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Teams

TEAMS

A Terran Empire story

by Ann Wilson

Narvon III, 2277 CE

Marine Captain Jase Thompson enjoyed Evaluation Team duty, and this particular assignment appealed to what his team members called his warped sense of humor. This had started out as an odd one; it was the Archbishop of Narvon III, rather than its Baron or the System Count, who had pushed the panic button. He'd appealed to the Emperor for a battle fleet, with a full complement of Security and Combat Division Marines, claiming civil war was breaking out because of something that was turning Narvon System's "best people" into "bloodsucking servants of the Devil."

Captain Thompson had no idea what His Majesty thought about the situation, but he was skeptical, himself. Still, no one asked for that sort of intervention without some reason; it was up to the E-Team to find out whether the reason was valid, and if so what degree of intervention was really

justified. He certainly didn't want to call in a fleet — no E-Team leader did — but he would if he had to. Then he'd hope that the Ranger or Fleet Admiral in charge overruled him; he didn't like thinking what military occupation could do to the occupied system. Not that the situation was likely to be that bad.

Thompson sighed, checking the clock and deciding he'd better get back to the bridge; the Koslov's Captain — Navy Lieutenant Inga Sanchez — should have the pre-landing surveillance reports for him by now.

She gave him a rueful shake of the head as he entered her small bridge. “It's peaceful as Terra down there, Jase. No trace of active weaponry, no civil disturbances our sensors can detect, no fires involving artificial substances — no nothing.”

Thompson grinned. “Sounds good to me, Inga. What about news reports, entertainment broadcasts, that sort of thing?”

Sanchez grinned back. “Just as normal, except for a couple of oddities. The holos aren't carrying any 'casts of contact sports, and on a talk show, one of the guests had fangs; the others were acting a little nervous, but she

was telling them how harmless she and the other `Kins of the Dragon' really were." Sanchez touched a control on the arm of her command chair. "Watch."

The Captain's monitor screen lit up to show several people seated in a group of comfortable-looking chairs around a low table, and Thompson repressed

a chuckle. Talk shows seemed to be the same everywhere, he thought — then one of the guests caught his attention. She was attractive, wearing the uniform of a System Security officer — Chief of Detectives, from her badge — except that she was more than slim, she looked damned near starved.

"How do you feel about the Kins who were killed, Chief Kaufman, and what do you plan to do with the ones who killed them?" a man — Thompson guessed him to be the show's host — asked.

The woman shrugged slightly. "My personal feelings have no bearing; I plan to deal with them as I would with any other murderers, how else? I am an officer of the law."

"You don't have any desire for revenge? After all, the killings were rather ... unpleasant."

The detective chief grimaced. “Yes, they were. But I can’t take revenge, any more than I can feed on someone who doesn’t want me to — it should be common knowledge by now that Kins feel any pain we deliberately inflict.”

“But you can feed on someone who’s not willing, or kill; Kins have done it.”

“We can, yes; I’ve killed in the line of duty since I became a Kin, which was bearable because I knew that not killing would cause more harm later. And I did try to feed on someone who didn’t want me, once — I suppose most Kins have — but I’d rather starve into coma than try that again. Thank the Prince I didn’t really hurt him, but I did feel every bit of his terror.”

“Looks like she’s doing just that, too,” Thompson commented. It didn’t look like much intervention, if any at all, would be needed — not with the ‘servants of the Devil’ appearing on talk shows trying to reassure people and looking like death warmed over. “What the hell do they do for food, then?”

Sanchez advanced the recording, then started playing it again. ” — willing Donors,” the detective chief was saying. “We feel pain we inflict deliberately, yes — but we can also project feelings. If somebody’s willing to feed me, I can let feel the satisfaction — even, if ‘s willing enough, the ecstasy — I do when I feed. And I certainly wouldn’t take enough to hurt, or even to weaken, !”

Sanchez shut off the recording. “You know, I believe her.”

“So do I,” Thompson said thoughtfully. “I do still have to investigate, of course, but I’d say from this that there’s no crisis big enough to call in even a squadron for.”

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The E-Team’s landing wasn’t the covert operation Thompson had originally planned; instead, the Koslov called for clearance, and they landed at the main spaceport, where Thompson and his team disembarked in full uniform, complete with sidearms. He didn’t particularly like weapons, but procedure called for E-Teams to carry them unless doing so would be more dangerous than not, which

didn't seem to be the case here.

Landing openly, even an E-Team had to go through Customs and Health, which was routine enough until a tech told Thompson that he needed blood samples to test for susceptibility to the nosferatu pseudo-virus.

“What’s that?” Thompson asked.

“What makes humans into Kins,” the tech said, sounding as if he were telling them something they should already know. “If you’re susceptible, and if the virus gets into your bloodstream, and if something seriously weakens your system more than twenty-four standard hours later, you turn into a Kin. The Count’s orders are that anyone from out-system be tested and warned, so if they are susceptible, they can leave before exposure is possible.” The tech shrugged. “Odds are none of you will be, though; no one I’ve tested has been, and so far it looks like only one percent — maybe less — are.”

“We all have full-spectrum immunizations,” Thompson pointed out.

“I know. But the pseudo-virus isn’t one of the things full-spectrum works against.”

“Okay.” Thompson extended his arm and let the tech take his sample.

When the rest of his team had followed suit, the tech sent them to a waiting room until the results were back, probably in less than an hour. Thompson posted the newest team member with their luggage, sent his second-in-command to a phone to make arrangements for them to be quartered in the System Palace, then told the rest to spread out and start up conversations with the others in the room, all of whom looked like locals.

Not that he really had to give them orders any more, he thought. All except Corporal Nkomo — who’d replaced Corporal van Breda, killed on an earlier mission — had been with him for at least four years; they were more of a family than a military unit, although they were careful to maintain protocol with anyone else around. Thompson knew he had a reputation for being overly concerned with his people’s welfare, especially since he’d turned down promotion to stay with his team, but he preferred being called a mother hen to taking command of a larger unit that would give him less personal satisfaction.

While his people circulated, Thompson leafed through several of the newsjournals that seemed to be an inevitable part of every waiting room. He

started with the oldest, published about six weeks ago, discovering that the Archbishop's basic facts were accurate. There had been riots, all right, when some kind of laboratory accident and explosion had released the pseudo-virus and created the first Kins of the Dragon. They'd called themselves that from the very beginning, it seemed, which Thompson found intriguing — and it was discovered almost immediately that they had to drink blood to survive.

Preferably human blood, taken directly from a donor's carotid, though they could manage for short times on packaged or even animal blood. Normal food made them violently ill, and strong spices caused anaphylactic shock, usually fatal. To balance those limitations, they developed great physical strength and endurance, as well as the responsive and projective forms of empathy the detective chief had mentioned.

Unfortunately, the first reaction to the Kins had been horror. Thompson could understand that, though he didn't share it; psych tests kept people who couldn't overcome such feelings out of Imperial service. He was more intrigued than frightened by the idea of a Kin drinking some of his blood, and according to the journals, most Narvonese had felt the same way after the initial shock had worn off — especially those who'd had friends or relatives affected.

But there had been enough whose horror had persisted to cause the trouble that had inspired the Archbishop's appeal. Riots had broken out in all but the smallest towns, Kins had been brutally murdered by impalement, decapitation, poisoning, incineration — but that trouble had tapered off dramatically, starting about a week after the Archbishop's call, when all three Planetary Barons and the System Count announced that they had been infected and become Kins themselves. Thompson found that amusing, if almost inevitable; once Imperial nobility embraced something new, most of the people in their fiefs followed suit. By now, attacks on Kins were down to scattered incidents, and it looked like they'd taper off to almost nothing soon.

In fact, public opinion had made almost a complete reversal from the initial near-universal horror. In spite of some lingering apprehension, Kins were rapidly becoming respected and even envied — a process speeded by the fact that many of them had been that way to begin with. The Archbishop had been right in his report that it was the “best people” who were becoming Kins. Not “best” in the sense of richest or most powerful, although some were, but in the sense of contributing most to society. Kins overwhelmingly came from groups like doctors, police officers, religious, and others who were devoted to some form of service; none came from criminal or other anti-social

elements, and only a few from generally-neutral groups. The approximately one-percent figure the tech had mentioned seemed accurate, so not all members of even the highest-incidence groups were Kins — but it was enough to convince Thompson that such an oddly selective disease called for scientific investigation, rather than military intervention. It wouldn't surprise him to see the Kins become Narvon System's local nobility, either.

“Captain Thompson?”

He looked up from the journal to see the tech approaching, and his people breaking off their conversations to join them. Waiting until his team had gathered around, he asked the tech, “What results?”

“One susceptible, Captain,” the tech said, his expression unreadable.

“You.”

Thompson was silent for a moment, then said, “Oh, Chaos.” He wouldn't mind letting a Kin drink from him, but he had no desire to become one, even with the social status they seemed to be gaining. He didn't know just how much blood a Kin needed, but he was positive it was more than his team could supply, and probably more than anything short of a base or mid-sized ship

could handle; if he became one, he'd lose his team, maybe even have to be discharged. "You said the virus has to get into my bloodstream to infect me?"

"Yes, sir — well, or into your digestive tract. But it's hard to get infected accidentally, except in a lab explosion like the original ones; most Kins got that way feeding a friend or family member. And then you have to be seriously weakened for it to change you. So if you don't feed any Kins, or if you do and then don't get badly hurt or sick, you'll stay just the way you are."

"Thank you." That was better; he could still lead this mission safely. He turned to his second-in-command. "Report."

"We have quarters at the System Palace," Gunnery Sergeant Audra King said. "Count Nilssun was expecting us, and wants to see you at your earliest convenience. She's sent transportation and an escort."

"She expected an E-Team?" No one was supposed to know about an E-Team, not even the person who'd called for help; teams that came in openly, like his, had covers that would allow them to go around asking questions about anything and everything.

“Yes, sir.” King gave her team leader a wry grin. “I’m afraid she was in IntelDiv herself, on an E-Team, before her brother died and she was named to succeed. I’d guess one of her former teammates let her know we were assigned here.”

That sounded likely; it was just a good thing the problem had solved itself before his team had to file its evaluation. “Was she upset?”

“No, sir. Pleased.”

“That’s good, I suppose.” Thompson kept from scowling by an effort of will. “When’s the transport supposed to get here?”

“Should be already, sir.”

“It figures.” If the Count had expected them, she’d probably given orders that she be notified when ten Marines arrived; being former E-Team herself, she’d be able to guess that with the primary danger past, they’d be likely to come in openly. “Main entrance?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

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They were taken to the System Palace in a luxury limousine, with a dozen System Security troops riding escort on gravcycles, then settled into a decade apartments in the Palace’s guest wing. Thompson changed into dress blues, and wasn’t surprised, moments after he was finished, to hear a knock on his door.

“Enter,” he called.

The door opened, and a man in black and silver livery bowed to him. “My Lady Count’s compliments, Captain Thompson. She invites you to her office to discuss your mission; if you will come with me?”

Thompson nodded shortly, and followed the man to an office whose open door was flanked by a pair of System Security officers. He entered, and the door closed behind him as he came to attention facing the woman standing behind the desk. “Captain Jase Thompson, my Lady Count.”

“You may be seated, Captain.” The Count gestured to a comfortable-looking leather armchair, and took her own seat as Thompson sat. “Now — you came here to investigate a report of rioting, did you not?”

“You know I did, my Lady.”

“And what will your report to His Majesty say?”

“That no intervention is required, of course.”

“No, Captain, it will not.” Count Nilsson smiled, and Thompson found himself admiring her fangs, with an uncomfortable certainty that she knew what he was thinking. “Since you are head of an E-Team, I’m sure you saw at least part of yesterday’s ‘Narvon Tonight,’ and read the spaceport newsjournals while you were waiting for your test results. I hope you weren’t too distressed at finding yourself susceptible.”

“Not overly, my Lady.” She’d been IntelDiv, all right, Thompson thought. E-Team, yes, but he’d be willing to bet she’d been a field agent before that — and that she’d set up the interview with her Chief of Detectives and had a complete set of journals waiting for him. She’d know

better than to try misleading him, with her background, but Thompson could understand her setting things up to let him get information without too much effort. And something in the information she'd arranged for him would tell him why she said his report would ask for some kind of intervention.

He was starting to enjoy himself. This was the sort of puzzle IntelDiv people liked to set up for each other, and it let him be sure there was nothing seriously wrong. "Let me see. You couldn't have known I'm susceptible to the pseudo-virus, since this is the only system that tests for that, which means it has no bearing."

"Correct."

"Okay." Thompson thought back. "The journals were a pretty straight-forward account, so you probably set them up just to give me background. The key has to be the interview, then." He saw her nod slightly, and concentrated. "The Empire can't do much about your feeding problem, if you need mostly fresh blood, so that's not it either. Oh!" He nodded, realizing. "You can't deliberately hurt anyone, which means you'd have a hard time defending yourselves from anything, criminals to a full-scale invasion. You need an Imperial military presence, probably a Sub-Sector or Sector-level

base. Maybe police, too, though Narvonese who aren't Kins may be able to handle that."

The Count looked pleased. "Exactly, Captain. I do need a full-scale base, and the Empire has none in this Sector as yet. Debate on where to place one is evenly balanced between this system and Argyros; your report on our limitation will swing that debate in our favor."

It sure would, Thompson thought. Given equal merit, the Empire preferred to site bases and jobs where the need was greatest, and a completely vulnerable system needed a base far more than one like Argyros, which could defend itself at least until reinforcements could arrive.

"As for police," the Count went on, "yes, non-Kins can handle most of what Kins cannot — but I have already begun trying to recruit Security Division veterans. Non-susceptible ones, of course."

Thompson grinned appreciation. Former SecuDiv Marines made the best police available, if you were willing to let them do the job you paid them for; if you didn't, they'd probably consider it a breach of contract and leave. Not too many people were willing to deal with someone who'd alienated

such police, so that was a definite point in the Count's favor. "I'll be glad to recommend construction of a base, then, my Lady."

"Excellent." The Count leaned forward, her expression serious. "As you have deduced, Captain, I was once a field agent, and I had this set up to give you the maximum amount of information in the minimum amount of time. I can see from your reactions that you also know I want more from you than a base, now that I have learned of your susceptibility." She smiled, showing those tempting fangs again. "And that you are trying to avoid thinking about it, because you want it as well."

Thompson tried to keep his face impassive, even though he knew perfectly well that it was useless, with a field agent reading him. Dammit, a man was entitled to his privacy! "By my Lady Count's leave, I must remind her that my responsibilities to my team outweigh my personal desires."

Count Nilsson leaned back with a sigh. "Formality doesn't change things, Captain. You want to feed a Kin, and I have to send a Liaison Officer to the Imperial Palace to represent Narvon System; a Kin who was head of the team sent here to investigate us would be ideal, from a public relations viewpoint. I can't force you, as you are well aware — but I needn't be the

one who introduces the virus, or who weakens you so you will Change. I am perfectly capable of requesting that you and your team be stationed here indefinitely, then surrounding you with Kins until you can no longer resist your own desires.”

Thompson’s jaw tightened. “My Lady Count may of course do as she thinks best — but I will, equally of course, protest any such orders.”

The Count stood, and Thompson had to follow suit. “So be it, then, Captain, although I had hoped you would be more reasonable. You have leave to use the Palace ultrawave for your protest — after I have made the initial request.” She smiled, this time almost sadly and without revealing her fangs. “I can sense hidden depths within you, Captain, and I would like to be the one to bring them to the surface. Should you ever decide you want to see me, I will grant you an audience as soon as I can.”

Thompson was unwillingly impressed; an Imperial Count’s time was worth considerably more than a Marine Captain’s. That didn’t make enough difference to change his mind, though. “By the Count’s leave, I would like to return to my people.”

“Permission granted, Captain. But please remember, I am not doing this out of hostility; I do what I do only because I think it best for my own people.”

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Returning to his assigned apartment, Thompson changed back into service black. He wasn't sure whether to be angry or flattered at the Count's intentions for him; at the moment, he felt a bit of both. She was trying to take him away from his team, but on the other hand, she wanted him to become Liaison Officer for an entire system — which, being primarily ceremonial in nature, was a less responsible, but far more prestigious, position. And, though he was reluctant to admit it even to himself, he was more than a little tempted by the prospect of —

Resolutely, he blanked out the inviting image of Kin fangs, and went to knock on King's door. She had evidently been going through the library; when she let him in he saw tapes on the coffee table, and more in the delivery tray. “Research again, Audra?”

“Uh-huh. What's up, Cap?”

He described his conversation with the Count, then scowled, knowing Audra wouldn't take it as aimed at her. "I'd try to get back to the ship, but she'd anticipate that. I'm afraid we're stuck here until either she decides on someone else as liaison, or I let myself be turned into a Kin."

King looked thoughtful, hesitating before she spoke. "Cap ... we could all use a leave, and this isn't half bad."

Thompson chuckled, startled into real humor. "True, Audra. And we won't get too many chances at living in a System Palace; pass the word to take full advantage of it."

"Will do, Cap. Anything we should do when her Ladyship starts setting Kins on you?"

"I don't think so," Thompson said, "unless you can arrange for someone to be on hand to interrupt if things get touchy. They won't hurt me, or even try to; from what I've read and been told, they can't. But ... Audra, I may need — well, protection from myself. I ... it's hard for me not to — "

King nodded understandingly. “They are tempting, aren’t they? Cap, in your position I wouldn’t hesitate; I’d donate, and enjoy the hell out of myself, even if it meant I’d have to stay here.” She gestured to the tapes she’d been studying. “This system is in the beginning of a major social change, one that ought to be absolutely fascinating.”

“I’m sure it would, if I shared your interest in sociology,” Thompson said drily. Audra was the team’s socio spec, and kept trying to get the rest as interested as she was. “But I’ll be damned if I’ll voluntarily do anything to take myself off this team, or out of the service.”

“If you’re given the choice, no. But — ” King raised a cautionary hand — “if the Count’s as determined as you say, it may not be your choice. They have something called projective empathy, according to these tapes, and they can use it to make you feel anything they want you to feel. Especially if it reinforces something you already feel a little.”

“And I already want to donate. Yeah, I see what you mean. Her Ladyship could have taken me already — and made me like it. I wonder why she didn’t.” Another thought struck him, and he looked sharply at his second-in-command. “Our hostess was a field agent, Audra. Were any of these tapes waiting for

you?”

King looked startled, then nodded. “Two of them, yes. And one answers your question — they don’t know how long the effects of the projective empathy last. Which may mean they won’t use it to infect or change you for fear it’ll backfire on them.”

That made sense, Thompson thought. Her Ladyship had to know that a Marine who realized ‘d been coerced into a decision, even gently, would rebel against both the decision and the coercer. “Then I’d say they won’t go beyond persuasion and the temptation her Ladyship promised — or threatened me with.”

King nodded, her expression troubled. “There’s another aspect, Cap, one you may not be thinking about. At least it’s something I’ve never known you to be concerned with — but these tapes make it pretty clear that feeding is ... well — “

“That’s enough,” Thompson interrupted shortly. He’d been trying to avoid thinking about that aspect; what had made Audra bring it up? It was a personal problem, a reason as important as what he’d spoken openly about for his reluctance to donate — the reason he had opted out of his original

assignment selection when he'd found out what it involved. The idea of casual liaisons left him cold; the only people he felt close enough to want intimacy with were the members of his team — and regulations forbade that. So although he certainly didn't lack it, he'd never shown any outward interest in sex.

“No offense intended, Cap. Sorry.”

“None taken, Audra; you just pushed the wrong button.” Thompson took a deep breath. “And you haven't mentioned one factor that's damned hard for me to resist.” He couldn't help thinking about the detective chief he'd seen on holo. “Some of these Kins, at least, aren't much more than skin and bones. I could provide a meal for one of them, yes — and I would, gladly, if it wouldn't change me into one of them. Hell, if I could, I'd feed 'em as often as my body would tolerate the blood loss!”

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The Count didn't waste any time acting on her intention; she had

Thompson summoned to the Palace communications section, where she called HQMC

and requested the E-Team's indefinite assignment to Narvon System. Thompson filed his protest immediately, but it had no more effect than he'd expected; he and his team were assigned to the Count's command.

She turned to him when the tech broke contact. "I don't think you will find my first commands too unpleasant, Captain. I would like you and your people to consider yourselves my guests; you are welcome to full use of all Palace facilities. I would also like you to attend a get-acquainted party tomorrow night."

Thompson had resigned himself to spending at least several weeks in this system; he found himself grateful that the Count was making it as pleasant as possible for them. "Thank you, my Lady. We'll be there; should we wear blues or civvies?"

"Whichever you choose, Captain. It will be semi-formal."

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Thompson wore blues, more for the illusory protection of the dress uniform's high collar than for any other reason; the rest of his team opted

for civilian wear. He thought King looked particularly sharp in the shimmer-cloth culotte outfit she'd had the fabricator make, and almost as soon as

their group entered the Grand Ballroom he saw that he wasn't the only one.

Several Kins, ranging from almost normal physique to near-starvation gauntness, surrounded her and began an animated conversation. Others started

discussions with the rest of his team, leaving Thompson himself momentarily alone.

That didn't last long, however. The Count joined him, accompanied by half a dozen other Kins who she introduced as her Planetary Barons, her Chief of System Security, and the Head Nurse of the Palace medcenter. "And you've already seen Detective Chief Enna Kaufman," the Count finished.

Thompson acknowledged the introductions with a certain amount of discomfort. He wasn't used to associating with the nobility, and it was unsettling for him to feel the restrained hunger they all radiated. The two Security people were in the worst shape, and a moment's thought told Thompson it made sense; their jobs were unlikely to bring them into much contact with people willing to let them feed.

As they chatted about inconsequentials, Thompson had to keep himself from staring at the Kins' mouths, or getting within touching range. The Count

had read him all too accurately; while one Kin was relatively easy to resist, seven — two of whom were near starvation — made it an entirely different case, even though they weren't doing anything but stand there and converse. He was far too aware not only of their hunger, but of his urge to satisfy it. How the hell was he going to resist this kind of pressure even for however long the party lasted, much less for weeks or maybe months? He sipped at a drink he'd taken from a passing waiter's tray, wishing for some excuse to leave, but he couldn't think of any. He couldn't even fall back on the Corps' informal motto, because there was no dishonor involved.

“At least your teammates aren't refusing to enjoy what we can do for them,” Kaufman said, gesturing as she chuckled.

Thompson turned, to see Sergeant Gottfried — his communications expert — in the arms of a tall, equally Nordic-looking man, her expression almost ecstatic as the Kin's mouth worked at her throat. Nearby he saw Audra, pale but looking pleased, with a petite Polynesian-looking Kin being obviously solicitous of her. Thompson shook his head ruefully, then turned back to his group. “It looks like you have a few more donors, at least as long as we're assigned here.” He hesitated, trying to decide whether he should go on, but the Count made that decision for him.

“Go on, Captain. I can see you have more to say.”

“Yes, sir.” Thompson took a breath, then did so. “As I told Sergeant King, I’d donate myself, as often as I could, except that I’m told that if I do it even once, I’ll become a Kin. And that would cost me my career, something I’m not willing to give up.”

“More to the point,” the Count said, “you think it would cost you your team.”

Dammit, Thompson thought, couldn’t she give him any slack? “The only way it wouldn’t, my Lady, is if you got the Emperor to assign them here permanently — which would ruin their careers. I say again, my responsibilities to my team outweigh my personal desires.”

He hadn’t kept his distance carefully enough; Kaufman touched his shoulder, then his throat, and he shivered with the promise of it. “Captain,” she said softly, “would it really be that bad, staying in this system? The human race, after all, was restricted to one planet for millions of years, and most people still remain planetbound for their entire lives. Believe me, Narvon System can provide enough challenge for you and your team. Have you

asked them whether they would consider staying here with you?”

“No, I haven’t,” Thompson admitted. But he had to add, “I wouldn’t, either, because I’m afraid they’d think I was pressuring them.”

Kaufman eased her hand to the other side of his neck, and Thompson moved closer without quite realizing it. “Look at them, my friend. They’re feeling good, and I can assure you that anyone who’s donated to one of us once wants to do it again.” She chuckled. “The kind of pleasure we can give is unique, and you want the best possible for your people; wouldn’t you like to give them feeding-pleasure yourself, as often as you could do it without endangering their health?”

That gave Thompson an entirely different point of view, and he moved still closer to the Kin, again without realizing it. “Yes ... yes, I would.” He did want the best for his people, and if he could get that in a way that also let him be even closer to them —

He felt lips at his throat, hard sharpness under their warmth, and knew he’d surrendered.

Then a large hand closed on his shoulder and he was pulled away, to stumble back against Corporal Nkomo's chest. "What — "

"No marks, sir; you're safe."

Thompson took a deep breath, coming back to reality as his team surrounded him. It seemed he'd been right when he told Audra he might need protection from himself. "Thanks, Corporal. And the rest of you."

"No problem, sir. Sergeant King said this might happen."

The Count smiled ruefully. "You have a very well trained team, Captain Thompson — but they cannot be around you all the time. Sooner or later, you will give in to your own desire."

He'd already come too close for comfort, Thompson thought bitterly. The worst part of it was that it was himself he was fighting, not the Count — and whichever way the fight went, he lost. "That may be, my Lady, but they're here now. And they'll keep me from doing anything I'd regret later."

"Indeed," the Count said politely. "Then you will stay and enjoy the

rest of the party.”

That was an order, Thompson knew, not a request. “As my Lady Count wishes,” he said, trying to conceal resentment from the others, if not from the Count herself.

“Good.” The Count signalled a waiter, who approached carrying a tray loaded with foam-topped mugs. “Your records say you have a fondness for New Bavarian beer, something I doubt you can find very often. I can recommend this; it is their Oktoberfest Doppelbock, a brew I enjoyed myself before becoming a Kin.”

Thompson didn’t doubt that; it was a brew he’d heard quite a lot about, though he’d never been able to afford any. He reached for a mug, shaking his head when Nkomo tried to restrain him. “It’s okay, Corporal. I’m in danger of becoming a Kin, not being poisoned. But if it’d make you feel better, you can taste it before I have any.”

“I’ll do that, sir.” Nkomo took a deep drink, then handed the mug to Thompson, shaking his head. “Whoo! That’s beer?”

“It certainly is,” the Count said with obvious amusement. “Rather potent beer, I might add, though it is also quite smooth. Feel free to drink all you wish; my medcenter has considerable experience treating hangovers.”

With that, the group of Kins broke up and began circulating. Thompson took a hearty drink from the mug he held, while the rest of the team took advantage of the Count’s offer, accepting mugs of their own from the waiter. Not at all to his surprise, he saw that all of them had fang marks on their throats; when Nkomo lowered his mug, Thompson indicated the marks. “How was it?”

Nkomo rubbed the marks, grinning. “It was great, sir — like nothing I’ve ever felt before. I’m going to do it again, as often as they’ll let me.” He gestured resignation. “Not as often as I’d like, but the one who fed on me says they don’t take chances on their donors’ health; even if I dose with rapid-heal, which I intend to, I’m not allowed to donate more than once every four tendays. What they call a Class Four Donor.”

That seemed to be about average, Thompson found. Gottfried was a Class Three, King a Class One, and all the rest were Fours like Nkomo. Also like

Nkomo, all of them intended to repeat the experience as often as they were allowed to. “And if you do become a Kin,” King told him, “we want you to be the one who feeds from us. Mine said that it’s good with any Kin, but best with someone you know and like or respect. And that a custom is developing for a Kin who leads a regular group of Donors to be responsible for taking care of them that way.”

Thompson raised an eyebrow. “The Kin is responsible for feeding on ‘s people?”

“Yes, sir. If you’d Donated, you wouldn’t be questioning it, either.”

“Maybe not,” Thompson conceded. It did seem to make an odd sort of sense ... but he didn’t care to find out. “That’s academic for the moment, though, so let’s do what her Ladyship said, and enjoy the party.”

*

The next morning, Thompson woke feeling hungry. That was something that almost never happened, especially when he’d been drinking the night before; breakfast, for him, was seldom more than a cup of coffee and maybe an English

muffin. Well, he knew where the guest dining room was, he told himself, and it was likely that Audra would be eating there; the rest were more likely to eat with the System Security troops in their chow hall.

She wasn't there, so Thompson took a small table and began scanning the menu as soon as he'd punched for coffee. That was delivered by a human waiter, not too surprising in a System Palace dining room, and Thompson was giving his order when King walked in. She looked surprised, but joined him at his gesture and ordered her usual Spanish omelet, toast, and coffee. It wouldn't be quite like the same items on any other world, but it was always how she started the day.

When their food came and Thompson cleaned his plate, then signalled for a second helping while she was barely halfway through, King gave her commanding officer a quizzical look. "Is everything all right, Cap?"

"Fine, as far as I know," Thompson said. "I'm just hungry."

"Hungry enough to eat two breakfasts when you normally don't eat any."

King frowned. "Cap — did Carlo pull you away before that detective chief got her fangs into you?"

“Yes, why?”

“Because some of the tapes I dug out — not the ones her Ladyship left for me — say that some susceptibles get hungrier than usual after they’ve become infected. But if she didn’t bite you, you can’t be infected.”

Thompson set down the coffee cup he’d just picked up, an unpleasant thought forming. “I ... don’t know about that,” he said slowly. “I may have a nasty mind, but I can’t forget that our gracious hostess used to be a field agent.”

“And field agents don’t exactly have the same standards as the rest of the Imperial services.” King hesitated. “Cap, you don’t think she’d — “

“That’s exactly what I do think.” The Count couldn’t force him, no, but a field agent would feel perfectly justified in tricking him, if the stakes were high enough. “I’m not sure whether it was her primary plan or a backup, but thinking back, she could very well have laced that beer with virus. With you not susceptible and the rest of her guests being Kins already, I’m the only one it would have any effect on.”

King chuckled. “That makes sense, Cap — but if so, it backfired on her. According to the tapes, the ones who get the hungries may become high-class Donors when they’re weakened for the Change, but they don’t become Kins.”

“Oh, yeah?” Thompson grinned in relief. “I can handle that easily enough, especially since it means the team doesn’t have to break up. I think I’ll ask to see her as soon as we finish eating.”

*

The Count sent word that she’d see him as soon as her morning formal audience was over, so Thompson was waiting in her working office when she came in just before noon. He rose and, since he was in civilian clothes this time, bowed slightly. “Good morning, my Lady.”

“Good morning, Captain. You look pleased with yourself.” The Count motioned him back to his seat, while she leaned against her desk. “What is it?”

Thompson outlined what he and King had discussed, feeling more relaxed in her presence than he'd have thought possible the previous night. "So if what Sergeant King read is accurate," he finished, "I can let one of you feed, enjoy it, and still stay with my team."

"It is accurate enough," the Count said, her expression unreadable to anyone without a field agent's training. "Perhaps a tenth of those who are susceptible do not Change into Kins. They do become the best Donors available, though no Kin will risk feeding even from them more than once per tenday." She sighed. "I cannot share your relief, Captain, though I can understand it. I am fully aware of the way most people out-system will react to us, and being from out-system yourself, you would have gotten a far more sympathetic reaction than a Narvonese-born Kin. Your being a Donor will help, even so. Do you have any preference as to the Kin?"

"One of the really hungry ones," Thompson said. "Otherwise, not particularly."

"Very well. You seemed quite taken with Chief Kaufman yesterday; she is Night Duty Officer now, so she is sleeping, but will be in her office about

twenty-two-thirty tonight. Shall I leave word that you are coming?”

“I felt sorry for her, was all,” Thompson said. “The poor kid —
Yes, please let her know.”

“All you felt consciously, perhaps,” the Count said drily. “I read it
as potentially far more — but that no longer matters. I will rescind my
request for your indefinite assignment here.”

“Thank you, my Lady.” Thompson rose, and this time his bow was
everything her rank entitled her to.

*

Thompson entered the System Security office complex and approached the
desk sergeant, ready to introduce himself, but she stood. “Captain Thompson?”

“Yes.”

“Chief Kaufman is waiting for you, sir. To your right, third door on
the left.” She smiled. “You made a good choice, Captain. She’s the best

I've ever Donated to.”

“How did you know I chose her, rather than the other way around?”

“It's always the Donor's choice, sir. The Kin can ask someone, or pass on a volunteer, but one will never feed on an unwilling Donor.” The desk sergeant grinned. “Besides, her Ladyship said you had.”

Thompson chuckled. “Thanks, Sergeant. Third on my left, you said.” He went to the door she'd described, still amused. Now that the danger of becoming one himself was past, he discovered he was beginning to like these blood-drinkers, and to hope the Count would find a good, sympathetic Liaison Officer.

He didn't have to knock; the door opened as he neared it, and Kaufman invited him in with a flourish. “Nice to see you again, Captain,” she said, smiling — and this time Thompson let himself respond to her hunger and her gleaming fangs. He went into her open arms, leaning his head to one side.

She brushed his throat with her lips, and he felt amusement mixed with her hunger. “May I assume that your Corporal Nkomo won't pull you away from

me this time, my dear Captain?” she murmured.

“You may, my dear Chief.” Thompson relaxed completely, feeling the assurance she projected. “This may be my only chance, so drink as much as you want.”

“As much as I’d take for a Change, yes. You’ll go into a deep sleep, and wake up hungry enough to eat a hellbeast.”

“That’s what my socio spec told me.” Thompson’s earlier desire was back in full force, stronger than ever; he licked his lips, wishing she’d get on with it.

Warmth on his throat, the sensation of hunger, hard sharpness — He cried out at the sudden intense pleasure of fangs in his throat, his blood filling the Kin’s eager mouth, satisfying her driving hunger ...

#

He woke with that memory, his hand going to his throat and caressing the wounds there. It was comfortable lying in bed — he knew, somehow, that he was back in the apartment he'd been assigned — and he'd like to stay there, holding on to the memory of Kaufman's feeding, but he was much too hungry. He

got up and used the 'fresher, then dressed, intending to go to the dining room.

It wasn't necessary; a covered serving tray sat on the coffee table in his apartment's living room, with a note beside it. He uncovered the tray and began eating, curious about the note but not willing to interrupt until he'd taken the edge off his appetite. Whoever had prepared the tray, he thought gratefully, had a pretty good idea what one of the "near-misses" like himself needed; by the time he emptied it, he was satisfied.

He picked up the note and leaned back, chuckling as he read it.

"Dear Jase,

“By the time you get to this, you’ll have eaten and I’ll be asleep. I want you to know: you were delicious, and I have never had a better meal. I hope I was able to give you as much pleasure as you gave me, and if you are going to be here long enough, I’d appreciate the opportunity to feed from you again.

“Affectionately,

“Enna”

It was odd thinking of himself as a delicious meal, but Thompson found it tickled him; sure, he’d feed her again if he and his team were here long enough. In the meantime, until he got orders, he and his team were on leave, and as he’d told Audra, they might as well take advantage of their stay in a System Palace.

For the rest of the day, they did just that. Their status as the

Count's guests let them enjoy the prerogatives only local nobility or above usually got, and they took advantage of it in the ways their various interests dictated. For Thompson, that meant a run through the Count's target range, a hearty lunch, a trip through the planetary zoo — he'd need a week to do justice to the whole thing, but this was a good start — a four-course supper, and an evening at the local classics theater to see *Last Starfighter* for perhaps the twentieth time.

He went to bed feeling comfortably tired, and for several hours slept well, if with increasing unease, but about 0200 he woke and couldn't get back to sleep. His throat itched, and he felt restless, bloated, so irritable he had to get up and move around. For awhile he prowled around his apartment, but that didn't help for long; eventually, he put on a robe and went out.

He prowled the Palace corridors, rubbing the fang marks on his throat from time to time, his unease and restless irritability growing. He didn't like being this way — it was nothing like his usual self — but he couldn't seem to do fight his way out of it.

After what felt like decades, he found himself at the System Security office complex. Something inside him seemed to say "That's it," so he went

inside.

The desk sergeant — the same one who had been there the day before — looked at him in surprise. “Is there something I can do for you, Captain?”

“I ... I don’t know.” Thompson rubbed at the fang marks, frustrated that it didn’t seem to help, then began scratching at them. “Is Chief Kaufman here?”

“No, sir, she’s patrolling. You can wait here till she gets back, if you want to. Uh ... you shouldn’t be doing that.”

“Doing what?” Thompson snapped.

“Scratching yourself like that. You could ... well, hurt yourself.”

“Dammit, they itch!” The reminder made it worse; Thompson’s scratching went deeper, beginning to draw blood. That helped a little, so he dug in more.

“Sir, don’t!”

Thompson paid no attention, needing that bit of relief, small as it was, even when the desk sergeant hit the station alarm. Half a decade troopers seemed to materialize around him, and he heard the sergeant order him restrained.

When they grabbed him and tried to force his arms down behind his back, though, he started fighting. IntelDiv had some nasty moves picked up from combat techniques developed by a couple of decade cultures; he'd decked three of his assailants before reinforcements arrived and took him down, handcuffing him and confining him to a padded holding cell.

An indeterminate, almost painfully frustrating amount of time later, he felt some relief and slumped to the padded floor; a Kin was approaching. Whoever it was stopped, perhaps at the desk, then he sensed anxiety, and the Kin started moving again. Not long after, Enna Kaufman was at the door of his cell, opening it and entering. She knelt beside him.

“Jase, what’s wrong?”

Her nearness calmed him; Thompson breathed deeply, his tension easing.

“I wish to Chaos I knew! I damnsure didn’t bargain for anything like this when I wanted you to feed on me.”

“Neither did I, or I wouldn’t have.” She removed the handcuffs, then stroked the wounds on his throat; he relaxed. “I can feel what you want, Jase, but I can’t do anything about it; I fed off you last night, so you have another nine days before any Kin will touch you again.”

“I ... don’t think I’ll last another nine hours, much less nine days. Chaos, Enna, what do I have to do?”

“I don’t know. Prince knows, I’d help you if I could!”

#

The Count was having a night as restless as Thompson's. Finally, not long after he'd been put in the holding cell, she got out of bed — carefully, so she wouldn't disturb the Donor she'd mated with — and went into her living area to call Security. "Is anything wrong?" she demanded as soon as the desk sergeant appeared on her screen.

"Not really, my Lady," the desk sergeant replied. "Captain Thompson came in a few minutes ago looking for Chief Kaufman, but she's out on patrol, so I told him he could wait. But he was scratching his throat, drawing blood, and he wouldn't stop — I had to order him restrained. He's handcuffed and in the holding cell till she gets back. He's trying to climb the walls, but at least he can't hurt himself."

The Count frowned. That was a peculiar reaction to an attempted Change, even to one she and Kaufman had known would be unsuccessful — but it did explain the feeling of strain she sensed. Perhaps the attempt had had some effect after all; though it certainly hadn't made him into a Kin, he was reacting as strongly as if it had. "Call me when Chief Kaufman arrives. I want to see for myself exactly what is happening."

“Yes, my Lady.”

The Count switched off and dressed, thinking. It had never seemed reasonable to her that ten percent of susceptibles didn't react except to become Donors of a class that was unusual, but didn't require most to be susceptible or go through Change. There had never been evidence of more than a difference in degree, however — or not until now, perhaps. Thompson's reaction might indicate a difference in kind, a Change to ... what?

Something that would complement the Kin Change?

It was half an hour before the desk sergeant called to report that Kaufman had come in, but when she did, the Count lost no time getting to Security and the holding cell. She arrived as Kaufman was using a damp cloth to gently wipe blood from scratches on Thompson's neck.

She felt immediate sympathy for the Marine; reading him told her that he was in pain, as well as under the terrible strain she'd felt in him earlier. She had sensed that strain before, she realized now, though far less intensely: in some of the others who hadn't — or apparently hadn't — Changed, near the end of the ten days that separated their allowable

Donations. That irritability and anxiety had been attributed to a natural desire to Donate as often as they could, but now the Count was beginning to think it might be a physiological need as real as a Kin's need for blood. Thompson certainly hadn't had time to miss Donating to that degree, not with Kaufman having taken him the day before. "Captain," she said gently.

The face that turned to her held desperation and sudden hope. "Y ... yes, my Lady?"

"Did you dream tonight?"

"Huh?" Thompson was startled at the question, but he nodded. "Yes — a dragon wearing a crown. An Oriental dragon. He ... approves of me."

"The Dragon Prince," Kaufman said softly. "The one who used the virus to make us what we are. He always appears to a new Kin."

"But never, to the best of anyone's knowledge, to anyone else." The Count swore briefly, though only to herself. They had never thought to ask the supposedly-unChanged ones about their dreams, and they — or at least she! — should have. It was stupid to think Change had to bring about a visible

change; she could only excuse herself by pleading the press of other problems that had claimed her attention since Kins began appearing. “Your desire to feed Kins is more than simple desire now, Captain; I can tell that. It is a physical requirement.” She turned to her Chief of Detectives. “He needs you.”

“But it’s only been a day,” Kaufman said.

The detective chief’s heart wasn’t in her objection; the Count nodded.

“The law will have to be changed to accommodate Captain Thompson and the other

... ” What was a good word for them? They weren’t Kins, though they were of the — the Kindred, yes.

Thompson chuckled harshly. “Call me a Bloodmate, my Lady. I give blood, and I damnsure feel like Enna’s mate.”

The Count nodded, raising an eyebrow. “Appropriate; very well. Care for your Bloodmate, Enna.”

Kaufman didn’t have to be told twice; she took Thompson into her arms and nuzzled his throat, breaking the skin to sip but not piercing his carotid.

Thompson relaxed, his irritable frustration easing, and he felt his consort's satisfaction at that. There was far more to his need than her gentle sipping; he was responding to her physically as well, knew she felt it, and luxuriated in her answering caress. There was no such thing, he realized dreamily, as a casual liaison between Kin and Bloodmate; he was free to accept her love-making, as well as her feeding.

“But not in a detention cell,” Kaufman murmured against her Bloodmate's throat. He might be too far gone to care, but she had no intention of taking him on the floor, no matter how well padded it might be. She picked him up, sensing the Count's approval, and carried him to the duty officer's apartment.

Thompson was content to wait; for now, the promise of her delicate fangs, the strength of the body he would nourish, were enough. She would make love to him, and when he peaked, she would sate her fierce hunger in their shared ecstasy. She would care for him, yes ...

The Count watched them leave, pleased. She had hoped for an ex-E-Team leader turned Kin as Liaison Officer, though she would have settled for whatever benefit a team-full of Donors might bring; now she had something beyond her most optimistic hopes. She would give Kaufman and Thompson time

for — she grinned to herself — a honeymoon. While they were indulging in each other, she would name the Kindred — Kins and Bloodmates alike — as the System's local nobility. And then she would designate the pair of them as Liaison. Thompson had lost his team, yes, but he had gained at least as much in the way of companionship and more in physical satisfaction; he would be fine. And what a team those two would make!

END