

## ANCILLARY JUSTICE

“It’s strange. You hear stories about ancillaries, and it seems like the most awful thing, the most viscerally appalling thing the Radchaai have done. To invade and take, what, half the adult population? And turn them into walking corpses, slaved to your ships’ AIs. Turned against their own people. If you’d asked me before you . . . annexed us, I’d have said it was a fate worse than death.” She turned to me. “Is it?”

“None of my bodies is dead, Divine,” I said. “And your estimate of the typical percentage of annexed populations who were made into ancillaries is excessive.”

“You used to horrify me,” said the head priest to me. “The very thought of you near was terrifying, your dead faces, those expressionless voices. But today I am more horrified at the thought of a unit of living human beings who serve voluntarily. Because I don’t think I could trust them.”



# ANCILLARY JUSTICE

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*For my parents, Mary P. and David N. Dietzler,  
who didn't live to see this book but were  
always sure it would exist.*



# 1

The body lay naked and facedown, a deathly gray, spatters of blood staining the snow around it. It was minus fifteen degrees Celsius and a storm had passed just hours before. The snow stretched smooth in the wan sunrise, only a few tracks leading into a nearby ice-block building. A tavern. Or what passed for a tavern in this town.

There was something itchingly familiar about that out-thrown arm, the line from shoulder down to hip. But it was hardly possible I knew this person. I didn't know anyone here. This was the icy back end of a cold and isolated planet, as far from Radchaai ideas of civilization as it was possible to be. I was only here, on this planet, in this town, because I had urgent business of my own. Bodies in the street were none of my concern.

Sometimes I don't know why I do the things I do. Even after all this time it's still a new thing for me not to know, not to have orders to follow from one moment to the next. So I can't explain to you why I stopped and with one foot lifted the naked shoulder so I could see the person's face.

Frozen, bruised, and bloody as she was, I knew her. Her name was Seivarden Vendaai, and a long time ago she had been one of my officers, a young lieutenant, eventually promoted to her own command, another ship. I had thought her a thousand years dead, but she was, undeniably, here. I crouched down and felt for a pulse, for the faintest stir of breath.

Still alive.

Seivarden Vendaai was no concern of mine anymore, wasn't my responsibility. And she had never been one of my favorite officers. I had obeyed her orders, of course, and she had never abused any ancillaries, never harmed any of my segments (as the occasional officer did). I had no reason to think badly of her. On the contrary, her manners were those of an educated, well-bred person of good family. Not toward me, of course—I wasn't a person, I was a piece of equipment, a part of the ship. But I had never particularly cared for her.

I rose and went into the tavern. The place was dark, the white of the ice walls long since covered over with grime or worse. The air smelled of alcohol and vomit. A barkeep stood behind a high bench. She was a native—short and fat, pale and wide-eyed. Three patrons sprawled in seats at a dirty table. Despite the cold they wore only trousers and quilted shirts—it was spring in this hemisphere of Nilt and they were enjoying the warm spell. They pretended not to see me, though they had certainly noticed me in the street and knew what motivated my entrance. Likely one or more of them had been involved; Seivarden hadn't been out there long, or she'd have been dead.

“I'll rent a sledge,” I said, “and buy a hypothermia kit.”

Behind me one of the patrons chuckled and said, voice mocking, “Aren't you a tough little girl.”

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I turned to look at her, to study her face. She was taller than most Nilters, but fat and pale as any of them. She out-bulked me, but I was taller, and I was also considerably stronger than I looked. She didn't realize what she was playing with. She was probably male, to judge from the angular mazelike patterns quilting her shirt. I wasn't entirely certain. It wouldn't have mattered, if I had been in Radch space. Radch'ai don't care much about gender, and the language they speak—my own first language—doesn't mark gender in any way. This language we were speaking now did, and I could make trouble for myself if I used the wrong forms. It didn't help that cues meant to distinguish gender changed from place to place, sometimes radically, and rarely made much sense to me.

I decided to say nothing. After a couple of seconds she suddenly found something interesting in the tabletop. I could have killed her, right there, without much effort. I found the idea attractive. But right now Seivarden was my first priority. I turned back to the barkeep.

Slouching negligently she said, as though there had been no interruption, "What kind of place you think this is?"

"The kind of place," I said, still safely in linguistic territory that needed no gender marking, "that will rent me a sledge and sell me a hypothermia kit. How much?"

"Two hundred shen." At least twice the going rate, I was sure. "For the sledge. Out back. You'll have to get it yourself. Another hundred for the kit."

"Complete," I said. "Not used."

She pulled one out from under the bench, and the seal looked undamaged. "Your buddy out there had a tab."

Maybe a lie. Maybe not. Either way the number would be pure fiction. "How much?"

“Three hundred fifty.”

I could find a way to keep avoiding referring to the barkeep’s gender. Or I could guess. It was, at worst, a fifty-fifty chance. “You’re very trusting,” I said, guessing *male*, “to let such an indigent”—I knew Seivarden was male, that one was easy—“run up such a debt.” The barkeep said nothing. “Six hundred and fifty covers all of it?”

“Yeah,” said the barkeep. “Pretty much.”

“No, all of it. We will agree now. And if anyone comes after me later demanding more, or tries to rob me, they die.”

Silence. Then the sound behind me of someone spitting. “Radchaai scum.”

“I’m not Radchaai.” Which was true. You have to be human to be Radchaai.

“*He* is,” said the barkeep, with the smallest shrug toward the door. “You don’t have the accent but you stink like Radchaai.”

“That’s the swill you serve your customers.” Hoots from the patrons behind me. I reached into a pocket, pulled out a handful of chits, and tossed them on the bench. “Keep the change.” I turned to leave.

“Your money better be good.”

“Your sledge had better be out back where you said.” And I left.

The hypothermia kit first. I rolled Seivarden over. Then I tore the seal on the kit, snapped an internal off the card, and pushed it into her bloody, half-frozen mouth. Once the indicator on the card showed green I unfolded the thin wrap, made sure of the charge, wound it around her, and switched it on. Then I went around back for the sledge.

No one was waiting for me, which was fortunate. I didn’t want to leave bodies behind just yet, I hadn’t come here to

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cause trouble. I towed the sledge around front, loaded Seivarden onto it, and considered taking my outer coat off and laying it on her, but in the end I decided it wouldn't be that much of an improvement over the hypothermia wrap alone. I powered up the sledge and was off.

I rented a room at the edge of town, one of a dozen two-meter cubes of grimy, gray-green prefab plastic. No bedding, and blankets cost extra, as did heat. I paid—I had already wasted a ridiculous amount of money bringing Seivarden out of the snow.

I cleaned the blood off her as best I could, checked her pulse (still there) and temperature (rising). Once I would have known her core temperature without even thinking, her heart rate, blood oxygen, hormone levels. I would have seen any and every injury merely by wishing it. Now I was blind. Clearly she'd been beaten—her face was swollen, her torso bruised.

The hypothermia kit came with a very basic corrective, but only one, and only suitable for first aid. Seivarden might have internal injuries or severe head trauma, and I was only capable of fixing cuts or sprains. With any luck, the cold and the bruises were all I had to deal with. But I didn't have much medical knowledge, not anymore. Any diagnosis I could make would be of the most basic sort.

I pushed another internal down her throat. Another check—her skin was no more chill than one would expect, considering, and she didn't seem clammy. Her color, given the bruises, was returning to a more normal brown. I brought in a container of snow to melt, set it in a corner where I hoped she wouldn't kick it over if she woke, and then went out, locking the door behind me.

The sun had risen higher in the sky, but the light was

hardly any stronger. By now more tracks marred the even snow of last night's storm, and one or two Nilters were about. I hauled the sledge back to the tavern, parked it behind. No one accosted me, no sounds came from the dark doorway. I headed for the center of town.

People were abroad, doing business. Fat, pale children in trousers and quilted shirts kicked snow at each other, and then stopped and stared with large surprised-looking eyes when they saw me. The adults pretended I didn't exist, but their eyes turned toward me as they passed. I went into a shop, going from what passed for daylight here to dimness, into a chill just barely five degrees warmer than outside.

A dozen people stood around talking, but instant silence descended as soon as I entered. I realized that I had no expression on my face, and set my facial muscles to something pleasant and noncommittal.

"What do you want?" growled the shopkeeper.

"Surely these others are before me." Hoping as I spoke that it was a mixed-gender group, as my sentence indicated. I received only silence in response. "I would like four loaves of bread and a slab of fat. Also two hypothermia kits and two general-purpose correctives, if such a thing is available."

"I've got tens, twenties, and thirties."

"Thirties, please."

She stacked my purchases on the counter. "Three hundred seventy-five." There was a cough from someone behind me—I was being overcharged again.

I paid and left. The children were still huddled, laughing, in the street. The adults still passed me as though I weren't there. I made one more stop—Seivarden would need clothes. Then I returned to the room.

Seivarden was still unconscious, and there were still no

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signs of shock as far as I could see. The snow in the container had mostly melted, and I put half of one brick-hard loaf of bread in it to soak.

A head injury and internal organ damage were the most dangerous possibilities. I broke open the two correctives I'd just bought and lifted the blanket to lay one across Seivarden's abdomen, watched it puddle and stretch and then harden into a clear shell. The other I held to the side of her face that seemed the most bruised. When that one had hardened, I took off my outer coat and lay down and slept.

Slightly more than seven and a half hours later, Seivarden stirred and I woke. "Are you awake?" I asked. The corrective I'd applied held one eye closed, and one half of her mouth, but the bruising and the swelling all over her face was much reduced. I considered for a moment what would be the right facial expression, and made it. "I found you in the snow, in front of a tavern. You looked like you needed help." She gave a faint rasp of breath but didn't turn her head toward me. "Are you hungry?" No answer, just a vacant stare. "Did you hit your head?"

"No," she said, quiet, her face relaxed and slack.

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

"When did you eat last?"

"I don't know." Her voice was calm, without inflection.

I pulled her upright and propped her against the gray-green wall, gingerly, not wanting to cause more injury, wary of her slumping over. She stayed sitting, so I slowly spooned some bread-and-water mush into her mouth, working cautiously around the corrective. "Swallow," I said, and she did. I gave her half of what was in the bowl that way and then I ate the rest myself, and brought in another pan of snow.

She watched me put another half-loaf of hard bread in the pan, but said nothing, her face still placid. “What’s your name?” I asked. No answer.

She’d taken kef, I guessed. Most people will tell you that kef suppresses emotion, which it does, but that’s not all it does. There was a time when I could have explained exactly what kef does, and how, but I’m not what I once was.

As far as I knew, people took kef so they could stop feeling something. Or because they believed that, emotions out of the way, supreme rationality would result, utter logic, true enlightenment. But it doesn’t work that way.

Pulling Seivarden out of the snow had cost me time and money that I could ill afford, and for what? Left to her own devices she would find herself another hit or three of kef, and she would find her way into another place like that grimy tavern and get herself well and truly killed. If that was what she wanted I had no right to prevent her. But if she had wanted to die, why hadn’t she done the thing cleanly, registered her intention and gone to the medic as anyone would? I didn’t understand.

There was a good deal I didn’t understand, and nineteen years pretending to be human hadn’t taught me as much as I’d thought.

## 2

Nineteen years, three months, and one week before I found Seivarden in the snow, I was a troop carrier orbiting the planet Shis'urna. Troop carriers are the most massive of Radchaai ships, sixteen decks stacked one on top of the other. Command, Administrative, Medical, Hydroponics, Engineering, Central Access, and a deck for each decade, living and working space for my officers, whose every breath, every twitch of every muscle, was known to me.

Troop carriers rarely move. I sat, as I had sat for most of my two-thousand-year existence in one system or another, feeling the bitter chill of vacuum outside my hull, the planet Shis'urna like a blue-and-white glass counter, its orbiting station coming and going around, a steady stream of ships arriving, docking, undocking, departing toward one or the other of the buoy- and beacon-surrounded gates. From my vantage the boundaries of Shis'urna's various nations and territories weren't visible, though on its night side the planet's cities glowed bright here and there, and webs of roads between them, where they'd been restored since the annexation.

I felt and heard—though didn't always see—the presence of my companion ships—the smaller, faster Swords and Mercies, and most numerous at that time, the Justices, troop carriers like me. The oldest of us was nearly three thousand years old. We had known each other for a long time, and by now we had little to say to each other that had not already been said many times. We were, by and large, companionably silent, not counting routine communications.

As I still had ancillaries, I could be in more than one place at a time. I was also on detached duty in the city of Ors, on the planet Shis'urna, under the command of Esk Decade Lieutenant Awn.

Ors sat half on waterlogged land, half in marshy lake, the lakeward side built on slabs atop foundations sunk deep in the marsh mud. Green slime grew in the canals and joints between slabs, along the lower edges of building columns, on anything stationary the water reached, which varied with the season. The constant stink of hydrogen sulfide only cleared occasionally, when summer storms made the lakeward half of the city tremble and shudder and walkways were knee-deep in water blown in from beyond the barrier islands. Occasionally. Usually the storms made the smell worse. They turned the air temporarily cooler, but the relief generally lasted no more than a few days. Otherwise, it was always humid and hot.

I couldn't see Ors from orbit. It was more village than city, though it had once sat at the mouth of a river, and been the capital of a country that stretched along the coastline. Trade had come up and down the river, and flat-bottomed boats had plied the coastal marsh, bringing people from one town to the next. The river had shifted away over the centuries, and now Ors was half ruins. What had once been miles

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of rectangular islands within a grid of channels was now a much smaller place, surrounded by and interspersed with broken, half-sunken slabs, sometimes with roofs and pillars, that emerged from the muddy green water in the dry season. It had once been home to millions. Only 6,318 people had lived here when Radchaai forces annexed Shis'urna five years earlier, and of course the annexation had reduced that number. In Ors less than in some other places: as soon as we had appeared—myself in the form of my Esk cohorts along with their decade lieutenants lined up in the streets of the town, armed and armored—the head priest of Ikkt had approached the most senior officer present—Lieutenant Awn, as I said—and offered immediate surrender. The head priest had told her followers what they needed to do to survive the annexation, and for the most part those followers did indeed survive. This wasn't as common as one might think—we always made it clear from the beginning that even breathing trouble during an annexation could mean death, and from the instant an annexation began we made demonstrations of just what that meant widely available, but there was always someone who couldn't resist trying us.

Still, the head priest's influence was impressive. The city's small size was to some degree deceptive—during pilgrimage season hundreds of thousands of visitors streamed through the plaza in front of the temple, camped on the slabs of abandoned streets. For worshippers of Ikkt this was the second holiest place on the planet, and the head priest a divine presence.

Usually a civilian police force was in place by the time an annexation was officially complete, something that often took fifty years or more. This annexation was different—citizenship had been granted to the surviving Shis'urnans

much earlier than normal. No one in system administration quite trusted the idea of local civilians working security just yet, and military presence was still quite heavy. So when the annexation of Shis'urna was officially complete, most of *Justice of Toren* Esk went back to the ship, but Lieutenant Awn stayed, and I stayed with her as the twenty-ancillary unit *Justice of Toren* One Esk.

The head priest lived in a house near the temple, one of the few intact buildings from the days when Ors had been a city—four-storied, with a single-sloped roof and open on all sides, though dividers could be raised whenever an occupant wished privacy, and shutters could be rolled down on the outsides during storms. The head priest received Lieutenant Awn in a partition some five meters square, light peering in over the tops of the dark walls.

“You don’t,” said the priest, an old person with gray hair and a close-cut gray beard, “find serving in Ors a hardship?” Both she and Lieutenant Awn had settled onto cushions—damp, like everything in Ors, and fungal-smelling. The priest wore a length of yellow cloth twisted around her waist, her shoulders inked with shapes, some curling, some angular, that changed depending on the liturgical significance of the day. In deference to Radchaai propriety, she wore gloves.

“Of course not,” said Lieutenant Awn, pleasantly—though, I thought, not entirely truthfully. She had dark brown eyes and close-clipped dark hair. Her skin was dark enough that she wouldn’t be considered pale, but not so dark as to be fashionable—she could have changed it, hair and eyes as well, but she never had. Instead of her uniform—long brown coat with its scattering of jeweled pins, shirt and trousers, boots and gloves—she wore the same sort of skirt the head priest did, and a thin shirt and the lightest of gloves. Still, she was sweating. I

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stood at the entrance, silent and straight, as a junior priest laid cups and bowls in between Lieutenant Awn and the Divine.

I also stood some forty meters away, in the temple itself—an atypically enclosed space 43.5 meters high, 65.7 meters long, and 29.9 meters wide. At one end were doors nearly as tall as the roof was high, and at the other, towering over the people on the floor below, a representation of a mountain-side cliff somewhere else on Shis’urna, worked in painstaking detail. At the foot of this sat a dais, wide steps leading down to a floor of gray-and-green stone. Light streamed in through dozens of green skylights, onto walls painted with scenes from the lives of the saints of the cult of Ikkt. It was unlike any other building in Ors. The architecture, like the cult of Ikkt itself, had been imported from elsewhere on Shis’urna. During pilgrimage season this space would be jammed tight with worshippers. There were other holy sites, but if an Orsian said “pilgrimage” she meant the annual pilgrimage to this place. But that was some weeks away. For now the air of the temple susurrated faintly in one corner with the whispered prayers of a dozen devotees.

The head priest laughed. “You are a diplomat, Lieutenant Awn.”

“I am a soldier, Divine,” answered Lieutenant Awn. They were speaking Radchaai, and she spoke slowly and precisely, careful of her accent. “I don’t find my duty a hardship.”

The head priest did not smile in response. In the brief silence that followed, the junior priest set down a lipped bowl of what Shis’urnans call tea, a thick liquid, lukewarm and sweet, that bears almost no relationship to the actual thing.

Outside the doors of the temple I also stood in the cyanophyte-stained plaza, watching people as they passed. Most wore the same simple, bright-colored skirting the head

priest did, though only very small children and the very devout had much in the way of markings, and only a few wore gloves. Some of those passing were transplants, Radchaa'i assigned to jobs or given property here in Ors after the annexation. Most of them had adopted the simple skirt and added a light, loose shirt, as Lieutenant Awn had. Some stuck stubbornly to trousers and jacket, and sweated their way across the plaza. All wore the jewelry that few Radchaa'i would ever give up—gifts from friends or lovers, memorials to the dead, marks of family or clientage associations.

To the north, past a rectangular stretch of water called the Fore-Temple after the neighborhood it had once been, Ors rose slightly where the city sat on actual ground during the dry season, an area still called, politely, the upper city. I patrolled there as well. When I walked the edge of the water I could see myself standing in the plaza.

Boats poled slowly across the marshy lake, and up and down channels between groupings of slabs. The water was scummy with swaths of algae, here and there bristling with the tips of water-grasses. Away from the town, east and west, buoys marked prohibited stretches of water, and within their confines the iridescent wings of marshflies shimmered over the water weeds floating thick and tangled there. Around them larger boats floated, and the big dredgers, now silent and still, that before the annexation had hauled up the stinking mud that lay beneath the water.

The view to the south was similar, except for the barest hint on the horizon of the actual sea, past the soggy spit that bounded the swamp. I saw all of this, standing as I did at various points surrounding the temple, and walking the streets of the town itself. It was twenty-seven degrees C, and humid as always.

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That accounted for almost half of my twenty bodies. The remainder slept or worked in the house Lieutenant Awn occupied—three-storied and spacious, it had once housed a large extended family and a boat rental. One side opened on a broad, muddy green canal, and the opposite onto the largest of local streets.

Three of the segments in the house were awake, performing administrative duties (I sat on a mat on a low platform in the center of the first floor of the house and listened to an Orsian complain to me about the allocation of fishing rights) and keeping watch. “You should bring this to the district magistrate, citizen,” I told the Orsian, in the local dialect. Because I knew everyone here, I knew she was female, and a grandparent, both of which had to be acknowledged if I were to speak to her not only grammatically but also courteously.

“I don’t know the district magistrate!” she protested, indignant. The magistrate was in a large, populous city well upriver from Ors and nearby Kould Ves. Far enough upriver that the air was often cool and dry, and things didn’t smell of mildew all the time. “What does the district magistrate know about Ors? For all I know the district magistrate doesn’t exist!” She continued, explaining to me the long history of her house’s association with the buoy-enclosed area, which was off-limits and certainly closed to fishing for the next three years.

And as always, in the back of my mind, a constant awareness of being in orbit overhead.

“Come now, Lieutenant,” said the head priest. “No one likes Ors except those of us unfortunate enough to be born here. Most Shis’urnans I know, let alone Radchaai, would rather be in a city, with dry land and actual seasons besides rainy and not rainy.”

Lieutenant Awn, still sweating, accepted a cup of so-called tea, and drank without grimacing—a matter of practice and determination. “My superiors are asking for my return.”

On the relatively dry northern edge of the town, two brown-uniformed soldiers passing in an open runabout saw me, raised hands in greeting. I raised my own, briefly. “One Esk!” one of them called. They were common soldiers, from *Justice of Ente’s* Seven Issa unit, under Lieutenant Skaaiat. They patrolled the stretch of land between Ors and the far southwestern edge of Kould Ves, the city that had grown up around the river’s newer mouth. The *Justice of Ente* Seven Issas were human, and knew I was not. They always treated me with slightly guarded friendliness.

“I would prefer you stay,” said the head priest, to Lieutenant Awn. Though Lieutenant Awn had already known that. We’d have been back on *Justice of Toren* two years before, but for the Divine’s continued request that we stay.

“You understand,” said Lieutenant Awn, “they would much prefer to replace One Esk with a human unit. Ancillaries can stay in suspension indefinitely. Humans...” She set down her tea, took a flat, yellow-brown cake. “Humans have families they want to see again, they have lives. They can’t stay frozen for centuries, the way ancillaries sometimes do. It doesn’t make sense to have ancillaries out of the holds doing work when there are human soldiers who could do it.” Though Lieutenant Awn had been here five years, and routinely met with the head priest, it was the first time the topic had been broached so plainly. She frowned, and changes in her respiration and hormone levels told me she’d thought of something dismaying. “You haven’t had problems with *Justice of Ente* Seven Issa, have you?”

“No,” said the head priest. She looked at Lieutenant Awn

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with a wry twist to her mouth. “I know you. I know One Esk. Whoever they’ll send me—I won’t know. Neither will my parishioners.”

“Annexations are messy,” said Lieutenant Awn. The head priest winced slightly at the word *annexation* and I thought I saw Lieutenant Awn notice, but she continued. “Seven Issa wasn’t here for that. The *Justice of Ente* Issa battalions didn’t do anything during that time that One Esk didn’t also do.”

“No, Lieutenant.” The priest put down her own cup, seeming disturbed, but I didn’t have access to any of her internal data and so could not be certain. “*Justice of Ente* Issa did many things One Esk did not. It’s true, One Esk killed as many people as the soldiers of *Justice of Ente*’s Issa. Likely more.” She looked at me, still standing silent by the enclosure’s entrance. “No offense, but I think it was more.”

“I take no offense, Divine,” I replied. The head priest frequently spoke to me as though I were a person. “And you are correct.”

“Divine,” said Lieutenant Awn, worry clear in her voice. “If the soldiers of *Justice of Ente* Seven Issa—or anyone else—have been abusing citizens...”

“No, no!” protested the head priest, her voice bitter. “Radchaai are so very careful about how citizens are treated!”

Lieutenant Awn’s face heated, her distress and anger plain to me. I couldn’t read her mind, but I could read every twitch of her every muscle, so her emotions were as transparent to me as glass.

“Forgive me,” said the head priest, though Lieutenant Awn’s expression had not changed, and her skin was too dark to show the flush of her anger. “Since the Radchaai have bestowed citizenship on us...” She stopped, seemed to reconsider her words. “Since their arrival, Seven Issa has given

me nothing to complain of. But I've seen what your human troops did during what you call *the annexation*. The citizenship you granted may be as easily taken back, and..."

"We wouldn't..." protested Lieutenant Awn.

The head priest stopped her with a raised hand. "I know what Seven Issa, or at least those like them, do to people they find on the wrong side of a dividing line. Five years ago it was noncitizen. In the future, who knows? Perhaps not-citizen-enough?" She waved a hand, a gesture of surrender. "It won't matter. Such boundaries are too easy to create."

"I can't blame you for thinking in such terms," said Lieutenant Awn. "It was a difficult time."

"And I can't help but think you inexplicably, unexpectedly naive," said the head priest. "One Esk will shoot me if you order it. Without hesitation. But One Esk would never beat me or humiliate me, or rape me, for no purpose but to show its power over me, or to satisfy some sick amusement." She looked at me. "Would you?"

"No, Divine," I said.

"The soldiers of *Justice of Ente* Issa did all of those things. Not to me, it's true, and not to many in Ors itself. But they did them nonetheless. Would Seven Issa have been any different, if it had been them here instead?"

Lieutenant Awn sat, distressed, looking down at her unappetizing tea, unable to answer.

"It's strange. You hear stories about ancillaries, and it seems like the most awful thing, the most viscerally appalling thing the Radchaai have done. Garsedd—well, yes, Garsedd, but that was a thousand years ago. This—to invade and take, what, half the adult population? And turn them into walking corpses, slaved to your ships' AIs. Turned against their own people. If you'd asked me before you...*annexed* us, I'd

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have said it was a fate worse than death.” She turned to me. “Is it?”

“None of my bodies is dead, Divine,” I said. “And your estimate of the typical percentage of annexed populations who were made into ancillaries is excessive.”

“You used to horrify me,” said the head priest to me. “The very thought of you near was terrifying, your dead faces, those expressionless voices. But today I am more horrified at the thought of a unit of living human beings who serve voluntarily. Because I don’t think I could trust them.”

“Divine,” said Lieutenant Awn, mouth tight. “I serve voluntarily. I make no excuses for it.”

“I believe you are a good person, Lieutenant Awn, despite that.” She picked up her cup of tea and sipped it, as though she had not just said what she had said.

Lieutenant Awn’s throat tightened, and her lips. She had thought of something she wanted to say, but was unsure if she should. “You’ve heard about Ime,” she said, deciding. Still tense and wary despite having chosen to speak.

The head priest seemed bleakly, bitterly amused. “News from Ime is meant to inspire confidence in Radch administration?”

This is what had happened: Ime Station, and the smaller stations and moons in the system, were the farthest one could be from a provincial palace and still be in Radch space. For years the governor of Ime used this distance to her own advantage—embezzling, collecting bribes and protection fees, selling assignments. Thousands of citizens had been unjustly executed or (what was essentially the same thing) forced into service as ancillary bodies, even though the manufacture of ancillaries was no longer legal. The governor controlled all communications and travel permits, and normally

a station AI would report such activity to the authorities, but Ime Station had been somehow prevented from doing so, and the corruption grew, and spread unchecked.

Until a ship entered the system, came out of gate space only a few hundred kilometers from the patrol ship *Mercy of Sarrse*. The strange ship didn't answer demands that it identify itself. When *Mercy of Sarrse's* crew attacked and boarded it, they found dozens of humans, as well as the alien Rrrrrr. The captain of *Mercy of Sarrse* ordered her soldiers to take captive any humans that seemed suitable for use as ancillaries, and kill the rest, along with all the aliens. The ship would be turned over to the system governor.

*Mercy of Sarrse* was not the only human-crewed warship in that system. Until that moment human soldiers stationed there had been kept in line by a program of bribes, flattery, and, when those failed, threats and even executions. All very effective, until the moment the soldier *Mercy of Sarrse* One Amaat One decided she wasn't willing to kill those people, or the Rrrrrr. And convinced the rest of her unit to follow her.

That had all happened five years before. The results of it were still playing themselves out.

Lieutenant Awn shifted on her cushion. "That business was all uncovered because a single human soldier refused an order. And led a mutiny. If it hadn't been for her...well. Ancillaries won't do that. They can't."

"That business was all uncovered," replied the head priest, "because the ship that human soldier boarded, she and the rest of her unit, had aliens on it. Radchaai have few qualms about killing humans, especially noncitizen humans, but you're very cautious about starting wars with aliens."

Only because wars with aliens might run up against the terms of the treaty with the alien Presger. Violating that agree-

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ment would have extremely serious consequences. And even so, plenty of high-ranking Radchaai disagreed on that topic. I saw Lieutenant Awn's desire to argue the point. Instead she said, "The governor of Ime was not cautious about it. And would have started that war, if not for this one person."

"Have they executed that person yet?" the head priest asked, pointedly. It was the summary fate of any soldier who refused an order, let alone mutinied.

"Last I heard," said Lieutenant Awn, breath tight and turning shallow, "the Rrrrrr had agreed to turn her over to Radch authorities." She swallowed. "I don't know what's going to happen." Of course, it had probably already happened, whatever it was. News could take a year or more to reach Shis'urna from as far away as Ime.

The head priest didn't answer for a moment. She poured more tea, and spooned fish paste into a small bowl. "Does my continued request for your presence present any sort of disadvantage for you?"

"No," said Lieutenant Awn. "Actually, the other Esk lieutenants are a bit envious. There's no chance for action on *Justice of Toren*." She picked up her own cup, outwardly calm, inwardly angry. Disturbed. Talking about the news from Ime had increased her unease. "Action means commendations, and possibly promotions." And this was the last annexation. The last chance for an officer to enrich her house through connections to new citizens, or even through outright appropriation.

"Yet another reason I would prefer you," said the head priest.

I followed Lieutenant Awn home. And watched inside the temple, and overlooked the people crisscrossing the plaza

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as they always did, avoiding the children playing kau in the center of the plaza, kicking the ball back and forth, shouting and laughing. On the edge of the Fore-Temple water, a teenager from the upper city sat sullen and listless watching half a dozen little children hopping from stone to stone, singing:

*One, two, my aunt told me  
Three, four, the corpse soldier  
Five, six, it'll shoot you in the eye  
Seven, eight, kill you dead  
Nine, ten, break it apart and put it back together.*

As I walked the streets people greeted me, and I greeted them in return. Lieutenant Awn was tense and angry, and only nodded absently at the people in the street, who greeted her as she passed.

The person with the fishing-rights complaint left, unsatisfied. Two children rounded the divider after she had gone, and sat cross-legged on the cushion she had vacated. They both wore lengths of fabric wrapped around their waists, clean but faded, though no gloves. The elder was about nine, and the symbols inked on the younger one's chest and shoulders—slightly smudged—indicated she was no more than six. She looked at me, frowning.

In Orsian addressing children properly was easier than addressing adults. One used a simple, ungendered form. "Hello, citizens," I said, in the local dialect. I recognized them both—they lived on the south edge of Ors and I had spoken to them quite frequently, but they had never visited the house before. "How can I help you?"

"You aren't One Esk," said the smaller child, and the older made an abortive motion as if to hush her.

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“I am,” I said, and pointed to the insignia on my uniform jacket. “See? Only this is my number Fourteen segment.”

“I *told* you,” said the older child.

The younger considered this for a moment, and then said, “I have a song.” I waited in silence, and she took a deep breath, as though about to begin, and then halted, perplexed-seeming. “Do you want to hear it?” she asked, still doubtful of my identity, likely.

“Yes, citizen,” I said. I—that is, I—One Esk—first sang to amuse one of my lieutenants, when *Justice of Toren* had hardly been commissioned a hundred years. She enjoyed music, and had brought an instrument with her as part of her luggage allowance. She could never interest the other officers in her hobby and so she taught me the parts to the songs she played. I filed those away and went looking for more, to please her. By the time she was captain of her own ship I had collected a large library of vocal music—no one was going to give me an instrument, but I could sing anytime—and it was a matter of rumor and some indulgent smiles that *Justice of Toren* had an interest in singing. Which it didn’t—I—I—*Justice of Toren*—tolerated the habit because it was harmless, and because it was quite possible that one of my captains would appreciate it. Otherwise it would have been prevented.

If these children had stopped me on the street, they would have had no hesitation, but here in the house, seated as though for a formal conference, things were different. And I suspected this was an exploratory visit, that the youngest child meant to eventually ask for a chance to serve in the house’s makeshift temple—the prestige of being appointed flower-bearer to Amaat wasn’t a question here, in the stronghold of Ikkt, but the customary term-end gift of fruit and

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clothing was. And this child's best friend was currently a flower-bearer, doubtless making the prospect more interesting.

No Orsian would make such a request immediately or directly, so likely the child had chosen this oblique approach, turning a casual encounter into something formal and intimidating. I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out a handful of sweets and laid them on the floor between us.

The littler girl made an affirmative gesture, as though I had resolved all her doubts, and then took a breath and began.

*My heart is a fish  
Hiding in the water-grass  
In the green, in the green.*

The tune was an odd amalgam of a Radchaai song that played occasionally on broadcast and an Orsian one I already knew. The words were unfamiliar to me. She sang four verses in a clear, slightly wavering voice, and seemed ready to launch into a fifth, but stopped abruptly when Lieutenant Awn's steps sounded outside the divider.

The smaller girl leaned forward and scooped up her payment. Both children bowed, still half-seated, and then rose and ran out the entranceway into the wider house, past Lieutenant Awn, past me following Lieutenant Awn.

"Thank you, citizens," Lieutenant Awn said to their retreating backs, and they started, and then managed with a single movement to both bow slightly in her direction and continue running, out into the street.

"Anything new?" asked Lieutenant Awn, though she didn't pay much attention to music, herself, not beyond what most people do.

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“Sort of,” I said. Farther down the street I saw the two children, still running as they turned a corner around another house. They slowed to a halt, breathing hard. The littler girl opened her hand to show the older one her fistful of sweets. Surprisingly, she seemed not to have dropped any, small as her hand was, as quick as their flight had been. The older child took a sweet and put it in her mouth.

Five years ago I would have offered something more nutritious, before repairs had begun to the planet’s infrastructure, when supplies were chancy. Now every citizen was guaranteed enough to eat, but the rations were not luxurious, and often as not were unappealing.

Inside the temple all was green-lit silence. The head priest did not emerge from behind the screens in the temple residence, though junior priests came and went. Lieutenant Awn went to the second floor of her house and sat brooding on an Ors-style cushion, screened from the street, shirt thrown off. She refused the (genuine) tea I brought her. I transmitted a steady stream of information to her—everything normal, everything routine—and to *Justice of Toren*. “She should take that to the district magistrate,” Lieutenant Awn said of the citizen with the fishing dispute, slightly annoyed, eyes closed, the afternoon’s reports in her vision. “We don’t have jurisdiction over that.” I didn’t answer. No answer was required, or expected. She approved, with a quick twitch of her fingers, the message I had composed for the district magistrate, and then opened the most recent message from her young sister. Lieutenant Awn sent a percentage of her earnings home to her parents, who used it to buy their younger child poetry lessons. Poetry was a valuable, civilized accomplishment. I couldn’t judge if Lieutenant Awn’s sister had any particular talent, but then not many did, even among more

elevated families. But her work and her letters pleased Lieutenant Awn, and took the edge off her present distress.

The children on the plaza ran away home, laughing. The adolescent sighed, heavily, the way adolescents do, and dropped a pebble in the water and stared at the ripples.

Ancillary units that only ever woke for annexations often wore nothing but a force shield generated by an implant in each body, rank on rank of featureless soldiers that might have been poured from mercury. But I was always out of the holds, and I wore the same uniform human soldiers did, now the fighting was done. My bodies sweated under my uniform jackets, and, bored, I opened three of my mouths, all in close proximity to each other on the temple plaza, and sang with those three voices, “My heart is a fish, hiding in the water-grass...” One person walking by looked at me, startled, but everyone else ignored me—they were used to me by now.

# 3

The next morning the correctives had fallen off, and the bruising on Seivarden's face had faded. She seemed comfortable, but she still seemed high, so that was hardly surprising.

I unrolled the bundle of clothes I had bought for her—insulated underclothes, quilted shirt and trousers, undercoat and hooded overcoat, gloves—and laid them out. Then I took her chin and turned her head toward me. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes.” Her dark brown eyes stared somewhere distant over my left shoulder.

“Get up.” I tugged on her arm, and she blinked, lazily, and got as far as sitting up before the impulse deserted her. But I managed to dress her, in fits and starts, and then I stowed what few things were still out, shouldered my pack, took Seivarden by the arm, and left.

There was a flier rental at the edge of town, and predictably the proprietor wouldn't rent to me unless I put down twice the advertised deposit. I told her I intended to fly northwest, to visit a herding camp—an outright lie, which she likely

knew. “You’re an offworlder,” she said. “You don’t know what it’s like away from the towns. Offworlders are always flying out to herding camps and getting lost. Sometimes we find them again, sometimes not.” I said nothing. “You’ll lose my flier and then where will I be? Out in the snow with my starving children, that’s where.” Beside me Seivarden stared vaguely off into the distance.

I was forced to put down the money. I had a strong suspicion I would never see it again. Then the proprietor demanded extra because I couldn’t display a local pilot certification—something I knew wasn’t required. If it had been, I would have forged one before I came.

In the end, though, she gave me the flier. I checked its engine, which seemed clean and in good repair, and made sure of the fuel. When I was satisfied, I put my pack in, seated Seivarden, and then climbed into the pilot’s seat.

Two days after the storm, the snowmoss was beginning to show again, sweeps of pale green with darker threads here and there. After two more hours we flew over a line of hills, and the green darkened dramatically, lined and irregularly veined in a dozen shades, like malachite. In some places the moss was smeared and trampled by the creatures that grazed on it, herds of long-haired bov making their way southward as spring advanced. And along those paths, on the edges here and there, ice devils lay in carefully tunneled lairs, waiting for a bov to put a foot wrong so they could drag it down. I saw no trace of them, but even the herders who lived their lives following the bov couldn’t always tell when one was near.

It was easy flying. Seivarden sat, half-lying and quiet beside me. How could she be alive? And how had she ended up here, now? It was beyond improbable. But improbable things happened. Nearly a thousand years before Lieutenant Awn was

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even born, Seivarden had captained a ship of her own, *Sword of Nathtas*, and had lost it. Most of the human crew, including Seivarden, had managed to get to an escape pod, but hers had never been found, that I had heard. Yet here she was. Someone must have found her relatively recently. She was lucky to be alive.

I was four billion miles away when Seivarden lost her ship. I was patrolling a city of glass and polished red stone, silent but for the sound of my own feet, and the conversation of my lieutenants, and, occasionally, me trying my voices against the echoing pentagonal plazas. Falls of flowers, red and yellow and blue, draped the walls surrounding houses with five-sided courtyards. The flowers were wilting; no one dared walk the streets except me and my officers, everyone knew the likely fate of any person placed under arrest. Instead they huddled in their houses, waiting for what would come next, wincing or shuddering at the sound of a lieutenant laughing, or my singing.

What trouble we'd run into, I and my lieutenants, had been sporadic. The Garseddai had put up only nominal resistance. Troop carriers had emptied, the Swords and Mercies were essentially on guard duty around the system. Representatives from the five zones of each of the five regions, twenty-five in all, speaking for the various moons, planets, and stations in the Garseddai system, had surrendered in the name of their constituents, and were separately on their way to *Sword of Amaat* to meet Anaander Mianaai, Lord of the Radch, and beg for the lives of their people. Hence that frightened, silent city.

In a narrow, diamond-shaped park, by a black granite monument inscribed with the Five Right Actions, and the

name of the Garseddai patron who had wished to impress them on the local residents, one of my lieutenants passed another and complained that this annexation had been disappointingly dull. Three seconds later I received a message from Captain Seivarden's *Sword of Nathtas*.

The three Garseddai electors she was carrying had killed two of her lieutenants, and twelve of *Sword of Nathtas*'s ancillary segments. They had damaged the ship—cut conduits, breached the hull. Accompanying the report, a recording from *Sword of Nathtas*—the gun that an ancillary segment saw, irrefutably, but that according to *Sword of Nathtas*'s other sensors just didn't exist. A Garseddai elector, against all expectations surrounded by the gleaming silver of Radchaaai-style armor that only the ancillary's eyes could see, firing the gun, the bullet piercing the ancillary's armor, killing the segment, and, with its eyes gone, the gun and armor flickering back into nonexistence.

All the electors had been searched before boarding, and *Sword of Nathtas* should have been able to detect any weapon or shield-generating device or implant. And while Radchaaai-style armor had once been in common use in the regions surrounding the Radch itself, those regions had been absorbed a thousand years before. The Garseddai didn't use it, didn't know how to make it, let alone how to use it. And even if they had, that gun, and its bullet, were flatly impossible.

Three people armed with such a gun, and armored, could do a great deal of damage on a ship like *Sword of Nathtas*. Especially if even one Garseddai could reach the engine, and if such a gun could pierce the engine's heat shield. Radchaaai warship engines burned star-hot, and a failed heat shield meant instant vaporization, an entire ship dissolved in a brief, bright flash.

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But there was nothing I could do, nothing anyone could do. The message was nearly four hours old, a signal from the past, a ghost. The issue had been decided even before it had reached me.

A harsh tone sounded, and a blue light blinked on the panel in front of me, beside the fuel indicator. An instant before the indicator had read nearly full. Now it read empty. The engine would shut down in a matter of minutes. Beside me Seivarden sprawled, relaxed and quiet.

I landed.

The fuel tank had been rigged in a way I hadn't detected. It seemed three-quarters full, but it wasn't, and the alarm that ought to have sounded when I'd used half of what I'd started with had been disconnected.

I thought of the double deposit I certainly wouldn't see again. Of the proprietor, so concerned that she might lose her valuable flier. Of course there would be a transmitter, whether or not I triggered the emergency call. The proprietor wouldn't want to lose the flier, just strand me alone in the middle of this plain of moss-streaked snow. I could call for help—I had disabled my communication implants, but I did have a handheld I could use. But we were very, very far from anyone who might be moved to send assistance. And even if help came, and came before the proprietor who clearly meant me no good, I wouldn't get where I was going, a matter of great importance to me.

The air was minus eighteen degrees; the breeze from the south, at approximately eight kph, implied snow sometime in the near future. Nothing serious, if the morning's weather report could be trusted.

My landing had left a green-edged smear of white in the snowmoss, easily visible from the air. The terrain seemed gently hilly, though the hills we'd flown over were no longer visible.

Had this been an ordinary emergency, the best course would have been to stay inside the flier until help came. But this was not an ordinary emergency, and I did not expect rescue.

Either they would come as soon as their transmitter told them we were grounded, prepared to murder, or they would wait. The rental had several other vehicles, the proprietor would likely not be inconvenienced if she waited even several weeks to retrieve her flier. As she herself had said, no one would be surprised if a foreigner lost herself in the snow.

I had two choices. I could wait here and hope to ambush anyone who came to murder and rob me, and take their transport. This would, of course, be futile in the event that they decided to wait for cold and hunger to do their job for them. Or I could pull Seivarden out of the flier, shoulder my pack, and walk. My intended destination was some sixty kilometers to the southeast. I could walk that in a day if I had to, ground and weather—and ice devils—permitting, but I would be lucky if Seivarden could do it in twice that time. And that course would be futile if the proprietor decided not to wait, but to retrieve her flier more or less immediately. Our trail through the moss-striated snow would be clear, they would need only to follow us and dispose of us. I would have lost any advantage of surprise I might have gained by hiding near the downed flier.

And I would be lucky if I found anything, once I reached my destination. I had spent the past nineteen years following the most tenuous of threads, weeks and months of searching or waiting, punctuated by moments like this, when success or

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even life hung on the toss of a coin. I had been lucky to come this far. I could not reasonably expect to go farther.

A Radchaai would have tossed that coin. Or more accurately a handful of them, a dozen disks, each with its meaning and import, the pattern of their fall a map of the universe as Amaat willed it to be. Things happen the way they happen because the world is the way it is. Or, as a Radchaai would say, the universe is the shape of the gods. Amaat conceived of light, and conceiving of light also necessarily conceived of not-light, and light and darkness sprang forth. This was the first Emanation, EtrepaBo; Light/Darkness. The other three, implied and necessitated by that first, are EskVar (Beginning/Ending), IssaInu (Movement/Stillness), and VahnItr (Existence/Nonexistence). These four Emanations variously split and recombined to create the universe. Everything that is, emanates from Amaat.

The smallest, most seemingly insignificant event is part of an intricate whole and to understand why one particular mote of dust falls in one particular path, and lands in one particular location, is to understand the will of Amaat. There is no such thing as “just a coincidence.” Nothing happens by chance, but only according to the mind of God.

Or so official Radchaai orthodoxy teaches. I myself have never understood religion very well. It was never required that I should. And though the Radchaai had made me, I was not Radchaai. I knew and cared nothing about the will of the gods. I only knew that I would land where I myself had been cast, wherever that would be.

I took my pack from the flier, opened it, and removed an extra magazine, which I stowed inside my coat near my gun. I shouldered the pack, went around to the other side of the flier, and opened the hatch there. “Seivarden,” I said.

She didn't move, only breathed a quiet *hmmm*. I took her arm and pulled, and she half-slid, half-stepped out into the snow.

I had gotten this far by taking one step, and then another. I turned northeast, pulling Seivarden along, and walked.

Dr. Arilesperas Strigan, whose home I very much hoped I was walking toward, had been, at one time, a medic in private practice on Dras Annia Station, an aggregation of at least five different stations, one built onto another, at the intersection of two dozen different routes, well outside Radch territory. Nearly anything could end up there, given enough time, and in the course of her work she had met a wide variety of people, with a wide variety of antecedents. She had been paid in currency, in favors, in antiques, in nearly anything that might imaginably be said to have value.

I'd been there, seen the station and its convoluted, interpenetrating layers, seen where Strigan had worked and lived, seen the things she'd left behind when one day, for no reason anyone seemed to know, she'd bought passage on five different ships and then disappeared. A case full of stringed instruments, only three of which I could name. Five shelves of icons, a dizzying array of gods and saints worked in wood, in shell, in gold. A dozen guns, each one carefully labeled with its station permit number. These were collections that had begun as single items, received in payment, sparking her curiosity. Strigan's lease had been paid in full for 150 years, and as a result station authorities had left her apartment untouched.

A bribe had gotten me in, to see the collection I had come for—a few five-sided tiles in colors still flower-bright after a thousand years. A shallow bowl inscribed around its gilt edge in a language Strigan couldn't possibly have read. A flat

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plastic rectangle I knew was a voice recorder. At a touch it produced laughter, voices speaking that same dead language.

Small as it was, this had not been an easy collection to assemble. Garseddai artifacts were scarce, because once Anaander Mianaai had realized the Garseddai possessed the means to destroy Radchaai ships and penetrate Radchaai armor, she had ordered the utter destruction of Garsedd and its people. Those pentagonal plazas, the flowers, every living thing on every planet, moon, and station in the system, all gone. No one would ever live there again. No one would ever be permitted to forget what it meant to defy the Radch.

Had a patient given her, say, the bowl, and had that sent her looking for more information? And if one Garseddai object had fetched up there, what else might have? Something a patient might have given her as payment, maybe not knowing what it was—or knowing and wanting desperately to be rid of it. Something that had led Strigan to flee, to disappear, leaving nearly everything she owned behind, perhaps. Something dangerous, something she couldn't bring herself to destroy, to be rid of in the most efficient way possible.

Something I wanted very badly.

I wanted to get as far as we possibly could, as quickly as we possibly could, and so we walked for hours with only the briefest of stops when absolutely necessary. Though the day was clear, and bright as it ever gets on Nilt, I felt blind in a way that I had thought I had learned to ignore by now. I had once had twenty bodies, twenty pairs of eyes, and hundreds of others that I could access if I needed or desired it. Now I could only see in one direction, could only see the vast expanse behind me if I turned my head and blinded myself to what was in front of me. Usually I dealt with this by avoiding

too-open spaces, by making sure of just what was at my back, but here that was impossible.

My face burned, despite the very gentle breeze, then numbed. My hands and feet ached at first—I hadn't bought my gloves or boots with the intention of walking sixty kilometers in the cold—and then grew heavy and numb. I was fortunate I hadn't come in winter, when temperatures could be a great deal lower.

Seivarden must have been just as cold, but she walked steadily as I pulled her along, step after apathetic step, feet dragging through the mossy snow, staring down, not complaining or even speaking at all. When the sun was nearly on the horizon she shifted her shoulders just slightly and raised her head. "I know that song," she said.

"What?"

"That song you're humming." Lazily she turned her head toward me, her face showing no anxiety or perplexity at all. I wondered if she had made any effort to conceal her accent. Likely not—on *kef*, as she was, she wouldn't care. Inside *Radch* territories that accent declared her a member of a wealthy and influential house, someone who, after taking the aptitudes at fifteen, would have ended up with a prestigious assignment. Outside those territories, it was an easy shorthand for a villain—rich, corrupt, and callous—in a thousand entertainments.

The faint sound of a flier reached us. I turned without stopping, searched the horizon, and saw it, small and distant. Flying low and slowly, following our trail, it seemed. It wasn't a rescue, I was sure. My toss had landed wrong, and now we were exposed and defenseless.

We kept walking as the sound of the flier grew nearer. We couldn't have outraced it even if Seivarden hadn't begun to

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half-stumble, catching herself, but clearly at the end of her endurance. If she was speaking unprompted, noticing anything around her, she was likely beginning to come down. I stopped, dropped her arm, and she came to a halt beside me.

The flier sailed over us, banked, and landed in our path, approximately thirty meters in front of us. Either they didn't have the means to shoot us from the air, or they didn't wish to. I shrugged off my pack and loosened the fastenings of my outer coat, the better to reach my gun.

Four people got out of the flier—the owner I had rented from, two people I didn't recognize, and the person from the bar, who had called me a “tough little girl,” and whom I had wanted to kill but had refrained from killing. I slid my hand into my coat and grasped the gun. My options were limited.

“Don't you have any common sense?” called the proprietor, when they were fifteen meters away. All four stopped. “You stay with the flier when it goes down, so we can find you.”

I looked at the person from the bar, saw her recognize me, and see that I recognized her. “In the bar, I said that anyone who tried to rob me would die,” I reminded her. She smirked.

One of the people I didn't recognize produced a gun from somewhere on her person. “We aren't gonna just *try*,” she said.

I drew my gun and fired, hitting her in the face. She crumpled to the snow. Before the others could react, I shot the person from the bar, who likewise fell, and then the person beside her, all three in quick succession, taking less than one second.

The proprietor swore, and turned to flee. I shot her in the back, and she took three steps and then fell.

“I'm cold,” said Seivarden beside me, placid and heedless.

\* \* \*

They had left the flier unguarded, all four approaching me. Foolish. The whole venture had been foolish, undertaken without any sort of serious planning, it seemed. I had only to load Seivarden and my pack into their flier and be off.

The residence of Arilesperas Strigan was barely visible from the air, only a circle slightly more than thirty-five meters in diameter, within which the snowmoss was perceptibly lighter and thinner. I brought the flier down outside the circle and waited a moment to assess the situation. From this angle it was obvious there were buildings, two of them, snow-covered mounds. It might have been an unoccupied herding camp, but if I could trust my information, it was not. There was no sign of a wall or fence, but I would make no assumptions about her security.

After consideration, I opened the hatch on the flier and got out, pulling Seivarden out behind me. We walked slowly to the line where the snow changed, Seivarden stopping when I stopped. She stood incuriously, staring straight ahead.

Beyond this I had not been able to plan. “Strigan!” I called, and waited, but no answer came. I left Seivarden standing where she was and walked the circumference of the circle. The entrances of the two snow-mounded buildings seemed oddly shadowed, and I stopped, and looked again.

Both hung open, dark beyond. Buildings like these would probably have double-doored entrances—like an airlock, to keep warm air inside—but I didn’t think anyone would leave either door hanging ajar.

Either Strigan had security in place, or she did not. I stepped over the line, into the circle. Nothing happened.

The doors were open, both inner and outer, and there

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were no lights. One of the buildings was just as cold inside as out. I presumed that when I found a light I would discover it was used for storage, filled with tools and sealed packages of food and fuel. The other was two degrees Celsius inside—I guessed that it had been heated until relatively recently. Living quarters, evidently. “Strigan!” I called into the darkness, but the way my voice echoed back told me the building was likely unoccupied.

Outside again, I found the marks where her flier had sat. She was gone, then, and the open doors and the darkness were a message for whoever would come. For me. I had no means to discover where she’d gone. I looked up at the empty sky, and down again at the imprint of the flier. I stood there a while, looking at that empty space.

When I returned to Seivarden, I found she’d lain down in the green-stained snow and gone to sleep.

In the back of the flier I found a lantern, a stove, a tent, and some bedding. I took the lantern into the building I presumed was living quarters and switched it on.

Wide, light-colored rugs covered the floor, and woven hangings the walls; these were blue and orange and an eye-hurting green. Low benches, backless, with cushions, lined the room. Beyond benches and the bright hangings, there was little else. A game board with counters, but the board had a pattern of holes I didn’t recognize, and I didn’t understand the distribution of the counters among the holes. I wondered whom Strigan played with. Perhaps the board was only decorative. It was finely carved, and the pieces brightly colored.

A wooden box sat on a table in a corner, a long oval with a carved, pierced lid and three strings stretched tight across. The wood was pale gold, with a waving, curling grain. The

holes cut in the flat top were as uneven and intricate as the grain of the wood. It was a beautiful thing. I plucked a string and it rang softly.

Doors led to kitchen, bath, sleeping quarters, and what was obviously a small infirmary. I opened a cabinet door and found a neat stack of correctives. Each drawer I pulled out revealed instruments and medicines. She might have gone to a herding camp to tend to some emergency. But the lights and the heat being off, and those doors left open, argued otherwise.

Barring a miracle, it was the end of nineteen years of planning and effort.

The house controls were behind a panel in the kitchen. I found the power supply in place, hooked it back in, and switched on the heat and the lights. Then I went out and got Seivarden, and dragged her into the house.

I made a pallet of blankets I found in Strigan's bedroom, then stripped Seivarden and laid her on it, and covered her with more blankets. She didn't wake, and I used the time to search the house more thoroughly.

The cabinets held plenty of food. A cup sat on a counter, a thin layer of greenish liquid glazing the bottom. Next to it sat a plain white bowl holding the last bits of a hunk of hard bread disintegrating into ice-rimmed water. It looked as though Strigan had left without cleaning up after a meal, leaving nearly everything behind—food, medical supplies. I checked the bedroom, found warm clothes in good repair. She had left on short notice, not taking much.

She knew what she had. Of course she did—that was why she'd fled to begin with. If she was not stupid—and I was quite certain she was not—she had gone the moment she real-

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ized what I was, and would keep going until she was as far from me as she could get.

But where would that be? If I represented the power of the Radch, and had found her even here, so distant from both Radch space and her own home, where could she go that they would not ultimately find her? Surely she would realize that. But what other course would be open to her?

Surely she would not be foolish enough to return.

In the meantime, Seivarden would be sick soon, unless I found kef for her. I had no intention of doing that. And there was food here, and heat, and perhaps I could find something, some hint, some clue to what Strigan had been thinking, in the moment she had thought the Radch were coming for her, and fled. Something that would tell me where she'd gone.

## 4

At night, in Ors, I walked the streets, and looked out over the still, stinking water, dark beyond the few lights of Ors itself, and the blinking of the buoys surrounding the prohibited zones. I slept, also, and sat watch in the lower level of the house, in case anyone should need me, though that was rare in those days. I finished any of the day's work still uncompleted, and watched over Lieutenant Awn, who lay sleeping.

Mornings I brought water for Lieutenant Awn to bathe in, and dressed her, though the local costume was a good deal less effort than her uniform, and she had stopped wearing any sort of cosmetics two years before, as they were difficult to maintain in the heat.

Then Lieutenant Awn would turn to her icons—four-armed Amaat, an Emanation in each hand, sat on a box downstairs, but the others (Toren, who received devotions from every officer on *Justice of Toren*, and a few gods particular to Lieutenant Awn's family) sat near where Lieutenant Awn slept, in the upper part of the house, and it was to them that she made her morning devotions. "The flower of justice

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is peace,” the daily prayer began, that every Radchaai soldier said on waking, every day of her life in the military. “The flower of propriety is beauty in thought and action.” The rest of my officers, still on *Justice of Toren*, were on a different schedule. Their mornings rarely coincided with Lieutenant Awn’s, so it was almost always Lieutenant Awn’s voice alone in prayer, and the others, when they spoke so far away, in chorus, without her. “The flower of benefit is Amaat whole and entire. I am the sword of justice . . .” The prayer is antiphonal, but only four verses long. I can sometimes hear it still when I wake, like a distant voice somewhere behind me.

Every morning, in every official temple throughout Radchaai space, a priest (who doubles as a registrar of births and deaths and contracts of all kinds) casts the day’s omens. Households and individuals sometimes cast their own as well, and there’s no obligation to attend the official casting—but it’s as good an excuse as any to be seen, and speak to friends and neighbors, and hear gossip.

There was, as yet, no official temple in Ors—these are all primarily dedicated to Amaat, any other gods on the premises take lesser places, and the head priest of Ikkt had not seen her way clear to demoting her god in its own temple, or identifying Ikkt with Amaat closely enough to add Radchaai rites to her own. So for the moment Lieutenant Awn’s house served. Each morning the makeshift temple’s flower-bearers removed dead flowers from around the icon of Amaat and replaced them with fresh ones—usually a local species with small, bright-pink, triple-lobed petals that grew in the dirt that collected on the outside corners of buildings, or cracks in slabs, and was the nearest thing to a weed but greatly admired by the children. And lately small cupped blue-and-white lilies had been blooming in the lake, especially near the buoy-barricaded prohibited areas.

Then Lieutenant Awn would lay out the cloth for the omen-casting and the omens themselves, a handful of weighty metal disks. These, and the icons, were Lieutenant Awn's personal possessions, gifts from her parents when she had taken the aptitudes and received her assignment.

Occasionally only Lieutenant Awn and the day's attendants came to the morning ritual, but usually others were present. The town's medic, a few of the Radchaai who had been granted property here, other Orsian children who could not be persuaded to go to school, or care about being on time for it, and liked the glitter and ring of the disks as they fell. Sometimes even the head priest of Ikkt would come—that god, like Amaat, not demanding that its followers refuse to acknowledge other gods.

Once the omens fell, and came to rest on the cloth (or, to any spectators' dread, rolled off the cloth and away somewhere harder to interpret), the priest officiating was supposed to identify the pattern, match it with its associated passage of scripture, and recite that for those present. It wasn't something Lieutenant Awn was always able to do. So instead she tossed the omens, I observed their fall, and then I transmitted the appropriate words to her. *Justice of Toren* was, after all, nearly two thousand years old, and had seen nearly every possible configuration.

The ritual done, she would have breakfast—usually a round of bread from whatever local grain was available, and (real) tea—and then take her place on the mat and platform and wait for the day's requests and complaints.

"Jen Shinnan invites you to supper this evening," I told her, that next morning. I also ate breakfast, cleaned weapons, walked the streets, and greeted those who spoke to me.

Jen Shinnan lived in the upper city, and before the annexa-

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tion she had been the wealthiest person in Ors, in influence second only to the head priest of Ikkt. Lieutenant Awn disliked her. "I suppose I don't have a good excuse to refuse."

"Not that I can see," I said. I also stood at the perimeter of the house, nearly on the street, and watched. An Orsian approached, saw me, slowed. Stopped about eight meters away, pretending to look above me, at something else.

"Anything else?" asked Lieutenant Awn.

"The district magistrate reiterates the official policy regarding fishing reserves in the Ors Marshes..."

Lieutenant Awn sighed. "Yes, of course she does."

"Can I help you, citizen?" I asked the person still hesitating in the street. The impending arrival of her first grandchild hadn't yet been announced to the neighbors, so I pretended I didn't know either, and used only the simple respectful address toward a male person.

"I wish," Lieutenant Awn continued, "the magistrate would come here herself and try living on stale bread and those disgusting pickled vegetables they send, and see how she likes being forbidden to fish where all the fish actually are."

The Orsian in the street started, looked for a moment as if she were going to turn around and walk away, and changed her mind. "Good morning, Radchaai," she said, quietly, coming closer. "And to the lieutenant as well." Orsians were blunt when it suited them, and at other times oddly, frustratingly reticent.

"I know there's a reason for it," said Lieutenant Awn to me. "And she's right, but still." She sighed again. "Anything else?"

"Denz Ay is outside and wishes to speak to you." As I spoke, I invited Denz Ay to step within the house.

“What about?”

“Something she seems unwilling to mention.” Lieutenant Awn gestured acknowledgment and I brought Denz Ay around the screens. She bowed, and sat on the mat in front of Lieutenant Awn.

“Good morning, citizen,” said Lieutenant Awn. I translated.

“Good morning, Lieutenant.” And by slow, careful degrees, beginning with an observation on the heat and the cloudless sky, progressing through inquiries about Lieutenant Awn’s health to mild local gossip, she finally came around to hinting at her reason for coming. “I...I have a friend, Lieutenant.” She stopped.

“Yes?”

“Yesterday evening my friend was fishing.” Denz Ay stopped again.

Lieutenant Awn waited three seconds, and when nothing further seemed forthcoming, she asked, “Did your friend catch much?” When the mood was on them, no amount of direct questioning, or begging an Orsian to come to the point, would avail.

“N-not much,” said Denz Ay. And then, irritation flashing across her face, just for an instant: “The best fishing, you know, is near the breeding areas, and those are all prohibited.”

“Yes,” said Lieutenant Awn. “I’m sure your friend would never fish illegally.”

“No, no, of course not,” Denz Ay protested. “But...I don’t want to get her in trouble...but maybe sometimes she digs tubers. *Near* the prohibited zones.”

There weren’t really any plants that produced edible tubers near the prohibited zones—they’d all been dug up months

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ago, if not longer. Poachers were more careful about the ones inside—if the plants decreased too noticeably, or disappeared entirely, we'd be forced to find out who was taking them, and guard them much more closely. Lieutenant Awn knew this. Everyone in the lower city knew it.

Lieutenant Awn waited for the rest of the story, not for the first time annoyed at the Orsian tendency to approach topics by stealth, but managing mostly not to show it. "I've heard they're very good," she ventured.

"Oh, yes!" agreed Denz Ay. "They're best right out of the mud!" Lieutenant Awn suppressed a grimace. "But you can slice them and grill them too..." Denz Ay stopped, with a shrewd look. "Perhaps my friend can get some for you."

I saw Lieutenant Awn's dissatisfaction with her rations, the momentary desire to say, *Yes, please*, but instead she said, "Thank you, there's no need. You were saying?"

"Saying?"

"Your... friend." As she spoke Lieutenant Awn was asking me questions, with minute twitches of her fingers. "Was digging tubers *near* a prohibited zone. And?"

I showed Lieutenant Awn the spot this person was most likely to have been digging in—I patrolled all of Ors, saw the boats go in and out, saw where they were at night when they doused lights and maybe even thought they were running invisible to me.

"And," said Denz Ay, "they found something."

*Anyone missing?* Lieutenant Awn asked me, silently, alarmed. I replied in the negative. "What did they find?" Lieutenant Awn asked Denz Ay, aloud.

"Guns," said Denz Ay, so quietly Lieutenant Awn almost didn't hear. "A dozen, from before." From before the annexation, she meant. All the Shis'urnan militaries had been

relieved of their weapons, no one on the planet should have had any guns we didn't already know about. The answer was so surprising that for a blinking two seconds Lieutenant Awn didn't react at all.

Then came puzzlement, alarm, and confusion. *Why is she telling me this?* Lieutenant Awn asked me silently.

"There's been some talk, Lieutenant," said Denz Ay. "Perhaps you've heard it."

"There's always talk," acknowledged Lieutenant Awn, the answer so formulaic I didn't need to translate it for her, she could say it in the local dialect. "How else are people to pass the time?" Denz Ay conceded this conventional point with a gesture. Lieutenant Awn's patience frayed, and she attacked directly. "They might have been put there before the annexation."

Denz Ay made a negative motion with her left hand. "They weren't there a month ago."

*Did someone find a pre-annexation cache, and hide them there?* Lieutenant Awn asked me, silently. Aloud she asked, "When people talk, do they say things that might account for the appearance of a dozen guns underwater in a prohibited zone?"

"Such guns are no good against *you*." Because of our armor, Denz Ay meant. Radchaai armor is an essentially impenetrable force shield. I could extend mine at a thought, the moment I desired to do so. The mechanism that generated it was implanted in each of my segments, and Lieutenant Awn had it as well—though hers was an externally worn unit. It didn't make us completely invulnerable, and in combat we sometimes wore actual pieces of armor under it, lightweight and articulated, covering head and limbs and torso, but even without that a handful of guns wouldn't do much damage to either of us.

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“So who would those guns be meant for?” asked Lieutenant Awn.

Denz Ay considered, frowning, biting her lip, and then said, “The Tanmind are more like the Radchaai than we are.”

“Citizen,” said Lieutenant Awn, laying noticeable, deliberate stress on that word, which was only what *Radchaai* meant in the first place, “if we were going to shoot anyone here, we’d already have done it.” Had already done it, in fact. “We wouldn’t need secret stashes of weapons.”

“This is why I came to you,” said Denz Ay, emphatic, as though explaining something in very simple terms, for a child. “When you shoot a person, you say why and do it, without excuse. This is how the Radchaai are. But in the upper city, before you came, when they would shoot Orsians, they would always be careful to have an excuse. They wanted someone dead,” she explained, to Lieutenant Awn’s uncomprehending, appalled expression, “they did not say, *You are trouble we want you gone* and then shoot. They said, *We are only defending ourselves* and when the person was dead they would search the body or a house and discover weapons, or incriminating messages.” Not, the implication was clear, genuine ones.

“Then how are we alike?”

“Your gods are the same.” They weren’t, not explicitly so, but the fiction was encouraged, in the upper city and elsewhere. “You live in space, you go all wrapped up in clothes. You are rich, the Tanmind are rich. If someone in the upper city”—and by this I suspected she meant a specific someone—“cries out that some Orsian threatens them, most Radchaai will believe her, and not some Orsian who is surely lying to protect her own.”

And that was why she had come to Lieutenant Awn—so

that, whatever happened, it would be plain and clear to Radchaai authorities that she—and by extension anyone else in the lower city—had in fact had nothing to do with that cache of weapons, if the accusation should materialize.

“These things,” said Lieutenant Awn. “Orsian, Tanmind, Moha, they mean nothing now. That’s done. Everyone here is Radchaai.”

“As you say, Lieutenant,” answered Denz Ay, voice quiet and nearly expressionless.

Lieutenant Awn had been in Ors long enough to recognize the unstated refusal to agree. She tried another angle. “No one is going to shoot anybody.”

“Of course not, Lieutenant,” said Denz Ay, but in that same quiet voice. She was old enough to know firsthand that we had, indeed, shot people in the past. She could hardly be blamed for fearing we might do so in the future.

After Denz Ay left, Lieutenant Awn sat thinking. No one interrupted; the day was quiet. In the green-lit temple interior, the head priest turned to me and said, “Once there would have been two choirs, a hundred voices each. You would have liked it.” I had seen recordings. Sometimes the children would bring me songs that were distant echoes of that music, five hundred years gone and more. “We’re not what we used to be,” said the head priest. “Everything passes, eventually.” I agreed that it was so.

“Take a boat tonight,” said Lieutenant Awn, stirring at last. “See if there’s anything to indicate where the weapons came from. I’ll decide what to do once I have a better idea of what’s going on.”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” I said.

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\* \* \*

Jen Shinnan lived in the upper city, across the Fore-Temple lake. Few Orsians lived there who weren't servants. The houses there were built to a slightly different plan from those in the lower; hip-roofed, the central part of each floor walled in, though windows and doors were left open on mild nights. All of the upper city had been built over older ruins, and thus much more recently than the lower, within the last fifty or so years, and made much larger use of climate control. Many residents wore trousers and shirts, and even jackets. Radchaaï immigrants who lived here tended to wear much more conventional clothes, and Lieutenant Awn, when she visited, wore her uniform without too much discomfort.

But Lieutenant Awn was never comfortable, visiting Jen Shinnan. She didn't like Jen Shinnan, and though of course it was never even hinted at, very likely Jen Shinnan didn't like Lieutenant Awn much either. This sort of invitation was only extended out of social necessity, Lieutenant Awn being a local representative of Radchaaï authority. The table this evening was unusually small, just Jen Shinnan, a cousin of hers, and Lieutenant Awn and Lieutenant Skaaiat. Lieutenant Skaaiat commanded *Justice of Ente* Seven Issa, and administered the territory between Ors and Kould Ves—farmland, mostly, where Jen Shinnan and her cousin had their holdings. Lieutenant Skaaiat and her troops assisted us during pilgrimage season, so she was nearly as well-known in Ors as Lieutenant Awn was.

“They confiscated my entire harvest.” This was the cousin of Jen Shinnan's, the owner of several tamarind orchards not far from the upper city. She tapped her plate emphatically with her utensil. “The *entire* harvest.”

The center of the table was laden with trays and bowls filled with eggs, fish (not from the marshy lake, but from the sea beyond), spiced chicken, bread, braised vegetables, and half a dozen relishes of various types.

“Didn’t they pay you, citizen?” asked Lieutenant Awn, speaking slowly and carefully, as she always did when she was anxious her accent might slip. Jen Shinnan and her cousin both spoke Radchaai, so there was no need to translate, nor any anxiety over gender or status or anything else that would have been essential in Tanmind or Orsian.

“Well, but I would certainly have gotten more if I could have taken it to Kould Ves and sold it myself!”

There had been a time when a property owner like her would have been shot early on, so someone’s client could take over her plantation. Indeed, not a few Shis’urnans had died in the initial stages of the annexation simply because they were in the way, and *in the way* could mean any number of things.

“As I’m sure you understand, citizen,” said Lieutenant Awn, “food distribution is a problem we’re still solving, and we all need to endure some hardship while that’s accomplished.” Her sentences, when she was uncomfortable, became uncharacteristically formal, and sometimes dangerously convoluted.

Jen Shinnan gestured to a laden plate of fragile pale-pink glass. “Another stuffed egg, Lieutenant Awn?”

Lieutenant Awn held up one gloved hand. “They’re delicious, but no thank you, citizen.”

But the cousin had landed in a track she found it hard to deviate from, despite Jen Shinnan’s diplomatic attempt to derail her. “It’s not like fruit is a necessity. Tamarind, of all things! And it’s not like anyone is starving.”

“Indeed it isn’t!” agreed Lieutenant Skaaiat, heartily. She

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smiled brightly at Lieutenant Awn. Lieutenant Skaaiat—dark-skinned, amber-eyed, aristocratic as Lieutenant Awn was not. One of her Seven Issas stood near me, by the door of the dining room, as straight and still as I was.

Though Lieutenant Awn liked Lieutenant Skaaiat a good deal, and appreciated her sarcasm on this occasion, she could not bring herself to smile in response. “Not this year.”

“Your business is doing better than mine, Cousin,” said Jen Shinnan, voice placating. She too owned farmland not far from the upper city. But she had also owned those dredgers that sat, silent and still, in the marsh water. “Though I suppose I can’t be too regretful, it was a great deal of trouble for very little return.”

Lieutenant Awn opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it again. Lieutenant Skaaiat saw it, and said, vowels effortlessly broad and refined, “What is it, another three years for the fishing prohibitions, Lieutenant?”

“Yes,” said Lieutenant Awn.

“Foolishness,” said Jen Shinnan. “Well-intentioned, but foolishness. You saw what it was like when you arrived. As soon as you open them, they’ll be fished out again. The Orsians may have been a great people once, but they’re no longer what their ancestors were. They have no ambition, no sense of anything beyond their short-term advantage. If you show them who’s boss, then they can be quite obedient, as I’m sure you’ve discovered, Lieutenant Awn, but in their natural state they are, with few exceptions, shiftless and superstitious. Though I suppose that’s what comes of living in the Underworld.” She smiled at her own joke. Her cousin laughed outright.

The space-dwelling nations of Shis’urna divided the universe into three parts. In the middle lay the natural environment of

humans—space stations, ships, constructed habitats. Outside those was the Black—heaven, the home of God and everything holy. And within the gravity well of the planet Shis’urna itself—or for that matter any planet—lay the Underworld, the land of the dead from which humanity had had to escape in order to become fully free of its demonic influence.

You can see, perhaps, how the Radchaai conception of the universe as being God itself might seem the same as the Tanmind idea of the Black. You might also see why it seemed a bit odd, to Radchaai ears, to hear someone who believed gravity wells were the land of the dead call people superstitious for worshipping a lizard.

Lieutenant Awn managed a polite smile, and Lieutenant Skaaiat said, “And yet you live here too.”

“I don’t confuse abstract philosophical concepts with reality,” said Jen Shinnan. Though that too sounded odd, to a Radchaai who knew what it meant for a Tanmind stationer to descend to the Underworld and return. “Seriously. I have a theory.”

Lieutenant Awn, who had been exposed to several Tanmind theories about the Orsians, managed a neutral, even almost curious expression and said, blandly, “Oh?”

“Do share!” encouraged Lieutenant Skaaiat. The cousin, having scooped a quantity of spiced chicken into her mouth moments before, made a gesture of support with her utensil.

“It’s the way they live, all out in the open like that, with nothing but a roof,” Jen Shinnan said. “They can’t have any privacy, no sense of themselves as real individuals, you understand, no sense of any sort of separate identity.”

“Let alone private property,” said Jen Taa, having swallowed her chicken. “They think they can just walk in and take whatever they want.”

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Actually, there were rules—if unstated ones—about entering a house uninvited, and theft was rarely a problem in the lower city. Occasionally during pilgrimage season, almost never otherwise.

Jen Shinnan gestured acknowledgment. “And no one *here* is ever really starving, Lieutenant. No one has to work, they just fish in the swamp. Or fleece visitors during pilgrimage season. They have no chance to develop any ambition, or any desire to improve themselves. And they don’t—can’t, really—develop any sort of sophistication, any kind of . . .” She trailed off, searching for the right word.

“Interiority?” suggested Lieutenant Skaaiat, who enjoyed this game much more than Lieutenant Awn did.

“That’s it exactly!” agreed Jen Shinnan. “Interiority, yes.”

“So your theory is,” said Lieutenant Awn, her tone dangerously even, “that the Orsians aren’t really *people*.”

“Well, not *individuals*.” Jen Shinnan seemed to sense, remotely, that she’d said something to make Lieutenant Awn angry, but didn’t seem entirely certain of it. “Not as such.”

“And of course,” interjected Jen Taa, oblivious, “they see what we have, and don’t understand that you have to *work* for that sort of life, and they’re envious and resentful and blame *us* for not letting them have it, when if they’d only *work* . . .”

“They send what money they have to support that half-broken-down temple, and then complain they’re poor,” said Jen Shinnan. “And they fish out the marsh and then blame us. They’ll do the same to you, Lieutenant, when you open the prohibited zones again.”

“Your dredging up the mud by the ton to sell as fertilizer didn’t have anything to do with the fish disappearing?” asked Lieutenant Awn, her voice edged. Actually, the fertilizer had

been a by-product of the main business of selling the mud to space-dwelling Tanmind for religious purposes. “That was due to irresponsible fishing on the part of the Orsians?”

“Well of course it had *some* effect,” said Jen Taa, “but if they’d only managed their resources properly...”

“Quite right,” agreed Jen Shinnan. “You blame me for ruining the fishing. But I gave those people jobs. Opportunities to improve their lives.”

Lieutenant Skaaiat must have sensed that Lieutenant Awn was at a dangerous point. “Security on a planet is very different from on a station,” she said, her voice cheerful. “On a planet there’s always going to be some...some slippage. Some things you don’t see.”

“Ah,” said Jen Shinnan, “but you’ve got everyone tagged so you always know where we are.”

“Yes,” agreed Lieutenant Skaaiat. “But we’re not always *watching*. I suppose you could grow an AI big enough to watch a whole planet, but I don’t think anyone has ever tried it. A station, though...”

I watched Lieutenant Awn see Lieutenant Skaaiat spring the trap Jen Shinnan had walked into moments ago. “On a station,” Lieutenant Awn said, “the AI sees everything.”

“So much easier to manage,” agreed Lieutenant Skaaiat happily. “Almost no need for security at all.” That wasn’t quite true, but this was no time to point that out.

Jen Taa set down her utensil. “Surely the AI doesn’t see *everything*.” Neither lieutenant said anything. “Even when you...?”

“Everything,” answered Lieutenant Awn. “I assure you, citizen.”

Silence, for nearly two seconds. Beside me, Lieutenant Skaaiat’s Seven Issa guard’s mouth twitched, something that

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might have been an itch or some unavoidable muscle spasm, but was, I suspected, the only outward manifestation of her amusement. Military ships possessed AIs just as stations did, and Radchaai soldiers lived utterly without privacy.

Lieutenant Skaaiat broke the silence. “Your niece, citizen, is taking the aptitudes this year?”

The cousin gestured yes. So long as her own farming provided income, she wouldn’t need an assignment, and neither would her heir—however many heirs the land might support. The niece, however, had lost her parents during the annexation.

“These aptitudes,” said Jen Shinnan. “You took them, Lieutenants?” Both indicated affirmatively. The aptitudes were the only way into the military, or any government post—though that didn’t encompass all assignments available.

“No doubt,” said Jen Shinnan, “the test works well for you, but I wonder if it’s suited to us Shis’urnans.”

“Why is that?” asked Lieutenant Skaaiat, with slightly frowning amusement.

“Has there been a problem?” asked Lieutenant Awn, still stiff, still annoyed with Jen Shinnan.

“Well.” Jen Shinnan picked up a napkin, soft and bleached a snowy white, and wiped her mouth. “Word is, last month in Kould Ves all the candidates for civil service were ethnic Orsians.”

Lieutenant Awn blinked in confusion. Lieutenant Skaaiat smiled. “You mean to say,” she said, looking at Jen Shinnan but also directing her words to Lieutenant Awn, “that you think the testing is biased.”

Jen Shinnan folded her napkin and set it down on the table beside her bowl. “Come now, Lieutenant. Let us be honest. There’s a reason so few Orsians occupied such posts before

you arrived. Every now and then you find an exception—the Divine is a very respectable person, I grant you. But she’s an exception. So when I see twenty Orsians destined for civil service posts, and not a single Tanmind, I can’t help but think either the test is flawed, or . . . well. I can’t help but remember that it was the Orsians who first surrendered, when you arrived. I can’t blame you for appreciating that, for wanting to . . . acknowledge that. But it’s a mistake.”

Lieutenant Awn said nothing. Lieutenant Skaaiat asked, “Assuming you’re correct, why would that be a mistake?”

“It’s as I said before. They just aren’t suited to positions of authority. Some exceptions, yes, but . . .” She waved a gloved hand. “And with the bias of the assignments being so obvious, people won’t have confidence in it.”

Lieutenant Skaaiat’s smile grew broader in proportion to Lieutenant Awn’s silent, indignant anger. “Your niece is nervous?”

“A bit!” admitted the cousin.

“Understandably,” drawled Lieutenant Skaaiat. “It’s a momentous event in any citizen’s life. But she needn’t fear.”

Jen Shinnan laughed, sardonic. “Needn’t fear? The lower city resents us, always has, and now we can’t make any legal contracts without either taking transport to Kould Ves or going through the lower city to your house, Lieutenant.” Any legally binding contract had to be made in the temple of Amaat. Or, a recent (and extremely controversial) concession, on its steps, if one of the parties was an exclusive monotheist. “During that pilgrimage thing it’s nearly impossible. We either lose an entire day traveling to Kould Ves, or endanger ourselves.”

Jen Shinnan visited Kould Ves quite frequently, often merely to visit friends, or shop. All the Tanmind in the upper city did, and had done so before the annexation. “Has there

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been some unreported difficulty?” asked Lieutenant Awn, stiff, angry. Utterly polite.

“Well,” said Jen Taa. “In fact, Lieutenant, I’ve been wanting to mention. We’ve been here a few days, and my niece seems to have had a bit of trouble in the lower city. I told her it was better not to go, but you know how teenagers are when you tell them not to do something.”

“What sort of trouble?” asked Lieutenant Awn.

“Oh,” said Jen Shinnan, “you know the sort of thing. Rude words, threats—empty, no doubt, and of course nothing next to what things will be like in a week or two, but the child was quite shaken.”

The child in question had spent the past two afternoons staring at the Fore-Temple water and sighing. I had spoken to her once and she had turned her head away without answering. After that I had left her alone. No one had troubled her. *No problems that I saw*, I messaged Lieutenant Awn.

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” said Lieutenant Awn, silently acknowledging my information with a twitch of her fingers.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” said Jen Shinnan. “I know we can count on you.”

“You think it’s funny.” Lieutenant Awn tried to relax her too-tight jaw. I could tell from the increasing tension of her facial muscles that without intervention she would soon have a headache.

Lieutenant Skaaiat, walking beside her, laughed outright. “It’s pure comedy. Forgive me, my dear, but the angrier you get the more painstakingly correct your speech becomes, and the more Jen Shinnan mistakes you.”

“Surely not. Surely she’s asked about me.”

“You’re still angry. Worse,” said Lieutenant Skaaiat,

hooking her arm around Lieutenant Awn's, "you're angry with *me*. I'm sorry. And she *has* asked. Very obliquely, just *interested* in you, only natural, of course."

"And you answered," suggested Lieutenant Awn, "equally obliquely."

I walked behind them, alongside the Seven Issa who had stood with me in Jen Shinnan's dining room. Directly ahead, along the street and across the Fore-Temple water, I could see myself where I stood in the plaza.

Lieutenant Skaaiat said, "I said nothing untrue. I told her that lieutenants on ships with ancillaries tended to be from old, high-ranking families with lots of money and clients. Her connections in Kould Ves might have said a bit more, but not much. On the one hand, since you aren't such a person, they have cause to resent you. On the other hand, you *do* command ancillaries and not vulgar human troops, which the old-fashioned deplore just as much as they deplore the scions of obscure, nobody houses getting assigned as officers. They approve of your ancillaries and disapprove of your antecedents. Jen Shinnan gets a very ambivalent picture of you." Her voice was quiet, pitched so that only someone standing very near could hear it, though the houses we passed were closed up, and dark on the lower levels. It was very unlike the lower city, where even late into the night people sat nearly in the street, even small children.

"Besides," Lieutenant Skaaiat said, "she's right. Oh, not that foolishness about Orsians, no, but she's right to be suspicious about the aptitudes. You know yourself the tests are susceptible to manipulation." Lieutenant Awn felt a sick, betrayed indignation at Lieutenant Skaaiat's words, but said nothing, and Lieutenant Skaaiat continued. "For centuries only the wealthy and well-connected tested as suitable for

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certain jobs. Like, say, officers in the military. In the last, what, fifty, seventy-five years, that hasn't been true. Have the lesser houses suddenly begun to produce officer candidates where they didn't before?"

"I don't like where you're headed with this," snapped Lieutenant Awn, tugging slightly at their linked arms, trying to pull away. "I didn't expect it from you."

"No, no," protested Lieutenant Skaaiat, and didn't let go, drew her closer. "The question is the right one, and the answer the same. The answer is no, of course. But does that mean the tests were rigged before, or rigged now?"

"And your opinion?"

"Both. Before and now. And our friend Jen Shinnan doesn't fully understand that the question can even be asked—she just knows that if you're going to succeed you've got to have the right connections, and she knows the aptitudes are part of that. And she's utterly shameless—you heard her imply the Orsians were being rewarded for collaboration, and in nearly the same breath imply her people would be even better collaborators! And you notice neither she nor her cousin are sending their *own* children for testing, just this orphaned niece. Still, they're invested in her doing well. If we'd asked for a bribe to ensure it, she'd have handed it over, no question. I'm surprised she didn't offer one, actually."

"You wouldn't," protested Lieutenant Awn. "You won't. You can't deliver anyway."

"I won't need to. The child will test well, likely get herself sent to the territorial capital for training to take a nice civil service post. If you ask me, the Orsians *are* being rewarded for collaborating—but they're a minority in this system. And now the unavoidable unpleasantness of the annexation is over, we want people to start realizing that being Radchaa

will benefit them. Punishing local houses for not being quick enough to surrender won't help."

They walked in silence for a bit, and stopped at the edge of the water, arms still linked.

"Walk you home?" asked Lieutenant Skaaiat. Lieutenant Awn didn't answer, but looked away over the water, still angry. The green skylights in the temple's slanted roof shone, and light poured out the open doors onto the plaza and reflected on the water—this was a season of nightly vigils. Lieutenant Skaaiat said, with an apologetic half-smile, "I've upset you, let me make it up to you."

"Sure," said Lieutenant Awn, with a small sigh. She never could resist Lieutenant Skaaiat, and indeed there was no real reason to do so. They turned and walked along the water's edge.

"What's the difference," Lieutenant Awn said, so quietly it didn't seem like a break in the silence, "between citizens and noncitizens?"

"One is civilized," said Lieutenant Skaaiat with a laugh, "and the other isn't." The joke only made sense in Radchaai—*citizen* and *civilized* are the same word. To be Radchaai is to be civilized.

"So in the moment the Lord of Mianaai bestowed citizenship on the Shis'urnans, in that very instant they became civilized." The sentence was a circular one—the question Lieutenant Awn was asking is a difficult one in that language. "I mean, one day your Issas are shooting people for failing to speak respectfully enough—don't tell me it didn't happen, because I know it did, and worse—and it doesn't matter because they're not Radchaai, not civilized." Lieutenant Awn had switched momentarily into the bit of the local Orsian language she knew, because the Radchaai words refused to

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let her mean what she wished to say. “And any measures are justified in the name of civilization.”

“Well,” said Lieutenant Skaaiat, “it was effective, you have to admit. Everyone speaks very respectfully to us these days.” Lieutenant Awn was silent. Unamused. “What brought this on?” Lieutenant Awn told her about her conversation with the head priest the day before.

“Ah. Well. You didn’t protest at the time.”

“What good would it have done?”

“Absolutely none,” answered Lieutenant Skaaiat. “But that’s not why you didn’t. Besides, even if ancillaries don’t beat people, or take bribes, or rape, or shoot people out of pique—those people human troops shot... a hundred years ago they’d have been stored in suspension for future use as ancillary segments. Do you know how many we still have stockpiled? *Justice of Toren’s* holds will be full of ancillaries for the next million years. If not longer. Those people are effectively dead. So what’s the difference? And you don’t like my saying that, but here’s the truth: luxury always comes at someone else’s expense. One of the many advantages of civilization is that one doesn’t generally have to see that, if one doesn’t wish. You’re free to enjoy its benefits without troubling your conscience.”

“It doesn’t trouble yours?”

Lieutenant Skaaiat laughed, gaily, as though they were discussing something completely different, a game of counters or a good tea shop. “When you grow up knowing that you deserve to be on top, that the lesser houses exist to serve your house’s glorious destiny, you take such things for granted. You’re born assuming that someone else is paying the cost of your life. It’s just the way things are. What happens during annexation—it’s a difference of degree, not a difference of kind.”

“It doesn’t seem that way to me,” answered Lieutenant Awn, short and bitter.

“No, of course it doesn’t,” answered Lieutenant Skaaiat, her voice kinder. I’m quite sure she genuinely liked Lieutenant Awn. I know that Lieutenant Awn liked her, even if Lieutenant Skaaiat sometimes said things that upset her, like this evening. “Your family has been paying some of that cost, however small. Maybe that makes it easier to sympathize with whoever might be paying for *you*. And I’m sure it’s hard not to think of what your own ancestors went through when they were annexed.”

“*Your* ancestors were never annexed.” Lieutenant Awn’s voice was biting.

“Well, some of them probably were,” admitted Lieutenant Skaaiat. “But they’re not in the official genealogy.” She stopped, pulling Lieutenant Awn to a halt beside her. “Awn, my good friend. Don’t trouble yourself over things you can’t help. Things are as they are. You have nothing to reproach yourself with.”

“You’ve just said we all do.”

“That wasn’t what I said.” Lieutenant Skaaiat’s voice was gentle. “But you’ll take it that way all the same, won’t you? Listen—life will be better here, because we’re here. It already is, not just for the people here but for those who were transported. And even for Jen Shinnan, even though just now she’s preoccupied with her own resentment at no longer being the highest authority in Ors. She’ll come around in time. They all will.”

“And the dead?”

“Are dead. No use fretting over them.”

# 5

When Seivarden woke, she was fidgety and irritable. She asked me twice who I was, and complained three times that my answer—which was a lie in any event—conveyed no meaningful information to her. “I don’t know anyone named Breq. I’ve never seen you before in my life. Where am I?”

Nowhere with a name. “You’re on Nilt.”

She drew a blanket around her bare shoulders, and then, sulkily, shoved it off again and folded her arms across her chest. “I’ve never even heard of Nilt. How did I end up here?”

“I have no idea.” I set the food I was holding down on the floor in front of her.

She reached for the blanket again. “I don’t want that.”

I gestured my indifference. I had eaten and rested while she slept. “Does this happen to you often?”

“What?”

“Waking up and finding you don’t know where you are, who you’re with, or how you got there?”

She fidgeted the blanket on and off again, and rubbed her arms and wrists together. “A couple of times.”

“I’m Breq, from the Gerentate.” I had already told her, but I knew she would ask me again. “I found you two days ago in front of a tavern. I don’t know how you got there. You would have died if I’d left you. I’m sorry if that’s what you wanted.”

For some reason that angered her. “How very charming you are, Breq from the Gerentate.” She sneered slightly as she said it. It was mildly, irrationally surprising to hear that tone from her, naked and disheveled as she was, and not in uniform.

That tone made me angry. I knew very precisely why I was angry, and knew as well that if I dared to explain my anger to Seivarden she would respond with nothing but contempt, and that made me even angrier. I held my face in the neutral, slightly interested expression I had used with her from the moment she’d awakened, and made the same indifferent gesture I had made moments before.

I had been the first ship Seivarden ever served on. She’d arrived fresh out of training, seventeen years old, plunged straight into the tail end of an annexation. In a tunnel carved through red-brown stone under the surface of a small moon she had been ordered to guard a line of prisoners, nineteen of them, crouched naked and shivering along the chill passageway, waiting to be evaluated.

Actually I was doing the guarding, seven of me ranged along the corridor, weapons ready. Seivarden—so young then, still slight, dark hair, brown skin, and brown eyes unremarkable, unlike the aristocratic lines of her face, including a nose she hadn’t quite grown into yet. Nervous, yes, left in charge here just days after arriving, but also proud of herself and her sudden, small authority. Proud of that dark-brown uniform jacket, trousers, and gloves, that lieutenant’s insig-

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nia. And, I thought, a tiny bit too excited at holding an actual gun in what certainly wasn't a training exercise.

One of the people along the wall—broad-shouldered, muscled, cradling a broken arm against her torso—wept noisily, moaning each exhale, gasping every inhale. She knew, everyone in this line knew, that they would either be stored for future use as ancillaries—like the ancillaries of mine that stood before them even now, identities gone, bodies appendages to a Radchaai warship—or else they would be disposed of.

Seivarden, pacing importantly up and down the line, grew more irritated with this piteous captive's every convulsive breath, until finally she halted in front of her. "Aatr's tits! Stop that *noise!*" Small movements of Seivarden's arm muscles told me she was about to raise her weapon. No one would have cared if she'd taken the butt of her gun and beaten the prisoner senseless. No one would have cared if she'd shot the prisoner in the head, so long as no vital equipment was damaged in the process. Human bodies to make into ancillaries weren't exactly a scarce resource.

I stepped in front of her. "Lieutenant," I said, flat and toneless. "The tea you asked for is ready." Actually it had been ready five minutes before but I'd said nothing, held it in reserve.

In the readings coming from that terribly young Lieutenant Seivarden I saw startlement, frustration, anger. Irritation. "That was fifteen minutes ago," she snapped. I didn't answer. Behind me the prisoner still sobbed and moaned. "Can't you shut her up?"

"I'll do my best, Lieutenant," I said, though I knew there was only one way to really do that, only one thing that would

silence that captive's grief. The newly minted Lieutenant Seivarden seemed unaware of that.

Twenty-one years after arriving on *Justice of Toren*—just over a thousand years before I found her in the snow—Seivarden was senior Esk lieutenant. Thirty-eight, still quite young by Radchaai standards. A citizen could live some two hundred years.

Her last day, she sat drinking tea on her bunk in her quarters, three meters by two meters by two, white-walled, severely neat. She was grown into that aristocratic nose by now, grown into herself. No longer awkward or unsure.

Beside her on the tightly made-up bunk sat the Esk decade's most junior lieutenant, arrived just weeks ago, a sort of cousin of Seivarden's, though from another house. Taller than Seivarden had been at that age, broader, a bit more graceful. Mostly. Nervous at being asked to confer in private here with the senior lieutenant, cousin or no, but concealing it. Seivarden said to her, "You want to be careful, Lieutenant, who you favor with your . . . attentions."

The very young lieutenant frowned, embarrassed, realizing suddenly what this was about.

"You know who I mean," continued Seivarden, and I knew too. One of the other Esk lieutenants had definitely noticed when the very young lieutenant had come on board, had been slowly, discreetly sounding out the possibility of the very young lieutenant perhaps noticing her back. But not so discreetly that Seivarden hadn't seen it. In fact, the entire decade room had seen it, and seen, as well, the very young lieutenant's intrigued response.

"I know who you mean," said the very young lieutenant. Indignant. "But I don't see why . . ."

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“Ah!” said Seivarden, sharp and peremptory. “You think it’s harmless fun. Well, it would probably be fun.” Seivarden had slept with the lieutenant in question herself at one point and knew whereof she spoke. “But it wouldn’t be harmless. She’s a good enough officer, but her house is very provincial. If she weren’t senior to you, there would be no problem.”

The very young lieutenant’s house was definitely *not* “very provincial.” Naive as she was, she knew immediately what Seivarden meant. And was angry enough at it to address Seivarden in a way that was less formal than propriety demanded. “Aatr’s tits, Cousin, no one’s said anything about clientage. No one could, none of us can make contracts until we retire.” Among the wealthy, clientage was a very hierarchical relationship—a patron promised certain sorts of assistance to her client, both financial and social, and a client provided support and services to her patron. These were promises that could last generations. In the oldest, most prestigious houses the servants were nearly all the descendants of clients, for instance, and many businesses owned by wealthy houses were staffed by client branches of lower ones.

“These provincial houses are ambitious,” Seivarden explained, voice the slightest bit condescending. “And clever as well or they wouldn’t have gotten as far as they have. She’s senior to you, and you’ve both got years to serve yet. Grant her intimacy on those terms, let it continue, and depend on it, one of these days she’ll be offering *you* clientage when it ought to be the other way around. I don’t think your mother would thank you for exposing your house to that sort of insult.”

The very young lieutenant’s face heated with anger and chagrin, the shine of her first adult romance suddenly gone, the whole thing turned sordid and calculating.

Seivarden leaned forward, reached out for the tea flask and stopped, with a surge of irritation. Said silently to me, the fingers of her free hand twitching, “This cuff has been torn for three days.”

I said, directly into her ear, “I’m sorry, Lieutenant.” I ought to have offered to make the repair immediately, dispatched a segment of One Esk to take the offending shirt away. I ought, in fact, to have mended it three days before. Ought not to have dressed her in that shirt that day.

Silence in the cramped compartment, the very young lieutenant still preoccupied with her discomfiture. Then I said, directly into Seivarden’s ear, “Lieutenant, the decade commander will see you at your earliest convenience.”

I had known the promotion was coming. Had taken a petty satisfaction in the fact that even if she ordered me that moment to mend her sleeve, I would have no time to do it. As soon as she left her quarters I started packing her things, and three hours later she was on her way to her new command, freshly made captain of *Sword of Nathtas*. I hadn’t been particularly sorry to see her go.

Such small things. It wasn’t Seivarden’s fault if she had reacted badly in a situation that few (if any) seventeen-year-olds could have handled with aplomb. It was hardly surprising that she was precisely as snobby as she had been brought up to be. Not her fault that over my (at the time) thousand years of existence I had come to have a higher opinion of ability than of breeding, and had seen more than one “very provincial” house rise far enough to lose that label, and turn out its own versions of Seivarden.

All the years between young Lieutenant Seivarden and Captain Seivarden, they were made up of tiny moments.

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Minor things. I never hated Seivarden. I had just never particularly liked her. But I couldn't see her, now, without thinking of someone else.

The next week at Strigan's house was unpleasant. Seivarden needed constant looking after, and frequent cleaning up. She ate very little (which in some respects was fortunate), and I had to work to make sure she didn't get dehydrated. But by the end of the week she was keeping her food down, and sleeping at least intermittently. Even so she slept lightly, twitching and turning, often trembling, breathing hard, and waking suddenly. When she was awake, and not weeping, she complained that everything was too harsh, too rough, too loud, too bright.

Another few days after that, when she thought I was asleep, she went to the outer door and stared out over the snow, and then put on her clothes and a coat and trudged to the outbuilding, and then the flier. She tried to start it, but I had removed an essential part and kept it close. When she returned to the house she had at least the presence of mind to close both doors before she tracked snow into the main room, where I sat on a bench holding Strigan's stringed instrument. She stared, unable to conceal her surprise, still shrugging slightly, uncomfortable in the heavy coat, itchy.

"I want to leave," she said, in a voice oddly half cowed and half arrogant, commanding Radchaai.

"We'll leave when I'm ready," I said, and fingered a few notes on the instrument. Her feelings were too raw for her to be able to conceal them just now, and her anger and despair showed plainly on her face. "You are where you are," I said, in an even tone, "as a result of decisions you made yourself."

Her spine straightened, her shoulders went back. "You

don't know anything about me, or what decisions I have or haven't made."

It was enough to make me angry again. I knew something about making decisions, and not making them. "Ah, I forget. Everything happens as Amaat wills, nothing is *your* fault."

Her eyes went wide. She opened her mouth to speak, drew breath, but then blew it out, sharp and shaky. She turned her back, ostensibly to remove her outer coat and drop it on a nearby bench. "You don't understand," she said, contemptuous, but her voice trembled with suppressed tears. "You're not Radchaai."

Not civilized. "Did you start taking kef before or after you left the Radch?" It shouldn't have been available in Radchaai territory, but there was always some minor smuggling station authorities might turn a blind eye toward.

She slumped down onto the bench beside where she'd sloppily left her coat. "I want tea."

"There's no tea here." I set the instrument aside. "There's milk." More specifically, there was fermented bov milk, which the people here thinned with water and drank warm. The smell—and taste—was reminiscent of sweaty boots. And too much of it would likely make Seivarden slightly sick.

"What sort of place doesn't have *tea*?" she demanded, but leaned forward, elbows on her knees, and put her forehead on her wrists, her bare hands palm-up, fingers outstretched.

"This sort of place," I answered. "Why were you taking kef?"

"You wouldn't understand." Tears dropped into her lap.

"Try me." I picked up the instrument again, picked out a tune.

After six seconds of silent weeping, Seivarden said, "She said it would make everything clearer."

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“The kef would?” No answer. “What would be clearer?”

“I know that song,” she said, her face still resting on her wrists. I realized it was very likely the only way she would recognize me, and changed to a different tune. In one region of Valskaay, singing was a refined pastime, local choral associations the center of social activity. That annexation had brought me a great deal of the sort of music I had liked best, when I had had more than one voice. I chose one of those. Seivarden wouldn’t know it. Valskaay had been both before and after her time.

“She said,” Seivarden said finally, lifting her face from her hands, “that emotions clouded perception. That the clearest sight was pure reason, undistorted by feeling.”

“That’s not true.” I’d had a week with this instrument and very little else to do. I managed two lines at once.

“It seemed true at first. It was *wonderful* at first. It all went away. But then it would wear off, and things would be the same. Only worse. And then after a while it was like not feeling felt bad. I don’t know. I can’t describe it. But if I took more that went away.”

“And coming down got less and less endurable.” I’d heard the story a few times, in the past twenty years.

“Oh, Amaat’s grace,” she moaned. “I want to die.”

“Why don’t you?” I changed to another song. *My heart is a fish, hiding in the water-grass. In the green, in the green...*

She looked at me as though I were a rock that had just spoken.

“You lost your ship,” I said. “You were frozen for a thousand years. You wake up to find the Radch has changed—no more invasions, a humiliating treaty with the Presger, your house has lost financial and social status. No one knows you or remembers you, or cares whether you live or die. It’s not

what you were used to, not what you were expecting out of your life, is it?”

It took three puzzled seconds for the fact to dawn. “You know who I am.”

“Of course I know who you are. You told me,” I lied.

She blinked, tearily, trying, I supposed, to remember if she had or not. But her memories were, of course, incomplete.

“Go to sleep,” I said, and laid my fingers across the strings, silencing them.

“I want to leave,” she protested, not moving, still slumped on the bench, elbows on her knees. “Why can’t I leave?”

“I have business here,” I told her.

She curled her lip and scoffed. She was right, of course, waiting here was foolish. After so many years, so much planning and effort, I had failed.

Still. “Go back to bed.” *Bed* was the pallet of cushions and blankets beside the bench, where she sat. She looked at me, half-sneering still, and contemptuous, and slid down to the floor and lay, pulled a blanket over herself. She wouldn’t sleep at first, I was sure. She would be trying to think of some way to leave, to overpower me or convince me to do what she wanted. Any such planning would be useless until she knew *what* she wanted, of course, but I didn’t say that.

Within the hour her muscles slackened and her breathing slowed. Had she still been my lieutenant I would have known for certain she slept, known what stage of sleep she was in, known whether or not she dreamed. Now I could only see externals.

Still wary, I sat on the floor, leaning against another bench, and pulled a blanket up over my legs. As I had done every time I’d slept here, I opened my inner coat and put my hand on my gun, leaned back, and closed my eyes.

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Two hours later a faint sound woke me. I lay unmoving, my hand still on my gun. The faint sound repeated itself, slightly louder—the second door closing. I opened my eyes, just the slightest bit. Seivarden lay too quiet on her pallet—surely she had heard the sound as well.

Through my eyelashes I saw a person in outdoor clothes. Just under two meters tall, thin under the bulk of the double coat, skin iron-gray. When she pushed back her hood I saw her hair was the same. She was certainly not a Nilter.

She stood, watching me and Seivarden, for seven seconds, and then quietly stepped to where I lay, and bent to pull my pack toward her with one hand. In the other she held a gun, pointed steadily at me, though she seemed not to know I was awake.

The lock baffled her for a few moments, and then she pulled a tool out of her pocket, which she used to bypass the lock quite a bit more quickly than I had anticipated. Her gun still trained on me, and glancing occasionally at still-motionless Seivarden, she emptied the pack.

Spare clothes. Ammunition, but no gun, so she would know or suspect that I was armed. Three foil-wrapped packets of concentrated rations. Eating utensils, and a bottle for water. A gold disk five centimeters in diameter, one and a half centimeters thick that she puzzled over, frowning, and then set aside. A box, which she opened to find money—she let out an astonished breath when she realized how much, and looked over at me. I didn't move. I don't know what she had thought she would find, but she seemed not to have found it, whatever it was.

She picked up the disk that had puzzled her, and sat on a bench from which she had a clear view of both me and

Seivarden. Turning the disk over, she found the trigger. The sides fell away, opening like a flower, and the mechanism disgorged the icon, a person nearly naked except for short trousers and tiny jewel-and-enamel flowers. The image smiled, serene. She had four arms. One hand held a ball, the other arm was encased in a cylindrical armguard. Her other hands held a knife and a severed head, which dripped jeweled blood at her bare feet. The head smiled the same smile of saintly utter calm as she did.

Strigan—it had to be Strigan—frowned. The icon had been unexpected. It had piqued her curiosity yet further.

I opened my eyes. She tightened her grip on her gun—the gun I was now looking at as closely as I could, now my eyes were fully open, now I could turn my head toward it.

Strigan held the icon out, raised a steel-gray eyebrow. “Relative?” she asked, in Radchaai.

I kept my face pleasantly neutral. “Not exactly,” I said, in her own language.

“I thought I knew what you were when you came,” she said, after a long silence, thankfully following my language switch. “I thought I knew what you were doing here. Now I’m not so sure.” She glanced at Seivarden, to all appearances completely undisturbed by our talking. “I *think* I know who *he* is. But who are *you*? *What* are you? Don’t tell me *Breg from the Gerentate*. You’re as Radchaai as that one.” She gestured slightly toward Seivarden with her elbow.

“I came here to buy something,” I said, determined to keep from staring at the gun she held. “He’s incidental.” Since we weren’t speaking Radchaai I had to take gender into account—Strigan’s language required it. The society she lived in professed at the same time to believe gender was insignificant. Males and females dressed, spoke, acted indis-

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tinguishably. And yet no one I'd met had ever hesitated, or guessed wrong. And they had invariably been offended when I *did* hesitate or guess wrong. I hadn't learned the trick of it. I'd been in Strigan's own apartment, seen her belongings, and still wasn't sure what forms to use with her now.

"Incidental?" asked Strigan, disbelieving. I couldn't blame her. I wouldn't have believed it myself, except I knew it to be true. Strigan said nothing else, likely realizing that to say much more would be extremely foolish, if I was what she feared I was.

"Coincidence," I said. Glad on at least one count that we weren't speaking Radchaai, where the word implied significance. "I found him unconscious. If I'd left him where he was he'd have died." Strigan didn't believe that either, from the look she gave me. "Why are you here?"

She laughed, short and bitter—whether because I'd chosen the wrong gender for the pronoun, or something else, I wasn't certain. "I think that's my question to ask."

She hadn't corrected my grammar, at least. "I came to talk to you. To buy something. Seivarden was ill. You weren't here. I'll pay you for what we've eaten, of course."

She seemed to find that amusing, for some reason. "Why are you here?" she asked.

"I'm alone," I said, answering her unspoken question. "Except for him." I nodded at Seivarden. My hand was still on my gun, and Strigan likely knew why I kept that hand so still, under my coat. Seivarden still feigned sleep.

Strigan shook her head slightly, disbelieving. "I'd have sworn you were a corpse soldier." An ancillary, she meant. "When you arrived I was certain of it." She'd been hiding nearby, then, waiting for us to leave, and the entire place had been under her surveillance. She must have trusted her hiding

place quite extravagantly—if I had been what she feared, staying anywhere near would have been extremely foolish. I would certainly have found her. “But when you saw there was no one here you wept. And him . . .” She shrugged toward Seivarden, slack and motionless on the pallet.

“Sit up, citizen,” I said to Seivarden, in Radchaai. “You’re not fooling anyone.”

“Fuck off,” she answered, and pulled a blanket over her head. Then shoved it off again and rose, slightly shaky, and went into the sanitary facility and closed the door.

I turned back to Strigan. “That business with the flier rental. Was that you?”

She shrugged ruefully. “He told me a couple of Radchaai were coming out this way. Either he badly underestimated you, or you’re even more dangerous than I thought.”

Which would be considerably dangerous. “I’m used to being underestimated. And you didn’t tell her . . . him why you thought I was coming.”

Her gun hadn’t wavered. “Why are you here?”

“You know why I’m here.” A quick change in her expression, instantly suppressed. I continued. “Not to kill you. Killing you would defeat the purpose.”

She raised an eyebrow, tilted her head slightly. “Would it.”

The fencing, the feinting, frustrated me. “I want the gun.”

“What gun?” Strigan would never be so foolish as to admit the thing existed, that she knew what gun I was talking about. But her pretended ignorance didn’t convince. She knew. If she had what I thought she had, what I had gambled my life she had, further specificity would be unnecessary. She *knew*.

Whether she would give it to me was another question. “I’ll pay you for it.”

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“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The Garseddai did everything in fives. Five right actions, five principal sins, five zones times five regions. Twenty-five representatives to surrender to the Lord of the Radch.”

For three seconds Strigan was utterly still. Even her breathing seemed to have stopped. Then she spoke. “Garsedd, is it? What does that have to do with me?”

“I’d never have guessed if you’d stayed where you were.”

“Garsedd was a thousand years ago, and very, very far away from here.”

“Twenty-five representatives to surrender to the Lord of the Radch,” I repeated. “And twenty-four guns recovered or otherwise accounted for.”

She blinked, drew in a breath. “Who are you?”

“Someone ran. Someone fled the system before the Radch-ai arrived. Maybe she was afraid the guns wouldn’t work as advertised. Maybe she knew that even if they did it wouldn’t help.”

“On the contrary, no? Wasn’t that the point? No one defies Anaander Mianaai.” She spoke bitterly. “Not if they want to live.”

I said nothing.

Strigan’s hold on the gun didn’t waver. Even so, she was in danger from me, if I decided to harm her, and I thought she suspected that. “I don’t know why you think I have this gun you’re talking about. Why would I have it?”

“You collected antiques, curiosities. You already had a small collection of Garseddai artifacts. They’d made their way to Dras Annia Station, somehow. Others might do so as well. And then one day you disappeared. You took care you wouldn’t be followed.”

“That’s a very slight basis for such a large assumption.”

“So why this?” I gestured carefully with my free hand, the other still under my coat, holding my gun. “You had a comfortable post on Dras Annia, patients, plenty of money, associations and reputation. Now you’re in the icy middle of nowhere, giving first aid to bov herders.”

“Personal crisis,” she said, the words carefully, deliberately pronounced.

“Certainly,” I agreed. “You couldn’t bring yourself to destroy it, or pass it on to someone who might not be wise enough to realize what a danger it presented. You knew, as soon as you realized what you had, that if Radch authorities ever even dreamed of half-imagining it existed, they would track you down and kill you, and anyone else who might have seen it.”

While the Radch wanted everyone to remember what had happened to the Garseddai, they wanted no one to know just how the Garseddai had managed to do what they’d done, what no one had managed to do for a thousand years before or another thousand years after—destroy a Radchaai ship. Almost no one alive remembered. I knew, and any still-extant ships that had been there. Anaander Mianaai certainly did. And Seivarden, who had seen for herself what the Lord of the Radch wanted no one to think was possible—that invisible armor and gun, those bullets that defeated Radchaai armor—and her ship’s heat shield—so effortlessly.

“I want it,” I told Strigan. “I’ll pay you for it.”

“*If* I had such a thing... if! It’s entirely possible no amount of money in the world would be sufficient.”

“Anything is possible,” I agreed.

“You’re Radchaai. And you’re military.”

“Was,” I corrected. And when she scoffed, I added, “If I still were, I wouldn’t be here. Or if I were, you would already have given me whatever information I wanted, and you’d be dead.”

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“Get out of here.” Strigan’s voice was quiet, but vehement. “Take your stray with you.”

“I’m not leaving until I have what I came for.” There would be little point in doing so. “You’ll have to give it to me, or shoot me with it.” As much as admitting I still had armor. Implying I was precisely what she feared, a Radchaai agent come to kill her and take the gun.

Frightened of me as she must be, she could not avoid her own curiosity. “Why do you want it so badly?”

“I want,” I told her, “to kill Anaander Mianaai.”

“What?” The gun in her hand trembled, moved slightly aside, then steadied again. She leaned forward three millimeters, and cocked her head as though she was certain she hadn’t heard me correctly.

“I want to kill Anaander Mianaai,” I repeated.

“Anaander Mianaai,” she said, bitterly, “has thousands of bodies in hundreds of locations. You can’t possibly kill him. Certainly not with one gun.”

“I still want to try.”

“You’re insane. Or is that even possible? Aren’t all Radchaai brainwashed?”

It was a common misconception. “Only criminals, or people who aren’t functioning well, are reeducated. Nobody really cares what you think, as long as you do what you’re supposed to.”

She stared, dubious. “How do you define ‘not functioning well?’”

I made an indefinite, *not my problem* gesture with my free hand. Though perhaps it *was* my problem. Perhaps that question did concern me now, insofar as it might very well concern Seivarden. “I’m going to take my hand out of my coat,” I said. “And then I’m going to go to sleep.”

Strigan said nothing, only twitched one gray eyebrow.

“If I found you, Anaander Mianaai certainly can,” I said. We were speaking Strigan’s language. What gender had she assigned to the Lord of the Radch? “He hasn’t, yet, possibly because he is currently preoccupied with other matters, and for reasons that ought to be clear to you, he is likely hesitant to delegate in this affair.”

“I’m safe, then.” She sounded more convinced of that than she could possibly be.

Seivarden came noisily out of the bathroom and sank back onto her pallet, hands trembling, breathing quick and shallow.

“I’m taking my hand out of my coat now,” I said, and then did that. Slowly. Empty.

Strigan sighed and lowered her gun. “I probably couldn’t shoot you anyway.” Because she was sure I was Radchaa military, and hence armored. Of course, if she could take me unawares, or fire before I could extend my armor, she could indeed shoot me.

And of course, she had that gun. Though she might not have it near to hand. “Can I have my icon back?”

She frowned, and then remembered she was still holding it. “*Your* icon.”

“It belongs to me,” I clarified.

“That’s quite a resemblance,” she said, looking at it again. “Where’s it from?”

“Very far away.” I held out my hand. She returned it, and one-handed I brushed the trigger and the image folded into itself, and the base closed into its gold disk.

Strigan looked over at Seivarden intently, and frowned. “Your stray is having some anxiety.”

“Yes.”

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Strigan shook her head, frustrated or exasperated, and went into her infirmary. She returned, went to where Seivarden sat, leaned over, and reached for her.

Seivarden started, shoving herself up and back, grabbing Strigan's wrist in a move I knew was meant to break it. But Seivarden wasn't what she had once been. Dissipation and what I suspected was malnutrition had taken a toll. Strigan left her arm in Seivarden's grasp, and with her other hand plucked a small white tab out of her own fingers and stuck it to Seivarden's forehead. "I don't feel sorry for you," she said, in Radchaai. "It's just that I'm a doctor." Seivarden looked at her with an unaccountable expression of horror. "Let go of me."

"Let go, Seivarden, and lie down." I said, sharply. She stared two seconds more at Strigan, but then did as she was told.

"I'm not taking him as my patient," Strigan said to me, as Seivarden's breathing slowed and her muscles slackened. "It isn't more than first aid. And I don't want him panicking and breaking my things."

"I'm going to sleep now," I answered. "We can talk more in the morning."

"It *is* morning." But she didn't argue further.

She wouldn't be foolish enough to search my person while I slept. She would know how dangerous that would be.

She wouldn't shoot me in my sleep either, though it would be a simple and effective way to be rid of me. Asleep, I would be an easy target for a bullet, unless I extended my armor now and left it up.

But there was no need. Strigan wouldn't shoot me, at least not until she had the answers to her many questions. Even then she might not. I was too good a puzzle.

\* \* \*

Strigan wasn't in the main room when I woke, but the door into the bedroom was closed, and I assumed she was either asleep or wanted privacy. Seivarden was awake, staring at me, fidgeting, rubbing her arms and shoulders. A week earlier I'd had to prevent her from scraping her skin raw. She'd improved a great deal.

The box of money lay where Strigan had left it. I checked it—it was undisturbed—put it away, latched my pack closed, thinking the while what my next step should be.

“Citizen,” I said to Seivarden, brisk and authoritative. “Breakfast.”

“What?” She was surprised enough to stop moving for a moment.

I lifted the corner of my lip, just slightly. “Shall I ask the doctor to check your hearing?” The stringed instrument lay beside me, where I had set it the night before. I picked it up, plucked a fifth. “Breakfast.”

“I'm not your servant,” she protested. Indignant.

I increased my sneer, just the smallest increment. “Then what are you?”

She froze, anger visible in her expression, and then very visibly debated with herself how best to answer me. But the question was, now, too difficult for her to answer easily. Her confidence in her superiority had apparently taken too severe a blow for her to deal with just now. She didn't seem to be able to find a response.

I bent to the instrument and began to pick out a line of music. I expected her to sit where she was, sullen, until at the very least hunger drove her to prepare her own meal. Or maybe, much delayed, find something to say to me. I found I half-hoped she'd take a swing at me, so I could retaliate, but

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perhaps she was still under the influence of whatever Strigan had given her last night, even if only slightly.

The door to Strigan's room opened, and she walked into the main living space, stopped, folded her arms, and cocked an eyebrow. Seivarden ignored her. None of us said anything, and after five seconds Strigan turned and strode to the kitchen and swung open a cabinet.

It was empty. Which I'd known the evening before. "You've cleaned me out, Breq from the Gerentate," Strigan said, without rancor. Almost as though she thought it was funny. We were in very little danger of starving—even in summer here, the outdoors effectively functioned as a huge freezer, and the unheated storage building held plenty of provisions. It was only a matter of fetching some, and thawing them.

"Seivarden." I spoke in the casually disdainful tone I had heard from Seivarden herself in the distant past. "Bring some food from the shed."

She froze, and then blinked, startled. "Who the *hell* do you think you are?"

"Language, citizen," I chided. "And I might ask you the same question."

"You . . . you ignorant *nobody*." The sudden intensity of her anger had brought her close to tears again. "You think you're better than me? You're barely even *human*." She didn't mean because I was an ancillary. I was fairly sure she hadn't yet realized that. She meant because I wasn't Radchaai, and perhaps because I might have implants that were common some places outside Radch space and that would, in Radchaai eyes, compromise my humanity. "I wasn't bred to be your servant."

I can move very, very quickly. I was standing, and my arm halfway through its swing, before I registered my intention to move. The barest fraction of a second passed during which

I could have possibly checked myself, and then it was gone, and my fist connected with Seivarden's face, too quickly for her to even look surprised.

She dropped, falling backward onto her pallet, blood pouring from her nose, and lay unmoving.

"Is he dead?" asked Strigan, still standing in the kitchen, her voice mildly curious.

I made an ambiguous gesture. "You're the doctor."

She walked over to where Seivarden lay, unconscious and bleeding. Gazed down at her. "Not dead," she pronounced. "Though I'd like to make sure the concussion doesn't turn into anything worse."

I gestured resignation. "It is as Amaat wills," I said, and put on my coat and went outside to bring in food.

## 6

On Shis'urna, in Ors, the *Justice of Ente Seven Issa* who had accompanied Lieutenant Skaaiat to Jen Shinnan's sat with me in the lower level of the house. She had a name beyond her designation—one I never used, though I knew it. Even Lieutenant Skaaiat sometimes addressed individual human soldiers under her command as merely "Seven Issa." Or by their segment numbers.

I brought out a board and counters, and we played a silent two games. "Can't you let me win a time or two?" she asked, when the second was concluded, and before I could answer a thump sounded from the upper floor and she grinned. "It looks like Lieutenant Stiff can unbend after all!" and she cast me a look intended to share the joke, her amusement at the contrast between Awn's usual careful formality and what was obviously going on upstairs between her and Lieutenant Skaaiat. But the instant after Seven Issa had spoken, her smile faded. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it, it's just what we..."

"I know," I said. "I took no offense."

Seven Issa frowned, and made a doubtful gesture with her left hand, awkwardly, her gloved fingers still curled around half a dozen counters. “Ships have feelings.”

“Yes, of course.” Without feelings insignificant decisions become excruciating attempts to compare endless arrays of inconsequential things. It’s just easier to handle those with emotions. “But as I said, I took no offense.”

Seven Issa looked down at the board, and dropped the counters she held into one of its depressions. She stared at them a moment, and then looked up. “You hear rumors. About ships and people they like. And I’d swear your face never changes, but...”

I engaged my facial muscles, smiled, an expression I’d seen many times.

Seven Issa flinched. “Don’t *do* that!” she said, indignant, but still hushed lest the lieutenants hear us.

It wasn’t that I’d gotten the smile wrong—I knew I hadn’t. It was the sudden change, from my habitual lack of expression to something human, that some of the Seven Issas found disturbing. I dropped the smile.

“Aatr’s tits,” swore Seven Issa. “When you do that it’s like you’re possessed or something.” She shook her head, and scooped up the counters and began to distribute them around the board. “All right, then, you don’t want to talk about it. One more game.”

The evening grew later. The neighbors’ conversations turned slow and aimless and finally ceased as people picked up sleeping children and went to bed.

Denz Ay arrived four hours before dawn, and I joined her, stepping into her boat without speaking. She did not acknowledge my presence, and neither did her daughter, sit-

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ting in the stern. Slowly, nearly noiselessly, we slid away from the house.

The vigil at the temple continued, the priests' prayers audible on the plaza as an intermittent shushing murmur. The streets, upper and lower, were silent except for my own footsteps and the sound of the water, dark but for the stars brilliant overhead, the blinking of the prohibited zones' encircling buoys, and the light from the temple of Ikkt. The Seven Issa who had accompanied us back to Lieutenant Awn's house slept on a pallet on the ground floor.

Lieutenant Awn and Lieutenant Skaaiat lay together on the upper floor, still and on the edge of sleep.

No one else was out on the water with us. In the bottom of the boat I saw rope, nets, breathers, and a round, covered basket tied to an anchor. The daughter saw me look at it, and she kicked it under her seat, with studied nonchalance. I looked away, over the water, toward the blinking buoys, and said nothing. The fiction that they could hide or alter the information coming from their trackers was a useful one, even if no one actually believed it.

Just inside the buoys, Denz Ay's daughter put a breather in her mouth and slid over the edge, a rope in her hand. The lake wasn't terribly deep, especially at this time of year. Moments later she reemerged and climbed back aboard, and we pulled the crate up—a relatively easy job until it reached the surface, but the three of us managed to tip it into the boat without taking on too much water.

I wiped mud off the lid. It was of Radchaaï manufacture, but that wasn't too alarming in itself. I found the latch and popped it open.

The guns within—long, sleek, and deadly—were the sort

that had been carried by Tanmind troops before the annexation. I knew each one would have an identifying mark, and the marks of any guns confiscated by us would have been listed and reported, so that I could consult the inventory and determine more or less immediately if these were confiscated weapons, or ones we had missed.

If they were confiscated weapons, this situation would suddenly become a great deal more complicated than it seemed at the moment—and it was already a complicated situation.

Lieutenant Awn was in stage one of NREM sleep. Lieutenant Skaaiat seemed to be as well. I could consult the inventory on my own initiative. Indeed, I *should*. But I didn't—partly because I had just been reminded, yesterday, of the corrupt authorities at Ime, the misuse of accesses, the most appalling abuse of power, something any citizen would have thought was impossible. That reminder itself was enough to make me cautious. But also, after Denz Ay's assertions about residents of the upper city planting evidence in the past, and the evening's dinner conversation with its clear reminder of resentment in that upper city, something didn't seem quite right. No one in the upper city would know I had requested information about confiscated weapons, but what if someone else was involved? Someone who could set alerts to notify her if certain questions were asked in certain places? Denz Ay and her daughter sat quietly in the boat, to all appearances unconcerned and not particularly eager to be anywhere, or to be doing anything else.

Within a few moments I had *Justice of Toren's* attention. I had seen no few of those confiscated weapons—not I, One Esk, but I, *Justice of Toren*, whose thousands of ancillary troops had been on the planet during the annexation. If I could not consult an official inventory without alerting an

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authority to the fact that I had found this cache, I could consult my own memory to see if any of them had passed under my own eyes.

And they had.

I went in to where Lieutenant Awn was sleeping and put a hand on her bare shoulder. "Lieutenant," I said, softly. In the boat I closed the crate with a soft snap and said, "Back to the city."

Lieutenant Awn jerked awake. "I'm not asleep," she said blearily. In the boat, Denz Ay and her daughter silently picked up their oars and started back.

"The weapons were confiscated," I said to Lieutenant Awn, still quiet. Not wanting to wake Lieutenant Skaaiat, not wanting anyone else to hear what I was saying. "I recognized the serial numbers."

Lieutenant Awn looked at me dazedly for a few moments, uncomprehending. Then I saw her understand. "But..." And then she woke fully, and turned to Lieutenant Skaaiat. "Skaaiat, wake up. I've got a problem."

I brought the guns to the upper level of Lieutenant Awn's house. Seven Issa didn't even stir when I went past.

"You're sure?" asked Lieutenant Skaaiat, kneeling by the open crate, naked but for gloves, a bowl of tea in one hand.

"I confiscated these myself," I answered. "I remember them." We were all speaking very quietly, so that no one outside could hear.

"Then they would have been destroyed," argued Lieutenant Skaaiat.

"Obviously they weren't," said Lieutenant Awn. And then, after a brief silence, "Oh, *shit*. This is not good."

Silently I messaged her. *Language, Lieutenant.*

Lieutenant Skaaiat made a short, breathy sound, unamused laughter. “To put it mildly.” She frowned. “But why? Why would anyone go to the trouble?”

“And *how?*” asked Lieutenant Awn. She seemed to have forgotten her own tea, in a bowl on the floor beside her. “They put them there without us seeing them.” I’d looked at the logs for the past thirty days and seen nothing I couldn’t already account for. Indeed, no one had been to that spot at all besides Denz Ay and her daughter thirty days ago, and just the other night.

“*How* is the easy part, if you’ve got the right accesses,” said Lieutenant Skaaiat. “Which might tell us something. It’s not someone who’s got high-level access to *Justice of Toren*, or they’d have made sure it didn’t remember these guns. Or at least couldn’t say it did.”

“Or they didn’t think of that particular detail,” suggested Lieutenant Awn. She was puzzled. And only beginning to be frightened. “Or maybe that’s part of the plan to begin with. But we’re back to *why*, aren’t we? It doesn’t much matter how, not right this moment.”

Lieutenant Skaaiat looked up at me. “Tell me about the trouble Jen Taa’s niece had in the lower city.”

Lieutenant Awn looked at her, frowning. “But...” Lieutenant Skaaiat shushed her with a gesture.

“There was no trouble,” I said. “She sat by herself and threw rocks in the Fore-Temple water. She bought some tea in the shop behind the temple. Beyond that, no one spoke to her.”

“You’re certain?” asked Lieutenant Awn.

“She was in my view the entire time.” And I would take care that she would be on any future visits, but that hardly needed saying.

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The two lieutenants were silent a moment. Lieutenant Awn closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She was now truly frightened. “They’re lying about that,” she said, eyes still closed. “They want some excuse to accuse someone in the lower city of... something.”

“Sedition,” Lieutenant Skaaiat said. She remembered her tea, and took a sip. “And getting above themselves. That’s easy enough to see.”

“Yes, I can see that,” said Lieutenant Awn. Her accent had slipped entirely, but she hadn’t noticed. “But why the hell would anyone with this sort of access”—she gestured at the crate of guns—“want to help them?”

“That would seem to be the question,” answered Lieutenant Skaaiat. They were silent for several seconds. “What are you going to do?”

The question upset Lieutenant Awn, who presumably had been wondering just that. She looked up at me. “I wonder if this is all.”

“I can ask Denz Ay to take me out again,” I said.

Lieutenant Awn gestured affirmatively. “I’ll write the report, but I won’t file it just yet. Pending our further investigation.” Everything Lieutenant Awn did and said was observed and recorded—but as with the trackers everyone in Ors wore, there wasn’t always someone paying attention.

Lieutenant Skaaiat made a low whistle. “Is someone setting you up, dear?” Lieutenant Awn looked incomprehension at her. “Like maybe,” Lieutenant Skaaiat continued, “Jen Shinnan? I may have underestimated her. Or can you trust Denz Ay?”

“If someone wants me gone, they’re in the upper city,” said Lieutenant Awn, and privately I agreed but I didn’t say it. “But that can’t be it. If anyone who could do this,” she

gestured at the crate, “wanted me out of here, it would be easy enough—just give the order. And Jen Shinnan couldn’t have done this.” Unspoken, hanging behind every word, was the memory of news from Ime. Of the fact that the person who had revealed the corruption there was condemned to die, probably was already dead. “No one in Ors could have, not without . . .” Not without help, from a very high level, she would surely have said, but she let the sentence trail off.

“True,” mused Lieutenant Skaaiat. Understanding her. “So it’s someone high up. Who would benefit?”

“The niece,” said Lieutenant Awn, distressed.

“Jen Taa’s niece would benefit?” asked Lieutenant Skaaiat, puzzled.

“No, no. The niece is insulted or assaulted—allegedly. I won’t do anything, *I say nothing happened.*”

“Because nothing happened,” said Lieutenant Skaaiat, looking as though something was beginning to come clear to her, but still puzzled.

“They can’t get justice from me, so they come down to the lower city to get it for themselves. It’s the sort of thing that happened before we came.”

“And afterward,” said Lieutenant Skaaiat, “they find all these guns. Or even during. Or . . .” She shook her head. “It’s not all fitting together. Let’s say you’re right. Still. *Who benefits?* Not the Tanmind, not if they cause trouble. They can accuse all they like, but no matter what anyone finds in the lake, they’re still for reeducation if they riot.”

Lieutenant Awn gestured doubtfully. “Someone who could get those guns here without our seeing them might be able to keep the Tanmind out of trouble. Or believably say they could.”

“Ah.” Lieutenant Skaaiat understood immediately. “A

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minor fine, mitigating circumstances. No doubt of it. It'll be someone high up. Very dangerous. But why?"

Lieutenant Awn looked at me. "Go to the head priest and ask her a favor. Tell her, from me, even though it's not the rainy season, to station someone near the storm alarm at all times." The alarm, an earsplitting siren, was on the top of the temple residence. Its sounding would trigger the storm shutters of most of the buildings in the lower city, and would certainly wake the inhabitants of any building not automated in that fashion. "Ask her to be ready to sound it if I ask."

"Excellent," said Lieutenant Skaaiat. "Any mob will at least have to work a bit harder to get past the shutters. And then?"

"It might not even happen," said Lieutenant Awn. "Whatever it is, we'll have to take it as it comes."

What came, the next morning, was news that Anaander Mianaai, Lord of the Radch, would be visiting us some time in the next few days.

For three thousand years Anaander Mianaai had ruled Radch space absolutely. She resided in each of the thirteen provincial palaces, and was present at every annexation. She was able to do this because she possessed thousands of bodies, all of them genetically identical, all of them linked to each other. She was still in Shis'urna's system, some of her on the flagship of this annexation, *Sword of Amaat*, and some of her on Shis'urna Station. It was she who made Radchaa law, and she who decided on any exceptions to that law. She was the ultimate commander of the military, the highest head priest of Amaat, the person to whom, ultimately, all Radchaa houses were clients.

And she was coming to Ors, at some unspecified date

within the next few days. It was, in fact, mildly surprising she hadn't visited Ors sooner—small as it was, far as Orsians had fallen from their former glory, still the yearly pilgrimage made Ors a moderately important place. Important enough that officers of higher families and more influence than Lieutenant Awn had wanted this post—and tried continually to pry her out of it, despite the determined resistance of the Divine of Ikkt.

So the visit itself wasn't unexpected. Though the timing seemed odd. It was two weeks before the start of the pilgrimage, when hundreds of thousands of Orsians and tourists would pass through the city. During pilgrimage Anaander Mianaai's presence would be highly visible, an opportunity to impress a high number of the worshippers of Ikkt. Instead she was coming just before. And of course it was impossible not to notice the sharp coincidence between her arrival and the discovery of the guns.

Whoever had placed those guns was acting either for or against the interests of the Lord of the Radch. She should have been the one logical person to tell, and to ask for further instructions. And her being in Ors in person was incredibly convenient—it presented an opportunity to tell her about the situation without anyone else intercepting the message and either spoiling whatever the plan was, or alerting wrongdoers that their plan had been discovered, making them harder to catch.

On that account alone, Lieutenant Awn was relieved to hear of her visit. Even though for the next few days, and while she was here, Lieutenant Awn would have to wear her full uniform.

In the meantime I listened more closely to conversations in the upper city—more difficult than in the lower, because the

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houses were all enclosed and of course any Tanmind involved would be closemouthed if they knew I was in earshot. And no one was foolish enough to have the sort of conversation I was listening for anywhere but in person, in private. I also watched Jen Taa's niece—or as well as I could. After the dinner party she never left Jen Shinnan's house, but I could see her tracker data.

For two nights I went out on the marsh with Denz Ay and her daughter, and we found two more crates of guns. Once again I had no way of determining who had left them, or when, though Denz Ay's oblique statements, careful not to implicate the fishermen I knew usually poached in those areas, implied that they must have arrived some time in the past month or two.

"I'll be glad when the Lord of Mianaai gets here," said Lieutenant Awn to me, quietly, late one night. "I don't think I should be handling something like this."

And in the meantime I noticed that no one but Denz Ay went out on the water at night, and in the lower city no one sat or lay where the shutters might come down—a routine precaution during the rainy season, even though there were safeties to stop them if someone was in their way, but one that was usually ignored in the dry season.

The Lord of the Radch arrived in the middle of the day, on foot, a single one of her walking down through the upper city, no trace of her in the tracker logs, and went straight to the temple of Ikkt. She was old, gray-haired, broad shoulders slightly stooping, the almost-black skin of her face lined—which accounted for the lack of guards. The loss of one body that was more or less near death anyway would not be a large one. The use of such older bodies allowed the Lord of the

Radch to walk unprotected, without any sort of entourage, when she wished, without much risk.

She wore not the jeweled coat and trousers of the Radchaai, nor the coverall or trousers and shirt a Shis'urnan Tanmind would wear, but instead the Orsian lungi, shirtless.

As soon as I saw her, I messaged Lieutenant Awn, who came as quickly as she could to the temple, and arrived while the head priest was prostrating herself in the plaza before the Lord of the Radch.

Lieutenant Awn hesitated. Most Radchaai were never in the personal presence of Anaander Mianaai in such circumstances. Of course she was always present during annexations, but the sheer number of troops compared to the number of bodies the Lord of the Radch sent made it unlikely one would run into her by chance. And any citizen can travel to one of the provincial palaces and ask for an audience—for a request, for an appeal in a legal case, for whatever reason—but in such a case, an ordinary citizen is briefed beforehand on how to conduct herself. Perhaps someone like Lieutenant Skaaiat would know how to draw Anaander Mianaai's attention to herself without breaching propriety, but Lieutenant Awn did not.

"My lord," Lieutenant Awn said, heart speeding with fear, and knelt.

Anaander Mianaai turned to her, eyebrow raised.

"I beg my lord's pardon," said Lieutenant Awn. She was slightly dizzy, either from the weight of her uniform in the heat, or from nerves. "I must speak with you."

The eyebrow rose farther. "Lieutenant Awn," she said, "yes?"

"Yes, my lord."

"This evening I attend the vigil in the temple of Ikkt. I'll speak to you in the morning."

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It took Lieutenant Awn a few moments to digest this. “My lord, a moment only. I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

The Lord of the Radch tilted her head inquisitively. “I understood you had this area under control.”

“Yes, lord, it’s just . . .” Lieutenant Awn stopped, panicked, at a loss for words for a second. “Relations between the upper and lower city just now . . .” She halted again.

“Concern yourself with your own job,” said Anaander Mianaai. “And I will concern myself with mine.” She turned away from Lieutenant Awn.

A public slight. An inexplicable one—there was no reason the Lord of the Radch could not have turned aside for a few urgent words with the officer who was chief of local security. And Lieutenant Awn had done nothing to deserve such a slight. At first I thought that was the only reason for the distress I read coming from Lieutenant Awn. The matter of the guns could be communicated in the morning just as well as now, and there seemed no other difficulty. But as the Lord of the Radch had walked through the upper city, word of Anaander Mianaai’s presence had spread, as of course it would, and the residents of the upper city had come out of their houses and begun gathering on the northern edge of the Fore-Temple water to watch the Lord of the Radch, dressed like an Orsian, stand in front of the temple of Ikkt with the Divine. And listening to the mutterings of the watching Tanmind, I realized that at this particular instant the guns were only a secondary concern.

The Tanmind residents of the upper city were wealthy, well-fed, the owners of shops and farms and tamarind orchards. Even in the precarious months following the annexation, when supplies had been scarce and food expensive, they had managed to keep their families fed. When Jen

Shinnan had said, a few evenings earlier, that no one here had starved, she had likely believed that to be true. She had not, nor had anyone she knew well, nearly all of them wealthy Tanmind. As much as they complained, they had come out of the annexation relatively comfortably. And their children did well when they took the aptitudes, and would continue to do so, as Lieutenant Skaaiat had said.

And yet these same people, when they saw the Lord of the Radch walk straight through the upper city to the temple of Ikkt, concluded that this gesture of respect to the Orsians was a calculated insult to them. This was clear in their expressions, in their indignant exclamations. I had not foreseen it. Perhaps the Lord of the Radch had not foreseen it. But Lieutenant Awn had realized it would happen, when she saw the Divine on the ground in front of the Lord of the Radch.

I left the plaza, and some of the upper city streets, and went to where the Tanmind were standing, a half-dozen of me. I didn't draw any weapons, didn't make any threats. I said, merely, to anyone near me, "Go home, citizens."

Most turned away and left, and if their expressions weren't pleasant, they offered no actual protest. Others took longer to leave, testing my authority, perhaps, though not far—anyone with the stomach to do such a thing had been shot sometime in the last five years, or at least had learned to restrain such a near-suicidal impulse.

The Divine, rising to escort Anaander Mianaai into the temple, cast an unreadable look at Lieutenant Awn, where she still knelt on the plaza stones. The Lord of the Radch did not even glance at her.