



Keeping Promises

...sometimes costs you more than you expect...

A Cosca Swarm Cycle Story

By

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CAVEAT LECTOR!

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Chapter 1 - Heroes Die Young

The mission was nearly routine. The *Nagina*-class carrier, *Rosa DiCatania*, had barely departed the target system, when an opportunity to “lay the egg,” (in Asp pilots’ parlance), had occurred. The *Rosa* had released a number of self-deploying observation drones before leaving, so after deploying his first planet-buster, Cristiano Martelli made tracks to the primary rendezvous point, in order to observe the effects and wait for retrieval.

Although the rendezvous points were only a short hop away from the primary body (star), using the Hwee FTL drives, they were nonetheless far enough that light, and thus information moving at light speed, would take many, many months to make the trip. Because of that, every mission required that the drones deploy themselves closer in, so that video information could be relayed using subspace radio. Like all of the *cosca*’s military assets, the drones were programmed to self-destruct if tampered with.

Following mission SOP, Cris had instructed his AI to begin recording the feeds, before settling in to wait for pickup. The recorded observations showed a textbook-classic mission: only minutes after he had evacuated, the “egg” had translocated into the planetary crust near the center of Sa’arm activity. The target didn’t completely disintegrate, the way Confederacy records seemed to indicate things *should* happen, but the upheaval triggered by the explosion made life, on or anywhere near the planet, impossible, at least any time in the foreseeable future.

As expected, some of the planetary mass reached escape velocity and would never again be part of that world, most did not, however, and the effect of mutual gravitational attraction would draw in all of the larger bits within a few weeks. Of course, the surface of the newly reformed planet would be mostly chunky lava, and it would be peppered with smaller, house-sized bits returning home for many decades. In short, this planet would not be usable again, as a base for the Sa’arm (or anybody else!), for a long, long, time.

Not for the first time, Cris found himself questioning this approach to fighting the Sa’arm - it seemed a prodigious waste of a planet. On the other hand, he had seen first-hand some of the worlds that had been taken, used, and then abandoned by the Sa’arm, and there appeared to be little difference in the end. Even, and maybe especially, when those planets had harbored sentient life, they had become total wastelands, with nothing of value left to extract. Those planets’ prior tenants had all become Sa’arm chow, and their civilizations were gone, not even leaving behind any ruins to show they had ever existed. The records given to Earth authorities by the Confederacy were the only evidence of that. Such would be the fate of Earth, if the Sa’arm were not stopped.

Once again, he concluded he was doing the right thing.

With nothing more pressing to do, while facing a likely six-week wait for the return of the *Rosa*, Cris instructed the AI to monitor the feeds, and to notify him if anything odd

happened, while he went about sorting through his collection of entertainment media, looking for something to pass the time. This was his hedge against that situation which normally describes both military and law enforcement jobs: i.e., long periods of mind-numbing boredom, punctuated by irregular moments of sheer terror.

Being a closet *Enya* fan, he was about halfway through her last release when the AI chirped to get his attention. Removing the headset, he commanded “Report!”

“A SMALL VESSEL HAS BEEN DETECTED ENTERING THE SYSTEM. IT HAS BEEN TENTATIVELY IDENTIFIED AS A SA’ARM COURIER. REQUESTING INSTRUCTIONS.”

“Lock on and make ready to pursue!” he responded.

“ACKNOWLEDGED. PREPARING TO PURSUE.”

Not for the first time, Cris found himself wishing that the AI was as capable as the ones made by the Confederacy. Along with other Hwee technology, the *cosca* had recovered AI programming from a damaged vessel, and it was far and away ahead of anything that Earth had come up with on its own. It was, however, severely limited in comparison with the AI’s that seemed to run the Confederacy - even the ones they considered obsolete! If there were any advantages in using the Hwee technology, they lay in the fact that the technology was accessible, and would run on readily available computer hardware. Even the *hardware* used by Confederacy AI’s was out of reach, at this point.

Following his third mission, Cris had noticed a Sa’arm courier entering the system containing the destroyed target, then immediately departing. This event coincided with the timing of a successful deconstruction of an HSIT, its sensors and command computers. Studying these components resulted in techniques that allowed construction of devices that could detect, track, and match phase with, objects moving in hyperspace.

The convergence of these discoveries allowed him to propose a change in the standard mission SOP. The proposal posited that *if* the Asp still had HSIT ordnance remaining after the successful conclusion of its assigned mission, *and* had sufficient energy reserves to engage in pursuit, *then*, at the pilot’s discretion, the Asp *might* follow the Sa’arm courier to its next destination and attack targets of opportunity. Any such activity had to be completed or terminated quickly enough to allow the Asp to return to one of its original rendezvous points, before scheduled pickup.

The change in SOP was approved, and since that event, Cris had only returned home with unspent ordnance on one occasion.

“PHASE LOCKED AND IN PURSUIT,” the AI reported.

“Maintain separation of 0.5 AU¹ approximate,” Cris directed.

“ACKNOWLEDGED. MAINTAINING 0.5 AU SEPARATION.”

There was no guessing how long the pursuit might take, but since he had nearly six weeks to get back to the rendezvous, Cris instructed the AI to limit pursuit to fourteen Earth-standard days, and to alert him if there was any change in apparent flight plan, then settled in to take a nap.

The next six days were pretty boring. It was pretty much the same thing, over and over: eat, check systems, sleep, check systems, piss, check systems... but then the AI announced:

“TARGET HAS TRANSITIONED TO REALSPACE. CLOSING ON TARGET. POINT 4... POINT 3...”

Cris yelled out, “Transition now!” The Asp entered realspace at a distance of about two-tenths AU from the courier’s exit point. And all hell broke loose.

“WE ARE UNDER FIRE. SHIELDS UP. INSTRUCTIONS PLEASE.”

“SitRep!” Cris demanded, strapping himself into the command chair.

“EXIT TO REALSPACE HAS PLACED THIS VESSEL WITHIN WEAPONS RANGE OF A FULLY FUNCTIONAL SA’ARM HIVE SHIP. THIS VESSEL CURRENTLY SURROUNDED AND UNDER ATTACK. PRIMARY ENGINES ARE DEFUNCT. ATTITUDE CONTROLS STILL OPERATIONAL. SHIELDS CURRENTLY AT 85 PERCENT AND FAILING. INSTRUCTIONS PLEASE.”

“Divert all power not required for life support to shields. How long do we have?”

“ESTIMATED TIME TO SHIELD FAILURE 18 MINUTES. PROBABLE LIFESPAN FOLLOWING FAILURE, TOO SMALL TO QUANTIFY.”

“Prepare the message torpedo for launch. Camera and sound on me NOW!”

“ACKNOWLEDGED. READY NOW.”

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The *Rosa* entered normal space, somewhat beyond the periphery of the Oort Cloud surrounding the target system. The pilot and commander, one Julius “Jules” Lancini, took a long look at the planetary system, verifying that the mission had been accomplished. The evidence was clear: the fourth planet in the system, which six weeks previously had sustained an active Sa’arm colony, had been replaced by a glowing mass of molten rock. There was no sign of life anywhere in the system.

Jules carefully maneuvered the ship to the primary rendezvous point, and began searching for the *Asp* bomber that had been assigned to this target. The smaller vessel wasn’t anywhere to be found, but that wasn’t a particular cause for concern.

¹ an astronomical unit, or AU is roughly the distance between the Earth and the Sun, or about 150 million kilometers

Jules launched a small self-propelled beacon, which after moving a safe distance off, began burst-transmitting a low-power encrypted hail at irregular intervals. Many long minutes passed with no response from the *Asp*, and Jules began to worry.

Standard procedures at this point called for proceeding on to the alternate rendezvous, and repeating the process. This would be the first time that those procedures were ever invoked, though, and Jules was worried. He moved the *Rosa* further out into interstellar space, and sent the beacon a self-destruct command. After observing the small flash created by the disintegration of the beacon, he made the short jump to the alternate rendezvous location.

On arrival, he repeated the entire search and retrieval sequence, and this time an answer came back, but not from the *Asp*. Instead, the response came from a message torpedo. This was bad. Every *Asp* carried a single message torpedo, to be launched only as a last resort. Its flight plan was updated automatically and continuously, by the ship's AI, to return it to the secondary rendezvous location, in the event of a mission failure that resulted in the loss of the *Asp*.

The torpedo's payload consists of a message cube - essentially, a large chunk of static RAM - that contains flight and activity data for the *Asp*. Like the torpedo's flight plan, it is continuously updated, and has sufficient capacity to retain (with data compression) the entirety of the ship's sensor and monitor logs for the normal duration of a mission. In addition, it has space for a pilot's action report and, if he wishes, a short video message.

Jules instructed the *Rosa*'s AI to issue the encrypted command that would cause the torpedo to eject its payload. *Rosa*'s waldoes then recovered and stored the package, and after moving off a safe distance, the torpedo self-destructed. He called a meeting of the current supercargo, to inform them that one of their number would not be returning.

The nine other *Asp* pilots who had already completed their missions already knew what the SOP called for in this case, but Jules had the AI play back the required actions anyway. Only two of the pilots gave him any grief about it, and in the face of the evidence, even they had to admit to, and accept, the loss.

Four Earth-standard hours after arriving in the formerly Sa'arm-controlled system, the *Rosa* departed for Home

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Joe Fanelli - aka *Don Giuseppe DiCatania* - sat alone at his desk, having just read the action report filed by the pilot of the *Rosa*. He hadn't yet opened the message packet that had been delivered along with the report. Instead, he instructed the office AI to retrieve and display the personnel record for the missing pilot. When the AI notified him that the information was ready, Joe turned to his ancient, flat-panel LCD monitor to

review the data. He wasn't a big fan of holographic displays, and the flat-panel still worked very well for his purposes, without adding unnecessary layers of confusion. What he saw on the screen was exactly what he expected.

NAME: CRISTIANO MARTELLI

OCCUPATION: ASP BOMBER PILOT/COMMANDER

STATUS: MISSING IN ACTION, PRESUMED DEAD.

AGE: 28 EARTH STANDARD YEARS

SPOUSE(S):

NAME: ORQUIDEA AGE: 43

NAME: TEODORA AGE: 30

NAME: GEMMA, AGE: 21

NAME: CLARISSE AGE: 16

MINOR DEPENDENTS: 7 (3 M, 4 F)

There was more, of course, but none of the rest was as important to Joe as were those few lines. They told him, not only what the *cosca* lost on this last mission, but the number and names of those who would feel the loss much more deeply and sharply. Cristiano was in the first class to graduate *Asp* pilot school, and like his classmates, he had a record of exemplary and effective service in the *cosca*'s war against the Sa'arm. Now he was to be honored as the *cosca*'s first fallen hero of that war.

There would be public acknowledgement of Cris' valor, and the equivalent of a state funeral, but first there was the matter of breaking the news to his family, and taking care of their needs. Both jobs fell to Joe. Even before that, however, there was a need to review the mission data log.

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Time was of the essence. The pilots returning with the Rosa had been debriefed, and would be arriving at their homes by evening. Getting to Cris Martelli's family before the news did was of critical importance. Joe made one call before he left the office.

"Hello? Oh hi darling!" Not knowing the reason, Maria was pleased that Joe had, uncharacteristically, called home before actually arriving there. That is, she was pleased, until she saw the look on his face.

"Maria, I have some bad news, and I'll need your help in dealing with it," he said softly.

Looking concerned, she responded, "What is it Joe? Are you sick or something?"

"Just sick at heart, my love. One of our *Asp* pilots did not return. There is no doubt

that he is dead."

"Oh! No!"

"Afraid so... and worse, he's got a family... a big one..."

"Kids?"

"Seven," he confirmed. "and one of the wives is *very* young, as well."

"What do you need for me to do?" she asked, becoming businesslike. "We have to take care of his family."

"Yes, we do. I need to get over there tonight to break the news to them, and let them know we're going to be there for them. The first thing I need for you to do is to contact the family and wangle us an invitation to visit tonight on some other pretext. I don't want them going off the deep end before we can get there to help."

"We?" she queried.

"Yes. That's the second thing I need from you. Try to find someone to watch the kids tonight... perhaps your Aunt Michela... I want you and Luisa to come with me."

"Good plan," she agreed, "we can hold their hands while you give them the news, and maybe offer some comfort."

"My thoughts exactly. Oh! When you talk to Michela, ask Father Nicholas if he could show up at the Martelli house, about twenty minutes behind us?"

"Oh yes! I'm sure he'll be needed."

"In the future he might want to delegate the task, especially if we start losing many... I hate to think about that... but this is the first, and needs special handling."

"Okay. How long do I have?"

"A half-hour, maybe, no more."

"I'd better get moving then... that's not much time..."

"Thanks, love. You are my angel."

"Let me go, you flatterer. I don't have time to waste!" she responded with a wan smile.
"Now what's their comm code?"

...

Joe and both his wives stood at the entrance to the Martelli home. Luisa, having only

just finished nursing her new baby boy, remained somewhat blissed-out, while Maria fidgeted nervously.

Moments after Joe rang the doorbell, a tall, stately woman answered. Her apparent age, somewhat younger than himself, and a little older than Maria made guessing her identity trivial. She was obviously Orquidea - Cris Martelli's senior wife. In conversation with someone else, she would have been described as handsome rather than pretty. Her face was attractive, but strong rather than beautiful, and hinted at the character of the person who wore it.

"Welcome to our home," she said to the visitors. As she stood aside, her gesture invited them to enter. The Fanelli women entered first, followed by Joe, and Orquidea led them into a small formal parlor, where she invited them to sit.

Seating herself, she observed, "It is a rare occasion when the *Don* visits the home of one of his many followers. To what do we owe this pleasure? I am sure that Cristiano will be distraught that he couldn't be here. He is away on a mission, but he is due back, today..."

"Yes Madame, I am aware of that... but I must ask... where are his other wives?"

Orquidea stiffened visibly as she responded, "They are each occupied with their normal duties as we speak. Do you need to meet with all of them?"

Joe could see in her face, that she had already guessed what was going on, but was holding herself together with an iron will.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," he replied gently. "Please gather them here, and I will speak with all of you at once."

She stifled a sob as she arose to do as he asked. When she turned to leave the room, Maria caught Joe's eye, and raised her eyebrows in an unspoken question. Joe nodded, imperceptibly, and Maria followed Orquidea out of the room.

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When Maria and Orquidea returned, followed by the three younger Martelli wives, the mood was somber. Maria had been successful at persuading Orquidea to let Joe handle the news, but the other women had picked up the tension, although they knew not why.

Joe had not needed to coach his wives: when everyone was seated, Luisa was between the two younger wives and Maria between the older women. He stood and paced for a few seconds as he composed himself, preparing to speak.

"I know that you ladies are wondering why I am here, and you are probably feeling that it is not a happy thing. You would be correct. I won't play with your emotions, or try to

soften what I have to say... you need to know and feel the truth in my words." He paused.

"It is my sad duty," he said, resuming his speech, "to inform you that Cristiano Martelli is missing in action..."

As soon as he said the words, Orquidea fell to pieces, sobbing. Maria pulled the older woman to her breast and hugged her, stroking her back and repeating over and over, "I am so sorry..."

Teodora, the 30 year old, seemingly went catatonic, while the younger wives began shouting their denial, and demanding that Joe produce their husband. Luisa put an arm around both of them, and held them to her side as they struggled against the truth.

It took a substantial amount of time to restore a sense of normalcy to the gathering, during which Joe felt utterly helpless, but eventually it did happen. When it did, Orquidea took her rightful place as the senior spouse and asked Joe what Cris' chances were for having survived.

"None," he responded flatly. "He managed to fire off a message torpedo, with his flight and operations data, before his shields were overwhelmed. They clearly show that the Asp was already in self-destruct mode."

"How can you send out ships that kill their own pilots!" she demanded hotly.

Joe fixed her with a hard stare, and replied, "That only happens if there is no hope for the pilot's survival. The self-destruct mechanism only engages if the hull is breached - in which case it is a foregone conclusion that the pilot is already dead - or if the pilot initiates the sequence himself.

"I will not burden you with further details, but you must realize that we, for the sake of humans everywhere, cannot allow our technology to fall into the hands of the enemy.

"The action report Cris sent back made it clear that he was under attack by a Sa'arm hive ship and its support vehicles, at close range. The Asp was damaged beyond repair, and its defenses were withering under continuous fire. On the plus side, the attacking vessels were close enough that the destruction of the Asp - and its remaining HSIT device - was almost certainly sufficient to at least cripple, and possibly destroy them all.

"It would not just be a miracle, if Cris survived... it would be a physical manifestation of the Second Coming."

As if on cue, the doorbell rang. "That is probably Father Nicholas," Joe observed. Looking at Orquidea, he said, "With your permission..."

She nodded, and he went to answer the door. When he returned, Father Nicholas

followed him into the parlor. After getting everyone's attention again, Joe resumed speaking.

"I am not here only as the bearer of the bad news," he said. "I am also here to advise you of two very important things. First, you should know that the *cosca* will provide for Cris's family, as he would have, had he lived. What this means exactly, we still have to work out, but in any event, you need not worry about the essentials.

"The second thing I have to tell you is that Cris sent a message to you, and the content of that message bears strongly upon your individual futures. I think it necessary at this point for you to see that message."

Joe approached the comm unit to make contact with the colony's central AI. Seeing that it was a standard flat-screen model, he breathed a sigh of relief. Upon making the connection, he was required to authenticate using the keyboard after which he put the connection into multimedia mode and began issuing verbal commands.

"RETRIEVING VIDEO MESSAGE FROM C MARTELLI, ASP PILOT." the AI droned in response.

After a brief delay, the video playback began, displaying a fit, handsome young man who was obviously under a great deal of stress. He began to speak.

"My darling wives. This is both my farewell message and my last will and testament. I am under attack, and there is no hope of survival. In only minutes, my defensive shields will fail and my ship will self-destruct.

"I want each of you to know that I have missed you, your voice, your touch, your embrace, for these weeks that we've been apart. I love you, and if, as we believe, my soul lives on after my body is destroyed, I will continue to love you for all eternity.

"The *Don* has promised that the *cosca* see to your needs after my passing. As you were advised when we were wed, there is a price for that - the *cosca* demands that any children you bear be mine, whether or not you remarry. To that end they have saved and stored my seed.

"It is not my wish that any of you should remain widowed. Rather I would have each of you seek and find, if you can, the love of a good man with whom you can build a new life.

"Any man worth having will want children of his own body, and I fear that the *geis* of bearing only my children would drastically reduce your opportunities. That is unacceptable to me. For that reason, I release you from that obligation.

"I would be pleased if any of you wish to bear more of my children, but this is a decision that *you* must make, without my influence, and without

pressure from the cosca.

“Please love one another, whatever each of you decides. Love and take care of the children we have already have. Find your happiness. I love you, and goodbye.”

The video ended abruptly, and everyone in the room fell silent. Before, the war against the Sa’arm had been an abstraction for them. The cosca had conducted its attacks with seeming impunity, suffering losses of neither equipment nor men. Now it was personal.

Orquidea and Teodora resumed their quiet weeping, as the younger wives approached hysterics. The Fanelli women were hard pressed to offer what comfort and solace they could, and Joe was once again helpless. Looking to Father Nicholas, he plead silently for help. The priest nodded, almost invisibly, and rose to his feet.

“Ladies, please pay attention,” he began. All four of the Martelli women took umbrage with his approach, and it appeared momentarily as he might be in danger of a physical attack. That moment passed, however, and they were focused on him - which was what he wanted, after all.

“It is tragic, any time a loved one passes away,” he resumed, “but doubly so when it is one so young, and who has so much to admire as our beloved Cristiano.” He began to pace as he spoke.

“Nevertheless it happens, and life goes on. It is in times like these that we who are left behind must look outside ourselves for additional strength... to our families, friends, community... and within ourselves, to our faith.

“While life goes on, we cannot allow the memory of the deceased to fade... we must remember him in order to remember the blessings we received *because* of him, and we must remember him for the children that are too young to remember on their own.”

Turning back to face the women, he pointed to them and said, “*You* have a duty and sacred trust... in that you are the vessels of that memory, and you must ensure that it is preserved and transmitted to the children. You can and must also reinforce those memories, by sharing them among yourselves, and by sharing both the joy and the sadness that they bring. In doing so you will draw closer together, providing each other the comfort and solace you need.

“In time, the sting of your loss will fade, but even so, the sadness and sorrow will sometimes manifest as heartache. When it does, you should reach for each other - you should not try to bear it alone. When that is not enough, you should reach out to your extended family, your community, and your Church. Your faith will sustain you when all else fails, but faith works better with a warm embrace to hold you, and a willing shoulder upon which you can cry.

“By all means, mourn your loss... but do not let sorrow supplant the joy that life has to

offer. With his last words, your husband has given you a gift. Use it wisely. Consider how you may best carry out his wishes, and live the life he wants you to have. Don't make any decisions yet... it is too soon... but think about your future. The Church and doubtless, the *cosca*, will support you, whatever you decide."

Turning back to Joe, he said, "I suspect that we'll need to talk about this *very* soon." Joe nodded, and Father Nicholas sedately withdrew, seeing himself out of the house. As he did, Luisa and Maria separated themselves from the Martelli women, who now appeared to be in control of their emotions.

Looking over the people in the room Joe observed, 'I can only echo the sentiment behind the words that Father Nicholas has so eloquently delivered. The *cosca* *will* take care of your needs. More than that we are family, and you need only call on us, if some unforeseen need arises, or even if you only need comforting.

"In the meantime, I suggest that you take seriously this opportunity that your late husband has provided. When you feel that your period of mourning is finished, please carefully consider your future. You are all much too young, and too beautiful, to accept widowhood as a permanent condition. I am sure that the *cosca* will honor his wishes in this matter. You will not be held hostage to our need to perpetuate his line. If need be, we will find other ways.

"We will take our leave of you now," he continued, taking Maria and Luisa by the hand and walking to toward the entrance. On reaching it he turned back briefly, and said, "Call on us, anytime, if you need anything."

With a sad smile, he turned and led his wives out of the door.

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Turning to her sister-wives, Orquidea said, "I think we need to have a family meeting."

"Everyone? Or just the wives?" Gemma asked.

"Not the children! At least not yet..." Teodora objected.

"Just the wives, then," Orquidea agreed, "but we have things to discuss and some planning to do... including how to break the news to the kids. Speaking of the kids, it'll be bedtime for most of them soon, so we won't have to wait long..."

She stopped speaking for a moment, staring into space, before continuing, "I think, however that Jason is old enough to sit with us. He'll be fourteen in a few months, and legally an adult."

"He's still a child though... are you sure you want to do that?" Teodora queried.

Orquidea fixed her with a fierce look, and said, "I'm absolutely sure. My son is barely

two years younger than Clarisse, and in the eyes of every authority we now know, will be a *man* soon.' Pausing again in thought, she looked away and added, "He loved Cris as much as if he were his natural father, and it will be hard on him, but not as hard as it will be for the others."

Her eyes snapped back into focus, and she said, "Enough of this for now. We'll meet back here after the children are asleep," and with that, she turned and left the room to her shell-shocked sisters.

Chapter 2 - Life Goes On

The Fanelli women were uncharacteristically silent as they left the Martelli residence, and took their seats in their car. That condition lasted almost until they arrived home, at which point Maria gave Joe a serious look, and said:

“You know, don’t you, that you are headed for trouble with the *cosca* over the issue of continuing the Martelli line...”

“Yes,” he sighed. “It is no secret that we promised to perpetuate our pilots’ genes if they fell in the line of duty. Cris’s final wishes notwithstanding, the rank and file wouldn’t tolerate us reneging on that promise.”

“So what do you intend to do about it?” she asked.

“I don’t know... but I need to come up with a solution fast, or there’ll be hell to pay!”

“I agree,” Luisa interjected. “The younger Martelli women, at least, are not going to want to give up their chance at having normal relations with a living husband, and Cris was right: many men in the *cosca* will be unwilling to take on a wife who can’t give them children. Those same men, though, will feel that the *cosca* is honor-bound to ensure that the fallen pilots will have more sons and daughters.

“It is as if their honor will require them to rape these women in order to accomplish that goal, if necessary - and make no mistake, if a woman is impregnated against her will, it is rape!”

“I have an idea that might solve the problem,” Maria said, thoughtfully, “but it will take some sacrifices, *personal* sacrifices on our part, to make it work.”

Parking the car, Joe looked at his senior wife and said, humorlessly, “So far I haven’t got a clue, so anything you offer will be light-years ahead of me! What do you have?”

Joe thought he’d seen and heard just about everything, until Maria began to speak, but as he listened, both he and Luisa felt their jaws drop. In the end, though, Luisa was sold, and he found himself, grudgingly, giving the idea his blessing

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Orquidea faced her co-wives with grim determination. She had already filled Jason in on the fact of Cris’ demise, and felt she already knew what the outcome of the meeting would be, but it was necessary, for planning the future, to get everything out in the open.

“All of you, except Jason, heard what Cris said. You also heard what Father Nicholas and the *Don* said. We are each free to pursue new relationships, if that is what we individually want to do. I have to tell you, though, I’m concerned that about the welfare

of our children. The rest of you may feel you need to find new husbands, but I intend to stay here and make a home for the children."

"Are you going to have more of Cris' babies?" Gemma challenged.

"I may have one more," she responded. "I am approaching that time when my own fertility will begin to falter, and risks of both birth defects and difficult pregnancies rise. If I do it, it'll have to be soon.

"I have already had two for Cris, and I brought two into this marriage. That is already one more than my own mother had. All of our children have been raised in the tradition of the *cosca*. If I have another, I will have more than done my duty."

"What about love?" Clarisse queried, timidly. "Won't you miss the feel of being held by a man, having his hands caress your body?"

"You're talking about sex, not necessarily love, my dear," Teodora interjected. "Although, I will miss that, as well." Turning to Orquidea, went on, 'As you know, my Ruby was two years old when I married you and Cris. And I too have borne two children for him. I'm not facing the limits you are, quite as soon, but they will be coming. I don't feel right about leaving you alone to manage Cris' household. I'll stay with you for now, and maybe have a couple more of his babies."

"Well, I think you are both nuts!" Gemma exploded. "He *wanted* us to find new husbands, not be widows the rest of our lives! I for one am going to accept his gift!"

Regaining her composure, she went on more calmly, "I will still love you all, and want to see you and the kids regularly, but I want a husband who can *be* a husband, not a ghost, and I want *my* babies to have a father they can see and touch!"

Orquidea heard a muted sob, and noticed that Clarisse was crying. Moving closer, she took the younger woman in her arms, and asked what was the matter.

"I want a living husband too," she sobbed, "I loved Cris, enough to carry his baby in my belly, but now he's gone and my baby won't have a father... and I don't have a husband! What am I going to do? How will I raise a child without his help?"

"There, there," Orquidea said, trying to console the distraught girl. "It'll all work out. If you decide to stay with Teodora and me, we'll help raise the baby. The *Don* has also promised that the *cosca* will support our needs. On the other hand, if you want to find a husband, there are a *lot* of good men in the *cosca* who would raise the child as their own."

The discussion went on until the early hours of morning, and there was plenty of emotion to it. In the end, all of the women accepted the decisions that their mates made, and it was settled that Orquidea and Teodora would maintain the family, while Gemma and Clarisse sought their futures elsewhere. The two younger women would

stay with the family, though, and help out where needed, until they found a new path. There were hugs and tears enough to go around, even for Jason.

...

Twenty-four hours after delivering the sad news to the Martelli widows, Joe made the formal announcement that Cristiano Martelli was missing in action and presumed dead. In order to do so, he pre-empted all video links throughout the *cosca*'s colony worlds, and following that, he announced the scheduling of a memorial service, to be held in two months.

Immediately after, in private teleconference with the *Capi*, he requested that each colony send a delegation to attend the service, preferably led by the *Capi* themselves. The reason for this being that he intended to have a formal business meeting of the *cosca*, to deal with issues raised by Martelli's death. Whoever attended the meeting needed to be able to speak for their people.

Upon concluding his teleconference, he sat and thought a moment, cataloging the myriad tasks comprising support of the Martelli family. One issue in particular leapt out at him. Knowing that the younger wives were going to want to shop for and eventually marry, new husbands, he realized that in doing so, they would be vulnerable to (at least verbal) maltreatment at the hands of immature and less-genteel members of the *cosca*.

And I know just what to do about it! he concluded, as he punched in a pair of familiar comm codes. Shortly thereafter, he had both Marco and Frank in a three-way conversation.

"I need help from the two of you," he told them, "to provide some obvious protection for the younger Martelli women."

"Are they being threatened?" Marco questioned. "Who did it? I can probably change his mind..."

"And if he can't, then I sure as Hell can!" Frank added vehemently.

"No," Joe responded, "as far as I know, no one has done any such thing. I just don't want it to come to that, and if everyone sees them being squired around by two of my favorite 'heavies,' it probably won't."

"But why would anyone bother them, anyway?" Frank interjected.

"Because they will be trying to find new husbands."

There followed a pregnant silence.

"Um.. Boss... aren't they supposed to keep having babies for the deceased husband?" Marco asked.

"That was the original plan," Joe answered, "but Cris Martelli, with the support of my wives, has thrown a monkey wrench into the works. It seems that he wants... wanted, now that he is dead... his widows to remarry, and in his final statement, he released them from their obligation to have more of his babies.

"The two younger ones want to accept that release, and your cousin, along with Luisa, has committed to supporting their rights to do so. I'm in a corner here because of that, and along with it, I've concluded that it wouldn't be honorable for the *cosca* to force the issue.

"Maria has a plan that I believe can work, but it's going to take some time to fully develop and implement. In the meantime, I need your help. Can I count on you?"

Both of the men agreed, but Marco had another question.

"I can see that having us with them might protect them from some of our less-well-behaved elements, Boss, but wouldn't it work the other way, too?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm thinking that their prospects for meeting interested guys might not be as good, if we're always hanging around..."

Joe barely succeeded at keeping his smile to himself, before replying: "That might be true, at first, but I'm sure that any really good man would find a way to approach them. Besides, it probably won't be necessary for very long... people will get used to seeing them dating, and after a while it'll be accepted. You won't have to baby-sit them for long."

Only after the men acknowledged the assignment, did Joe break the connection and allow himself a visible grin.

Yes... I have plans for you boys...

...

Marco and Frank took their new assignment as seriously as any other, and Joe was very pleased. He stayed busy over the course of the next several weeks, as he went about making arrangements for the service, but he continued to check in on the Martelli women at least daily.

In order to avoid feeding the ubiquitous rumor mongers, he always had Maria or Luisa, or both, accompany him during these visits. He saw no value in supplying the gossips in the community with grist for their mill, and regular visits to a house full of widows, by an unescorted *Don*, would be just that.

After a few such visits, Maria approached Luisa with concern etched on her face.

“Luisa, have you noticed Joe putting forth *any* effort to recruit younger wives for us?”

“No-o-o... should I have?”

“Neither have I, and it’s a big problem.”

“How is that?”

“It’s a problem, because as the *Don*, he should be setting an example for the men of the *cosca!*.”

“Okay, you’ve lost me somehow. Our husband isn’t chasing skirts, and that is somehow setting a bad example...”

“Exactly!” Maria exclaimed. “I knew you’d understand!”

“Umm... but I don’t! How is that a problem?”

“Oh... well, he only has two of us, and he needs four! My thinking is that the next two should be younger women, who have more fertile years ahead than you or I...”

“I see... you want some more junior wives to boss around...”

Maria laughed, and said “Get serious! You know very well that the Church has decreed that all men who are able should have the maximum number of wives that they can support. There is *nobody* more able than Joe! He should set an example by having four wives - the maximum allowed by the Church.

“The purpose in his having multiple wives is to have lots of children. You and I still have a few fertile years left, but not so many that we can afford to rest on our laurels. We need to somehow encourage him to find and marry some younger women...”

“I guess I can see that,” Luisa granted. “And it’s not like we don’t get more than enough attention from him now...”

“If he gave us any more attention, we’d both be walking bowlegged all of the time,” Maria snorted.

“So what, or should I say who, do you have in mind?”

“Well, have you noticed how he looks at Clarisse, whenever we visit the Martelli’s? Perhaps there is the seed of interest, and a situation that we can use to promote unity in the *cosca*...”

...

Orquidea was unnerved by the unnatural quiet reigning in the house. With the other Martelli women away, or otherwise occupied and all of the children asleep, there was

little to distract her from the uncertainty of her future, and the sorrow of losing her husband. Pulling herself up by her bootstraps, she decided that there was little point in remaining awake, since all of the necessary housekeeping was done. Faced with a boring, lonely evening, she decided to head for bed.

As she approached the room she shared with Teodora (when they weren't in Cris' bed!) she heard the sound of muted sobs filtering through the wooden door. Torn between a need to offer solace, and an inhibition against intruding on her roommate's privacy, her maternal instincts won out. Quietly, she opened the door to find Teodora stretched out, face down, on her bed, her body shaking with grief.

Orquidea marveled that the younger woman had been so effective at hiding her suffering. Only when she was completely alone had she let it go, not expecting that anyone would find her out. It might have worked, too, if Orquidea hadn't gotten bored with being awake and alone. Gemma was out on the town, trailing one of the nice young men who were serving as bodyguards, and Clarisse was visiting with the Don's wives... again... for the fourth time in a week.

After watching for a moment, Orquidea moved over to sit on the bed, and began to stoke the younger woman's back.

"Cry it out, baby," she murmured. "I'll be here for you until you're finished and ready for sleep."

Teodora quickly turned over and threw her arms around her roommate's neck, burying her face in the older woman's bosom.

Orquidea hugged her tightly as she continued stroking. Surprisingly, she found herself becoming aroused.

I must be hornier than I thought... she mused, ... we've sometimes kissed and touched each other as part of our play with Chris, but girl/girl action was never the main event...

Nonetheless, her nipples were undeniably hardening, and they became maddeningly sensitive as Teodora innocently rasped her blouse over them. The feeling was so intense that it was impossible to disguise her gasps.

As Teodora calmed herself, she, too, noticed the erotic implications of their embrace. She pushed away, only slightly, to examine Orquidea's face. The lust she found there resonated in her own body, and without further thought, she simply planted a passionate kiss on the senior wife's mouth.

It was a watershed moment, and both women abandoned all pretense of platonic love. No buttons flew, and no fabric tore in a rush to touch flesh to flesh. Instead, light, loving caresses simply became more intimate, stroking areas that would normally be avoided. Kisses became deeper and more prolonged, and by mutual (if silent) agreement, each began to help the other disrobe.

Breaking for a moment to grab a lungful of air, Orquidea noticed that her lover's nipples stood up invitingly, and on impulse, she bent down to nurse gently on the rubbery protrusion. If Teodora's gasp of pleasure did not give ample assurance that such attention was more than welcome, her other responses did. With both hands she clasped Orquidea's face firmly to her breast, encouraging further, firmer suckling.

When Teodora could take it no longer, she pushed the older woman over onto her back, and began planting little kisses all over her face, neck, and chest. She stopped momentarily at her lover's own nipples, nipping and suckling at them to the sound of her partner's groans and moans of pleasure. She abandoned them fairly quickly, though, to Orquidea's temporary disappointment, and moved down her abdomen, bathing her body with yet more kisses.

As the younger woman neared her lover's sexual center, Orquidea tensed momentarily, and raised up to look her in the face.

"You don't have to do that," she began.

"I want to," Teodora insisted. "Unless you'd rather I didn't..."

"I don't know," she responded, "I always liked it when Chris did it. I've just never done it with a woman..."

"If anything, it should be better. Who besides a woman would know what feels best?"

"That kind of makes sense," she allowed. Then suspiciously, "Have you done it with many other women?"

"Actually, no, but I read and I hear talk, and it made sense to me. I don't feel attracted to women, but I love **you**. I know you love me too, and this is a way that we can help each other now that Chris is gone."

Having no adequate response, Orquidea let herself fall back on the bed, and Teodora, taking that as surrender, continued her southward journey. As she approached her target though, her lover raised up and spoke.

"If you're going to do that, you need to change position."

"Okay," she responded, and began to move toward a kneeling position between her lover's legs.

"No-no-no!" her lover rebuked. "I meant that I should return the favor!"

Shocked, she said, "You don't have to do that! I just want to make you feel good!"

"And how do you think I feel?" Orquidea demanded. "Don't you think I want to make you feel good too? Now get over here!"

Teodora complied reluctantly, feeling that somehow she had coerced her friend and co-wife, and now lover, but the older woman would have none of it. Hurrying the junior wife along with gentle pressure, Orquidea got them situated in a classic "69" position..

She had tasted her sister-wives before, on Chris' lips, and had herself achieved many orgasms as a result of *his* oral attentions. This was the first time, however, that she had ever taken that taste directly from the source, as it were, and she didn't know that might alter her perceptions.

As it turned out, it was a non-issue. Teodora kissed her partner's lower lips, then parted them with her tongue. She stroked the older woman's mons, and pushed her fingers inside, to massage her G-spot while licking, nibbling, and sucking on her clit.

Once Orquidea began receiving oral stimulation, it took nearly all of her remaining concentration just to reciprocate, but she managed. She felt her back and legs tense, involuntarily, and moaned while yet further spreading legs . She trembled as a confused mix of sensation and emotion overran all conscious thought. She came.

Teodora followed her in climax, not long after, and both women collapsed in near-exhaustion. After a long moment, Teodora shifted around, so that she could cuddle with her bed-mate, and the couple drifted off to sleep.

Some hours later, Orquidea awoke to the sound of a sharp intake of breath. Opening her eyes, she saw Gemma standing in the doorway, her mouth agape at the sight of the two sharing a bed where normally only one slept.

Orquidea simply smiled, and stiffly pushed her nude body out of bed, noticing as she did, that the room smelled of sex. Suddenly, Gemma clapped her hand over her mouth, and turning, ran out of the room. It was obvious that she, too, had noticed the odor.

At that precise moment, the house AI announced, "We have a visitor..."

...

Father Nicholas shifted uncomfortably as he waited (impatiently) for someone to answer the door. *I'll never get used to these infernal machines... and they seem to be getting downright snooty!*

At about the time his patience ran out, the door opened to show Orquidea welcoming him into her home. Nicholas noticed that she seemed to be somewhat in dishabille, but he chose to ignore it.

He followed her into the formal sitting room, and moved to sit on the sofa. As he did, he passed close enough to her to catch a familiar scent, which he could not immediately identify. Dismissing it for the moment, he got right down to business.

"How are you, the other wives, and the children doing?"

"Not too poorly," Orquidea responded. "We still have the occasional bout with sadness and depression, but for the most part we are coping. We have to learn how to live without him [Chris]. I think that soon we will adjust and become a more normal family."

Nicholas nodded and continued his pep talk.

"That's the way life works. Since I haven't seen or heard otherwise from you, I presume that it hasn't gotten bad enough for you to ask for help..."

"Well," she answered, "It's kind of a hit-or-miss thing. Each of us has had a few bad moments, but usually not at the same time as anyone else. That has made it easier to get our comforting from each other. Also, the Don and his wives have been here nearly every day, since we got the news. They have been wonderful."

"Have you and your sister-wives come to any conclusions about your futures?"

"I believe so. Teodora and I will stay together and raise the children we have. Gemma has declared her intention to remarry, and Clarisse wants to do so as well."

"What about Clarisse's child? Will she be leaving it with you, after the delivery?"

"I don't think so. She has said that she will only accept a man who will be a father to her child. I believe that if she marries, she intends to raise her child in her new home."

"And what of Gemma? Will she simply cut all ties to you and the children?"

"She says not... you know, she has borne no children for the family as yet, and is not now pregnant, so her ties to us are not as strong. Nonetheless, she says she wants to remain a part of our lives, even if she finds a man to love."

Nicholas acknowledged this with a nod, and then queried, "Is there anything at all I might be able to do for you? Do you need any kind of assistance that you aren't getting?"

"You are very kind to take the time from your busy schedule to worry about us," Orquidea said, patting his knee, "but I think we're going to be fine. If I can think of anything to ask of you, I won't fail to do so, Father."

"All right then," he concluded, "I need to be on my way, but I'll hold you to that promise." They both rose from their seats at the same time, bringing them yet again into close proximity, and yet again Nicholas caught that familiar scent.

This time he recognized the scent for what it was - it was the aroma of a woman who had recently had some serious sex! He recognized it only because he'd had occasion to experience it with his own wife.

He stood stiffly and gave Orquidea a hard look. She knew instantly that he had found

her out, and she dropped her gaze to the floor.

“What have you done, my child?”

Gathering her courage, she forced herself to look at him in defiance, and replied
“Absolutely nothing that I’m ashamed of!”

Surprised at the force of her statement, he raised one eyebrow, rather like Spock of the original *Star Trek*TM television series, and asked, “Are you sure? It is clear to me that you have recently had sex, and you no longer have a husband. How can there *not* be a matter to confess?”

She almost broke under his examination, but again gathered hers courage and answered his question with one of her own.

“Did we not take our vows until death us do part? Are we, the wives of Cristiano Martelli, not married to each other, as much as we were to Chris? How can there be a matter to confess while we cleave only to one another?”

“But if I understand you correctly, what you are doing is a perversion!”

“I say it is not!” she replied hotly. “You have said yourself that there is no perversion in any act of married love!”

“This is not exactly what I had in mind when I said that...”

“Nonetheless, we are married, and we love one another. Chris’ death only parted us from him, not from each other, and it did not change our mutual love.”

Nicholas drew a deep breath and sighed. “I must think on this... and pray.”

“While you are about it,” she observed, primly, “you might want to consider how the junior wives can be released from our marriage, since they want to find new husbands...”

He nodded and with a heavy heart, saw himself out the door.

...

The next stop for Nicholas was the Fanelli residence. He didn’t normally drop in on people unexpectedly, but Maria had requested an appointment. As he was out and about anyway, he thought it would be a good idea to take care of whatever matter concerned her immediately, rather than try to schedule office time.

Coincidentally, Maria rather than one of the other adults, answered the door, and her bright smile made Nicholas feel very welcome. It did little to prepare him for the onslaught of her concerns, though.

"Father, we have some issues regarding the continuance of Chris Martelli's bloodline, and we need your guidance, and if you are willing, your support of a possible solution."

He was eager to hear what she had to say, but by the time she finished making her case, his hair was standing on end.

...

A rather shaken Father Nicholas returned home quietly, and even before announcing himself, he poured himself a brandy. Michela entered the room, and he would have poured her one as well, but she was heavy with their first child.

"It must have been a trying day," she observed. "You don't normally need one of those so soon after getting home..."

"It was," he declared, "possibly the worst day I've had since I first met Joseph Fanelli!"

"That covers a lot of ground," she responded. "Care to talk about it?"

"Can't," he said. "Some of it might be in a confession, later on."

"You're talking about the Martelli women, aren't you?"

"What?" he exclaimed. "How can you know anything about them?"

"Orquidea called me almost two hours ago. She told me everything." She stopped and gazed at him, poker faced. "I think she's right. But you have to decide if *you* think she's right..."

He sighed. *I've been doing a lot of that...* "I know what I *want* to do. I just don't know if it's the right *thing* to do..." He got up and began pacing.

"Then there's the thing Maria brought up this afternoon..." he continued.

"Oh, is that the project she wants to start for continuing the pilot's bloodlines?" Maria asked casually.

"Am I the last person on the planet to hear about *everything*?" he complained.

Michela moved into his arms and held him closely. "No dear, there are literally thousands of people on the planet, including most of the *cosca* leadership, who have absolutely no idea that these things are happening. You are among the privileged few to hear about it at this time," she assured him.

He seemed to wilt under the weight of the decisions he had to make. "I'm going to need some guidance from higher up," he stated, "and I need to make a trip to Earth, to get it."

“You want to talk to the Pope? Are you sure about that? What if he wants to know why you haven’t taken on any more wives?”

“I’ll tell him I’ve been too busy. He’ll understand...”

“He’ll understand that you’ve been dragging your feet! If you can’t find time to locate suitable candidates, maybe I should pre-screen some for you...”

“Whatever...” he said, waving her off. “I’ve got to talk to Joe about passage...”

Michela considered *that* to be something of a victory. Her husband *had* been dragging his feet, and it was high time something was done about it. He would have at *least* three candidates to sort through by the time he returned from Earth!

Chapter 3 - Stand Up and Be Counted

Joe entered his house with his wives, after returning Clarisse Martelli to her own home. The women had been strangely silent, again, throughout the trip, and that worried him. On entering the house, they had immediately disappeared into the bedroom while he secured the entry door.

It had been a long day, and he was tired. Loosening his tie (yes, he still wore one of those archaic affectations!), he made his way toward the bedroom, hoping that the ladies only had sleep in mind.

Entering the room, he saw that neither of his wives had prepared for bed... in any sense. They were both sitting, fully dressed, on the oversized bed, with their hands folded in their laps. With a sense of foreboding, he asked. "what's up?"

Maria looked at Luisa, and got a nod. Then she took a deep breath and launched into her speech.

"We are disappointed in you, husband. You have been shirking your duty to set a good example for the *cosca*."

Confused, he asked, "What do you mean?"

"You know very well that you should have already filled your quota of wives. Because you haven't, many men of the *cosca* do not feel compelled to do so. That is a shameful lack of leadership in a *Don*."

"Furthermore, the wives you *do* have are past their peak reproductive years. You should be finding and courting younger women, who can give you babies for many years to come! What do you have to say for yourself?"

He smiled, realizing that Maria was again on a crusade.

"I suppose I must plead guilty, and throw myself on the mercy of the court. There are extenuating circumstances..."

"Such as?"

"Well, my *own* age for one thing. I can barely keep up with you two. A younger woman would cripple me... *two* would likely kill me!"

"Oh tush," Luisa scoffed. "You keep us sore all of the time. Deliciously sore, true, but sore nonetheless!"

"And you still have energy to burn," Maria added. "Energy which would be better spent impregnating some sweet young bride..."

"Okay, okay," he laughed. "I surrender. Do you have a candidate in mind, or am I just

to go on the prowl?"

"Hah!" Maria huffed. "We have seen you staring at young Clarisse Martelli. Even pregnant, she draws your gaze whenever she enters the room. You cannot believably deny your attraction to her..."

"I confess," he interrupted, impatiently, "but I am still an old man. Compared to *her*, I am a *very* old man!"

"Apparently not *that* old," she smirked. "Perhaps it is only your eyes that are old, because everyone *else* can see that she is smitten with you!"

I will get no sleep tonight, unless I yield, he concluded, and there are many worse things than having a beautiful, pregnant, sixteen-year-old wife.

"What do you wish me to do?" he demanded.

"Just be your romantic self," Luisa told him. "She will be back with us again tomorrow night. Pay her some direct attention, and see where it leads."

Looking from one of his wives to the other, he observed, "You two have this all figured out, don't you?"

The two women stood and sauntered sexily over to his sides.

"Of course, dear," they said in unison, as they each kissed a cheek.

...

As the Fanelli women expected, the next few weeks brought Joe and Clarisse ever closer together. It wasn't unusual for her to spend several nights running at the Fanelli home, or to find her sitting on Joe's lap (swollen belly and all) while he teased her into giggling fits.

When she *did* have to leave for her home, it became commonplace for her to deposit sweet kisses upon the Fanelli adults, and those she gave to Joe became increasingly passionate. One night, as she was saying goodbye to him, the kiss ran long into overtime, and when they broke, they found themselves alone. The other women had abandoned them - really just given them some privacy.

Worried, she looked up at Joe and said, "I hope they aren't mad at me..."

"Not to worry, my little flower. They are just accommodating us."

"What do you mean?" she asked, brow furrowed.

"They seem to feel that you are attracted to me," he told her, causing her to blush. "And they have known for some time that I hold you dear to my heart, and that I lust for

you unashamedly, as well."

"Do not tease me so!" she rebuked him tearfully, and pulling away from him. "Who would want a woman who carries another man's child? Surely not so powerful a man as the *Don*! You could have any woman in the *cosca*, and as many as you would like... why would you want me?"

"I am not teasing," he reassured her, taking her once again into his arms. "What you say about those other women may be true, I know not: but I do know that I want you. And why? Because I can taste a sweetness in your soul that slakes a thirst in my own."

"Though you are young, you are already a beautiful and desirable woman. The child in your belly is proof of that, and being a father-figure for that child would be no great burden, if I can have your love, and possess your body."

Clarisse just stared at him, unwilling to believe, until he moved to kiss her. Then she melted in his arms and put her entire being into the kiss. Afterwards, when she had regained her breath, she acquiesced to his desires.

"I am yours, if you want me," she said with a sigh. "Now take me home while this poor young widow still has some virtue."

...

Across town, Marco Lentini poured wine into two stemmed glasses. Not unusually, he was entertaining an attractive young woman in his quarters. There was one thing unusual about the woman, however... she was every bit his intellectual match.

He passed one of the wineglasses to her, and Gemma gazed thoughtfully at him, over the rim.

"We shouldn't have done that, you know..." she said.

"I know," he responded. "When Joe finds out, he's going to blow a fuse. I'll be lucky if I don't end up with a new asshole." He stopped for a moment and grinned. "It was worth it though."

"You think so?" she smirked. "Will you still think so if it happens that I carry your child?"

Marco stopped and looked at her, stricken. "I know that we are nominally Catholic, but aren't you using birth control?"

"No, silly," she teased. "Up until just recently, I was a married woman! I didn't plan to be seduced, either..."

"I'm sorry," he murmured, "but I'll do the right thing by you. In fact, I'll marry you right

now if you like.”

“No Marco,” she told him seriously, “I don’t want to entrap you. If I’m pregnant, I’ll deal with it. I would only marry you if I believed you really wanted me for your wife.”

At that, Marco slipped into a reverie. On recovering, he said, “I think I do.”

“Why do you say that?” she queried. “I know you’ve brought many other women here, before. Why should I believe that I am special to you?”

“Because, as I just realized, I’ve never before been so thoroughly dedicated to eliminating any competition. I wanted you for my own almost from the moment I became your protector. You didn’t seem to notice that I cut Frank out of the job almost immediately...”

“I thought he was sort of assigned to Clarisse...”

“No, we were both assigned to both of you, but she obviously didn’t need our protection when she spent so much time at Joe’s place. Frank would have *liked* to share the duty of protecting you, but I told him I had it handled.”

“I see,” she acknowledged, smiling. “Go on...”

“Didn’t you notice that very few men ever approached you, when we were out together? They could see in my eyes that I would have *looked* for reasons kick their asses!”

“So where does that leave us now?” she asked.

“That depends upon you. Gemma, will you marry me?”

She set her glass on the bedside table, and took his hand. “Of course I will, you silly man. You just had to ask correctly.”

Pulling him into position, she wrapped in her arms and legs around him, kissed him thoroughly, and said, “Now make love to me again.”

There was no need for foreplay. She was ready, and so was he. With his rod already poised at her entrance, it was simply a matter of nudging his hips forward to achieve penetration. This was ground previously broken, so there was little resistance... nonetheless the feeling of being enveloped by her soft, wet warmth, was overpowering. Coupled with her caresses and kisses, and the sensation of her hard nipples boring into his chest, the effect was devastating.

They moved together in a time-honored rhythm, generating wavelets of pleasure with each cycle of motion. The wavelets piled up upon one another, like water driven by a storm, until, at the end, an impossibly large composite wave swamped them in exquisite bliss. The kisses they shared on the heels of that wave were short and small, because

they had yet to recover their breath.

After a while, Gemma said, "You know, there might be a problem with this..."

"How's that," he queried.

"Well, I overheard a conversation that I shouldn't have, recently, although in a way, it was my business. Anyway, the point was made that even though Chris died, I'm still married to the other Martelli wives. So is Clarisse."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Uh-uh," she answered. "We all took the same vows, swearing to cleave only to one another '*til death us do part!*' The Church is going to have to deal with it too. This is a situation that's never happened before."

"Well there's only one thing we can do then."

"What's that?"

"We have to go to confessional. We put it in the Church's lap and they'll have to fix it!"

"Now *you're* kidding!"

"Not a bit! They'll ignore the problem until someone threatens to make it public. It's just easier that way. But if we confess that we've had an affair, and tell them we want to get married, they'll find a way."

"I always knew you were a smart man. Kiss me!"

...

The memorial service went off without a hitch, exactly two months after the public announcement of Cristiano Martelli's death. The *cosca* spared no expense in preparing funeral trappings and meeting the protocols required for the interment of a hero. The fact that there was no body to inter was irrelevant.

Father Nicholas delivered the eulogy, personally. Clearly such things would normally be handled by a priest of lesser rank, but just as clearly, as the first pilot to die in the line of duty, Cristiano Martelli was not an ordinary casualty.

Immediately following the service, Joe stood before the assembled *Capi*, in the large meeting room. Considering how best to open the meeting, his gaze fell upon his new fiancée. *Thank God that Nicholas granted those annulments! That idiot Marco would have hung both of our hides out to dry!*

"Before we begin, I must tell you of my good fortune. Clarisse Martelli," he said, gesturing for her to rise, "... widow of the late Cristiano Martelli, will be joining my family

in the near future. Only last evening did she consent to become our wife. This is the first public announcement of our engagement. Maria, Luisa, and I invite you to share our joy, and welcome her to this gathering."

There was a smattering of polite applause, as the young, and very pregnant woman curtsied, blushing madly. Maria and Luisa rose simultaneously, and encircled her in their arms. Nicholas nodded his approval from his seat. Joe smiled his satisfaction, and after a moment, resumed speaking.

"Circumstances being what they are, our fiancée will take up residence in our home immediately, so that we may care for her during her pregnancy and delivery. For propriety's sake, however, the wedding will be delayed until after the child is born."

There was some murmuring among the audience, in apparent confusion as to just how such an arrangement might accommodate propriety, but no one raised an objection.

"On to business, now. To refresh your memories, I will review the history of the issue about which we meet tonight. When we began this undertaking - our unilateral declaration of war upon the Sa'arm - we needed pilots for our warships. Many young men volunteered to do the job, but few were qualified.

"Those who were qualified, had rational concerns about how such work would affect life and family. While the purpose was honorable and heroic, the process would be protracted, lonely and boring, and sometimes, dangerous. Many of these men were married, or planned to be, and they had hopes of building families. This kind of work creates obstacles to doing that.

"One of the things we did, to get the kind of pilots we wanted, was to guarantee the continuance of each of these men's bloodlines, at least into the next generation. It seemed little enough to offer at the time.

"Those promises were made for the best of reasons, but without much planning or forethought about how they would be fulfilled. In retrospect, it is clear that, on some level, we rejected the inevitability of losing pilots, and neglected to consider the issues that could complicate fulfilling them.

"Recently, that lack of foresight and planning has come home to roost, and we are faced with the unpleasant task of trying to accommodate our foolish commitment. I freely admit that I had no idea how to approach the problem, until Maria came to me with a proposed solution.

"I have listened and considered her words, and I think that once again, our Maria may have saved our bacon. So, rather than having me give you a poor facsimile of her ideas, I choose to have her to present them to you directly. Maria?"

Maria, whose pregnancy had become nearly as obvious as Clarisse's, approached the podium and took the microphone.

“The *Don* has succinctly described the dilemma we face. What I propose for your consideration, is a solution that will require voluntary participation from responsible members of the *cosca*, if it is going to work.

“First, let me give you my operating philosophy. I believe that when babies are born, they should be born into intact families. I know that it is not *always* going to happen, but whenever possible, there should be both a father and a mother present, for a variety of reasons of which you are already cognizant.

“While I would be the last person to deny a lone widow the right to bear her deceased husband’s seed, that creates a difficult situation: one that grows even more difficult as the number of children she has increases.

“How many of you would marry a widow, even a beautiful one, if she were obligated to only have her dead husband’s children?” she challenged. The men in the audience grew uncomfortable under her gaze, but none answered.

“I thought so,” she observed grimly. “So why would she be willing to obey that restriction, knowing that she could never again expect to feel the love of a living man? Why should she? Because we were too short-sighted to see the problem?

“I think not... nor do I believe that the women of the *cosca* at large - including your own wives - will be willing to support enforcement such requirements!” *There! The threat is out in the open now!*

“Doing so would be no better than rape! It would be the rape of a widow by the entire *cosca*! Where is the honor in that? There is none!” The discomfort level had grown so, that her audience had begun fidgeting. “There is an alternative, though,” Maria smiled, seeing the light of hope gleaming in their eyes - she had them where she wanted them now.

“What if there were *other* women of the *cosca*, who were willing to accept the seed of these dead heroes... would that not meet our obligation to them?” she asked. Many of those in the audience looked confused, others nodded careful agreement.

“I’ll get right to the point,” she continued. “I propose that the *cosca* solicit volunteers for this purpose from the ranks of our own married women.” Shock began to register on the faces of her audience, so to keep the tactical advantage - and to forestall immediate objections - she pressed on quickly.

“Think about it,” she invited them, “If a woman volunteers, then no one has to be forced to serve, and the issue of besmirching the *cosca*’s honor disappears, and the *cosca* is meeting the obligation. If she is married, then the baby will be born into an intact family - one with two parents.” One of the men in the audience raised his hand, as if he were a child in school. Maria nodded.

“What about her husband? What about his rights, and his proper expectations of his

wife?" he asked.

"I don't propose that any married woman should do this unilaterally," Maria replied. "That would defeat the purpose. No husband would be willing to nurture his wife's child by another man, if he felt that, in bearing that child, she had disrespected him."

"But that's the point!" the man cried. "If she *has* another man's child, she *is* disrespecting her husband!" Many in the audience seemed to be in agreement. Maria had to think and act fast.

"That is only true if she does it without his agreement!" she snapped. "I am not suggesting that *any* married woman should volunteer if her husband cannot be convinced that it is right and proper!"

Joe, sensing that things were about to get out of hand, intervened. "Why don't we hold the questions until the end of Maria's presentation. Otherwise we'll be here all night, and we still would not know everything we need to know in order to act." Not waiting for a response, he said, "Go on Maria."

She was a little angry with Joe for interfering, but realized that it was necessary in order to make any progress. After giving him a short glare, she took a deep breath and turned back to her audience.

"Okay. Here it is. The basic plan is stepwise, to first publicly admit to the *cosca* that we screwed up by making these commitments in the first place, but that we are now honor-bound to see that the names and the bloodlines of deceased pilots continue, for at least one more generation. The second thing we have to do, is decide on the limits of that obligation.

"I propose that practically speaking, even if the pilot had lived, and all of his wives been very young, it would have been very unusual for him to have sired more than five children on each wife. Even with the maximum allowed number of wives, that would have amounted to only twenty children. That number is probably even somewhat higher than is reasonable, but we shouldn't stint on meeting our obligation.

"The third thing, is to decide who, that is which women, will be bearing these children for them. We already know that we can't, with honor, force anyone to participate. We also know that we want children, when possible, to be raised in complete homes. That means the women must be volunteers, and that they must be married.

"I suggest that any woman who volunteers to have one child, would have met and far exceeded her portion of the *cosca*'s obligation to the deceased., and her husband, by his agreement, would have as well. On Catania alone, there are now over five thousand married women. Surely among them there are twenty women who, with their husbands' consent, would be willing to serve in this way.

"The final requirement, is to adopt and implement a system to select women from

among the volunteers. I fully expect enough response from among our women, that this will be necessary. I propose a lottery of sorts. To be eligible, the women must not only volunteer and have their husbands' agreement, they must be in *stable* relationships, in good health, and have sufficient resources to devote to raising an additional child without hardship.

"In conclusion, I would like to mention one other item. It was the *leadership* of the *cosca* that decided we should make this commitment in the first place. All of the *Capi* were participants in that decision. It was you who sold the idea for the commitment to the rank and file. Perhaps it should be the leadership who set the example, by meeting the challenge of this obligation head on. I would be happy to speak on your behalf, to any of your wives who are not here."

Maria had been keenly aware of the grimaces displayed by many in the audience, and it was difficult to ignore the sounds of discontent that had grown continuously, during her presentation.

"And that is the essence of my proposal," she concluded. "Are there any comments or questions?" There were, but they were not directed at *her*.

"Father Nicholas," one man began, "What Maria wants our wives to do, wouldn't that be adultery?"

Nicholas rose wearily from his seat and took the podium, as Maria yielded her place. Taking the microphone in his hand, he began to pace, back and forth, across the speaker's platform.

"I have wondered about that myself, and not finding any answers from within, I sought guidance from the Holy Father." He paused for a moment before continuing, wanting to be sure of the truth of his next words.

"The guidance he gave me, at first, seemed nebulous. He repeated the reason for creating this new branch of the Church. We are in a new environment, one which is hostile to the Church and to believers.

"He repeated his charge that I lead you spiritually, in a way that would insure the continuation of the Church in this new environment, and he added emphatically that I should do so *without* petitioning the Vatican concerning every need to deviate from historic traditions.

"He repeated his edict, that this new branch of the Church should have its *own* rules and traditions.

"Some of the rules and traditions that were considered sacrosanct on Earth, are not so much so, here. Witness the changes in marriage and the priesthood. Witness the revised age of majority. Witness the authority that His Holiness has vested in me and those who will come after me, to minister unto you, who he hopes and believes - as we

all do - will become more numerous than the sum of all believers who ever lived on Earth.

"The substance of his advice was... pray.

"I have prayed without ceasing concerning this exact matter, and I am satisfied in my heart that what we are doing is right. I know that this will not sit well with some of you, so I also must offer some observations that are indisputable.

"Adultery is prohibited, by the Seventh Commandment, and the biblical concept of adultery was very specific. In the context of the Hebrew culture, at the time the Commandments were given them, adultery only happened when a married woman had voluntary sexual relations with someone without her husband's permission.

"Originally, the prohibition had its roots in the status of women as chattels. Later on, however, our Christian forebears extended the definition to include *any* kind of sexual congress outside of marriage. A rationale for this can be found in Jesus' own principles concerning how one should treat one's neighbors, and who those neighbors actually *are*.

"The point of *all* of the Commandments is to *observe the Golden Rule*. Don't deliberately do things that will offend or hurt your loved ones, your friends, your neighbors... physically or emotionally.

"Now, as it did then, giving yourself sexually to someone, other than your sworn mate, offends your neighbors, confuses your friends, sets a poor example for children, and most importantly, hurts your mate emotionally. In response to that emotional injury, a mate might become irrational and behave in ways that can cause them physical injury; then there is the obvious increase in risk of exposure to sexually transmitted disease.

"So does the prohibition still stand? Are we so modern that we no longer need observe it? I have to believe that it still stands. Even though we view our wives differently than those ancient Hebrews did theirs, the intent of the Commandments, and the interpretation of them given to us by Jesus, still remains.

"So where does that leave us with respect to this new idea, and this obligation we have, to perpetuate the bloodlines of our fallen heroes? How does it affect our obligation when the hero has released his wives from theirs? Are we entitled to force those women to bear children they might not want?

"We are NOT! And that is true, whether or not the late husband releases them! It would be dishonorable to force someone to conceive and bear a child, under duress and against their will. Doing that, we would become no better than the minions of the Godless Confederacy!

"On the other hand, we still have an obligation to those men. The cosca made a promise in haste, and must now find a way to fulfill it.

“What Maria has proposed, is that we ask for volunteers... mature women who, with the consent of their husbands, will come forward to accept the seed of a fallen hero. No one will be coerced, so there is no dishonor, and sex isn’t involved, so there can be no adultery! I can conceive of no more elegant solution to the *cosca*’s dilemma, and the Church will stand solidly behind it. My own Michela has asked to participate, after our own child is born, and I have consented.”

“What about the ban on artificial insemination?” another man challenged. Nicholas was disgusted.

“I find it ironic that this objection should surface only now. I don’t recall hearing any of you voice such concerns when it was just the deceased pilots’ wives you were discussing,” Nicholas answered, dryly. “No matter. I broached that very subject to His Holiness.”

“His response was - *and I quote* - ‘Those rules were established for the Church on *Earth*. You [meaning me] are the Patriarch of the *Church Extraterrestialis*! Within the framework of scripture and prayer, it is *your* job to determine the appropriate rules of behavior for your flock. Do not to shirk that responsibility by attempting to delegate it to *me*!’

“I don’t think I can adequately convey how irritable he was, in delivering that statement.”

Nicholas looked around the room, meeting the eyes of each of the *Capi* in turn.

“The importance that the Pope has placed on population growth for the *cosca* is *prima facie* obvious, and his most recent words to me are a clear expression of his intention *not* to interfere in how we achieve that growth.

“It is also clear that he intends for us to find our own way in the cosmos, without reliance upon, or inhibition by, many of the requirements which have historically been imposed on earthbound believers.

“I have searched the scriptures, and spent many hours in prayer over this very issue. I have no sign from God that prohibits us these activities, nor has He moved my heart to dread the outcome of same. I have faith that if He disapproved, He would have guided me to a different conclusion, perhaps even by moving the Pope to take a different stance.”

Having said his piece, Nicholas replaced the microphone and returned to his seat, without waiting for further questions. It was clear that, as far as the Church was concerned, the matter was closed.

Maria returned to the podium, trying to hide how pleased she was with Nicholas’ stand on the matter. Taking a deep breath, she addressed the stunned crowd:

“Consider this! Neither the Church nor Father Nicholas were party to the promise we made, the *cosca* made, to our pilots; yet, he and his wife see it as *their* duty, as members of our society, to participate in fulfilling it!

“Do you think that *my* family would stand idly by, waiting for others in the *cosca* to face up to our obligations in this way? We would not ask you to do what we would not do ourselves!

“My husband and I, and my sister-wife Luisa, have discussed these matters in depth , and I can report that my family plans to take an active role in implementing this program.

“*Don Giuseppe* has graciously consented for Luisa to be the first to volunteer to accept the seed of our slain hero, Cristiano Martelli. When the child I am now carrying is weaned, I will volunteer as well.

“The *Don* has pledged that the children we bear from that seed, as well as the one to whom Clarisse will soon give birth, will be raised in our home; that they will be treated as if they were his own; but, that they will know their biological father as well as we can manage. They will carry the Martelli name into the future.

“*Familia DiCatania* will do our part. I challenge you to do as much!”

Returning to her seat, Maria was visibly shaken by the proceedings. Joe rose to his feet and embraced his wife, before taking over the podium himself.

“There you have it,” he said flatly. “You have heard our proposal, and you have the position of the Church on the matter. My family *will* do this. We will not dishonor ourselves by breaking our promise to those pilots. Each of you must decide for yourselves what is right for you.

“Any who choose to follow in our wake *will* be treated with honor and respect! No one will be forced to participate, but physical or verbal abuse of those who choose this path will be dealt with *summarily!*” He glared out across the room, reinforcing his determination for the benefit of the audience.

Riding roughshod over their objections was a gamble. No individual *mafiusu* could successfully oppose him, but if enough of them banded together, he could be ousted as *Don*. His greatest asset in this confrontation was their distrust of each other, and the fact that *everyone* in the room knew that he didn’t act capriciously. There was little point in opposing him, because no one else in the *cosca* had as much claim on their trust.

After the grumbling faded away, he looked over the crowd, observing the discomfort of his *Capi*, as they came to terms with the realities of the situation.

“All that remains for us to do now,” he began, “is to decide whether the leadership of

the *cosca* endorses this program as a means of meeting our obligation. I want there to be no room for criticism of the consensus when we leave here. I will have a show of hands when I put the question to you. Before I do that, does anyone here have anything else to say, or questions to ask?"

The gathered mafiusi looked around furtively, to see if anyone else had in mind to challenge the boss. Finally one man, far in the back of the room, stood and asked, "What happens if we agree to this, and some of us don't give our wives permission to participate?"

"You live with your conscience," Joe retorted. "There is no punishment for women who do not volunteer, and there is none for husbands who don't agree to allow it. If you feel your honor is unsullied by refusing, then you have only to live with the knowledge that you did not participate in meeting this obligation, and with the attitudes of your family and friends concerning your decision."

"On the other hand, what we do here will be common knowledge very quickly, and the rank and file will expect us to lead, not lag. If your own *crew* decides that your decision exposes you as a poor leader, that could be... career-limiting. That is not a threat, just an observation."

The questioner might have had other things to say, but apparently decided against doing so, and quickly faded back into the audience.

"Anyone else?" Joe queried. When no one else responded, he went on, "In that case, let's get down to business."

"There will be no possibility of questions concerning the true outcome of this meeting. There will be no room for accusations of 'creative evaluation' of a voice vote, and no back room counting of paper ballots. We are *each* going to show our indisputable support or opposition to this proposal before all of the *Capi*.

"All in favor of adopting this proposal as a policy of the *cosca*, please raise your right hand."

Only about a third of the *Capi* present raised their hands. Joe shook his head in disappointment.

"All right, you can put your hands down. All those opposed, please raise your right hand."

Surprisingly, not a single hand went up. This was not a consensus, nor was it an acceptable outcome. Joe gave each man a hard look in the eyes as he demanded: "Look guys, you can't abstain this time. This proposal is either a good thing, or it's not, and we need to know where you stand on it. Let's try it again. All those in favor?"

This time about two thirds of the *Capi* showed support for the plan immediately, while

others slowly began to come around. Before it was over, there were fewer than ten men in the audience who hadn't agreed to the proposal.

Joe looked at the hold-outs, and said, "You heard me say there would be *no abstaining*. When I call for the opposing votes, if you haven't already cast your lot with the rest of us, I'll expect to see you raise your hand. If you are going to oppose the will of the majority of this *cosca* on this, you should be willing to say so in front of everyone."

The men shifted about uncomfortably, and slowly, one by one, each one raised his hand in support of the proposal.

Gazing at them steadily, Joe murmured, "Thank you gentlemen. Everyone please lower your hands. Now for formality's sake: are there any who oppose the plan?"

Knowing that there wouldn't be, Joe waited only long enough to satisfy custom, and then declared, "We have a consensus. The leadership of the *cosca* unanimously supports the proposal put forward by Donna Maria DiCatania. Let any who say otherwise be branded as liars and enemies."

-- FIN --