

The Mitigator Strike

The girl was clever, but she had been feloniously clever. Using an unlicensed brain-upgrade implant is punishable by up to five years of daily torture as well as confiscation of the implant. The law allows licensed implants for certain jobs where superhuman skills are justifiable, but those implants must shut down when appropriate and make themselves obvious in use. The girl's implant was stealthed, and none of her associates knew of her advantage.

But as they like to teach us God knows all and He works in mysterious ways. No implant can make you omniscient and no implant can make you as wise as He is.

The monster was clever too, and it had had a long career. Its first and only mistake was to take the girl with the illegal implant for its prey. It attacked, as always, where it was least expected and where its prey could not hope for help. But as it stripped and bound her body she realized the cost of her crime would be more bearable than what the monster was about to do to her, so she unstealthed the implant. Under the circumstances she might even reasonably expect her own crime to be Mitigated.

If her implant had been licensed the monster would have passed her by. Such things are made public knowledge for good reason, and the monster was not stupid.

The monster was unaware that the authorities had been alerted until it was encircled, and when it understood that there was no escape it calmly and deliberately cut her throat. The tactical and medical teams moved in and they tried to save her but by the time they were able to flash-repair her jugular vein and re-establish her blood volume, most of her biological brain was dead.

God used her and took His justice, which is sometimes harsh. The monster in the form of a man came to us.

I am one of three Mitigators at Jackson Federal Prison. I can see your reaction in my mind's eye; I've seen it often enough firsthand. Yes, I wear the white robe, and I go at all times barefoot. I am the earthly agent of God's mercy. Church doctrine states that only the Emperor himself is closer to God than a practicing Mitigator. This was established by the Second Great Liberal Reformation, which also mandated the Mitigation of death sentences.

Each day we receive new appeals, in the form of computerized summaries followed at our discretion by personal interviews. The computer tells us the crime, the penalties, and the Mitigations which are available to us. The applicants tell us, each in their own way, why we should intercede.

I must Mitigate on average one case per day to maintain my status. Sometimes I do more, when the penalties are light. Sometimes I must take a day or two off after a heavy case and then I have to accept light ones to make up. On average we Mitigators reject ten appeals for every sentence

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we choose to Mitigate, but we are taught that God's mercy is adequate. If He chose not to make us strong enough to Mitigate more cases, it surely means that He did not intend for their justice to be Mitigated.

Here is a boy of sixteen caught in a stolen car; his eyes are panicky, but he is strong and his penalty is fair. Here is a man who kited credit applications to keep his failing business alive; he has the resigned look of one who has already given up and is just going through the motions. Here is a mother of two who had an abortion; she stands to lose her living children and spend the rest of her life being tortured. She looks at me and her eyes widen in horror.

"I've changed my mind," she says haltingly. "I'll take my punishment."

"You should at least make a case," I chide. "I'm your last chance."

"I have a daughter," she says. "You remind me of her."

"You'd be right to guess that it can be hard to be the instrument of God's mercy," I tell her. "But it's also an honor, and God provides strength."

"I can't stand the thought of you taking my punishment. I retract my application."

"The decision is no longer yours to make." She could be playing me, but I doubt it; her hands are shaking very convincingly. And though her crime is terrible it seems to me that she might be reformable. If I Mitigate her sentence to a finite term she'll be a first offender, so they won't be able to disfigure her, and she might be scared into having a second thought the next time she is tempted to sin. It will be a hard Mitigation, but it's the kind of decision I make every day.

There are four more appeals on my roster, but it is the abortion I choose to Mitigate.

She is chained in the Dock, naked, when I enter the Mitigation chamber. The designated Hand of God has been demonstrating the implements of His justice, and she is crying openly. When she sees me she gasps and sobs: "I begged you not to do this!"

"I know. I chose to do it anyway."

I approach her and I open the front of my robe, revealing my nude body beneath. In case you are in any doubt, the rumors are true; we Mitigators never wear underwear either. Only the robe. I press up against her and she squirms; her flesh is hot and sweaty and quivering.

She is still struggling so the Hand of God holds her head still for me. I embrace her and take the Kiss of Guilt. At first she holds her breath, but finally she gasps and I take her breath. It is done. I step back and let the robe slip off; this is why Mitigators never wear anything else. In a moment I have become Guilty and now I am no longer the holy Mitigator, I am just a naked felon ready to receive God's just punishment. The ability to discard the robe so quickly and

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completely is part of its symbolism. It is a powerful thing to make one motion like that, to let the robe slip, and descend from a step below the Emperor to only a hair above the wretched convict whose sentence I am Mitigating.

The Hand of God, the Clerical observer, and the witnesses are eyeing me warily, as if I have just sprouted horns. I must let them know that it is proper to proceed. I back away further, stepping away from the puddled fabric of my sacred robe, and I look at the convicted woman.

“Guilty!” I announce.

The Hand of God springs into action, grabbing me by the hair and dragging me back toward the whipping station. “Guilty!” I cry again as he strings me up. He is scowling at me, the witnesses are scowling, the Clerical observer is making the Sign of Damnation to shield his soul from the sudden contamination of my own.

I am spread-eagled between the floor and ceiling with chains and iron cuffs. The woman whose sentence I am Mitigating watches in awe and horror as the Hand of God draws the bullwhip out to its full length. The whip flies...

Outside of the Mitigation chamber this particular Hand of God is named Hank and he knows me well. He quickly takes me to that holy state of feeling where the pain isn't so much painful as it is exalting, and he is careful to keep me in that state as the Mitigation plays out. I am strung up so that I can't support my own weight and the cuffs are digging into my wrists, but I don't care. I hear myself screaming but that's just the animal self; my soul is in the Hand of God. When he starts burning my thighs with the hot iron God changes the nature of the heat into something more appropriate. Finally, as is standard, the Hand of God violates me; it starts out as a punitive rape and finishes as the loving touch of a masterful God, turning my pain into ecstasy as the sins of my applicant are Mitigated and I am rejoined with the Divine.

The witnesses and Clerical observer are deep in prayer as the Hand of God steps away from me and composes himself. He turns to the woman. “Her sacrifice has reduced your sentence to a single month, and you will not be disfigured. You will still be punished. But you will return to your family, and God willing you will not sin again.”

Two hours later the burns are still aching but the fast-heal has made the pain bearable. After the ritual, when the miracle of God's transformative power has run its course on our feelings, the recovery can be worse than the actual torture. Burns treated with fast-heal don't burn so much as they itch like hell for several days. The whip marks, which look worse, actually heal much faster and will be gone by the next morning.

I'm not doing any more Mitigations today, so I will lounge around in my white robe and read the news and listen to the house gossip.

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Muriel has decided to do several small Mitigations, only the last of which involves a moderately severe lashing. It isn't just that that girl stole quite a bit of money from her friends; she failed to pay taxes on her ill-gotten gains. The prosecutor jumped on her with both feet. Muriel suspects that he tried to get into her pants and she rebuffed him. This kind of thing is why there are Mitigators.

Jane has accepted another hard Mitigation, a family man who stole a great deal of money to keep his spendthrift wife happy. Jane is firmly convinced that the wife should be here but it is the husband who committed the crime. Although theft isn't as serious a crime as having an abortion, Jane wants to fully Mitigate his sentence so that he can return to his old job. An incomplete Mitigation leaves you a felon, with a lesser sentence but still barred from most positions of trust.

While we are performing our duties, the monster in the form of a man arrives in our midst.

Everybody wants to ask the question that nobody dares ask. So I will ease your discomfort and state it for you: Why did I become a Mitigator?

As the woman who had the abortion understands, I am someone's daughter. I could be your daughter, just as the Hand of God could be your son. God does not always require us to be physicists and physicians. Some of us are marked for other work. I knew I was destined to be a Mitigator by the time I was five years old.

Before the First Liberal Reformation of Emperor George the Third, people like Muriel and Jane and me were considered perverts. Those like Hank and the other Hands of God had found their place in the canon with the rise of Empire and the reintroduction of torture as God's holy punishment. Back in those days there were people who still remembered when this place had been run by half-baked democracy, and they wanted definite solutions from their new Emperor. Torture was popular with the masses.

But there were excesses. There were mistakes. Not all of the condemned were really criminals, despite our best human attempts to apply God's justice. Over and over, the question was asked: Where is God's mercy? We are taught from a young age that our God is a merciful God but in those days it was a hard mercy to find, especially if you were unfairly accused.

This is why George the Third instituted the Mitigators. Always female, just as the Hands of God are always men, we embody God's impulse to mercy. According to a complex formula derived during the First Liberal Reformation, we Mitigators can assume some or all of a convict's guilt. Then, of course, according to God's law our guilt must be punished. But we who are drawn to Mitigation have a natural talent, a Gift from God, that allows us to transform the pain of punishment into exaltation. It's a hard thing to understand if you don't have the Gift yourself, but it is adequate to do God's work.

There were still grumblings. It was still common for people to be proved innocent after having a finger or hand or life itself taken from them by the torturers. Capital punishment remained

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popular but plagued by scandal. Fifty years after the First Liberal Reformation, Jeb the Fourth instituted the Second Liberal Reformation. Besides setting new standards for the use of torture equipment, this reform required that first offenders for most offenses not be disfigured in the course of their torture, and that all death sentences be Mitigated. It soothed enough of the discontent that almost a hundred years later no further reforms have been required.

The monster in human form is naturally sentenced to death. That sentence has to be Mitigated. We normally do compulsory Mitigations on a rotation, and I am up next, so I have to interview him.

Because he is sentenced to death I interview him in the Mitigation chamber. He is already chained in the Dock. He is of course naked and has already been beaten pretty badly. He is smiling grandly.

“You seem in unusually good spirit for someone in your position,” I say as I take my seat to interview him.

He shrugs. “What can I say? The bitch had an illegal implant. So goes the game. I had a good run. And the media are calling *me* an instrument of God for offing her. It’s pretty funny.”

It doesn’t strike me as very funny, but I go on. “So how many people have you killed?”

“At least a hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty. They all blur together after awhile.”

“You’ve *killed* people and you *don’t remember them*?”

“Well I’ve been doing it a long time, and it’s not like I keep records.” He grins wickedly. “Maybe I should’ve gotten one of those illegal implants for myself.”

Fortunately the computer doesn’t really care how many people he’s killed; his sentence has simply been recorded as *death for the crime of deliberate murder*. His Mitigation will be no different than that of an ordinary robber or rapist who kills his victim. But this man isn’t ordinary at all, I quickly realize. He isn’t afraid. “You realize that even after Mitigation you’ll spend the rest of your life in a cell here. The extent of your crime doesn’t figure into your sentence, but it will affect your treatment. The rest of your life is going to be very hard.”

“As hard as what you go through to Mitigate my death sentence?”

“Very likely much harder. Since you’re never getting out they can disfigure you.”

“If I’m never getting out it doesn’t matter much, does it?”

“The prospect of torture doesn’t frighten you?”

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“Does the prospect of Mitigating my sentence frighten you?”

“Of course it does.”

“Then don’t do it.”

“I am called to do it by God.”

He laughs openly and, amazingly, *he is starting to get an erection*. “God has nothing to do with it. You’re a pawn of the State, a tool. You know what your real job is? It’s to keep the Hands of God from being perceived as homos. As long as they’re regularly banging Mitigators nobody thinks too hard about how much they enjoy what’s going on downstairs.”

“That is a vile lie,” I say evenly.

“Really. Tell me the end result of ‘the miracle of God’s transformative power’ isn’t lust. Tell me you don’t look forward to being ‘raped’ at the end of the ritual. Tell me that isn’t why you became a Mitigator.”

“You are not improving your case.”

“Miss, nothing can help my case right now. I played, I slipped up, game over. But I know how it works. I applied to become a Hand of God myself, you know. I even made the first cut in the selection process.”

“If you made the cut, you were in. You should have taken the job. By being an instrument of God’s will, instead...”

“You know why I dropped out? Two problems. First and foremost, I’m really only interested in women. Second, I really only get *very* interested if I can kill them. Especially if I can fuck them *as they are dying*. And as you know, the Hands of God have to observe strict rules about that kind of thing. It was much more fulfilling to do it my own way.”

“By doing so you sealed your fate though. Set yourself against all of society.”

“I also got to do what I wanted, my way, as often as I liked. I’ve gotten very good at the timing, you know. I like to look into their eyes as they feel me coming, as they also realize they are slipping away. Your Hands of God have never seen such perfect horror, felt such perfect exaltation. Will your Hand of God see *that* in your pretty eyes as you complete my Mitigation? I think not. You must live to Mitigate another day.”

“So it is your opinion that God’s mercy of Mitigation is just a sexual game like your own crimes?”

“A well-informed opinion too, if I do say so myself.”

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“I am not sure what I find more shocking, your impenitence or your ingratitude.”

“Oh, but I’m very grateful miss. I suppose you’ll be the last woman I ever see tortured. I hope you scream well.”

I feel my color rising. His erection is now full-blown and I feel dirty under his leering gaze. Somehow this convict, this *bound, naked, doomed convict*, has not only mocked the sacrifice I am prepared to make for him; he has somehow seized the upper hand in the interview process.

His crime is so terrible, and the penalty so severe, that only one Mitigation is possible. For a day of torture that will probably cost me a week in recovery, I can and, according to the law, must save his life. He will still end his days in the chambers below, as the Hands of God try to break him. But I am seeing that this man will never be broken.

He has touched an awful truth I rarely confront about myself: I *do* enjoy Mitigation. Even a hard Mitigation such as his will end with a strong masculine touch, and the feelings will be exquisite, overpowering, beyond description. And even before that, while I fear the pain of torture I know I will not experience Mitigation in the way that most convicts experience torture. There is something perfect and attractive about it, about being trapped in my body and trapped in the present moment and trapped in my shackles as the Hand of God sculpts my feelings.

The monster in human form is the same way, I suddenly realize. Except that, just as his hunger for the pain of others is infinitely more dangerous than anything done in God’s name, his ability to transform his own pain into a kind of entertainment must also exceed my own.

This is a deeply heretical thought but those of us who live within the prison culture are realists. All of God’s given talents are prone to misuse.

Since he is sentenced to death I am required to check off the one available Mitigation within the computer system, to indicate that I accept the terms and seal his fate. But I don’t. Instead I just leave the chamber.

“I won’t do it.” I can hardly believe the words coming out of my own mouth, but the longer I think about the interview the harder it is to imagine fulfilling my duty.

“I don’t believe I am hearing this,” the Warden says. “You have an obligation to the law and to God. If you shirk your duty you can be removed from your position and charged. You will almost certainly find yourself appealing for Mitigation.”

“And do you think my sisters will be reluctant to extend God’s mercy to one of their own?”

“If I had to perform your duty for you I might be a bit pissed off.”

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“You cannot do my duty, Warden. For one thing, you’re a man. This convict will benefit nothing from Mitigation. It will just be an entertaining show for him. He does not fear torture. I don’t think he even fears death. He has the Gift.”

“You’re saying that a man who raped, tortured, and killed over a hundred women is a *Masochist*?”

“How dare you cheapen the sacred Gift with that forbidden word,” I chide.

“How dare you cheapen the sacred Gift by failing your duty.”

“Touche’. The two Gifts are not always polar opposites. You well know of the habit some Mitigators and Hands of God have of reversing roles in our private time. We rationalize it by saying that after we have fulfilled God’s will the human Hand feels guilt and the human Mitigator itches for payback. But the truth is that the two Gifts are somehow related. This convict feels nothing but a mild amusement about his impending doom, and my Mitigation won’t change that. He will only find my torture entertaining. I will not give him that.”

“No matter how terrible he is, the form and protocol must be preserved. Such monsters are fortunately rare.”

“I will not Mitigate for him. Ask Jane or Muriel to do it.”

“He has already been interviewed. We cannot interview him again.”

“We don’t need to. Show them the video recording of my interview. He won’t care if it’s a different woman, as long as his Mitigator screams well.”

The Warden decides to show the other Mitigators my interview, but not to tell them why. He also makes me watch it again with them. I know he is hoping that I will reconsider, but it only hardens my resolve.

When it is over, Jane and Muriel are both ashen-faced. I am more furious than ever.

“What a horrible bastard,” Jane says. “Why on Earth did we have to see this?”

“Because your sister has refused to Mitigate for him.”

“Can you blame me?”

My sisters look at each other and Jane says, “Not really.”

“She will be cast out of her position and charged with malfeasance.”

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“Then I’ll Mitigate her sentence,” Jane says.

“And if she doesn’t, I will,” Muriel adds.

“Jane, you’re next in rotation. Since your sister has forfeited her position and her duty, you will Mitigate the serial killer.” He looks at me and added, “And we’ll see how well the Hands of God attend to your Gift when you *aren’t* Mitigating.”

“That could be interesting,” I say evenly. “We are all colleagues and most of us lovers if only through the ritual of Mitigation. My Gift has never been tested to its limits, and I’m sure the Hands of God will be curious.”

“And it’s her first offense, so you can’t maim her,” Muriel says.

“I won’t do it either,” Jane says. “I stand with my sister.”

“She is no longer your sister. She has forfeited her position.”

“Then I forfeit mine too.”

He turns to Muriel but before he can open his mouth she says, “Don’t even ask.”

“You could always transfer him to another prison,” I offer helpfully.

“He has been interviewed by a Mitigator, and his sentence will be Mitigated here. The Emperor will not tolerate this kind of insubordination.”

“Actually, as I recall Mitigators answer only to the Emperor anyway so if you’re serious about removing us from our posts you’ll have to take it up with him. Meanwhile you can go ahead and charge us with malfeasance if you wish but we can also Mitigate each others’ sentences.”

Our strike makes the top of the Imperial news, in a story that worries melodramatically about our fate. Someone leaks the tape of the Mitigation interview, and the news picks that up too. Overnight the Warden finds a Judge who is willing to sign an order of prima facie guilt on us for our malfeasance. In the morning our robes are taken from us and we are taken to the Mitigation chamber.

I am chained in the Dock and Jane kisses me, is strung up, and takes twenty lashes with a rattan cane for me. It’s a fast Mitigation but a very hard one that will hurt a lot even as the fast-heal works on the welts. Then I am given my robe, and Jane is chained in the Dock and Muriel kisses her and takes twenty lashes. Then Jane is given her robe and Muriel is put in the Dock and I kiss her, drop my robe, and take my twenty lashes for her. It is one of the weirdest Mitigation rituals ever performed and excerpts from the video record make the evening news.

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“Now we still have a death sentence to be Mitigated,” the Warden tells us later off-camera. “And you ladies can either see your way clear to picking one of you to do it, or we can all do this again tomorrow.”

“Nothing has changed,” I say, and my sisters nod.

That night he gets another warrant, and the next day we do the same thing again, except that this time the Warden orders the Hand of God to give each of us twenty-five lashes instead of just twenty. The implication is clear; it is unheard-of to excessively harm a Mitigator, but he will keep stepping up the pressure until we give in.

As we are recovering from those whippings we see on the news that the Emperor has heard of our situation, and has decided neither to relieve us of our positions nor to interfere in the Warden’s creative manner of allowing us to mutually Mitigate our sentences. I see the writing on the wall and call the Warden.

“I’ll do it,” I say.

After hours I call Hank to my chamber. He is resplendent in his Hand of God harness, with its thick leather straps revealing and outlining his musculature and its conveniently removable codpiece. And as part of his uniform on his left forearm arm he wears a blade in a convenient strap-on sheath. He is expecting light play, perhaps even to go under for me after those hard Mitigations.

When I tell him what I want he is somber. “They will sentence you to death automatically,” he reminds me.

“And my sisters will Mitigate my sentence,” I say with a wry smile.

“You will still spend a long time downstairs with us. Perhaps the rest of your life.”

“I’m sure you will make it an interesting time for me.”

He considers this, then takes my hands in his. “I will make sure that if you are sent to us, my brothers will make your time ... interesting.”

“I will be grateful. Tie me tightly so the work will be neat.”

“I will tie you tightly so that you will enjoy the work more. But first I have to show you how this thing works.”

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Later there is a lot of blood. It hurts less than I expect even though I don't let him use fast-heal; it is important that the scars remain bright.

The monster is more confident and leering than ever. He puckers his lips as I enter the room, mocking the Kiss of Guilt. That is all right. There are at least twenty people in the room; all the news agencies are represented. This Mitigation is major Imperial news not as much because of the monster's crime as because of our resistance to Mitigating it.

When I press up against him I feel his erection against my belly. When I kiss him I feel his tongue and I'm tempted to bite it off. But no. I must take his breath, and after he holds back for a bit he finally exhales. Everything is in order. I step back and the Hand of God scowls at me and the Clerical recorder backs away in mock horror and I drop my robe.

There is a collective gasp. This Hand of God isn't Hank but he pauses, understanding instantly what is going on. The scars on my back spell out the sentence I have chosen to pass: NO MERCY. The knife that made those scars is strapped to my left forearm. Acting quickly, as Hank showed me, I release it and plunge it into the monster's throat.

*Remember that humans are made of meat, it will be like cutting a raw steak, drive it hard and wiggle it back and forth if you have time. A great fountain of blood jets from the wound, splashing me and puddling at our feet and soaking my white robe. No loss; I am not thinking that I will ever wear it again anyway. The room is silent except for muted gasps and the gurgle of the convict's blood. His eyes register surprise but not anger. It is almost as if I can hear his final thought in my head: *Imagine that, two lawbreaking bitches in a row.**

"Guilty," I pronounce, and the word echoes around the room. "I am guilty and I'm not sorry either."

Suddenly there is shouting and I am grabbed and taken away, downstairs to the place where actual prisoners are kept, a murderer's cramped cell conveniently facing a well-equipped torture chamber. I don't mind. The prison has been my home for four years, and in this new role it is still my home.

A little later I am removed from the cell to the chamber and spread-eagled belly up on the hard uneven floor. My wrists and ankles are secured by iron cuffs and my head is clamped into a vise that prevents me from looking around at my surroundings or even down at my own body.

There are four Hands of God present. Hank isn't there but I know all of them. "The Warden has given us a paradox," one says. "We are not to disfigure you, but we are to make you regret your action. We are to exceed your Gift so that you are truly tortured."

"Bring it on," I say, and they laugh.

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“Exactly. Do we even know what the Mitigator’s limit is?”

One by one the Hands of God deny knowing my limit. “Bitch is a bottomless pit,” one says memorably.

“I am thinking we should use electricity. We don’t use electricity much in Mitigation because it’s not so visually dramatic, but it hurts like hell. What do you think, Mitigator?”

“Like I said, bring it on.”

And so they do. They are experts; the Warden is not. The Warden thinks my limit will be a threshold like the top of a coffee cup beyond which the pain will overflow. But my Gift is more like my vagina; it can be torn, but with preparation and pacing it can pass a lot more than you’d first expect. It is the atmosphere and pacing which allow me to maintain the divine transformation of pain into exaltation. But a similar kind of pacing is also the key to torturing ordinary people; one gradually escalates the torture, showing the victim what will happen next at each turn, so that the fear and terror are maximized. Fear of what is to come can be much worse than the actual pain. But fear is also one of the keys to my Gift.

The electrical machine hurts more and can be used much more than any of the more visually dramatic tortures common in Mitigation, and after a few hours of vigorous stimulation I am incoherent, sobbing, screaming and thrashing in my shackles like a madwoman. The warden leaves, satisfied that he has made his point, but the Hands of God smile behind his back because they know my Gift still protects me.

When they have exhausted their energies and their desires on me, I am left on the floor. This is relatively standard. I might stay here for a week as my torture progresses. Every once in awhile a caretaker splashes me with cold water to prevent sleep, and the electrodes are left in place. I am reminded that it is within their power to simply turn the machine up and leave me. I find the threat stimulating. In my case it is appropriate to be tortured by a machine, another entity without mercy.

Hours later I am tortured some more. This time a single Hand of God uses the hot poker. Although I can be branded and permanently scarred once it’s established that I will never leave, for now he uses a quick touch to make light burns that will eventually heal over. This is a familiar enough torture from my Mitigation experience, but I am mildly surprised that he starts with the soles of my feet. In Mitigation they always go for the thighs, belly, and breasts, areas that even people who don’t live and breathe torture know are sensitive. The soles of the feet and palms are not erogenous zones but they are quite sensitive, and I won’t be able to walk while the burns on my feet are healing.

When my feet are well ruined I am given a choice: I can open my balled fists and voluntarily accept a burn on each palm, or he can start working up my calves. Wincing I open my hands for

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him and take my punishment. As he silently leaves me I wonder why I have been burned like this after so much care was taken not to mark me. The Hands of God do everything for a definite reason. Eventually I realize that the point is not the pain, which is exquisite and sharp and ongoing without the balm of fast-heal. It's very practical. When I am released from the floor, I won't be able to walk or grip things. The renewed pain is only secondary.

Later more voices approach and I'm sure I am about to be tortured again. I am wondering what it will be this time when an imposing robed figure looms over me. Like any Imperial citizen I recognize him instantly, and only the chains prevent me from getting to my knees.

"This is the one, Excellency," the Warden says.

"So you are the rogue Mitigator," the Emperor says, "who refused to implement my just and merciful laws."

"So I am, Excellency," I say. "Forgive me for not prostrating myself correctly."

The Emperor laughs. "You are properly prostrated, lady Mitigator," he says. "This is how I would receive all beautiful young women if I could get away with it."

"Surely you could, Excellency."

He shakes his head. "Empire itself imposes limitations on me. But here, in private, with a rogue Mitigator, this is quite appropriate. You will now tell me why you pulled that stunt with the knife."

I explain myself. The difference between us could not be more stark; he is the most powerful man in the world, and I am a naked, bound, doomed convict. I can hide nothing; I own nothing; I am nothing. I am completely, brutally honest. Never has my own life been more obviously worthless. He asks good questions. It is clear he has seen the video recordings of my interrogation and my un-Mitigation of the serial killer. He asks where I got the knife and who cut the words into my back, and I tell him. "Please don't harm him, the responsibility is mine alone," I add.

"He should have known better, but I'll credit him with guessing that you would have just found another, possibly less effective way. Do you realize why I am here?"

"No Excellency."

"You're a clever girl, take a wild guess."

"I'd guess that you will resolve my fate. I know I've made a terrible mess, Excellency."

"That's true. You understand that I can order you killed right now."

"I understand that, Excellency." My heart hammers in my chest.

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“I want you to tell me how that makes you feel, Mitigator.”

My voice shaking just a little, I say, “I am ready to take my punishment, Excellency.”

“Hand of God,” the Emperor commands, “Give me your blade.” The Hand of God surrenders his dagger. The Emperor kneels straddling my chest and looks down into my eyes. With my head in the vise I cannot look away. He holds the tip of the dagger to my throat. For a moment he just holds it there, looking into my eyes as I contemplate the situation. All he has to do is put his weight on it, and it’s the end of me.

“Lady Mitigator, does this seem to you a just conclusion to events?”

Tears are making my vision blurry, but I say, “Yes, Excellency.”

“Hand of God,” he says. I can no longer see because of the tears.

“Excellency,” the Hand of God says.

“Make this woman have an orgasm.”

Skilled, knowing fingers go to work between my legs and I cry harder as my muscles begin shaking. The lust is like a terrible force coiled within my spine, and it does not care about the knife at my throat. I care about the knife, I care very deeply because I don’t want it to plunge before this feeling reaches its crescendo, and I am terribly sorry that once it plunges I will never be able to feel like this again.

Then I am just screaming. Eventually the feelings peak, and when I am somewhat coherent again I am a little surprised to find myself still alive. The knife isn’t even at my throat any more. The Emperor himself wipes away my tears so that I can see again, and he is beaming.

“Warden, why on Earth did you even bring her down here?” the Emperor is saying.

“I gave instructions to exceed her Gift.”

The Emperor actually *laughs*. “Warden, you’re a fine manager but you don’t understand the Gift. The Gift is *divine*. As such, it is potentially infinite. Mitigator, did you just now believe you were about to die?”

“I still do, Excellency.”

“Understandably. But God chooses to dispense His mercy in unexpected ways. I would not be the one to waste such a Gift as He has placed in you. Release her now.”

The Warden is taken aback. “But Excellency, we must sentence her properly so we can Mitigate...”

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The Emperor turns on him, scowling. “I say what we must do, Warden. Do you object to that?”

“No, no Excellency.”

“Let her go and return her to her quarters and give her a new robe. Give her a week to recover before resuming her duties. Mitigator, in the future I expect you to volunteer for all the really *hard* Mitigations. You alone among your sisters have experienced not just the boundary between pleasure and pain, but that between life and death. This is what your serial killer wanted to see in your eyes, and you were right to deny him. He did not deserve to see what I have just seen, because he was a fool who destroyed what he found beautiful. I am not such a fool. I may wish to come back and look in your eyes again some day.”

So I am taken to my quarters and fitted for a new robe and greeted by my sister Mitigators who embrace me and trace the cuts on my back and the burns in places they have never been burned. It will all heal but the burns are in an awkward place and the cuts will take a few weeks to fade out. Mitigators don’t get cut very often because it’s more disfiguring than painful, a poor combination considering how often we have to be tortured.

On the news we learn just what our little rebellion has bought us. The clarion trumpets announce a new Imperial Edict.

“Citizen subjects of the Empire, this is your Emperor. I shall now clarify some points of law concerning the Liberal Reformations and the position of Mitigator.

“Let it be reiterated that Mitigators answer only to God and to myself, being by their vocation as close to God as any mortal but myself, and that nobody but myself has the authority to tell a Mitigator which cases to Mitigate or by what degree. No prosecutor, no Judge, and no Warden has the authority of a Mitigator. This authority is earned through painful sacrifice and can only be abandoned by a consistent failure to sacrifice.

“Let it also be reiterated that the State is proven untrustworthy in the matter of the death penalty, and that it is the right of all death penalty convicts to have their sentences Mitigated.”

“It is possible to find a contradiction here. Usually there is no problem. But a recent case demonstrates how this apparent contradiction appears, and how it is resolved. The Mitigators are required to receive all death penalty appeals, but the element of choice remains with them. On reflection, it becomes apparent that Mitigators have for good reason what amounts to the power of life and death. Therefore, we must recognize that a Mitigator may, on occasion, not follow through with the usual Mitigation ritual.

“We shall use the example of the recent case to formalize a Mitigator’s choice at this point. A Mitigator may bring a bladed weapon beneath her robe to a suspect Mitigation, and after tasting

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the convict's guilt if she finds it unacceptable, she may use the blade to kill the convict instead of Mitigating the sentence.

"We further recognize that if Mitigators have this right in death penalty proceedings, they must also have it in any Mitigation proceeding, a fact which convicts praying for Mitigation might be wise to consider."

"This concludes this Imperial edict."

Jane turns off the vid as the news goes on to the next story. "How the fuck do you read that?" she asks.

"I'd say he just gave us the power of life and death. We suffering Lambs of God just got some teeth."

"Only where we belong anyway, at the point of final appeal. Face it, what we mostly see is the need for mercy."

"The Warden is going to be pissed."

I shrug. "Probably not. He got to rub shoulders with the Emperor, be on the news, and probably get a footnote in the history books. I'm guessing he'll invite us all to dinner within the week to make nice."

Which he does, three days later. He even arranges for Hank to carry me to the dinner hall, since I'm still unable to walk.

The typical Mitigator has a five to ten year career, after which we usually marry one of the Hands of God. Who else would understand a Mitigator? I hope I never have to repeat the knife stunt at a Mitigation ritual, but a few other Mitigators have picked up the trick. It's still news when a Mitigator kills a convict but not the way it was when I did it.

I will eventually retire and probably marry Hank, and if God is willing we will disappear into the heirarchy of prison management. And hopefully after awhile most people will forget that I was the cause of such a noticeable doctrinal shift.

It would be just as well. I still wake up from nightmares where the monster is laughing at my willingness to sacrifice.

But the Emperor taught me to have the last laugh, and when I have those nightmares I almost always put myself back to sleep by thinking of the knife at my own throat, and the mercy that my Gift earned when the Emperor saw what the monster wanted to see. One day, I believe, he will come back to look in my eyes again, and when he does I will be ready for him.