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“Considering the circumstances, you could use another lieutenant.” Anaander Mianaai, ruler (for the moment) of all the vast reaches of Radchaai space, sat in a wide chair cushioned with embroidered silk. This body that spoke to me—one of thousands—looked to be about thirteen years old. Black-clad, dark-skinned. Her face was already stamped with the aristocratic features that were, in Radchaai space, a marker of the highest rank and fashion. Under normal circumstances no one ever saw such young versions of the Lord of the Radch, but these were not normal circumstances.

The room was small, three and a half meters square, paneled with a lattice of dark wood. In one corner the wood was missing—probably damaged in last week’s violent dispute between rival parts of Anaander Mianaai herself. Where the wood remained, tendrils of some wispy plant trailed, thin silver-green leaves and here and there tiny white flowers. This was not a public area of the palace, not an audience chamber. An empty chair sat beside the Lord of the Radch’s, a table between those chairs held a tea set, flask, and bowls

of unadorned white porcelain, gracefully lined, the sort of thing that, at first glance, you might take as unremarkable, but on second would realize was a work of art worth more than some planets.

I had been offered tea, been invited to sit. I had elected to remain standing. “You said I could choose my own officers.” I ought to have added a respectful *my lord* but did not. I also ought to have knelt and put my forehead to the floor, when I’d entered and found the Lord of the Radch. I hadn’t done that, either.

“You’ve chosen two. Seivarden, of course, and Lieutenant Ekalu was an obvious choice.” The names brought both people reflexively to mind. In approximately a tenth of a second *Mercy of Kalr*, parked some thirty-five thousand kilometers away from this station, would receive that near-instinctive check for data, and a tenth of a second after that its response would reach me. I’d spent the last several days learning to control that old, old habit. I hadn’t completely succeeded. “A fleet captain is entitled to a third,” Anaander Mianaai continued. Beautiful porcelain bowl in one black-gloved hand, she gestured toward me, meaning, I thought, to indicate my uniform. Radchaai military wore dark-brown jackets and trousers, boots and gloves. Mine was different. The left-hand side was brown, but the right side was black, and my captain’s insignia bore the marks that showed I commanded not only my own ship but other ships’ captains. Of course, I had no ships in my fleet besides my own, *Mercy of Kalr*, but there were no other fleet captains stationed near Athoek, where I was bound, and the rank would give me an advantage over other captains I might meet. Assuming, of course, those other captains were at all inclined to accept my authority.

Just days ago a long-simmering dispute had broken out

and one faction had destroyed two of the intersystem gates. Now preventing more gates from going down—and preventing that faction from seizing gates and stations in other systems—was an urgent priority. I understood Anaander’s reasons for giving me the rank, but still I didn’t like it. “Don’t make the mistake,” I said, “of thinking I’m working for *you*.”

She smiled. “Oh, I don’t. Your only other choices are officers currently in the system, and near this station. Lieutenant Tisarwat is just out of training. She was on her way to take her first assignment, and now of course that’s out of the question. And I thought you’d appreciate having someone you could train up the way you want.” She seemed amused at that last.

As she spoke I knew Seivarden was in stage two of NREM sleep. I saw pulse, temperature, respiration, blood oxygen, hormone levels. Then that data was gone, replaced by Lieutenant Ekalu, standing watch. Stressed—jaw slightly clenched, elevated cortisol. She’d been a common soldier until one week ago, when *Mercy of Kalr*’s captain had been arrested for treason. She had never expected to be made an officer. Wasn’t, I thought, entirely sure she was capable of it.

“You can’t possibly think,” I said to the Lord of the Radch, blinking away that vision, “that it’s a good idea to send me into a newly broken-out civil war with only one experienced officer.”

“It can’t be worse than going understaffed,” Anaander Mianaai said, maybe aware of my momentary distraction, maybe not. “And the child is beside herself at the thought of serving under a fleet captain. She’s waiting for you at the docks.” She set down her tea, straightened in her chair. “Since the gate leading to Athoek is down and I have no idea what the situation there might be, I can’t give you specific

orders. Besides”—she raised her now-empty hand as though forestalling some speech of mine—“I’d be wasting my time attempting to direct you too closely. You’ll do as you like no matter what I say. You’re loaded up? Have all the supplies you need?”

The question was perfunctory—she surely knew the status of my ship’s stores as well as I did. I made an indefinite gesture, deliberately insolent.

“You might as well take Captain Vel’s things,” she said, as though I’d answered reasonably. “She won’t need them.”

Vel Osck had been captain of *Mercy of Kalr* until a week ago. There were any number of reasons she might not need her possessions, the most likely, of course, being that she was dead. Anaander Mianaai didn’t do anything halfway, particularly when it came to dealing with her enemies. Of course, in this case, the enemy Vel Osck had supported was Anaander Mianaai herself. “I don’t want them,” I said. “Send them to her family.”

“If I can.” She might well not be able to do that. “Is there anything you need before you go? Anything at all?”

Various answers occurred to me. None seemed useful. “No.”

“I’ll miss you, you know,” she said. “No one else will speak to me quite the way you do. You’re one of the very few people I’ve ever met who really, truly didn’t fear the consequences of offending me. And none of those very few have the . . . similarity of background you and I have.”

Because I had once been a ship. An AI controlling an enormous troop carrier and thousands of ancillaries, human bodies, part of myself. At the time I had not thought of myself as a slave, but I had been a weapon of conquest, the possession of Anaander Mianaai, herself occupying thousands of bodies spread throughout Radch space.

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Now I was only this single human body. “Nothing you can do to me could possibly be worse than what you’ve already done.”

“I am aware of that,” she said, “and aware of just how dangerous that makes you. I may well be extremely foolish just letting you live, let alone giving you official authority and a ship. But the games I play aren’t for the timid.”

“For most of us,” I said, openly angry now, knowing she could see the physical signs of it no matter how impassive my expression, “they aren’t games.”

“I am also aware of that,” said the Lord of the Radch. “Truly I am. It’s just that some losses are unavoidable.”

I could have chosen any of a half dozen responses to that. Instead I turned and walked out of the room without answering. As I stepped through the door, the soldier *Mercy of Kalr One Kalr Five*, who had been standing at stiff attention just outside, fell in behind me, silent and efficient. Kalr Five was human, like all *Mercy of Kalr’s* soldiers, not an ancillary. She had a name, beyond her ship, decade, and number. I had addressed her by that name once. She’d responded with outward impassivity, but with an inner wave of alarm and unease. I hadn’t tried it again.

When I had been a ship—when I had been just one component of the troop carrier *Justice of Toren*—I had been always aware of the state of my officers. What they heard and what they saw. Every breath, every twitch of every muscle. Hormone levels, oxygen levels. Everything, nearly, except the specific contents of their thoughts, though even that I could often guess, from experience, from intimate acquaintance. Not something I had ever shown any of my captains—it would have meant little to them, a stream of meaningless data. But for me, at that time, it had been just part of my awareness.

I no longer *was* my ship. But I was still an ancillary, could still read that data as no human captain could have. But I only had a single human brain, now, could only handle the smallest fragment of the information I'd once been constantly, unthinkingly aware of. And even that small amount required some care—I'd run straight into a bulkhead trying to walk and receive data at the same time, when I'd first tried it. I queried *Mercy of Kalr*, deliberately this time. I was fairly sure I could walk through this corridor and monitor Five at the same time without stopping or stumbling.

I made it all the way to the palace's reception area without incident. Five was tired, and slightly hungover. Bored, I was sure, from standing staring at the wall during my conference with the Lord of the Radch. I saw a strange mix of anticipation and dread, which troubled me a bit, because I couldn't guess what that conflict was about.

Out on the main concourse, high, broad, and echoing, stone paved, I turned toward the lifts that would take me to the docks, to the shuttle that waited to take me back to *Mercy of Kalr*. Most shops and offices along the concourse, including the wide, brightly painted gods crowding the temple façade, orange and blue and red and green, seemed surprisingly undamaged after last week's violence, when the Lord of the Radch's struggle against herself had broken into the open. Now citizens in colorful coats, trousers, and gloves, glittering with jewelry, walked by, seemingly unconcerned. Last week might never have happened. Anaander Mianaai, Lord of the Radch, might still be herself, many-bodied but one single, undivided person. But last week *had* happened, and Anaander Mianaai was not, in fact, one person. Had not been for quite some time.

As I approached the lifts a sudden surge of resentment and dismay overtook me. I stopped, turned. Kalr Five had stopped

when I stopped, and now stared impassively ahead. As though that wave of resentment Ship had shown me hadn't come from her. I hadn't thought most humans could mask such strong emotions so effectively—her face was absolutely expressionless. But all the Mercy of Kalrs, it had turned out, could do it. Captain Vel had been an old-fashioned sort—or at the very least she'd had idealized notions of what “old-fashioned” meant—and had demanded that her human soldiers conduct themselves as much like ancillaries as possible.

Five didn't know I'd been an ancillary. As far as she knew I was Fleet Captain Breq Mianaai, promoted because of Captain Vel's arrest and what most imagined were my powerful family connections. She couldn't know how much of her I saw. “What is it?” I asked, brusque. Taken aback.

“Sir?” Flat. Expressionless. Wanting, I saw after the tiny signal delay, for me to turn my attention away from her, to leave her safely ignored. Wanting also to speak.

I was right, that resentment, that dismay had been on my account. “You have something to say. Let's hear it.”

Surprise. Sheer terror. And not the least twitch of a muscle. “Sir,” she said again, and there was, finally, a faint, fleeting expression of some sort, quickly gone. She swallowed. “It's the dishes.”

My turn to be surprised. “The dishes?”

“Sir, you sent Captain Vel's things into storage here on the station.”

And lovely things they had been. The dishes (and utensils, and tea things) Kalr Five was, presumably, preoccupied with had been porcelain, glass, jeweled and enameled metal. But they hadn't been mine. And I didn't want anything of Captain Vel's. Five expected me to understand her. Wanted so much for me to understand. But I didn't. “Yes?”

Frustration. Anger, even. Clearly, from Five's perspective what she wanted was obvious. But the only part of it that was obvious to me was the fact she couldn't just come out and say it, even when I'd asked her to. "Sir," she said finally, citizens walking around us, some with curious glances, some pretending not to notice us. "I understand we're leaving the system soon."

"Soldier," I said, beginning to be frustrated and angry myself, in no good mood from my talk with the Lord of the Radch. "Are you capable of speaking directly?"

"We can't leave the system with no good dishes!" she blurted finally, face still impressively impassive. "Sir." When I didn't answer, she continued, through another surge of fear at speaking so plainly, "Of course it doesn't matter to *you*. You're a fleet captain, your rank is enough to impress anyone." And my house name—I was now Breq Mianaai. I wasn't too pleased at having been given that particular name, which marked me as a cousin of the Lord of the Radch herself. None of my crew but Seivarden and the ship's medic knew I hadn't been born with it. "*You* could invite a captain to supper and serve her soldier's mess and she wouldn't say a word, sir." Couldn't, unless she outranked me.

"We're not going where we're going so we can hold dinner parties," I said. That apparently confounded her, brief confusion showing for a moment on her face.

"Sir!" she said, voice pleading, in some distress. "*You* don't need to worry what other people think of you. I'm only saying, because you ordered me to."

Of course. I should have seen. Should have realized days ago. She was worried that *she* would look bad if I didn't have dinnerware to match my rank. That it would reflect badly on the ship itself. "You're worried about the reputation of the ship."

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Chagrin, but also relief. “Yes, sir.”

“I’m not Captain Vel.” Captain Vel had cared a great deal about such things.

“No, sir.” I wasn’t sure if the emphasis—and the relief I read in Five—was because my not being Captain Vel was a good thing, or because I had finally understood what she had been trying to tell me. Or both.

I had already cleared my account here, all my money in chits locked in my quarters on board *Mercy of Kalr*. What little I carried on my person wouldn’t be sufficient to ease Kalr Five’s anxieties. Station—the AI that ran this place, *was* this place—could probably smooth the financial details over for me. But Station resented me as the cause of last week’s violence and would not be disposed to assist me.

“Go back to the palace,” I said. “Tell the Lord of the Radch what you require.” Her eyes widened just slightly, and two tenths of a second later I read disbelief and then frank terror in Kalr Five. “When everything is arranged to your satisfaction, come to the shuttle.”

Three citizens passed, bags in gloved hands, the fragment of conversation I heard telling me they were on their way to the docks, to catch a ship to one of the outer stations. A lift door slid open, obligingly. Of course. Station knew where they were going, they didn’t have to ask.

Station knew where *I* was going, but it wouldn’t open any doors for me without my giving the most explicit of requests. I turned, stepped quickly into the dockbound lift after them, saw the lift door close on Five standing, horrified, on the black stone pavement of the concourse. The lift moved, the three citizens chattered. I closed my eyes and saw Kalr Five staring at the lift, hyperventilating slightly. She frowned just the smallest amount—possibly no one passing her would

notice. Her fingers twitched, summoning *Mercy of Kalr's* attention, though with some trepidation, as though maybe she feared it wouldn't answer.

But of course *Mercy of Kalr* was already paying attention. "Don't worry," said *Mercy of Kalr*, voice serene and neutral in Five's ear and mine. "It's not you Fleet Captain's angry with. Go ahead. It'll be all right."

True enough. It wasn't Kalr Five I was angry with. I pushed away the data coming from her, received a disorienting flash of Seivarden, asleep, dreaming, and Lieutenant Ekalu, still tense, in the middle of asking one of her Etrepas for tea. Opened my eyes. The citizens in the lift with me laughed at something, I didn't know or care what, and as the lift door slid open we walked out into the broad lobby of the docks, lined all around with icons of gods that travelers might find useful or comforting. It was sparsely populated for this time of day, except by the entrance to the dock authority office, where a line of ill-tempered ship captains and pilots waited for their turn to complain to the overburdened inspector adjuncts. Two intersystem gates had been disabled in last week's upheaval, more were likely to be in the near future, and the Lord of the Radch had forbidden any travel in the remaining ones, trapping dozens of ships in the system, with all their cargo and passengers.

They moved aside for me, bowing slightly as though a wind had blown through them. It was the uniform that had done it—I heard one captain whisper to another one, "Who is that?" and the responding murmur as her neighbor replied and others commented on her ignorance or added what they knew. I heard *Mianaai* and *Special Missions*. The sense they'd managed to make out of last week's events. The official version was that I had come to Omaugh Palace undercover, to

root out a seditious conspiracy. That I had been working for Anaander Mianaai all along. Anyone who'd ever been part of events that later received an official version would know or suspect that wasn't true. But most Radch'aii lived unremarkable lives and would have no reason to doubt it.

No one questioned my walking past the adjuncts, into the outer office of the Inspector Supervisor. Daos Ceit, who was her assistant, was still recovering from injuries. An adjunct I didn't know sat in her place but rose swiftly and bowed as I entered. So did a very, very young lieutenant, more gracefully and collectedly than I expected in a seventeen-year-old, the sort who was still all lanky arms and legs and frivolous enough to spend her first pay on lilac-colored eyes—surely she hadn't been born with eyes that color. Her dark-brown jacket, trousers, gloves, and boots were crisp and spotless, her straight, dark hair cut close. "Fleet Captain. Sir," she said. "Lieutenant Tisarwat, sir." She bowed again.

I didn't answer, only looked at her. If my scrutiny disturbed her, I couldn't see it. She wasn't yet sending data to *Mercy of Kalr*, and her brown skin hadn't darkened in any sort of flush. The small, discreet scatter of pins near one shoulder suggested a family of some substance but not the most elevated in the Radch. She was, I thought, either preternaturally self-possessed or a fool. Neither option pleased me.

"Go on in, sir," said the unfamiliar adjunct, gesturing me toward the inner office. I did, without a word to Lieutenant Tisarwat.

Dark-skinned, amber-eyed, elegant and aristocratic even in the dark-blue uniform of dock authority, Inspector Supervisor Skaaiat Awer rose and bowed as the door shut behind me. "Breq. Are you going, then?"

I opened my mouth to say, *Whenever you authorize our*

departure, but remembered Five and the errand I'd sent her on. "I'm only waiting for Kalr Five. Apparently I can't ship out without an acceptable set of dishes."

Surprise crossed her face, gone in an instant. She had known, of course, that I had sent Captain Vel's things here, and that I didn't own anything to replace them. Once the surprise had gone I saw amusement. "Well," she said. "Wouldn't you have felt the same?" When I had been in Five's place, she meant. When I had been a ship.

"No, I wouldn't have. I didn't. Some other ships did. Do." Mostly *Swords*, who by and large already thought they were above the smaller, less prestigious *Mercies*, or the troop carrier *Justices*.

"My Seven Issas cared about that sort of thing." Skaaiat Awer had served as a lieutenant on a ship with human troops, before she'd become Inspector Supervisor here at Omaugh Palace. Her eyes went to my single piece of jewelry, a small gold tag pinned near my left shoulder. She gestured, a change of topic that wasn't really a change of topic. "Athoek, is it?" My destination hadn't been publicly announced, might, in fact, be considered sensitive information. But Awer was one of the most ancient and wealthy of houses. Skaaiat had cousins who knew people who knew things. "I'm not sure that's where I'd have sent you."

"It's where I'm going."

She accepted that answer, no surprise or offense visible in her expression. "Have a seat. Tea?"

"Thank you, no." Actually I could have used some tea, might under other circumstances have been glad of a relaxed chat with Skaaiat Awer, but I was anxious to be off.

This, too, Inspector Supervisor Skaaiat took with equanimity. She did not sit, herself. "You'll be calling on Basnaaid

Elming when you get to Athoek Station.” Not a question. She knew I would be. Basnaaid was the younger sister of someone both Skaaiat and I had once loved. Someone I had, under orders from Anaander Mianaai, killed. “She’s like Awn, in some ways, but not in others.”

“Stubborn, you said.”

“Very proud. And fully as stubborn as her sister. Possibly more so. She was very offended when I offered her client-age for her sister’s sake. I mention it because I suspect you’re planning to do something similar. And you might be the only person alive even more stubborn than she is.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Not even the tyrant?” The word wasn’t Radchaai, was from one of the worlds annexed and absorbed by the Radch. By Anaander Mianaai. The tyrant herself, almost the only person on Omaugh Palace who would have recognized or understood the word, besides Skaaiat and myself.

Skaaiat Awer’s mouth quirked, sardonic humor. “Possibly. Possibly not. In any event, be very careful about offering Basnaaid money or favors. She won’t take it kindly.” She gestured, good-natured but resigned, as if to say, *but of course you’ll do as you like*. “You’ll have met your new baby lieutenant.”

Lieutenant Tisarwat, she meant. “Why did she come here and not go directly to the shuttle?”

“She came to apologize to my adjunct.” Daos Ceit’s replacement, there in the outer office. “Their mothers are cousins.” Formally, the word Skaaiat used referred to a relation between two people of different houses who shared a parent or a grandparent, but in casual use meant someone more distantly related who was a friend, or someone you’d grown up with. “They were supposed to meet for tea yesterday, and

Tisarwat never showed or answered any messages. And you know how military gets along with dock authorities.” Which was to say, overtly politely and privately contemptuously. “My adjunct took offense.”

“Why should Lieutenant Tisarwat care?”

“You never had a mother to be angry you offended her cousin,” Skaaiat said, half laughing, “or you wouldn’t ask.”

True enough. “What do you make of her?”

“Flighty, I would have said a day or two ago. But today she’s very subdued.” *Flighty* didn’t match the collected young person I’d seen in that outer office. Except, perhaps, those impossible eyes. “Until today she was on her way to a desk job in a border system.”

“The tyrant sent me a baby *administrator*?”

“I wouldn’t have thought she’d send you a baby anything,” Skaaiat said. “I’d have thought she’d have wanted to come with you herself. Maybe there’s not enough of her left here.” She drew breath as though to say more but then frowned, head cocked. “I’m sorry, there’s something I have to take care of.”

The docks were crowded with ships in need of supplies or repairs or emergency medical assistance, ships that were trapped here in the system, with crews and passengers who were extremely unhappy about the fact. Skaaiat’s staff had been working hard for days, with very few breaks. “Of course.” I bowed. “I’ll get out of your way.” She was still listening to whoever had messaged her. I turned to go.

“Breq.” I looked back. Skaaiat’s head was still cocked slightly, she was still hearing whoever else spoke. “Take care.”

“You, too.” I walked through the door, to the outer office. Lieutenant Tisarwat stood, still and silent. The adjunct

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stared ahead, fingers moving, attending to urgent dock business no doubt. “Lieutenant,” I said sharply, and didn’t wait for a reply but walked out of the office, through the crowd of disgruntled ships’ captains, onto the docks where I would find the shuttle that would take me to *Mercy of Kalr*.

The shuttle was too small to generate its own gravity. I was perfectly comfortable in such circumstances, but very young officers often were not. I stationed Lieutenant Tisarwat at the dock, to wait for Kalr Five, and then pushed myself over the awkward, chancy boundary between the gravity of the palace and the weightlessness of the shuttle, kicked myself over to a seat, and strapped myself in. The pilot gave a respectful nod, bowing being difficult in these circumstances. I closed my eyes, saw that Five stood in a large storage room inside the palace proper, plain, utilitarian, gray-walled. Filled with chests and boxes. In one brown-gloved hand she held a teabowl of delicate, deep rose glass. An open box in front of her showed more—a flask, seven more bowls, other dishes. Her pleasure in the beautiful things, her desire, was undercut by doubt. I couldn’t read her mind, but I guessed that she had been told to choose from this storeroom, had found these and wanted them very much, but didn’t quite believe she would be allowed to take them away. I was fairly sure this set was hand-blown, and some seven hundred years old. I hadn’t realized she had a connoisseur’s eye for such things.

I pushed the vision away. She would be some time, I thought, and I might as well get some sleep.

I woke three hours later, to lilac-eyed Lieutenant Tisarwat strapping herself deftly into a seat across from me. Kalr Five—now radiating contentment, presumably from the results of her stint in the palace storeroom—pushed herself

over to Lieutenant Tisarwat, and with a nod and a quiet *Just in case, sir* proffered a bag for the nearly inevitable moment when the new officer's stomach reacted to microgravity.

I'd known young lieutenants who took such an offer as an insult. Lieutenant Tisarwat accepted it, with a small, vague smile that didn't quite reach the rest of her face. Still seeming entirely calm and collected.

"Lieutenant," I said, as Kalr Five kicked herself forward to strap herself in beside the pilot, another Kalr. "Have you taken any meds?" Another potential insult. Antinausea meds were available, and I'd known excellent, long-serving officers who for the whole length of their careers took them every time they got on a shuttle. None of them ever admitted to it.

The last traces of Lieutenant Tisarwat's smile vanished. "No, sir." Even. Calm.

"Pilot has some, if you need them." That ought to have gotten some kind of reaction.

And it did, though just the barest fraction of a second later than I'd expected. The hint of a frown, an indignant straightening of her shoulders, hampered by her seat restraints. "No, thank you, sir."

Flighty, Skaaiat Awer had said. She didn't usually misread people so badly. "I didn't request your presence, Lieutenant." I kept my voice calm, but with an edge of anger. Easy enough to do under the circumstances. "You're here only because Anaander Mianaai ordered it. I don't have the time or the resources to hand-raise a brand-new baby. You'd better get up to speed *fast*. I need officers who know what they're doing. I need a whole crew I can *depend* on."

"Sir," replied Lieutenant Tisarwat. Still calm, but now some earnestness in her voice, that tiny trace of frown deepening, just a bit. "Yes, sir."

Dosed with *something*. Possibly antinausea, and if I'd been given to gambling I'd have bet my considerable fortune that she was filled to the ears with at least one sedative. I wanted to pull up her personal record—*Mercy of Kalr* would have it by now. But the tyrant would see that I had pulled that record up. *Mercy of Kalr* belonged, ultimately, to Anaander Mianaai, and she had accesses that allowed her to control it. *Mercy of Kalr* saw and heard everything I did, and if the tyrant wanted that information she had only to demand it. And I didn't want her to know what it was I suspected. Wanted, truth be told, for my suspicions to be proven false. Unreasonable.

For now, if the tyrant was watching—and she was surely watching, through *Mercy of Kalr*, would be so long as we were in the system—let her think I resented having a baby foisted on me when I'd rather have someone who knew what they were doing.

I turned my attention away from Lieutenant Tisarwat. Forward, the pilot leaned closer to Five and said, quiet and oblique, "Everything all right?" And then to Five's responding, puzzled frown, "Too quiet."

"All this time?" asked Five. Still oblique. Because they were talking about me and didn't want to trigger any requests I might have made to Ship, to tell me when the crew was talking about me. I had an old habit—some two thousand years old—of singing whatever song ran through my head. Or humming. It had caused the crew some puzzlement and distress at first—this body, the only one left to me, didn't have a particularly good voice. They were getting used to it, though, and now I was dryly amused to see crew members disturbed by my silence.

"Not a peep," said the pilot to Kalr Five. With a brief sideways glance and a tiny twitch of neck and shoulder muscles

that told me she'd thought of looking back, toward Lieutenant Tisarwat.

"Yeah," said Five, agreeing, I thought, with the pilot's unstated assessment of what might be troubling me.

Good. Let Anaander Mianaai be watching that, too.

It was a long ride back to *Mercy of Kalr*, but Lieutenant Tisarwat never did use the bag or evince any discomfort. I spent the time sleeping, and thinking.

Ships, communications, data traveled between stars using gates, beacon-marked, held constantly open. The calculations had already been made, the routes marked out through the strangeness of gate space, where distances and proximity didn't match normal space. But military ships—like *Mercy of Kalr*—could generate their own gates. It was a good deal more risky—choose the wrong route, the wrong exit or entrance, and a ship could end up anywhere, or nowhere. That didn't trouble me. *Mercy of Kalr* knew what it was doing, and we would arrive safely at Athoek Station.

And while we moved through gate space in our own, contained bubble of normal space, we would be completely isolated. I wanted that. Wanted to be gone from Omaugh Palace, away from Anaander Mianaai's sight and any orders or interference she might decide to send.

When we were nearly there, minutes away from docking, Ship spoke directly into my ear. "Fleet Captain." It didn't need to speak to me that way, could merely desire me to know it wanted my attention. And it nearly always knew what I wanted without my saying it. I could connect to *Mercy of Kalr* in a way no one else aboard could. I could not, however, be *Mercy of Kalr*, as I had been *Justice of Toren*. Not without losing myself entirely. Permanently.

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“Ship,” I replied quietly. And without my saying anything else, *Mercy of Kalr* gave me the results of its calculations, made unasked, a whole range of possible routes and departure times flaring into my vision. I chose the soonest, gave orders, and a little more than six hours later we were gone.