

Alien Conquest Chapter 1

Cassidy Hamilton sighed before shoving a chocolate in her mouth. Cloying sweetness invaded her taste buds. She offered a quiet moan of pleasure. It wasn't the best chocolate she'd ever had, but such goodies were few and far between. Even bad sweets were pretty damned good these days.

Swallowing her treat, Cassidy studied the page displayed on her illuminated reader for the second time. Little more than a dissident rant from decades before, the book was a dry read. It had been written when Earth's nations had first been forcibly gathered under a single banner, ending all-out war on her home world. For the most part, peace reigned over the once battle-torn planet.

The author's diatribe was against the one-world government that had been established under the auspices of the One True Religion founded a few decades before. There were the usual arguments against taking away free will to decide for oneself if the Church was the real authority on God, or if there even were a God. Cassidy had studied such arguments before, better ones in fact. None answered her own private questions on the matter.

The book was geared more towards the military aspect and near-dictatorship of the new world order. It took issue with the new regime's success, tended to by armed soldiers and soulless battle drones capable of wiping out entire cities. The accusations of militant tyranny were at the heart of the author's arguments. The book in Cassidy's hand claimed subsequent revolts following the final war had been quashed with quick ruthlessness, barely disturbing the fearful complacency of the general populace. It presented memos and text communications from government officials to bolster the author's claims, which Cassidy thought may or may not have been forgeries. Either way, the author had no doubt been executed for his anti-unified government views. Freedom of speech had gone into extinction alongside freedom of religion.

In the chapter Cassidy was currently trying to digest, the long-ago renegade seethed over the government's assertion that all Earth's outdated nuclear warheads had been detonated in space. He warned that such was an impossibility, given the smallness of the blasts transmitted through the government-controlled media. He went on with extensive mathematical formulae to prove his point, formulae that went on for five pages.

It wasn't that Cassidy couldn't grasp the weighty data. She played in mathematics as a child might play with clay. Normally, she'd scrutinize the computations, looking for errors or little twists in logical application that would serve the author's needs. In her thirst for real knowledge, Cassidy was relentless. She had no patience with those who slanted results to prove their theories. She appreciated facts, not fancies.

She couldn't concentrate, however. More interesting tomes awaited in the illicit collection stored in her reader. Their allure kept her from focusing on the outlawed manuscript.

Cassidy shifted, searching for a more comfortable position in the cramped ventilation shaft. Stretched out on her belly, her stiff, long-sleeved nightgown bunching about her knees, it wasn't easy to move around. The narrow ductwork glowed silvery-white in the wash of light from her device. It was the only place she dared to examine the illegal materials she'd downloaded from her grandfather's collection before being sequestered in the convent on Europa.

It was early in the convent's sleeping hours on the eternal night side of the moon. Cassidy read every night in her hiding spot, nibbling on sweets and snacks bought with the modest allowance her grandfather sent her. She'd been stuck on Europa for three years, her days a

monotonous drone of praying, tending crops, scrubbing floors, and bible study. Even the novelty of creeping through the ventilation system to spy on her fellow aspirants and the nuns had worn off. Only the stolen collection of banned books maintained her mind's sharpness and sanity. Fortunately, the library was vast. She'd barely sampled the offerings her grandfather had hidden deep in secret computer files.

Cassidy didn't wonder why her grandfather, so strict and upright with the Church's teachings, possessed the illegal collection. His oft-quoted direction to the soldiers beneath him was, "Know the enemy better than you know yourself." She could imagine him studying the words that enthralled her, his thin lips pressed in a bitter line of disgust.

She was halfway through the page once more when she realized she had yet again failed to digest its words. The siren call of the book she'd discovered two weeks ago thwarted her usually thirsty brain from absorbing the current material.

The Church, which had run Earth's government since Unification, taught women were innately evil and awash in sin. Cassidy's preoccupation with her recent discovery bore that out. She'd had no idea what she'd find when she opened the file labeled *The Kama Sutra*, and she hadn't been able to get the illustrations out of her head since.

Just like your mother.

Cassidy shook her head, and her long, platinum blond hair spilled over the reader. No, she'd never offered herself to any man. She'd never shown a man any part of her devil flesh. She wasn't the harlot her mother had proved to be.

Yet she couldn't deny the urges were there. As Eve before her, she was seduced by the temptation of the forbidden. It whispered to her, distracting her voracious brain from soaking up more intellectual ideas.

Just looking won't hurt. It's not as if you're fornicating.

The temptation of *The Kama Sutra* wouldn't give Cassidy a moment's peace. Who was she kidding? Even if she did finish this chapter, she knew she'd end up opening the other file. Just as she tolerated no falsehoods in her books, she couldn't bear to lie to herself.

Cassidy gave up the pretense that she cared about how the Church-run North American Bloc had devoured the rest of the world. She tapped the screen. She tried not to think about how much easier it was each night to talk herself into viewing the taboo pictures.

She rolled onto her back as the first image came on the screen. Licking her lips, she scrolled through the illustrations, drinking in the images of men piercing women from every angle possible. When she got to the end, she started over.

Cassidy's thick cotton panties turned damp. The scent teased her nostrils, reminiscent of the salty tang of the Neuse River on Earth. She looked at the artwork depicting a male, his devil flesh drawn out in a straight line, inserting fingers into the gaping sex of a smiling woman.

She drew her knees up like the woman in the picture. The stiff fabric of her nightgown slid down her thighs to bunch at her hips. Cassidy reached to draw light circles on her inner thigh as she studied the illustration. Her lower parts flexed with arousal, and she bit back a moan. How was it to be penetrated? Did it feel as good as touching the outer parts of her secret flesh? To judge by the smiling participants in every picture, the sensation must be pleasant.

Cassidy's touch slid down her soft, downy inner thigh and danced delicately over the moist crotch of her panties. She knew where the spot was, the sweet nubbin of skin that felt best. After only a moment's hesitation, she touched it.

A warm, melting sensation poured through her core. Cassidy sighed.

The characters in the book were thin, dark-skinned people with black hair. They looked nothing like Cassidy's pale, ample curves. The people of Earth came in a myriad of colors and sizes, a smorgasbord of offerings. How many men would find her attractive with her rounded buttocks and large breasts? How many would want to enjoy sex with someone such as she?

Cassidy didn't resemble the almost sexless twigs venerated on e-magazine spreads. Her love for the comfort of snack food since her mother's arrest had left her a far cry from fashionably thin. Fortunately, a good metabolism and hard physical work at the convent kept her reasonably in shape. When her face warmed in a blush from the thought of being seen naked, it wasn't because her body embarrassed her.

She scrolled to the next image, her favorite. The man mounted the female from behind, his organ poised just at her opening. Cassidy studied the mushroom tip of his sex. How would it feel to be entered from that position? Her breath came quickly, and she forced herself to move more slowly against her straining bud. The lightning flashes of pleasure subsided into a pleasurable hum.

She tried to imagine herself as the woman in the illustration. Crouched on all fours, feeling her lover kneeling between her legs, the hardness of his erect sex touching her entrance, poised to plunge into her. His hands gripping her hips. His penis parting her wet lips...

Cassidy's fingers slipped into the leg band of her panties. For only the third time in her nineteen years, she touched bare, sinful flesh. She arched with a soft groan. The reader fell from her grip, landing on the cushion of her breasts.

Both hands plunged into her panties, rubbing and caressing her aching sex, spiking desire from her depths. Cassidy was unaware of the tears creeping from beneath her closed eyelids as the pressure built until it cascaded in warm convulsions to leave her sobbing with release. She moaned, her thighs clenched around her hands as she throbbed.

Sinner. Whore. Unclean harlot.

The guilt flooded in as the last spasms flexed in Cassidy's belly. Why had God made the most sinful touch the most pleasurable? Not for the first time, Cassidy's intellect warred with her faith. The Church's teachings when it came to sin made little sense. The restrictions on intimacies only confused her more. There was no one Cassidy could trust to share her doubts with, not even her favorite nun, Sister Katherine. The subject was too dangerous.

If only she could resign herself to the pure faith that would keep her soul blameless. If only her evil, grasping mind would quiet on the subject and leave her in peace.

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Captain Tranis failed to hear Weapons Commander Lidon's approach, but he could smell him. It was no surprise that the Nobek's pleasant, animal-like musk was all that gave away his silent approach. Lidon was a predator through and through, a prime example of Kalquor's warrior caste. Tranis inhaled deeply, enjoying the nearness of his clanmate for a brief moment of self-indulgence.

Otherwise, he kept his attention focused on the vid transmission of his quarry. He stared at the alien vessel flying through space as if he could will it into his possession. The Kalquorian spyship had stalked the Earther freight transport for three days, flying cloaked to avoid detection. The time to take action was upon the captain. He could almost taste victory, and it took a great deal of self-control to not rush the capture.

Lidon spoke, low and intimate into Tranis' ear. "There's no sign they've detected our pursuit, Captain."

"How long before they reach Earth's main security grid?"

"Two days, but we might run into security check points before then. They'll break communication silence once they get past the largest gas giant. They call it Jupiter, after some ancient Earth god."

"Earthers and their religious fascinations. It touches everything they do." Tranis darted a glance at the huge planet displayed on another vid, floating at the forward section of the spyship's bridge. Its reddish striations and swirls were hypnotic in their beauty, a pretty round bauble seemingly suspended on one side of the stark command center. He paused for a brief second to enjoy the view before redirecting his focus once more to his prey.

Jupiter. Named for an Earther god. How typical. Was there nothing related to Earth that didn't have religious connotations? The species' fanaticism had brought on the war driving Tranis' people toward extinction faster than the virus had. A year ago, Kalquor had a projected three hundred years of survival left for its pureblood citizens. Now the number was two hundred seventy-five and falling fast.

The irony never failed to make the young captain wince. The race destroying his was the Kalquorians' only hope for survival. It was a sick joke.

Ten men worked the bridge of the spyship Tranis commanded. Most currently on duty bent over computer console podiums, their rapt attention absorbing the green-tinged vid readouts as they gathered information. Forty more men, mostly ground infiltration teams, were on the ship.

Three large vids floated at the front, their combined size spanning the height and width of the chamber. On the left was the monumental gas giant Jupiter, its rust-colored stripes giving the dimly-lit room a reddish hue. In the center was a diagnostic analysis, containing exhaustive information about the planet, their position, ship status, and the Earther transport they pursued.

The third vid showed the Earther transport, a blocky spaceship designed to convey supplies and goods. In this case, it also conveyed a certain General Patrick Hamilton. The military leader was in charge of Earth war supplies. He was hurrying home after engaging in talks with the agricultural representatives of the planet Adraf. Millions of Earther soldiers, all looking to spill Kalquorian blood, needed a lot of food. Adraf, a world which thrived on trade, would sell to anyone with the funds, be they Earther or Kalquorian.

Tranis stared at the Earther transport they followed and licked his lips. "Commander Lidon, if we're to make our move, it'll have to be soon?"

"Don't until you're absolutely ready to commit. If we get any closer, they'll detect us."

Tranis' spyship was cloaked, which worked well enough to fool the eye. Its movement caused distortions in the field around it, making it easy for the Earthers to discover it in a scan. Being found out by their enemy would be a very bad thing. Earther courier transports were just as heavily armed as their warships.

Score one for paranoia, he thought. Even Lidon's lightning fast reflexes and expertise with weapons wouldn't make up the difference if they got into a firefight with the larger vessel. Spyships were made for speed and infiltration, not battle.

First Officer Simdow turned from his computer's green-lined holoscreen. His dark, handsome face was animated with excitement. "The Earther transport is slowing, Captain."

"Match speed to maintain distance," Tranis said, his calm tone a counterpoint to Simdow's nervous pitch. Simdow was capable, but anxious with inexperience. Much of the young crew was untried, with the exception of Tranis' clan. The more experienced Kalquorians were fighting

the war, leaving him in command of raw youth. Nevertheless, his fifty-man crew represented Kalquor's last best hope for survival.

Tranis' stomach churned at the thought.

"What are the Earthers up to?" Lidon wondered out loud. "All stations, on alert."

Tranis looked at his clanmate of six years, marveling anew at his fortune to have Lidon as his Nobek. The warrior was the eldest of their clan, thirty years Tranis' senior, but still young by Kalquorian standards.

They were nearly the same height and weight, average for their race, colossal in comparison to their Earther enemies. Lidon's blue-black hair hung straight to his muscular shoulders, left bare by his sleeveless, red-trimmed formsuit. His clean-shaven, strong-featured face was grim with determination.

"I doubt we've been detected," Tranis said. "You're too good a weapons commander for that."

Lidon turned his predatory gaze to study Tranis. Blue-purple with slitted pupils, like all Kalquorians', his eyes missed nothing. "The Earthers have surprised us before. They may not have our technology, but stupidity isn't their weakness."

"They continue to slow, sir. They're approaching one of the planet's moons," Simdow reported.

Lidon hurried to his own computer vid to study the readout. His slight limp was a remnant of a horrific injury he'd suffered long before Tranis had met him. It kept the Nobek from typical Kalquorian quickness, but he could move fast when he had to.

"The moon is named Europa," Lidon said, scanning his reports. "We have no intelligence concerning any bases, military or otherwise, on that moon."

A secret installation? "Does it have an atmosphere?" Tranis asked.

"Oxygen-based, but not the right mix to support Earthers. Temperatures are well below minus-200 degrees. If they're using it, the installation would have to be containment-based."

Simdow matched their calm tones with his own, falling into his habit of emulating the elder officers. "The Earther transport has dropped into orbit around the moon."

"Helm, hold our position here," Tranis ordered. He left his computer podium to join Lidon. "Do you think it's a trap?"

Lidon's fingers flew over his computer controls, bringing up information faster than voice commands could manage. Despite knowing Tranis could see the information himself, protocol demanded the Nobek answer his captain. "There's no sign of other ships in the vicinity." He pursed his lips and growled so only his clanmate could hear, "I don't like this, Tranis."

A slight smile curled the corner of the captain's mouth. Deliberately challenging, he answered, "I want General Hamilton."

Lidon twitched, the slight movement the only indication his hunter's instincts were aroused. His expression remained grim, but Tranis heard the smile in his voice. "Caution is for Imdikos."

Tranis clapped a hand to his clanmate's shoulder in an uncharacteristic show of public affection. "And our Imdiko will have our heads if we rush in blindly. You know Degorsk's temper."

Lidon snorted amusement as Tranis resumed his post at the captain's podium. He knew indeed, and a tongue-lashing by their third clanmate was to be avoided as much as Degorsk's attempts at humor.

Tranis told his crew, "Hold here until the Earther ship's sensors are blocked by their orbit of the moon. When they're out of range, proceed slow. We'll enter orbit on the opposite side of Europa."

Simdow acknowledged, "Yes, Captain. We'll enter orbit in two hours."

Tranis didn't mind waiting despite his eagerness to capture the transport and the Earther general traveling in it. He was a patient man, after all.

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The spyship's senior officers gathered in the strategy room a few hours later. 'Strategy room' was a fancy name for a space that contained a long, low table and several chairs.

Lidon sat composed on Tranis' right, but inwardly he chafed at the delay caused by a missing member of the executive staff. The Nobek caught Tranis' attention and glanced pointedly at the chronometer.

"Dr. Degorsk is on his way," the captain said. "You can start, Commander Lidon."

The Nobek rose from his seat and started for the front of the meeting space, ignoring the now-familiar pull of his right leg. The stiffness beat the pain he'd lived with for several years, and he was glad he no longer required a brace to walk. Degorsk had been right about the effectiveness of surgery, though Lidon had thus far avoided admitting to it. Degorsk already had more than enough ammunition to tease Lidon with.

He was halfway to the spot where he'd address the assembled when the door slid open and Degorsk walked in. The Imdiko nodded at Lidon. His eyes narrowed slightly at his clanmate.

Lidon offered him a shrug and kept moving towards the head of the table. Degorsk was not just his Imdiko, the clan's caregiver. He was also the ship's chief medic, an immensely talented doctor. Exquisitely tuned to discern any hint of physical discomfort from his clanmates, Degorsk had noticed Lidon's limp was a little worse than usual. Fortunately, Lidon could count on his clanmate to not humiliate him by fussing over him in public. Degorsk knew better.

The doctor had other ways of embarrassing his Nobek and Dramok clanmates. Degorsk lived to get laughs, not caring that such shenanigans often resulted in getting his ass strapped. A much younger Lidon would have been aghast to discover he'd end up clanned to someone who delighted in practical jokes and bawdy humor.

Reaching the foot of the table, Lidon turned to face the other four men seated at the table. His gaze was drawn to his clanmates. Like most Kalquorians, Tranis and Degorsk possessed the same dark coloring, purple eyes, and similar muscular physiques clothed in black formsuits. Otherwise, they looked nothing alike.

Tranis' features were broader and thicker. His beard accentuated his strong jaw. He let his wavy hair fall loose to his shoulders. His stern, no-nonsense expression betrayed little of his youth and spoke volumes of the man's maturity. Tranis was the epitome of Kalquor's Dramok breed, a born leader. He had attained the rank of captain faster than any Kalquorian before him for good reason. In the end, his age had been no of consequence to Lidon consenting to join his clan.

By contrast, Degorsk's clean-shaven face was leaner and sharper. His waist-long hair was pulled back in its customary thick braid. A slight smile softened his face. Even now, with the ship on high alert and readying to attack the Earther transport, the Imdiko managed an air of good humor. He couldn't have been more opposite in temperament to Lidon's warrior mentality.

That they'd clanned confounded Lidon's underlings. As mystified by the pairing as they were, they had the sense to not ask why the match had happened. It was just as well; the answer would have confused them even more.

Degorsk was the only person who'd ever made Lidon laugh out loud.

The Nobek got straight to business, switching on the vid monitor. "We found this on the moon Europa."

An image of a transparent containment dome, housing several structures, filled the wall behind him. His audience's collective intake of breath wafted through the room.

"A secret base," Tranis said, avid on the image.

Lidon addressed the assembled group, which included First Officer Simdow and Weapons Subcommander Osopa. "It's about one thousand meters in circumference, not large enough to be a military base."

"Is there any indication of what they're using it for?"

Osopa answered, his voice steady, wearing a stoicism that defied the excitement charging the atmosphere. "We're not picking up anything besides a few buildings and agri-fields."

Lidon enhanced the picture to show the small-scale farm located at one end of the dome. The dome was on the dark side of Europa. A dimmed bank of lighting grids surrounded the crops, no doubt to give the illusion of daylight when turned on.

Degorsk drummed his fingers against the tabletop. "It looks like a civilian colony where they're growing most of their own food. Hell, it's barely the size of a start-up. Could the transport be dropping off supplies?"

Tranis mused for only a moment before answering. "I doubt an officer of General Hamilton's stature would be acting as a courier. He's using a transport of that type to escape notice of his comings and goings."

"None of the Earth defectors have mentioned this base?" Simdow asked.

"There's no information on this outpost in any of our intelligence. Our records don't contain a single hint of its existence."

Simdow pursed his lips in consideration. "Not surprising, considering this is the closest any of our ships has gotten to Earth space. So we're looking at a top secret facility that's too small for any functional use. It's smaller than any colony I've seen. Strange."

Lidon said, "The bulk of it could be underground. We won't be able to tell without scanning from directly overhead."

Tranis leaned back in his chair. "Is your team ready to take that ship?"

Lidon looked at Osopa. The subcommander sat up straight as he addressed the captain. "We've been drawing up to the transport gradually, keeping it from noticing our field distortion. As soon as we're within range, the boarding party will begin our approach."

Lidon added, "Once the team has infiltrated the Earther transport, they'll disable their weapons and communications. Captain, you'll have that ship, General Hamilton, and Earth's security grid before this work shift is over."

"And I'll get plenty of bodies to patch up, depending on how happy the Earthers are to fight," Degorsk said with fake cheer. "Thank the ancestors. I haven't been cursed out by a cranky Nobek in weeks. I was beginning to feel tolerated, and that'll never do."

Lidon rolled his eyes at his Imdiko. Tranis and Simdow exchanged a grin while Osopa tried not to look pained. The young subcommander's usual emotionless mask failed for once.

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Cassidy woke in the black void of the vent, having fallen asleep after pleasuring herself to two climaxes. She'd slept in the tight confines before. The vent was no less comfortable than the iron bed in her cell with its granite-hard mattress.

The reader had gone dark in hibernation mode. She'd slept at least an hour. Cassidy couldn't remember the last time she'd slept an entire night through. Maybe she never had.

As sinful as masturbation was, its relaxing aftermath helped her find elusive slumber. Rest was every bit as much a temptation as the pleasure her touch afforded.

Cassidy was the kind of awake that might keep her staring at the ceiling for hours and leave her head pounding with a migraine the following day. Her hands were still buried in her panties. Another orgasm might give her an additional hour, maybe even two, of sleep.

"Forgive me for my sin," she whispered as she explored her folds. "Not for wickedness this time, Heavenly Father. Only to get rest so that I may serve you better."

Sex with herself in service to God. A novel approach to damnation.

Cassidy's fingers were soon slick with honey. She imagined a man, much bigger than herself and naked, crouched over her as she pleased herself. The hot iron of his dark devil flesh touched her intimate parts, ready to join his body to hers.

She paused, a finger settled over her opening. Did she dare commit this last transgression? Was it any worse than her previous caresses?

If I'm discovered, it won't make any difference whether I've entered myself or not. My hands will be cut off, my sex branded and burned. The punishment will be the same.

Cassidy wanted to know how it felt. Locked away in the convent, she'd never be penetrated by any man. Her own touch would be all she'd ever enjoy.

She pressed against her secret opening. Her fingertip slipped in, eased by the thick juices seeping from her core. Heat radiated, inviting her to explore. Cassidy dared another fraction of an inch.

A harsh buzzing splintered the darkness. Cassidy gasped. Panicked, she scrambled to the vent opening, bursting into her dimly lit cell.

Her tiny bed was right below, and she crashed onto its hard surface. Even as she landed, she reached for the vent cover lying on her thin pillow. Hefting the cold rectangle of metal, she shoved it over the shaft opening. Cassidy winced at the high squeal of metal scraping metal.

The moment the vent cover was restored to where it belonged, she jumped from the bed and bounded the single step it took to get to her habit hanging on the wall peg. Cassidy knew her quarters even in pitch black. It was too small to flail around in confusion. Everything she needed was near at hand.

Her nightgown flew into the air, and she jerked on the sleeveless shift of her underdress, followed by the white dress of the convent aspirant. Despite its voluminous folds, it failed to conceal her generous curves.

Cassidy gathered her long, thick hair in a wad at the nape of her neck, holding it in place to stuff it into her head scarf. She grabbed a pair of socks from the shelf next to the wall peg. After hanging her nightgown, she yanked her socks on.

The buzzer blared again, and she uttered a little shriek. She made herself calm, coaxing her hammering heart to quiet.

"Lights up, one-quarter," Cassidy whispered. Her grim cell illuminated, displaying the forbidding gray walls, ceiling, and floor.

She smoothed the sheet and scratchy gray blanket that covered her bed. Except for the white of her clothes and black of her shoes, the surroundings were a uniform drab gray. It reflected her life since coming to Europa. If a more depressing dwelling in the universe existed, Cassidy couldn't imagine it.

With a last glance around, she assured herself nothing was out of place. Besides the bed, peg, and shelf, Cassidy's compartment contained only a wooden chair, too uncomfortable to be used for more than a minute or two. Her clunky shoes sat before it, but she didn't put them on. She'd rehearsed the eventuality she'd be surprised from the vent, and a tiny flare of gratification warmed her breast.

She stood before her closed door. A voice command would have opened it. However, Cassidy worried she might be more breathless than being wakened from sleep would account for. Instead of ordering the door, she pressed the button next to it. It opened, and light spilled in from the hallway, illuminating the figure that waited in the corridor. Cassidy's mouth dropped open in shock.

"Grandfather!"

General Patrick Hamilton, resplendent as always in his olive uniform, inclined his head in greeting. The rest of his whip-thin body remained ramrod straight. "Hello, Cassidy. I'm sorry to have wakened you at such an hour." His eyes narrowed as he looked her over. His lips thinned in a disapproving line. "Why are you out of breath?"

Cassidy's hand went to her scarf, assuring her none of her hair showed. "I thought I'd overslept. I rushed to dress and straighten my room before morning prayers."

The general's mouth quirked, a rare concession to humor. "You forgot your shoes."

Cassidy's guts loosened a fraction, and she stared at her feet in feigned surprise. "I'm sorry for my appearance, Grandfather. I guess I'm muddled from waking so suddenly."

"No apology is necessary. Finish dressing and join me in the chapel." He smiled, but it wasn't for her. He was puffed up, as if he'd just won an argument. "I have wonderful news for you."

Without waiting for her obedient "Yes sir", he marched down the hall towards the dorm exit.

Cassidy sagged in relief. The plan had worked, and on no less than her observant grandfather. She had even scored a few precious seconds by not putting on her shoes, time she could use to settle the racing of her pulse and make sure any evidence of her sojourn into the vent was taken care of. Smug satisfaction warmed her chest.

But what in the names of Jesus, Mohammed, and Moses was her grandfather doing here?

Cassidy hurriedly put on her shoes. She knew better than to keep the general waiting.