connoisseurship at that point, so he just tossed his back, as if it were a shot of whiskey. Maria found it amusing, but she didn't want him to pass out on her, so she didn't offer him another glass right away.

He moved toward her like a tiger on the prowl. She put her glass on a nearby table, and moved away, to the far side of the bed. He leapt upon the bed and reached for her, taking her into his arms. She came to him without resistance.

They kissed, exploring each other with their lips and tongues, each tasting the other, touching teeth and the tender, inner lining of the cheeks. Their hands roamed nonstop, all over each other's bodies, touching, stroking, squeezing, lightly pinching, even.

As their excitement grew, and their breathing became more labored, his erection got hard enough to drive nails; her satiny envelope was gushing with her natural lubricant. *How sad*, she thought, *these panties were brand-new. Now they're going to be stained!*

"Okay," he said.

“Okay?” she queried.

“Yes, okay,” he replied.

“Okay, what?”

“Okay, whatever you want. I know you have something in mind, and I won’t get any peace, or any *piece*, until I give in. So okay, you win.”

“Oh goody!” she giggled. “I’m just *sure* you’re going to *love* having Luisa as your second wife, and she’s going to love you, too!”

Oh shit! he thought. *What did I get myself into? Oh well, so much for discussion!*

Putting it out of his mind for the moment, he concentrated on getting Maria *out* of her costume, while she kept busy, keeping him hard. As soon as they were both naked, she gleefully spread her legs for him, and he plunged into her depths. If she hadn’t already been soaking with her own fluids, it might have been painful, but as it was, she just had a pleasant rush from being suddenly and completely filled.

They enjoyed more kisses and embraces for a few minutes before they undertook the main event, but ultimately, Maria couldn’t hold still any more. She began rhythmically moving under Joe, and he had no choice but to react. He reacted the way men have reacted to hot women ever since creation... he started pounding her pleasure center.

All this motion had the predictable effect on both of them, and it wasn’t long before their orgasms came sneaking up on them. When they arrived, it was as violent as a train crash, both of them clutching and thrusting as hard as they could.

Not their usual lovemaking style, but all in all, very satisfying.

Chapter 4

Two weeks after his meeting with the *cosche* bosses, Joe stood once again in the same conference room. This time he was addressing members of Phil's *cosca*. Ostensibly, as far as the outside world knew, Phil's family was holding a reunion in the space so generously donated by his good friend, Joe Fanelli.

In all, there were thirty-two adults to transport to the primitive colony, including boys fourteen or older. The three women between fifteen and twenty, and the seven children under fourteen, all of whom were to go to Catania, had already said their goodbyes and been transported to the waiting ship.

Joe looked the crowd over, particularly Phil's oldest son, Raul. Raul was unhappy, mostly about the fact that he'd not been allowed to pack in his sidearm.

Speaking to the crowd, Joe said, "I believe that Phil has told each of you what to expect..." He paused to see them acknowledge it, before continuing, "In that case there is little to be gained by postponing our business." Several of his men moved in among the prospective passengers, handing out large Ziploc bags and markers.

"You know that you are to make the trip in hibernation. There is nothing to be afraid of. We have moved literally hundreds of people this way, and have never lost a single person. What it amounts to is a fairly long state of general anesthesia. At the same time, your body temperature is lowered in order to slow down your metabolism. You consume less oxygen and take up less space, which allows us to transport you all at the same time.

"In order for this to work, you have to give up some modesty, at least on a temporary basis. Please remove all of your clothing and place it in the bag you were just given. Use the marker to write your name on the bag. It will be stowed with your other goods and returned to you when you are delivered to your new world and revived."

"Why do we have to go naked and drugged?" one of the men demanded, amid a lot of unhappy grumbling.

"That has already been explained," Joe answered. "The transport ships are not Darjee colony transports. They are cargo transports built by humans. There isn't enough space available to have extra people walking around. The ship can't carry enough extra oxygen, or water, or food, for that; nor is it equipped to recycle them fast enough to keep so many people alive and fully-functional for the duration of the voyage.

"Remember, you're going to be aboard the ship for the equivalent of about thirty days, but it'll feel like you just woke up from a short nap when you get there.

Believe me, it's better this way. You can't wear clothes in hibernation - it interferes with our ability to keep you alive and healthy. Be respectful of each other, and the nudity won't be a problem.

"Your goods are delivered first, in a cleared area far enough away from other people to prevent them being pilfered, then you are revived one at a time, and sent to the same location. We will have people waiting there to help you. You'll be given your clothes bags and a meal, then the access code to the transport module containing your goods will be delivered to your leader. Our people will transport out, and the terminus will self-destruct.

"Now if you'll just queue up over here, we'll begin loading..."

It took some time to complete the transfers, because processing for hibernation had to be done concurrently. There just wasn't enough room aboard ship to move everyone aboard first. In the end, Joe was unsurprised that Phil refused to join the rest of his family on the journey to their new home.

"Raul knows what to do," he said. "I wouldn't likely survive hibernation, in my condition, and if I did, I'd only be a burden to the group, even with this wheelchair. I expect to die any day now. I want you to take Luisa back with you now, as your wife. It would do no good for her to watch me die."

"You know I can't do that, Phil. While you live, she is *your* wife!"

"Then kill me now and she will be my widow!" he demanded, hotly. "It would end my body's pain, and ease my mind to know that she is safe..."

"Not going to happen!" Joe asserted grimly. "She will stay with you as long as possible. When the time comes, I'll come back for her. Maria has already decided that we will wed. Whether she ever shares my bed is another matter, but regardless, she will be cared for. Now, do not further dishonor her love for you, and do not dishonor me!"

Luisa, who had been standing behind Phil, came around in front and sank to her knees while holding his hand. Looking into his eyes, she declared, "I will not abandon you while you live!"

Phil looked down at her with a pained smile.

"My love, I watched my Rita die. That is not something I wish to put you through. At the point where I become less than human, I will not know you, even though the heart still beats, the blood still flows, and the eyes still see. I will not be the man you love then. Before that happens, you *must* move on!"

Turning to Joe, she asked "Will you let *me* decide when I will go with you?" He nodded his assent. Turning back to Phil, she said, "Then for now, I stay. When

I see that *you* are no longer in that body, I will go with Joe.”

Phil let go a deep sigh. It had turned out better than he had expected. If she was honest with him, and with herself, she wouldn't have to see him drool or wait while an orderly changed his diaper. Perhaps he could die with *some* dignity. He nodded his acceptance, and permitted her to embrace him, as well as the chair would allow.

Joe provided them with transportation to their home. En route, he contacted Jim, the only other boss with whom he felt any kind of kinship, and asked him to take over management of Phil's territories on a temporary basis. Phil agreed that it was the best course of action, and necessary to prevent chaos.

Joe left Phil and Luisa in the care of their housekeeping staff, and set about taking care of other business.

Phil stayed at home for less than a week, before moving into hospice care. He died thirty-two hours after that. Joe arranged for his funeral, and he, Maria and their children, stood with the distraught Luisa and her son, as family. Following the funeral, they all returned to the ship.

...

Nicholas returned to the ship quite shaken by his latest meeting with the Pope. His Holiness had *not* been pleased with progress in implementing certain portions of the plan. He had, in fact, told Nicholas that he would be expected to make another progress report in no more than three months, and that during that visit, he expected to be introduced to the new Mrs. O'Donnell.

He indicated that if Nicholas couldn't handle the assignment to find and wed a suitable woman, he would feel obliged to select one for him. His last comment on the subject was a reminder that he expected to priesthood to set a good example for the people, and for each priest to take, and have progeny with, the maximum possible number of wives, up to the established limit.

His Holiness wasn't far off the mark. Nicholas had no clue how to go about finding a bride. Meeting women as supplicants, in his capacity as a priest, had not prepared him for the social interaction required of a man on the make. *I don't even know how to **go** on the make*, he thought. *Maybe Joe or one of the Lentini boys could help me...*

After dinner with the Fanelli clan, he sat staring into the brandy snifter, trying to decide how to phrase what he wanted, no, needed to say. He looked around the room at his companions. There was Joe, Frank, and Marco, of course, and a new recruit sent by the Vatican, Father Federico "Fred" DeAngelo.

The ladies, Maria and Luisa were conspicuous by their absence. That was not

entirely accidental. Earlier, he'd given a brief synopsis of his problem to Joe, and Joe had in turn explained that if Maria got wind of it, she would without fail make it a personal mission to solve it for him. As much as he liked Maria, Nicholas *didn't* want her managing his life at that level of granularity. It was more than enough to have the Pope involved.

He took a deep breath and began his description of the problem, which to him was that very involvement. He was willing to seek a bride, but felt that His Holiness was pushing things too fast. He preferred to sneak up on the issue, rather than run headlong into it.

Frank and Marco could hardly contain themselves, their laughter drawing a look of mild disgust from Joe. When it became clear that they weren't going to take the matter seriously, he began drumming his fingers on the table next to him. That was a signal that even the Lentini cousins could recognize, that he was getting irritated. They *really* didn't want Joe irritated, so they quieted down.

He hadn't spoken yet, but when he did, he addressed them together.

"You know, I just realized that you two are nearly thirty years old, and you're still single. Why is that?"

The boys blanched. Having enjoyed their bachelorhood immensely, they hadn't given marriage much - actually, any - thought. They couldn't think of an appropriate response, so they didn't make one, hoping that it was just a rhetorical question. It wasn't.

"Okay, guys," Joe said smoothly, "I'm making you the same offer that the Pope made to Father Nicholas here. I just brought home a whole shipload of nice Catholic Italian girls. I want to meet your brides, or at least serious fiancées, before he has to go talk to the Holy Father. If you find you can't make a selection by that time, I'll do it for you. How about that?"

"Shithead!" Marco said, looking at Frank. "You just *had* to start laughing, didn't you? Now look what you got us into!"

"Asshat!" Frank snapped back, "You laughed just as hard. It's as much *your* fault as mine!"

"Boys, boys!" Joe chided them. "No fighting between you. You need to work together. You've known this was coming for a long time. You've just been ignoring it. So get with the program!"

"But first, let's help Father Nicholas. I've been out of the dating scene for too long to have any useful advice to give, and I seriously doubt that Father Fred could do any better, but I know you two hellions have cut a pretty wide swath through the single girls you've met. What can you tell him about approaching

ladies?”

Marco took a deep breath. “I guess the most important thing is to be yourself.”

Frank nodded his agreement, and added, “Then the next thing, is to find out what’s important to the lady...”

Over the next two hours or so, the cousins gave a discourse on which approaches that they had found worked best in different social situations. You might say it was “Dating 101: How to get the first date.” They pretty much stopped at that, feeling uncomfortable with the idea of telling a priest how to get a girl naked and willing to have sex.

“So how did you two learn so much about women?” Joe asked.

“Maria,” Frank said. “She told us pretty much everything you did, when you were courting her - up to a point. Knowing her rep with guys, we figured if it worked for you, it had to be good!”

“Yeah,” Marco added, “she was a real Ice Queen! You had to be hot stuff if you got her to melt...”

“Enough of that!” Joe grumped. Turning back to Nicholas and Fred, he continued “As the boys said, the main thing is to make first contact. That’s when you find out whether she has any interest in you, as well as whether you can be interested in her, as a person.

“Everything that follows is a test, intended to answer questions like ‘Can I be comfortable spending a great deal of time with this person? Can we avoid getting bored, or constantly irritated with each other? Can we actually *enjoy* each other’s company on a long term basis?’

“To get the answers, you go places and do things together. Spend time talking about what’s important to you, and what’s important to her. You need common interests and goals. If you don’t find much overlap there, then the relationship is probably *not* a good idea. It’s the same thing with personal habits. If she’s constantly wriggling her foot, and it bothers you, it’s going to be a problem, eventually.

“The bottom line is, you are trying to find out if you should be *together*. Like *nearly all the time*. It’s not just about who you have sex or sleep with, but who you can stand, who you *want* to be around, for that much of your life. If you find the *right* person, having sex becomes making love, and it’s *important* to make love, because babies should be born of love, not just intercourse.”

Turning back to the cousins, he spoke to them. “That’s where you boys have missed the boat. You’ve been successful at getting sex, because you’ve refined

the art of approach and romance, but you never had any motivation toward finding love.

“That’s why your mothers stay pissed at you all the time. They want you to get serious about finding love, and make some grandkids for them, and raise those kids up in a loving, nurturing home. I’m telling you now, and you know it’s true, that you are too old to play those games anymore. Capisci?”

“Yes, sir!” the boys answered in unison.

He looked hard at Frank. “Your dad died how long ago?”

“Um... about three years, I think...”

“Did your Mom ever remarry?”

“Uh... No sir...”

“Good, since I don’t remember an invitation. Is she seeing anyone regularly?”

“Uh... No sir...”

Joe sat silently for a few minutes, then said, “Frank, I want you to call your Mom, and tell her that she should plan to have dinner with me and my family tomorrow night, if possible. If that’s not enough notice, ask her to call me tonight and tell me when it would be better, okay?”

“Yes sir,” Frank replied, looking a little sick. *Shit!* he thought, *I’m gonna have a priest for a step-dad!*

Coincidentally, Nicholas asked himself, *Am I going to have a Lothario for a stepson?*

Fred resolved to make his own arrangements, before the matter was taken out of his hands.

When the meeting broke up, Joe went looking for Maria, to tell her of his dinner plans for the next evening. She took the news well, agreeing that Frank’s Mom was an excellent candidate, although she was somewhat miffed at being left out of the management of Nicholas’ love life.

She had yet another bone to pick with Joe, however: he was, in her estimation, neglecting Luisa. Other than greetings in passing, he hadn’t spoken two words to her, since she came aboard the ship.

“So when are you going to ask Luisa to marry us?” she demanded.

The sudden change in subject left him unbalanced. “What?”

“You promised Phil, in front of her, that you would take her to wife. As far as I can tell, you haven’t asked her yet. When’s it going to happen?”

He closed the distance between them, and pulled her to him. She remained stiff, in his arms. It was obvious she planned to have it out immediately.

“You know that you are the only woman I need...”

“You promised!” she shouted.

“Yes!” he barked back at her, “I promised, and I’ll follow through with it!” His face and his voice softened somewhat as he added, “But in case you haven’t noticed, I’ve been a *little busy* lately...”

“Yeah,” she pouted, “but she’s been in the house now for two weeks. If you don’t marry her soon, people will start to talk.”

“I know,” he sighed. “What do you suggest?”

“You need to get to know her, and you don’t have a lot of time to do it. Take her on a few dates, and talk to her. Pretend you’re single again, and courting a new girl. I think you’ll like her, and if you turn on the charm, she won’t be able to resist you.”

“That hardly seems fair to you...”

“There isn’t *time* for fair. I’ll be okay. I know you love me...”

For the next few weeks, it seemed that each time Joe needed Maria’s participation in something, other than lovemaking, she was too busy with other things. At her request, Luisa filled in, which meant that Joe had a *lot* more time with Luisa than he had anticipated.

At the same time, Maria made sure that the two had at least *some* private time together each day. Several times, she prepared a picnic basket and sent them off to explore some unsettled part of Catania. As the planet was still very sparsely populated, there were lots of locations untouched by humans - pristine beaches, verdant forests, and the like.

Being together was awkward at first, and talking, difficult. Luisa was still in mourning, and Joe was reluctant to invade her personal space; but with so much pressure from Maria, they eventually bonded in self-defense, and began to converse and enjoy each other’s company.

It was while they were walking hand in hand, on one of those pristine beaches that Joe finally decided to take the plunge. He stopped and gently pulled her around to face him as he spoke.

“Luisa, I know you are here because Phil wanted it, but before we might wed, I would have to know that *you* want it, too. It is not enough that you are willing to do what you perceive is your duty. Even if we don’t marry, I will see that you and your son are cared for. There are many good men in my *cosca*. You might find someone you *could* love and whose children you would want to bear.”

“Where is *your* sense of duty?” she demanded hotly. “Did you not promise him, as I did, that we would marry? Am I so ugly that you would sacrifice your honor to avoid wedding me, and bedding me?”

“No! You are lovely! As lovely as I’ve seen. You are as bright as you are lovely, and your disposition is as sweet as can be. I would be proud to have you as wife, but you *know* that you can’t be my one and only. I love my Maria, and wouldn’t leave her for *any* reason, but in this new social order even *she* will be one of several. You deserve a higher place than that of a junior wife.”

“Phil told me himself that you had no equal among men in the *cosche*.” she replied calmly. “I have now seen you at work, and I believe him.

“I have also seen you at home, and how you deal with your wife and children, how you deal with me and my son. I see a man who knows how to love as well as he knows how to wield authority.

“In this new social order, I know that I will *never* be *any* man’s one and only, but if I can’t be *one* of your *many*, then I will belong to *none*!

“Now,” she concluded, moving up so that her breasts bored into his chest, “why don’t you see if you can stand to kiss me?”

Seeing no alternative, he embraced her, and did just that. She threw her arms around his neck and held his lips locked to hers. He decided that he really *could* stand to kiss her, and for a long time, too. They were both breathing hard when they broke the kiss. Just in time, too. Their bodies were telling them that the pristine beach needed breaking in.

Looking in her eyes, Joe said, “I guess I should ask you to marry me.”

“No,” she sighed. “You should ask me to marry you and Maria.”

“All right then,” he replied. “Will you marry Maria and I?”

“Yes!” she shouted, before pulling him back in for another kiss.

...

It was an unusual wedding, to say the least, but it set the tone for the future. Being the first polygynous marriage in the *cosca*, there were no precedents to

fall back on. It wasn't long after the proposal that Joe threw up his hands and told Maria and Luisa to *just handle it*.

The ladies decided that it wasn't just a wedding of one couple with another partner, but a wedding of two families. Vows had to be adapted specifically for the occasion, and the end result was a pretty complex set of promises. Each adult had to promise, not only to love honor and cherish each of the other adults, but to love, nurture, and protect, all of the children, and to regard them all as their own.

The ceremony was public, held in the very same auditorium in which Father Nicholas had been introduced to the *cosca*. In fact, Father Nicholas presided, and most of the *cosca* were present. There was even representation from each of the other colonies.

Joe and Maria stood in the places where you would find the groom and best man, in a conventional wedding. Michael was ring bearer.

Rosa filled the role of flower girl, and bridesmaids were drawn from the ranks of the single women who had been recruited from Luisa's former *cosca*. Luisa's escort during the bridal march was her son, Jason.

In many respects it was very similar to a traditional, formal, Catholic wedding, diverging only when necessary to accommodate a trio rather than a pair.

Jason gave his mother away, and all three adults took their vows. Both Joe and Maria placed rings on Luisa, and she in turn gave each of them a ring. Joe kissed the bride, then Maria kissed the bride, then Joe kissed Maria. Everybody cheered, and the reception began.

...

Alone at last, Joe beheld the vision that was his new bride. He could see Maria's touch in the presentation of Luisa's charms to him. He *knew* that Maria would do this - use his preferences and weaknesses to turn this new woman, who was delectable in her own right, into an irresistible force of temptation.

She lay there quietly, regarding him, making clear that she had expectations, but not what they were.

Maria had taken it upon herself to prepare him for his new wife. She had bathed him, and shaved him, then dressed him in a handsome robe before she escorted him to the bridal bedroom. Once there, she kissed him outside the door, and pushed him through.

He had no script for this play, and the last time he'd played this part was many years previous. He strode toward the bed projecting a confidence that he

didn't feel. Once there, he held out his hand to his new bride. When she took it, he pulled her into a standing position, then into his arms.

Remembering the kiss on the beach, he suddenly wanted to recreate it, and to follow through to completion that which he had held at bay, that day. The fabric separating their bodies was much thinner this time, and he could feel the difference in texture between the soft skin of her breasts and the hardness of her erect nipples, when they were pressed into him.

He kissed her hungrily, and she returned his passion with an equal intensity. His hands roamed everywhere over her body, touching squeezing, caressing through the fabric of her peignoir, until he felt that that barrier, too, as ineffective as it was, needed to go.

Releasing her momentarily, he shed his robe and stood naked before her. It was the first time she'd seen him that way. She seemed pleased.

Moving back to her, he carefully removed her peignoir, exposing yet another of Maria's touches. It was a duplicate of his favorite costume, differing only in color. This set was champagne, rather than white. Regardless of color, it had the intended effect. He was hard as stone.

Taking her once again in his arms, he told her: "Put your arms around my neck, and then wrap your legs around my waist."

Her late husband, Phil, had been a much older man, and not quite so acrobatic, but she was game, and complied with the request. When she did, Joe turned them completely around, and sat on the bed, with Luisa in his lap and her legs wrapped behind him. He resumed kissing and fondling her, with her enthusiastic cooperation.

Eventually, he released her breasts from the confinement of the brassiere that she almost wore, and seeing her pink nipples unfettered was just too much temptation. He had to taste them. He broke the kiss and took her left nipple in his mouth. The best he could, he imitated a baby suckling at its mother's teat, while he kept the other nipple busy with his free hand.

Luisa had very sensitive nipples, and to her, it seemed that there must have been a wire making a direct connection between them and her crotch. She could feel her vagina spasming and leaking fluid. She had no choice about rocking her hips: it was an involuntary response.

When Joe had satisfied himself with her breasts, he again returned to her lips for another deep, soul-satisfying kiss, and while thus engaged, he stood up, surprising his bride. He turned around again and sat her on the bed, legs dangling over the side. He pushed her back so as to lay her down, and raised her legs to his shoulders. Grasping the pretty panties at their sides, he quickly

pulled them off without a hitch, leaving Luisa in nothing but her garter belt and hose. Maria's touch again.

Seeing her treasure exposed, he sank to his knees and began to kiss and lick her vaginal lips. Slowly he worked toward her clit, approaching but not touching, then he withdrew, only to repeat the process on the opposite side. Frequently he stopped to kiss and suck the soft skin of her inner thighs, almost but not quite leaving passion marks. These were brief respites for her though, for as soon as she relaxed, he returned to her vagina with those same teasing kisses licks and sucks. When he sensed her frustration could get no worse, he suddenly launched a vicious attack on her tender clit, battering it with his tongue and sucking with his lips until she went over the precipice of an overwhelming orgasm. It didn't take long.

As she was trying to regain her breath, he picked her up and rearranged her on the bed. Moving up between her splayed legs, he fisted his cock and guided it into her sex. Phil hadn't been giving her much action for awhile, and she'd had none since she came home with the Fanellis, so although she was well lubricated, she was still pretty tight.

In spite of a near overwhelming urge to ram himself home, Joe took his time, pushing in and backing off repeatedly until he was fully seated in her body. Her breathing was shallow, but regular, and the look on her face showed determination, but not pain.

After resting for a few moments, Joe started moving a little. Luisa responded to that, by moving as well. As she became accustomed to the presence of his tool, the sensations became more pleasurable, and her motions more demanding of him. Very soon he was ploughing her furrow with wild abandon, and she was meeting his thrusts with great enthusiasm. Under the circumstances, it was understandable that neither of them lasted very long.

On the other hand, they had all night, and they made use of it often, before fatigue claimed them and they had to sleep.

Chapter 5

Nicholas was having a bit of a rough time. He had followed the advice given him by the other men as best he could, but he had no way of gauging his progress. Without a wife, the specter of his upcoming meeting with the Holy Father affected him in much the same way as looking down the barrel of a loaded cannon would have.

He and Michela seemed to get along well, and he liked her a lot, but he couldn't tell whether she might be interested in a longer-term commitment, like marriage. With no prospect of solving the problem on his own, he did the only thing he could think of - he went to see Joe.

For her part, Michela was also frustrated. As an old-school Italian girl, she'd done everything she could think of to appropriately encourage Nicholas to move the relationship forward, but he hadn't responded. He hadn't even tried to kiss her, for goodness sakes! At her wits' end, she decided to talk to her niece about it.

...

The house was unusually quiet when Joe arrived. Usually, three rambunctious children had at least twelve different, noisy entertainment devices going, all at once, but there was no sign of either the children or his wives. Tossing his attaché into his favorite chair, he went in search of his family.

He found Maria in the kitchen, apparently preparing an evening meal for twenty-five people - at least the amount of food seemed to indicate that. Her back was toward him, so he quietly walked up behind her and put his arms around her waist.

"And which of my lovers are you?" she teased.

"I'm the tall, dark handsome one," he teased back, kissing her neck several times.

"Well, you can't stay long," she said, giggling. "My husband is due home any moment now!"

"I'm sure he won't mind me," he replied, moving his hands up to her breasts and teasing her nipples. "By the way, where is everyone else?"

She let go a sigh and leaned back into him. "Oh, Luisa took the kids on a jaunt down to the seaside. They'll be back in time for supper. Did you have a good day?" she asked.

"Not bad," he said. "Just the usual. Read progress reports. Listened to

harebrained schemes. Kicked some ass, every so often. Plead for reason. You know the drill. I meet with people and we talk.”

“Yeah? Who’d you talk to?”

“Well, there was Marco and Frank, of course. I’m working their asses off on this expansion plan. Then there are the guys at the manufacturing facilities. They wanted to complain about capacity. Oh, and the trainers at the pilot school are complaining about not having enough available students to meet our strategic goals.”

“Anybody else? Maybe I should say, anybody more interesting?”

“Well, the only odd one today was Father Nicholas. He seems to be in over his head with Michela...”

“That’s a coincidence... Michela came to see me today,” she said, noncommittally.

Joe pulled her around to face him, and looked into her eyes. It would be easy to get lost in them, but he recognized a certain urgency in her manner. “Do we have a problem here?”

She nodded. “Yes, I think we do.”

...

“Aunt Michela, has it ever occurred to you that the man might not know *how* to kiss a woman?” Maria asked in exasperation.

“What kind of man wouldn’t know how to kiss?” Michela demanded.

“A priest, maybe? He’s been isolated from women, from very early boyhood, maybe as young as ten years. He’s never dated, never made out, never done more than shake a woman’s hand until he met you. Why would he have ever learned how to kiss?”

“I didn’t think of that,” Michela admitted. “So what should I do?”

“Well, after hearing from Luisa, how she finally got Joe to propose, I think *she* might be better qualified to answer that than I am. Go talk to *her*.”

...

“You know, Father Nicholas, there’s an old rule that applies here.”

“What’s that, Joe?”

“You can’t win if you don’t play the game.”

“What if you don’t know how to play the game?”

“You get a good teacher - or you just go for broke.”

“I thought *you* were my teacher.”

“No. You need a *girl* to teach you what you should be doing. A guy, and most specifically me, wouldn’t let you do what you need to be doing!”

“So what is this ‘go for broke’ option?”

“It’s just a decision you make. You decide to do *something*, even if it’s wrong.”

That actually sounded less risky to the priest. Both men fell silent, alone with their thoughts.

...

Nicholas nervously adjusted his tie. He’d finally screwed his courage up to the point that he could go through with his plan. He knocked on the door and waited.

Michela answered the door, smiling, as radiant as she’d always been. “Hi, Nick. Come on in. I have a few more little things to do before we can go,” she said before disappearing into the rear of the house.

He waited on the sofa, and after a short time, she returned with a purse hanging on her shoulder. He hadn’t specified what kind of date it would be, so she assumed they’d be visiting one or another set of friends.

He stood to meet her and took both her hands in his, asking earnestly, “Michela, before we go, can we talk a little?”

“Well sure, Nick. What’s on your mind?” she responded, showing some worry.

“Please let’s sit down for a minute,” he asked, pulling her to the sofa. When they were both seated, he began speaking again.

“I know that I haven’t been the most impressive date, over the past weeks. My problem is ignorance. I don’t really know what I’m supposed to be doing. Even if I did, I probably wouldn’t know how to do it.

“I know nothing about women, or how to please them. I don’t have the kind of charm that it would take to convince a woman that she should overlook my faults while I try to become the focus of her life.

“I’m expected to find a woman to love and marry, and with whom I will have babies. I know where the babies come from, and how they get there, but only in an academic sense. I’ve never even seen a *film* demonstrating that process. I don’t know what that’s supposed to feel like, or how my wife can be expected to react to what I do.

“I know you haven’t been happy with my performance, but I guess what I’m saying is, I don’t expect to *get* any better. Will you marry me anyway? And then maybe you can teach me what I need to know... “

Michela raised her hand, indicating he should stop, and said “Maybe.”

“Maybe?” he queried.

“Yes, maybe.” she confirmed. “There is one thing I have to teach you before I can decide. You have to know how to *kiss*. Now the first thing you do...”

...

Fred re-read the vows he had prepared. Even though they were intended for a pair, they had to be open-ended enough to accommodate expansion of the relationship at a later time. The Pope had insisted on that. Satisfied, he signaled that the ceremony should begin.

Joe stood as best man, at times providing physical as well as moral support for the nervous groom.

Nicholas fidgeted as the bridal march began. It seemed to last forever, before the vision that was his bride-to-be made her appearance. Her son, Frank, escorted her down the aisle, and would give her away.

For the second time that year, Michael filled the role of ring bearer. He was actually getting a little bored with the job. He wished that cousin Frank had already married and had kids. It would have been *his* son’s responsibility then.

Since there were fewer actual participants, the ceremony was somewhat shorter than that which had been held for Joe, Maria, and Luisa. In what seemed an instant, the pair went from being single to being married. When they were given permission for their first public kiss, Nicholas took his new wife in his arms, and demonstrated all he had learned about kissing, for everyone to see.

Somewhat dazed, Michela pulled back, and said, “You’re getting pretty good at this!” before returning to his embrace and showing him how much more he needed to learn.

...

Six months after the meeting of the full *cosca*, on Catania, Marco was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Things were going too well. *Nobody's* plans ever worked without a hitch, but so far, the program that he and Frank had developed seemed to be proceeding apace.

Marco had commandeered all of the uncommitted resources of CareerPath Placements, Inc., a headhunter firm in which Catania Enterprises had held a majority equity position. In order to make this possible, Joe had agreed to transfer some alternate assets to the other stockholders, in exchange for their equity interest in the company, making it a wholly-owned subsidiary.

After the acquisition, CareerPath was forbidden to accept new contracts, or renew expiring ones. The reason given was that, although they were equipped and staffed to evaluate and recruit large numbers of people, the parent company was undertaking a project so vast, that they expected to consume all of their recruiting capability, for some time to come.

The biggest bump in the road came when their management asked for the job specification for the people they were to recruit. Rather than being told to look for specific professional skills, they were told to find adult pairs, of Italian or Sicilian extraction, who were raising or had raised large, stable families.

Preference was to be given to skilled craftsmen and blue-collar laborers, especially in the building trades, but the most important criteria were to be the intangibles: Catholic faith, loyalty to family and friends, and most of all, the desire and ability to provide a nurturing environment for raising children.

The headhunters were uncomfortable with the listed criteria, because they seemed to be promoting a kind of discrimination that appeared on the surface to be illegal. They were told, point blank, that the criteria were not going to be changed. The recruitment was being done to staff a large initiative in support of the Catholic Church, and as a voluntary religious activity, it wasn't subject to labor laws. At that point, the headhunters caved, and set about doing exactly as they were asked. Unwittingly, their focus was directed entirely to meeting the expansion needs of the *cosca's* colonies.

In a way, the Confederacy made the job easier, because of the requirement for universal CAP testing. CareerPath had managed to obtain the technology to read and interpret CAP sub-scores, and in combination with other analytical techniques, were able to develop and implement a successful recruitment campaign. One surprise was the number of very high CAP scores who had refused to emigrate, because of the impact it would have had on their families. These were fertile grounds for the kind of people the *cosca* wanted.

By the time the first two hundred families were ready to transport the *cosca* had a pretty good start on providing the extra housing on Catania. As soon as the

cosca had adopted the plan, practically all of their industrial replicator capacity had been diverted to the manufacture of transport ships, housing, and supporting infrastructure. Those first families were ready and waiting to receive their new adopted children, weeks before the first of the children would arrive.

...

"... and so, as I understand it, you are to provide for transportation of the children to their new facilities..."

"Yes, Father," Marco replied, "and as I understand it, you will be following them, to serve with Patriarch Nicholas, in a few weeks..."

"Yes, yes, quite so," the nervous clergyman confirmed, "I have my bishop's approval for that now. He was loath to allow it, but he had orders from higher still... I don't quite know why, though..."

"Perhaps it was a direct request by the Patriarch?"

"I suppose that's possible, but I am still at a loss... I mean, I don't think I've ever met him... Tell me again how this is supposed to work..."

"Okay, you know that the Church has been making press releases for weeks now, citing the need to consolidate facilities for financial reasons. The closure of this orphanage is listed as part of that consolidation. The official line is, the kids will be redistributed to other, Church-supported facilities, and in a way, it's true.

"You were transferred into this facility to provide a cover for your own disappearance. Obviously, when the orphanage closes here, your job here will be no more. You will be expected to move elsewhere. You will. In fact, the official line for you is true - you will be following the children to their new home, to continue providing them, along with others, spiritual guidance.

"We use our resources to get the kids where they're going, and distribute them into their new homes, while you close up shop here. Then we come back for you.

"The public sees an orphanage close, and its staff get reassigned. The other Church-operated facilities are never told that either you or the kids are coming there, so they don't get concerned, when you don't show up. Nobody's the wiser."

"What if someone comes looking for one of the children? If they can't be located, won't that raise some suspicion?"

"It might, except that you've already transferred out any child who has a living

relative, or the like, to one of the Earth-bound facilities. We want them all, but those are going to be hard to get, without bringing down the house. We'll be back for them at the last, because when the shit hit's the fan, we won't care who gets upset about what we're doing. Now don't worry so much. That's my job. All you have to do is..."

The discussion went on for a few more hours before Father Ricci finally decided to give up and put his trust in God... and the man who was trying to get him off Earth.

...

Joe looked around the room, if you could call it that. It was actually a hangar, housing twenty of the new "bombers" that were designed to deliver two HSIT devices.

The bombers were aligned, ten on either side of the main taxiway. Joe sat in the reviewing stand, behind the Commandant and the faculty. Maria sat on his right, and Luisa sat on his left.

On a signal from the Commandant, a fanfare announced the arrival of the first class of bomber pilot to graduate from flight school. It likely seemed a little silly to some, but Joe knew the value of ceremony. These young men needed to know the value that he, and the rest of the cosca, placed on them and their work.

Those twenty young men lined up ten abreast, facing the podium. The Commandant made a short speech of congratulations, and then turned the ceremony over to Joe.

Before beginning his speech, Joe looked into the eyes of each and every one of the graduates. At length he began to talk.

"Each of you knows why you are here. We had hoped to get some cooperation from the Confederacy, and if we had, we would be loathe to risk any of you on operations as dangerous as what you are about to undertake.

"Until and unless the Confederacy, or others with as much power, takes seriously the need to save the planet of our birth, we have a moral obligation to try to interdict the advance of the Sa'arm.

"There is still time for that to happen. The front line of the Sa'arm expansion is still a few years away from Earth. We cannot wait, however, in the hope that those who have the power will act in time. We must begin now, first to try and slow the advance of our enemies, and second, to demonstrate to those who should be our allies, just how serious we are about it.

"You have been taught, as well as we can teach you, about the important things.

How to fly these craft. How to avoid detection. How to evade capture, if you are detected and pursued. Moreover, you know about the weapons you carry. There aren't many, because you are not intended to engage the enemy in a direct confrontation.

"Our aim is not to take out enemy fighters, but to destroy the enemy's ability to *field* fighters. Our aim is not to take out hive ships, but to destroy their ability to build hive ships. In short, we intend to do our level best to treat the cancer represented by the Sa'arm by starving it. If we can destroy its industrial capacity, if we can destroy its source of fresh troops, if we can prevent it from capitalizing on resources *behind* its front lines, we believe that there is hope for our birth planet.

"We have given you the tools that will enable you to accomplish those objectives. Each of you has been given two HSIT devices, and been assigned primary and secondary targets.

"I am assured that the worlds that you have been told to destroy have no remaining native sentient beings on them. The Sa'arm have already destroyed them. There should be no guilt, no second thoughts concerning what you are about to do. Would you hesitate to shoot rats, if you saw them eating an innocent child? No, you would not. And you should not. The Sa'arm are no different. Yes they are sentient. Yes they are alien. But yes, they are still like those *rats*, and given the opportunity, they will eat our children!

"If all goes well, each of you will destroy at least one, possibly two Sa'arm-occupied worlds. That, and escape, are your only duties. You will do whatever you have to do to avoid capture - including the use of hyperspace jumps in the vicinity of large masses, if need be. You are not to worry about the consequences of such actions, as there will be no one near enough, other than the Sa'arm, to experience those consequences.

"You know that your bombers are rigged to self-destruct, if breached. I don't need to tell you why. You already know. We cannot allow the enemy to gain *any* knowledge of us or our capability. It would be a *bad* thing if they even learned of our *species*.

"Each of you has a family. At least one wife, maybe as many as four. Some of you have children. It is our greatest hope that all of you will come home safely to us after every mission, so that you can see your children grow up in a world unthreatened by the Sa'arm, or their like. It is possible that some of you won't.

"Do not worry about your families. Your wives and children will be cared for. The *cosca* will see to that. Furthermore, if you do *not* return alive, the stored gametes that we have taken from your bodies will allow your wives to conceive your children, for as long as their own fertility lasts. They may remarry, for love

or companionship, but any children that they bear will be yours, by blood, and those children will bear your name.

“Your place in our hearts is assured. For now, it appears you, and those who will follow you, are the last, best hope for Earth’s future as the home of humanity. You are the Sword of Michael! I know you will do your duty. I hope to greet you again in this life, and I salute you!”

With teary eyes, Joe returned to his seat. The remainder of the ceremony was mercifully short, as the Commandant recognized each pilot individually, and presented him with a diploma. At the conclusion, he said only, “God bless and keep you all.”

With that he dismissed the class.