

Logs by Walter Jon Williams

"Logs" is an excerpt from Conventions of War, Book Three of Dread Empire's Fall, which will be published in 2005 by HarperCollins (U.S.) and Simon & Schuster (U.K.)

LORD GARETH MARTINEZ ate alone in his office, staring sourly at the plump buttocks and chubby faces of the naked winged children that so oddly ornamented his office walls. He was served by his cook, Perry, and he dined alone.

It was normal for him to eat by himself. He was the squadron's tactical officer. A tactical officer was normally a lieutenant, and would mess in the wardroom, a kind of club for the lieutenants. Martinez, a full captain, couldn't take a meal in the wardroom without an invitation. Squadron Leader Chen had her own dining room, as did the flagship's Captain Gomberg. Unless someone invited him, or unless he invited others, his unique status on the ship ensured his solitude.

He had left the relatively carefree life of a lieutenant behind, but he missed the companionship that life had brought him. He would have traded that companionship for the loneliness of command, but the fact remained that he *wasn't* in command, and he had to dine alone anyway.

Perry cleared Martinez' plate and offered to pour more wine. Martinez placed his hand over the glass.

"Thank you, Perry," he said. Perry took the glass and left in silence.

Martinez called the tactical display onto the wall, just to make certain nothing new had appeared. Even though the naked children on the walls gazed at the displays as if in fascination, Martinez found there had been no change.

The flagship *Illustrious* and six other warships—"Chenforce"—were on an extended raid into Naxid space. Their task was to destroy enemy commerce, not to engage Naxid squadrons, and every enemy vessel at large in the Termaine system had been destroyed by Chenforce missiles within the first few days after the wormhole jump into the system. Chenforce would pass by Termaine itself in three days' time, and had already ordered the commander of the planet's ring station to jettison any ships docked on the ring. Their destruction would provide a close-up demonstration of the raiders' power.

The raid would last another two or three months. Martinez could look forward to many dinners alone in his office.

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He closed the display and gazed at his desk, at the images of his wife Terza that floated in the midnight surface. He thought of the child they had made together and he was suddenly possessed by a desperate exaltation, a hunger he could taste far more keenly than he had his meal. The idea of a child was a

wonder to him, and he felt a sudden blade-sharp longing.

Suddenly, desperately, he wanted to be with his family aboard the *Ensenada*, the Martinez family yacht that was taking them from abandoned Zanshaa to safety on Laredo. He wanted to be with Terza, to bask in her tranquil smile and watch the minute progress of the child growing within her. For a brief, intense moment he would have thrown away all ambition in exchange for a quiet life of familial bliss. There was a knock on the frame of his cabin door, and he looked up to see Lieutenant Chandra Prasad, the one person on *Illustrious* with whom he didn't want to be alone.

“Yes?” he said.

Chandra entered, closed the door behind her, and walked to his desk. She braced properly at the salute, shoulders flared back, chin high, throat bared—the posture imposed by the Shaa conquerors on all vanquished species, the better to allow their superiors to cut their throat if they felt so inclined.

“Yes, lieutenant?” Martinez said.

She relaxed and held out a thick envelope. “From Lord Captain Fletcher.”

The envelope was of a thick smooth paper of a faintly cranberry shade, no doubt custom-made for Captain Fletcher by the foremost paper-maker of Harzapid. The seal on the envelope had many quarterings, reflecting the

captain's illustrious heritage.

Martinez broke the seal and withdrew a card, which invited him to dine with the captain on the next day, to honor the birthday of Squadron Commander Chen. Exigencies of the service permitting, of course.

He looked up at Chandra. She had auburn hair, a pointed chin, and a mischievous glint in her long eyes.

"I'll come, of course," he said.

"Shall I wait for your reply?" Chandra asked.

Even though the captain's quarters were only a few paces away and the invitation was nothing a sane officer could possibly decline, custom of the service nevertheless required that

Martinez reply to a written invitation with a written reply.

“If you’re not required elsewhere,” he said.

The mischievous eyes sparkled. “I am entirely at the captain’s service,”

Chandra said.

Which was all too true. Lieutenant Lady Chandra Prasad was Captain Fletcher’s lover, a situation thorny with the potential for intrigue and service politics. That potential was all the greater for the fact that she and Martinez, at the time both obscure lieutenants of provincial origin, had been involved with each other some years earlier, a tempestuous relationship that featured mutual betrayals and a parting that had

left Martinez feeling more relieved than rueful. Martinez didn't know if Captain Fletcher was aware of his past involvement with Chandra, and the lack of certainty made him uneasy. His unease was increased by his knowledge of Chandra's character, which was ambitious, restless, and explosive.

Which was why he didn't want to be alone with her, certainly not for any length of time.

He got a card and envelope from his desk, and in his best hand wrote a brief acceptance. As he sealed the card in its envelope he had a mental picture of Fletcher touching the card stock with his sensitive fingers and shaking his head at its inferior quality.

Martinez offered the envelope to Chandra, who was looking down at Martinez' desktop with her head tilted, casting a critical glance at Terza's pictures.

"It's unfair that your wife is beautiful as well as rich and well-connected," she said.

"She's also talented, brave, and highly intelligent," Martinez said, and held the envelope clearly in Chandra's line of sight.

Her full lips gave an amused twist. She took the envelope, then glanced with her long eyes at the naked, winged boy-children fluttering on the office walls. "Do you like the view from your desk?" she asked. "The captain tells me they're

called *putti*, and they're an ancient artistic motif from Terra.”

“I wish they'd stayed there,” Martinez said.

“I imagine you'd prefer naked girls,” Chandra said. “I seem to remember that you liked naked girls very well.”

Martinez looked up at her and saw the invitation in her eyes. Suddenly he was aware of the nearness of her, the scent of her perfume. He looked away.

“Not in such quantity,” he said.

“Don't underestimate yourself. You juggled quite a number of us, back on Zarafan.”

He looked at her again. “It's not Zarafan any more.”

Now it was Chandra's turn to look

away. Her eyes passed over the chubby children. “Still,” she added, “it’s a good deal more cheerful than what the captain has in *his* private quarters.”

Martinez told himself that he wasn’t interested in what Chandra had seen in her visits to the captain’s chambers. “Is that so?” he found himself saying.

“Oh yes.” She raised an eyebrow. “It’s nothing like what he’s got in the public areas.”

Pornography, then, Martinez concluded. The thought depressed him. “Thank you, lieutenant,” he said. “I won’t take up any more of your time.”

“Oh,” Chandra said, “I don’t have anything to do. I’m not on watch for hours yet.”

“I have work,” Martinez said. Chandra gave a shrug, then braced to the salute. Martinez again called up the tactical display. Chandra left the room. Martinez glanced at the display and saw nothing new. In fact had no work, not until the squadcom found a task for him or something unexpected turned up on the tactical display.

Martinez called up hyper-tourney on the desktop computer and tried to lose himself within a game of strategy and abstract spacial relationships. He played both sides, and lost.

“I have always found tragedy to be the most human of the arts,” said Senior Captain Lord Gomberg Fletcher. “Other

species simply don't have a feeling for it."

"There's Lakaj Trallin's *The Messenger*," said Fulvia Kazakov, the first lieutenant.

"The choral parts are magnificent, as one might expect with the Daimong," the captain admitted, "but I find the psychology of Lord Ganmir and Lady Oppoda underdeveloped."

Captain Fletcher's dinner stretched the length of the ship's long afternoon. Every plate, saucer, cup, goblet, and salt cellar on the long table was blazoned with the captain's crest, and the table itself sat in the midst of painted revelry. The walls were covered with murals of banquets and banqueters: ancient

Terrans wearing sheets and eating on couches; humanoid creatures with horns and hairy, cloven-hoofed legs roistering with wine cups and bunches of grapes; a tall, commanding youth, crowned with leaves, surrounded by women carrying phallic staves. Statues stood in the corners, graceful seminude women bearing cups. A solid gold centerpiece crowned the table, armored warriors mysteriously standing guard over piles of brilliant metal fruits and nuts.

The captain was a renowned patron of the arts, and as an offspring of the eminent, preposterously rich Gomberg and Fletcher clans, he had the money to indulge himself. He had ornamented *Illustrious* with a lavish hand, sparing

no expense to create a masterpiece that would be the envy of the Fleet. The hull had been painted in a complex geometric pattern of brilliant white, pale green, and pink. The interior was filled with more geometric patterns broken by fantastic landscapes, trompe l'oeil, scenes of hunting and dancing, forests and vines, whimsical architecture and wind-tossed seascapes. Most of these works had been created in a graphics program, run off on long sheets, then mounted like wallpaper, but in the captain's own quarters the murals had been painted on, and were subsequently maintained, by a pudgy, graying, rather disheveled artist named Montemar Jukes, who Fletcher had brought aboard as a servant and

promptly rated Rigger First Class.

Jukes dined in the petty officers' lounge: no one present at the captain's dinner was anything less than an officer and a Peer. All glittered in their full dress uniforms, but that wasn't unusual, as the captain's wish was that all meals aboard *Illustrious* be formal, whether they were a special occasion or not. Lady Michi, the guest of honor, sat at the head of the table, with the rest below in order of precedence. She was a stocky woman with greying dark hair cut in straight bangs across her forehead. She was the aunt of Martinez' wife Michi, and as part of the marriage compact, arranged by the families, had agreed to take Martinez as her tactical officer, to

replace a lieutenant who had died of injuries. Fletcher and Martinez sat beneath Lady Michi, and below Fletcher was the first lieutenant, Fulvia Kazakov, her hair elaborately braided and tied into an elaborate knot behind her head, then transfixed with a pair of gold-embroidered chopsticks of camphor wood.

On Martinez' elbow was Chandra Prasad, her knee pressed familiarly to his. Below them were ranked the other four lieutenants, the ship's doctor, and the cadets

“There's Go-tul's *New Dynasty*,” Michi said. “A very moving tragedy, I've always thought.”

“I consider it flawed,” said Captain

Fletcher. He was a thin-faced man with ice-blue eyes that glittered from deep sockets and silvery hair set in unnaturally perfect waves. His manner combined the Fleet's assumption of unquestioned authority with the flawless ease of the high-caste Peer.

He was a complete autocrat, but perfectly relaxed about it.

“*New Dynasty* concerns a provincial Peer who travels to Zanshaa and comes within an ace of taking her place in elite society,” Fletcher continued. “But she fails, and in the end has to return home. She ends the story in her proper place.” He gave Lady Michi a questioning look. “How is that tragic? Genuine tragedy is the fall of someone born into the highest

place and then falling from it.”

Chandra's hand, under the table, dropped onto Martinez' thigh and gave it a ferocious squeeze. Martinez tried not to jump.

“Which is more tragic, lord captain,” Chandra asked, her voice a little high.

“A provincial who rises above her station and fails, or a provincial who rises and *succeeds*?”

Fletcher gave her a sharp look, and then his expression regained its accustomed poise. “The latter, I think,” he said.

Chandra dug her claws once more into Martinez' thigh. He could sense the anger vibrating in her. The other officers stiffened, their eyes on the drama being

played out between Chandra and the captain. They were all aware that she and Fletcher were lovers, and they all could see that the relationship might explode right at this moment, in front of them all.

It was like watching an accident, Martinez thought. You couldn't stop it, but you couldn't turn away.

“So provincials shouldn't try to rise in the world?” Chandra asked.

“Provincials should stay on their home worlds and let the High City families deal with affairs? The same families that nearly lost the empire to the rebels?” She looked at Martinez. “Where would the Fleet be if Captain Martinez had followed that advice?”

Though Martinez had to agree that the Fleet was improved by his presence, he preferred not to be used as an example. He knew perfectly well that his every word, uttered in his thick Laredo accent, condemned him as a provincial. He knew perfectly well that the Martinez clan were parvenus who had elbowed their way into marriages with the highest strata of Zanshaa High City. He knew as well that despite his success the captain considered him a freak of nature, something on a par with a bearded lady or a talking dog.

He knew, but he didn't particularly feel like rehashing it all at Michi Chen's birthday dinner, particularly since nothing he said or did would ever alter

the captain's mind.

“How much worse would our situation be without Captain Martinez, I'd like to know?” Chandra insisted.

“Captain Martinez,” said Fletcher easily, “isn't a tragic hero, so far as I know. We're discussing theater, not real life.” He gave a graceful inclination of his head toward Martinez. “Were a figure like Captain Martinez to appear on stage, it would be a tale of high adventure, surely, not the fall of the great.”

Chandra gave Fletcher a smouldering glare. “The great have abandoned Zanshaa and are running like hell from the enemy right now,” she said. “Do you think there'll ever be a tragedy about

that?” Her lip curled. “Or will it be a *farce*?”

“I think—” Michi began firmly, with the obvious intention of ending the discussion, but at that moment there was a respectful knock on the door. Martinez looked to see a detachment of the cruiser’s senior petty officers clustered in the doorway.

“We beg your pardon, my lady squadcom,” said Master Weaponer Gulik.

“We would like to make a presentation on the occasion of your birthday, if we may.”

“I would be honored, master weaponer,” Michi said.

Gulik—a small, dour, rat-faced man

—squeezed into the room past one of the cup-bearing statues and approached Michi's seat. He was followed by Master Engineer Thuc, a massive, muscled, slab-sided Terran with the goatee and curling mustachios of the senior petty officer. Behind these came the senior machinist, electrician, signaler, and the other petty officers in charge of the ship's departments.

“We wish to present you with this memento of your time aboard *Illustrious*, my lady,” Gulik said.

The memento was a scale model of the *Illustrious*, with the green, pink, and white of Fletcher's paint scheme minutely and exactly detailed. The model was mounted on a brass base

built in the cruiser's workshops. Michi thanked the deputation, and led the officers in a toast to the department heads. The deputation left, and the dinner resumed, one course after another, each reflecting the genius of Fletcher's personal chef, each course marked by toasts and compliments.

Martinez was aware of Chandra smouldering next to him, her leg jiggling up and down with impatience.

"You might have stood up for yourself," she told Martinez as he walked to his cabin after the feast.

"No one was attacking me," Martinez said. "The worst anyone said was that I wasn't a tragic hero, and I hope to hell that's true."

“Fletcher’s said a *lot* of things about you,” Chandra said.

“Yes,” Martinez said. He opened his cabin door, then turned to her. “But I’m not supposed to know that, am I? Because I’m not supposed to be on intimate terms with the captain’s girlfriend, am I?”

He closed the door on the mask of thwarted fury that had replaced Chandra’s face, made his way to his desk, and sat down. From around his neck he removed the disk of the Golden Orb, the empire’s highest decoration, and then opened the buttons on his dress tunic.

After the four-hour formal meal he felt like a bird stuffed and trussed for

roasting.

The winged children on the walls looked at him hungrily.

Chandra walked into Martinez' office in the middle of the afternoon watch and slid the door closed behind her. She looked at the game of hyper-tourney being played on Martinez' desk top and said, "Well, I'm free of the bastard at last."

Martinez looked up at her, his mind still filled with the intricacies of velocities and spacial relationships. "Congratulations," he said.

The color was high on Chandra's cheeks, and her eyes burned with fury. She paced back and forth in front of

Martinez' desk like a tigress whose feeding was arriving half an hour late.

"I finally asked him!" she proclaimed. "I asked him if he'd get me promoted—and he said he wouldn't!"

"I'm sorry," Martinez said. The words came reluctantly. He didn't want this scene taking place in his presence, and he didn't want to know any of the details of her relationship with the captain.

Doesn't she have any friends among the lieutenants? he found himself thinking. Doesn't she have anyone to talk to on this ship?

"Captains can't promote lieutenants," he said.

"This one can." Chandra said

savagely. “You know how those High City officers stick together—all he’d have to do is trade a favor with one of his cousins, Fletcher promotes the cousin’s cadet nephew in exchange for me getting my step.”

All that was true enough—Fletcher could have traded a favor with someone. That was how the high-caste Peers kept everything in their small circle.

“Bastard wants me to stay in my place,” Chandra said fiercely as she paced.

“Well, I *won't*. I just *won't*.”

“I didn’t understand how you got together with Fletcher in the first place.”

Chandra stopped her pacing. Her eyes gazed into her own past, a gaze thick

with contempt. "I'm the only officer on the ship who wasn't Fletcher's choice," she said. "He had someone else picked for my place but he didn't get to Harzapid before the war happened. When the squadron shipped out I got sent aboard. I didn't know anyone and—" She shrugged. "I tried to make myself agreeable to my captain." Her mouth drew up in a sneer. "I'd never met anyone like him. I thought he had an interesting mind." She barked out a laugh. "*Interesting mind!* He's as dull as a rusty spoon."

They looked at each other for a few brief seconds. Then Chandra took a half-step closer to Martinez' desk, her fingertips drifting over the black surface,

cutting through the holographic display of the hyper-tourney game.

“I could really use your help, Gare,” she said.

“I can’t promote you, either. You know that.”

An intense fire burned in Chandra’s eyes. “But your relatives can,” she said.

“Your father-in-law is on the Fleet Control Board and Michi Chen is his sister. Between the two of them they should be able to work an overdue promotion for a lieutenant.”

“I’ve told you before,” Martinez said. “I can’t do anything out here.”

She looked at him levelly. “Some day,” she said, “you’re going to need a friend in the service, and I’m going to *be*

that friend. I'm going to be the best and most loyal friend an officer ever had.”

Martinez had his doubts: Chandra's friendship seemed to come at a very high price. Though, professionally speaking, could think of no reason why Chandra shouldn't be promoted.

Other than the erratic and impulsive behavior, of course, and the chaotic love life.

But how bad was that, really? he asked himself. Compared with some of the captains he'd known, Chandra was practically a paragon.

Chandra, misunderstanding his silence, leaned forward and took his hand. Her fingers were warm in his palm. The hologram gleamed on her

tunic.

“Please, Gareth,” she said. “I really need you now.”

“I’ll speak to Lady Michi,” Martinez said. “I don’t know how much credit I’ve got with her, but I’ll try.”

“Thank you, Gareth.” She rested her hip on the desk and leaned across to kiss his cheek. Her scent flared in his senses. He stood, and dropped her hand.

“That won’t be necessary, lieutenant,” he said.

She looked at him for a moment out of her long eyes, and her look hardened. She straightened and regained her feet.

“As you wish, captain,” she said. She braced, her pointed chin held high.

“With the captain’s permission?”

“You are dismissed,” Martinez said. His mouth was dry.

She went to the door and slid it open.

“I meant what I said,” she said, “about being your friend.”

She was gone, leaving the door behind her. Someone walked past—Lord Shane Coen, Michi’s red-haired signals lieutenant—and Coen cast a curious glance into the room.

Martinez nodded at him in what he hoped was a brisk, military fashion, and sat down behind the game of hyper-tourney.

It was a while before he could get his mind on the game.

Three watches ticked by, with nothing

for Martinez to do but sleep, spend his time at hyper-tourney, check the tactical display to see if anything had changed, and stare at Terza's picture in the surface of his desk. No one invited Martinez to dine. He considered asking the lieutenants to an informal cocktail party, an alternative to the full-dress dinners Fletcher had imposed on the cruiser, but he then reflected that he'd have to invite Chandra, and decided against it.

Martinez glanced up at the sound of purposeful footsteps, and looked up to see Captain Lord Gomberg Fletcher standing in the door of his office. Fletcher wore his full dress uniform, with white gloves and the ceremonial

sickle-shaped knife at his waist.

Martinez jumped to his feet and braced. "Lord captain!" he said. Fletcher looked at him from his deep-set eyes. "I'd be obliged if you'd join me, Captain Martinez."

"Certainly, my lord." Martinez began to walk around the desk, then hesitated.

"Should I change into full dress, my lord?"

"That won't be necessary, lord captain. Please come along, if you please."

Martinez left his office and joined the captain, who was accompanied also by Lord Sabir Mersenne, the fourth lieutenant, and Marsden, the captain's short, bald secretary, both also in full

dress. Without another word, Fletcher turned and began walking down the corridor, the others following. Martinez wondered if he should have worn full dress when eating breakfast by himself, or at least should be embarrassed that he hadn't.

Fletcher's silver-embossed scabbard clanked faintly on the end of its chain. Martinez had never seen the captain wear his knife, but then he'd never accompanied Fletcher on an inspection before. Perhaps the extreme formality was a part of the captain's style.

The party went down two decks, leaving behind officers' country and the haunts of the enlisted. The captain marched to a hatch and knocked with a

gloved hand. It was the hatch, Martinez knew, that led to the engine spaces. The hatch was opened by Master Engineer Thuc, whose towering figure nearly filled the doorway before he stepped back to reveal the engine control room. Behind the line of acceleration cages, beneath murals showing strong-thewed characters working with huge levers and winches on some impossibly antique machinery, the control room crew were lined up, braced, and spotlessly turned out. Apparently Captain Fletcher had asked Martinez to accompany him on one of his frequent inspections.

The captain was a demon for inspections and musters, and usually inspected some part of the ship every

day that *Illustrious* wasn't engaged in crucial military business. Today was the engine division's turn, but Martinez could imagine no reason why he had been invited along. He wasn't a line officer, but staff, and not in Fletcher's chain of command—the state of *Illustrious*' engines was really none of his business.

So while he watched Fletcher and his two subordinates crawl over the engine control room, passing white-gloved fingers over the glossy surfaces, Martinez wondered why he had been summoned to observe this ritual, and paranoia soon began to scuttle through his mind on chitinous insect legs. Surely this had to do with Chandra Prasad.

Surely Fletcher suspected Martinez of being her lover, and the inspection was part of an elaborate revenge plot.

The captain found flaws—a suspicious creak in an acceleration cage that indicated a worn part, a scratch on the transparent cover of a gauge, an emergency radiation suit carelessly stowed—and then the party went on to look at the engine department's storage lockers, at the heavily shielded antihydrogen compartments, and—after donning ear protection—at the massive reactor that powered the ship, and the huge turbopumps that operated the thermal exchange system. The experience of the chamber was odd. Martinez knew that the noise was

hellish, but his earphones automatically pulsed out sound waves that canceled that of the pumps, and all he heard in his ears was a distant white noise. But his *body* reacted to the sound: he could feel the vibration in his bones and in his soft organs, and when he touched a wall or pipe.

Fletcher stroked the pumps with white-gloved fingers, found them clean, and then returned to the engine control room so that his questions might be heard. Thuc followed the captain in docile silence, his muscular body looming over Fletcher's shoulder except when he darted forward to open a hatch or a locker door.

“You've changed the filters on the

main pump recently?”

“Just after Protipanu, my lord,” Thuc said. “We aren’t due for another change for two months.”

“Very good. And the pump itself?”

“We’ll swap it out in another...” Thuc considered his answers, his eyes focused somewhere above his left shoulder “...thirty-eight days, my lord.”

“Very well.” The captain tugged his white gloves over his wrists and smoothed the fine kidskin over his fingers. “I’ll just inspect your crew, then.”

He marched down the line of engine crew, stopping to make an occasional comment about dress or deportment. At the end of the line he encountered Thuc

again, and nodded.

“Very good, Thuc,” he said.
“Excellent marks, as always.”

“Thank you, lord captain.” An hint of a smile touched his lips. When Fletcher moved it was so fast that Martinez failed to see it properly and could only reconstruct the action later, out of fragments of memory. The sickle-shaped blade sang from the sheath, whistled through the air, and buried itself in Thuc’s throat. A crescent of arterial blood splattered the mural behind Thuc’s head.

Thuc was too large a man to fall all at once. First his shoulders dropped, and then his knees gave way. His barrel chest sank, then his stomach sagged, and

then—as Fletcher’s knife cleared his throat—Thuc’s head lolled down. It was only then that Thuc fell like a tower of wooden blocks kicked by a careless child. Martinez’ heart began to beat again, a roaring in his ears. He looked at Fletcher in shock.

Fletcher looked expressionlessly at the body with his ice-blue eyes, and took a step away from the spreading pool of red. He flicked scarlet from his blade with a movement of his wrist.

The smell of blood hit Martinez’ senses, and he bit down hard on the stomach that was trying to quease its way past his throat.

“Marsden,” Fletcher said, “call the doctor to examine the body, and have

him bring a stretcher party to carry it away. Cho,” to a staring petty officer, “you are now in charge of the engineering department. Once the doctor is done, call the off-duty watch to help you police this ... untidiness. In the meantime, I’d appreciate a cleaning cloth.”

Cho nearly ran to one of the storage lockers, returned with a cloth, and handed it with quaking fingers to the captain. Fletcher used it to clean the knife blade and mop some of the blood on his tunic, then threw the cloth to the deck. A pale-faced young recruit swayed, then toppled to the floor in a dead faint. Fletcher ignored him, and turned again to Cho.

“Cho,” he said, “I trust you will maintain Engineer Thuc’s high standards.” He nodded to the control room crew, then turned and made his way out. Martinez followed, his nerves leaping. He wanted to flee Fletcher’s company, to barricade himself in his quarters with a pistol and several bottles of brandy, the first for protection and the second for comfort.

He looked left and right at Marsdan and Mersenne, and saw that their expressions were mirrors of his own thoughts.

“Captain Martinez,” Fletcher said. The words made Martinez start.

“Yes, lord captain?” He was moderately surprised that he managed

three whole words without stumbling, screaming, or falling into dumb silence. Fletcher reached the companionway that led to the deck above, and he turned to Martinez.

“Do you know why I invited you along this morning?”

“No, my lord.”

Martinez had managed another three words. He was making real progress. Soon he might be walking on his own and tying his own shoelaces. He found himself very aware of the captain's right hand, the hand that would reach across his body to draw the knife. He found his own hands ready to lurch forward and seize Fletcher's forearm if the hand approached the hilt. He hoped that

Fletcher was not aware that Martinez was so focused of Fletcher's right hand. He tried not to stare at it.

"I asked you along so that you could report to Squadron Commander Chen,"

Fletcher said, "and tell her exactly what just occurred."

"Yes, lord captain."

"I don't want her hearing a rumor, or getting a distorted version."

Distorted version. As if there was a version that would make this at all comprehensible.

Martinez searched his numbed mind and found a question, but the question required more than three words and he took a second or two to organize his thoughts.

“My lord,” he asked, “do you wish me to give Lady Michi the reason for your, your action?”

The captain straightened slightly. A superior smile touched his lips.

“Only that it was my privilege,” he said.

A chill shimmered up Martinez’ spine.

“Very good, lord captain,” he said.

Fletcher turned and led up the companionway. At the top he met the ship’s doctor, Lord Yuntai Xi, who was followed by his assistant carrying his bag.

“The engine control room, lord doctor,” Fletcher said. “A fatality.”

The doctor gave him a curious look,

and nodded.

“Thank you, lord captain. Can you tell me—?”

“Best you see for yourself, lord doctor. I won’t detain you.”

Xi stroked his little white beard, then nodded and began his descent of the companion. Fletcher led the party up three decks, to the deck he shared with the squadron commander, then turned to face the two lieutenants. “Thank you, my lords,” he said. “I won’t be needing you any farther.” He turned to his secretary.

“Marsden, I’ll need you to enter the death in the log.”

Martinez walked with Marsenne to the squadcom’s door. He felt a tingling in his back, as if he were expecting the

captain to draw his knife and lunge at him. He didn't quite dare to look at the other lieutenant, and he had a feeling that Marsenne wasn't looking at him, either.

He came to the squadcom's door, and without saying anything to Lieutenant Mersenne he stopped at the door and knocked.

Lady Michi's orderly, Vandervalk, opened the door, and Martinez asked to see the squadcom. Vandervalk said she'd check and left him waiting, then returned a few minutes later to say that the lady squadcom would meet Martinez in her office. Lady Michi came into her office a few minutes later, carrying her morning tea in a delicate gold-rimmed cup on which glowed the Chen family

crest. Martinez braced. The sensation of air on his exposed throat gave him a sudden shiver.

“Have a seat,” Michi said. Her tone was abstracted, her gaze focused on papers that waited on her desk. She sat in her straight-backed chair.

“How can I help you, captain?”

“Lord Captain Fletcher,” Martinez began, and then his voice failed him. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Lord Captain Fletcher asked that I inform you that he’s just executed Master Engineer Thuc.”

Suddenly he had the squadcom’s full attention. She placed her cup very carefully on a felt coaster, then looked up. “Executed? How?”

“With his top-trimmer. During an inspection. It was ... very sudden.”

He realized now that Fletcher must have rehearsed the move. You couldn't just cut a throat that efficiently unless you had practiced. He imagined Fletcher alone in his cabin, drawing the knife over and over as he slashed imaginary throat. The cold blue eyes glittering, the superior smile on his lips. Michi's gaze intensified. “Did Captain Fletcher give a reason?”

“No, my lady. He said only that it was his privilege.”

Michi softly drew in her breath. “I see,” she said.

Fletcher was technically correct: any officer had the authority to execute any

subordinate at any time, for any reason. There were practical reasons why this didn't happen very often, including lawsuits in civil court from the victim's patron clan; and usually when such a thing happened, the officer produced an elaborate justification. Fletcher very simply stood on his privilege. That had to be very, very rare. Michi turned her eyes deliberately away and took a very deliberate sip of her tea.

“Do you have anything to add?” she said.

“Just that the captain planned it in advance. He wanted me there to witness it and to report to you.”

“Nothing in the inspection could have provoked it?”

“No, my lady. The captain complimented Thuc on his department before killing him.”

Again Michi drew in her breath. Her eyes grew thoughtful.

“You can think of no reason?”

Martinez hesitated. “The captain and Lieutenant Prasad ... ended ... their relationship yesterday. But if he was going to kill anyone over it, I don’t know why it would be Thuc.”

Maybe Thuc was handy, he thought.

That night Martinez wore a virtual headset and projected the starscape from outside *Illustrious* into his mind, hoping it would aid his sleeping mind in achieving a tranquility that had eluded

him all day. It seemed to work, until he came awake with his heart pounding and, in his mind, the black emptiness of space turned the color of blood.

Breakfast was a meal eaten without noticing the contents of his plate. He dreaded hearing the businesslike sound of heels on the deck, Fletcher and Marsden and Mersenne, marching to his door to summon Martinez to another inspection. Even though he half expected the sound his nerves gave a surprised, jangled leap as he heard it. Martinez was on his feet and already half-braced when Fletcher appeared in his open door, wearing full dress, white gloves, and the knife in its curved, gleaming scabbard..

“Captain Martinez, I’d be obliged if you’d join us.”

Cold dread settled over Martinez like a rain-saturated cloak.

“Yes, my lord,” he said.

As he walked to the door he felt lightheaded, possessed by the notion that everything from this point was predestined, that he was fated to be a witness to another inexplicable tragedy without being able to intervene, that within an hour or two he would again be reporting to Michi Chen while somewhere in the ship crew scrubbed blood from the deck..

Once again Fletcher wanted him as a witness. He wished Fletcher had just brought a camera instead.

Again Fletcher's party consisted of himself and two others. One was Madsden the secretary, but Mersenne had been replaced by Lord Ahmad Husayn, the weapons officer. That told Martinez where the party was headed, and he wasn't surprised when Fletcher took a turn two bulkheads down, and headed through a hatch into Missile Battery Three.

Gulik, the rat-faced little Master Weaponer, stood there braced along with his crew. Once more Martinez watched as Fletcher conducted a detailed inspection, including not just the launchers and loaders but the elevator systems used to move personnel along the battery, and the large spider-shaped

damage-control robots used for repairs during high-g, when the crew themselves would be strapped in their acceleration couches and barely able to breathe or think, let alone move. Fletcher checked the hydraulic reservoirs of the robots, inspected the radiation-hardened bunker where the weaponers would shelter in combat, and then had two missiles drawn from their tubes. The missiles were painted the same green, pink, and white pattern as the exterior of the ship, and looked less like weapons of war than strange examples of design, art objects commissioned by an eccentric patron, or perhaps colorful candies intended for the children of giants. The captain dusted

them with his white-gloved fingers—he expected missiles in their tubes to be as clean as his own dinner table—then had them reinserted and asked Gulik when the loaders had last been overhauled.

At last Fletcher inspected the weaponers themselves, the line of immaculately-dressed pulpies, arranged in order of rank with the petty officers at the end.

Martinez felt his perceptions expanding through the battery, sensing every last cable, every last switch. He seemed hyperaware of everything that occurred within that enclosed space, from the scent of oil on the elevator cables to the nervous way Husayn flexed his hands when the captain wasn't

looking to the sheen of sweat on Master Weaponer Gulik's upper lip.

Gulik stood at the end of the line, properly braced. Fletcher moved with cold deliberation up the line, his practiced eyes noting a worn seam on a coverall, a tool inserted in its loop wrong way round, a laundry tag visible above a shirt collar. Martinez' nerves flashed hot and cold. Fletcher paused in front of Gulik and gazed at the man for a long, searching moment with his deep blue eyes.

“Very good, Gulik,” Fletcher said. “You're keeping up your standards.”

And then Fletcher, incredibly, turned and walked away, his brisk footsteps sounding on the deck, his knife clanking

faintly on the end of its chain. Martinez, head swimming, followed dumbly with the rest of the captain's party. Out of the corner of his eye, as he stepped over the hatch sill, he saw Gulik sag with relief.

Fletcher led up two companionways, then turned to Martinez.

“Thank you, captain,” he said. The superior smile twitched again at the corners of his mouth. “I appreciate your indulging my fancies.”

“Yes, my lord,” Martinez said, because “You're welcome” wasn't quite the effect he was after.

Martinez went to his office and sat behind his desk and thought about what he'd just witnessed. Fletcher had called him to witness an inspection at which

nothing unusual had occurred.

Fletcher makes scores of inspections every year, Martinez thought. But he's only killed *one* petty officer. So how eccentric is that, *really*?

An hour or so later Lieutenant Coen, Michi's red-haired signals officer, arrived with an invitation to join the squadcom for dinner. Martinez accepted, and over a cup of cold green melon soup informed Michi that nothing out of the ordinary had occurred at the morning's inspection.

Michi didn't comment, but instead asked about contingency plans for the squadron's nearest approach to Termaine, the next day. Martinez outlined his plans while frustration

bubbled at the base of his spine.

What are you going to *do*? he wanted to ask. But Michi only spoke about the Termaine approach.

At the end of the meal he was more baffled than ever.

That night he came awake out of a disordered dream to find himself floating. He glanced at the amber numerals of the chronometer that glowed in a corner of the wall display and saw that it was time for a course reorientation around one of the Termaine system's gas giants, a final slingshot that would send Chenforce racing past the enemy-held planet.

Martinez watched the seconds tick past, and then the engines fired and his

mattress rose to meet him.

Two hours later his orderly, Alikhan, woke him with a breakfast of coffee, salt mayfish, and one of Perry's fresh brioche. After this Alikhan began assisting him into his vac suit in preparation for the walk to the Flag Officer Station. Everyone on the ship knew the hour at which general quarters would be called, and most were now struggling into their vac suits, or would be shortly. The suit's checked its own systems and displayed the result on its sleeve display: all was well. Martinez took a last sip of coffee, then took his helmet from Alikhan and dismissed him to go to quarters, where he'd don his own suit with the aide of another

weaponer.

Martinez clomped down the corridor, awkward in the suit, and dropped down two decks to the Flag Officer Station. Michi was already present, along with her aides Li and Coen. Michi stood with her back to him, her helmet off, her hair tucked into the cap that held her earphones and the projectors of the virtual array. The unfixed chinstrap dangled on her shoulder. Her head was bent, and one hand was pressed over an ear as if to aid herself in hearing.

Even in the bulky suit Martinez could see the tension in her stance. "Stand by," she said, and swung around to Martinez, her face a mask of furious calculation. He braced.

“My lady.”

“I need you to take command of *Illustrious* immediately. Something’s happened to Captain Fletcher.”

“Has he...?” Martinez began. *Run amuck with a kitchen knife, perhaps?* He couldn’t seem to find a way to phrase the question tactfully. Michi’s words were clipped and curt, nearly savage. “There’s a report he’s dead,” she said. “Now get to Command and take charge before things to completely to hell.”

Martinez shifted to the channel that allowed him to address everyone in Command, then paused to collect his thoughts. It was difficult to pass on information that he did not himself

possess. He decided to keep it simple as possible.

“This is Captain Martinez,” he said. “I wished to inform you that the lady squadcom instructed me to take command of *Illustrious*, as Captain Fletcher has been reported ill. I don’t know any details, but I’m sure that Captain Fletcher will return to command as soon as circumstances permit.”

Well, he thought as he settled into his couch, *that* was as bland an announcement as he could possibly imagine. He doubted the curiosity of the watch was in any way softened.

Martinez then called up the tactical display and familiarized himself with the situation: Chenforce on its way to pass

by Termaine, the two pinnaces and their squadrons of missiles ahead, Termaine surrounded by a cloud of ships that had been cast off and abandoned. If the enemy commander was preparing any act of defiance, he had yet to launch it.

The day crawled by like an arthritic animal looking for hole to die in. Every so often the icons on the tactical display would move very slightly in one direction or another, and then everything would be still again.

Crewed pinnaces launched by the warships flashed past Termaine, cameras and sensors sweeping the planet's ring for hidden weapons or warships, the data fed to the sensor operators in Command and Auxiliary

Command. Lieutenant Kazakov correlated the data and informed Termaine that the enemy were to all appearances obeying Lady Michi's commands. The Naxids had been building no less than six warships on Termaine's ring, but none had been completed and all had been cast adrift.

He watched the missile bursts blossom in the display, as the expanding, overlapping spheres of superheated plasma momentarily obscured Termaine and its ring. When the plasma cooled and dissipated, the ring was still there, presumably to the relief of everyone on the planet or its ring.

Martinez watched the tactical situation crawl along for another half

hour, then called Michi to ask for permission to secure from general quarters. This time he spoke to her personally.

“Permission granted,” she said.

“How is Captain Fletcher?”

“He’s dead. I’ll need you and Lieutenant Kazakov to meet in my office as soon as we secure from quarters.”

“Yes, my lady.” He paused in hopes that Lady Michi would volunteer more information, but once again she remained silent.

“May I ask how the captain died?” he said finally.

He was prepared to wager that Fletcher had hanged himself. Michi’s tone turned resentful. “Fell and hit his

head on a corner of his desk, apparently. We don't know any more than that because we went to quarters soon after the body was discovered. Doctor Xi had the body moved to sick bay, and then had to go to quarters himself, so there hasn't been an examination.”

“Would you like me to make an announcement to the ship's crew?”

“No. I'll do that myself. For now, I want to see you in my office.”

“Very good, my lady.”

Michi ended the communication, and Martinez shifted to the channel that enabled him to speak with others in Command.

“Secure from general quarters,” he ordered. “Well done, everyone.”

He took off his helmet and took a breath of air free of the smell of suit seals. As the tone to secure from quarters buzzed through the ship, he unwebbed and stood.

“Who’s normally standing watch at this hour?” he asked.

Chandra pulled the helmet off her head and wiped a bit of sweat off her forehead with a gloved hand. “The premiere, lord captain,” she said.

“Lieutenant Kazakov is called elsewhere. If you’re not too tired, Lieutenant Prasad, I’d be obliged if you’d take the premiere’s watch.”

Chandra nodded. “Very good, my lord.”

“Lieutenant Prasad has the watch!”

Martinez said, loud enough for anyone to hear.

“I have the watch!” Chandra agreed, loudly.

Martinez stalked out of the room. The horsebacked officers on the walls watched with unfriendly, calculating eyes.

“I’m appointing you to command *Illustrious*,” Michi said. “You’re the only captain we’ve got.”

Martinez wished she had phrased it so that he didn’t sound like so much like a desperate last resort, but the warm, exuberant pleasure of having a command again soon erased any discomfort.

“Yes, my lady,” he said, glowing.

“Congratulations, my lord,” said Fulvia Kazakov. She sat next to Martinez, across the desk from the squadcom. Her dark hair was knotted as usual behind her head, but she’d changed hurriedly after *Illustrious* secured from quarters, and hadn’t had time to stick the usual pair of inlaid chopsticks through the knot.

“Thank you,” Martinez said, and then realized he should try not to beam quite so much. “A shame it had to happen after such a tragedy,” he added.

“Quite.” Michi said. She touched her comm panel. “Is Garcia there yet?”

“Yes, my lady.” The voice of her orderly Vandervalk.

“Send him in.”

Rigger First Class Garcia entered and braced. Under the loose supervision of the Military Constable Officer, Garcia was the head of the ship's constabulary, all three of them, and was a youngish man, a little plump, wearing a mustache. He had never been in the flag officer's office before, at least judging by the way his eyes kept turning to the ornamental fluted bronzed pillars, the bronze statues of naked Terran women holding baskets of fruit, and the murals filled with poised human figures sharing a landscape with fantastic beasts.

“You've finished your investigation?” Michi said.

“I've interviewed Captain Fletcher's staff,” Garcia said. “I wasn't able to see

them all personally, but I was able to speak to them through comm when we were at quarters.”

“Report, then.”

Garcia looked at his sleeve display, where he'd obviously stored the particulars. “The captain worked with Warrant Officer Marsden on ship's business till about 25:01 yesterday,” he said. “His orderly, Narbonne, was the last person to see him. He helped the captain undress, took his uniform to be brushed and his shoes to be polished. That was about 25:26.”

Garcia gave a polite cough that indicated his willingness to be interrupted by a question, and when there was none continued.

“Narbonne returned at 05:26 this morning to wake the captain, bring him his uniform and help him dress, but when he entered the captain’s room he saw that the captain wasn’t in his bed. He assumed Captain Fletcher was working in his office, so he put the uniform and the shoes on the rack, then returned to the orderly room and waited to be called.

“A few minutes later the captain’s cook, Baca, brought Captain Fletcher’s breakfast into the dining room. The captain wasn’t there, but that wasn’t unusual, and Baca also withdrew.”

“Neither of them looked in the office?” Michi asked.

“No. The captain doesn’t—didn’t—like to be disturbed when working.”

“Continue.”

“About 06:01 Baca returned and saw the captain’s breakfast hadn’t been touched. He knew we’d be going to quarters shortly, so he paged the Captain Fletcher to see if he’d be wanting anything at all to eat, and when there was no answer he went into the office and found the captain dead.”

Again Garcia coughed politely to provide a convenient break in his narrative, and this time Michi obliged him.

“What did Baca do then?”

“He paged Narbonne. Then he and Narbonne put their heads together and paged me.”

“You?” Martinez was startled. “Why

did they page the constabulary? Did they suspect foul play?”

Garcia seemed a little embarrassed. “I think they were afraid they might be blamed for the captain’s death. They wanted me there so they could ... assure me they weren’t responsible.”

Martinez supposed that was plausible. He could understand their reluctance to call an officer when they were standing over the body of their captain.

“I arrived on the scene at 06:14,” Garcia continued. “The captain was cold and had clearly been dead for some time. I paged the doctor and a stretcher party, and then called Lady Michi.” His eyes turned to the squadcom. “You ordered me to conduct an investigation. I

told Narbonne and Baca to return to the orderly room, and then waited for the doctor. Once the doctor and stretcher party arrived, Doctor Xi pronounced the captain dead and took the body to sick bay. I looked over the office and, well, it was clear what happened.”

“And what happened was?” Michi prompted.

“Captain Fletcher got out of bed some time during the night, went into his office, fell and hit his head. There was an obvious wound on his right temple, and the corner of his desk had some blood, hair, and a bit of skin adhering.” For some reason Garcia had trouble pronouncing the word “adhering,” but he managed it on the third try.

“My suspicion is that the captain got caught off-balance during the course change early this morning. There was one at 03:46. There was a moment of weightlessness, and then when acceleration resumed he was caught wrong-footed. Or maybe he was floating weightless in the room, and resumption of gravity caught him by surprise. Doctor Xi might be able to confirm the timing.”

Michi saw Martinez’ surprised look out of the corner of her eye. “Captain Martinez?” she said. “Did you have a question?”

Martinez was startled. “No, my lady,” he said quickly. “I just remembered that I woke during that course change. I wonder ... if I heard something.”

He groped through his memory, but failed to grasp whatever it was that had brought him awake.

“It was most likely the zero-gravity alarm that woke you up,” Kazakov said. Martinez surrendered his quest through his memories. “Very possible, my lady.”

Michi returned her attention to Garcia. “Was the captain dressed?” she asked.

“No, my lady. He wore pajamas, a dressing gown, and slippers.”

“I have no more questions,” Michi said. She glanced at Martinez and Kazakov. “Is there anything else?”

“I have a question,” Martinez said. “Did you take any notice of what the captain was working on?”

“Working?”

“If he was in his office, I’d suppose he’d be working.”

“He wasn’t working at anything. The display wasn’t turned on, and there were no papers on the desk.”

“Where was his captain’s key?”

Garcia opened his mouth, closed it, and opened again. “I don’t know, my lord.”

“Was it slotted into the desk?”

“I don’t think so.”

Martinez looked at Michi. “That’s all,” he said. “I think.”

Michi turned to the petty officer. “Thank you, Garcia,” she said. He braced and made his way out. Michi gave Martinez a look. “That was good thinking, about the captain’s key. It’s got

access to practically everything.”

She turned to her desk and began entering codes. “I’ll cancel the key’s privileges.”

This proved to be unnecessary, as the next person to report was Doctor Xi, who put Captain Fletcher’s key on the desk in front of the squadron commander.

“I found this on a cord around his neck,” Xi said.

Lord Yuntai Xi was a small man with a well-tended white beard, salt-and-pepper hair that hung over his collar, and a little pot belly. The Xi clan were clients of the Gombergs and he had known the captain from boyhood. He spoke in a steady tenor voice, but there

was a deep sadness in his brown eyes.

“Because we’ve spent most of the last hours at general quarters, I’ve been able to conduct only a superficial investigation. There is a substantial depression on the right side of the skull, and the skin is torn, and skull fracture is the obvious cause of death. There are no other wounds. I made a small incision under the ribs on the right side and inserted a thermometer into the liver, and from that I calculate that the time of death was 04:01, plus or minus half an hour.”

04:01 was only seven minutes after the change of course that might have caused the captain’s stumble and death.

“Thank you, lord doctor,” Michi said.

“I think in view of the questions that will inevitably be raised, I think an autopsy will be required.”

Xi closed his eyes and sighed. “Very well, my lady.”

After Xi left, Michi took up Fletcher’s key and held the thin plastic strip thoughtfully in her hand.

“Do you wish me to make an announcement to the ship’s company?”

Martinez asked.

“No. I’ll do it.” She tossed the key into the rubbish. “That’s a bad coincidence,” she said.

“Yes, my lady,” said Kazakov. Her expression was thoughtful.

“Coincidence?” Martinez repeated.

“First Kosinic,” Kazakov explained,

“and then Captain Fletcher.”

Kosinic had been Lady Michi's first tactical officer, and unusually for a staff officer had been a commoner, not a Peer. He had died early in Chenforce's journey from Harzapid to Zanshaa, and his death provided an opening on the staff that Martinez had jumped to fill; and he joined the squadron later, at Seizho.

“Coincidence?” Martinez said again. “I don't understand what you mean by coincidence. I thought Lieutenant Kosinic died from wounds received at Harzapid.”

“No.” Michi's glare was savage. “He fell and hit his head.”

Martinez returned to his cabin to find his orderly Alikhan, assisted by his other servants Espinosa and Ayutano, were packing his belongings. Alikhan turned to him as he paused in the doorway. He was a tall, iron-haired man, a thirty-year veteran who had retired with the rank of Master Weaponer, and who had returned to the Fleet in Martinez' service.

"I presume we will be moving to the captain's cabin, my lord," he said.

"I suppose we will." Martinez hadn't actually got that far in his thinking. Nor was there any point in wondering how Alikhan had known of the vacancy in the captain's quarters. Even though no announcement had been made, everyone on the ship might well know by now.

“We’ve removed your staff tabs from all your tunics except for the one you’re wearing now,” Alikhan said. “If you’d care to give me your jacket, my lord?”

Martinez changed into another tunic and stepped into his sleeping cabin. Alikhan and his mates had nearly finished the job, remarkably efficient considering the amount of gear an officer was supposed to carry with him from one posting to the next.

“Are the captain’s belongings also being packed?” he asked.

“Everything but what was in his office,” said Alikhan. “There’s a constable on guard there.”

“Right,” Martinez said. He turned, left his cabin, buttoned up his collar, and

marched down the corridor to Fletcher's office. The constable there braced as he entered.

“Come with me, constable,” he told her, and walked through the office, deliberately turning his eyes from the desk with the blood and the scrapings of Fletcher's scalp. He entered Fletcher's sleeping cabin, stopped in the doorway, and gaped.

Something Chandra said had led him to conclude that he'd find erotica on Fletcher's walls, but Fletcher hadn't adorned his private room with anything so ordinary. In place of the bright tile work or classically balanced frescos Fletcher had placed elsewhere on his *Illustrious*, in the sleeping cabin the

walls were paneled in ancient dark wood. The wood was rough-hewn and scarred and had never been painted or polished. Presumably it had been fireproofed as Fleet regulations required, but otherwise it looked as if it had been acquired from some timeworn ruin of a house, a timbered hulk survived from a distant, desolate dark age. The ceiling panels might have been equally as old but were in a different style, dark wood again and roughly hewn, but polished to a mellow glow. The floor was laid with mud-colored tiles with geometrical patterns in faded yellow. Lights were recessed into crude copper sconces. Small dark old pictures sat on the walls in metal frames that winked

dully of gold or silver.

Dominating the far wall was the life-sized figure of a man, cast apparently in porcelain. The man had been savagely tortured and then hung on a tree to die. Cuts and blood and the marks of burning tongs were vivid in the translucent porcelain flesh and rendered in immaculate detail by the artist. Despite the many wounds and the agonized posture, the clean-shaven face of the man was serene and unearthly, with unnaturally large dark eyes that wrapped partly around the sides of the head. His hair had been braided in long ringlets that hung to his shoulders. As Martinez took a step closer, he saw that the figure had been lashed by metal bands to what

appeared to a chunk of a perfectly genuine tree.

He looked in amazement from the object on the wall to the two servants who stood braced by open trunks half-filled with the captain's belongings.

“What is *that*?” he couldn't stop himself from asking.

“Part of Captain Fletcher's collection, my lord.”

The answer came from the older of the two, a gray-haired man with a long nose and a mobile, liquid mouth.

“You're Narbonne?” Martinez asked.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Stand by a moment.”

Martinez paged Marsden, the captain's secretary. When the secretary

arrived, Martinez turned to him.

“I want a complete inventory taken of all Captain Fletcher’s belongings,” he said. “I want that signed by you, and witnessed by everyone here, including —” He nodded toward the guard. “Your name?”

“Huang, my lord.”

“Including Huang.”

Marsden nodded his bald head. “Yes, my lord.”

“I’ll try to access the captain’s safe so that we can inventory the contents as well.”

“Very good, my lord.”

Getting into the captain’s safe proved more difficult than Martinez expected. A combination was available in records

available to the captain, but Fletcher had changed the numbers at least once since he'd taken command, and the old combination was no longer valid. Martinez got Fletcher's captain's key from Michi, but that didn't serve, either. In the end Martinez had to get Master Machinist Gawbyan and an assistant to drill the safe. Gawbyan, who had a truly spectacular pair of mustachios that curled so high and broadly they nearly met his eyebrows, settled grimly to work, and when the safe was finally open the contents were uninteresting: some money, a beautifully made custom pistol with a box of ammunition, some bank records, notes on investments, and a pair of small boxes. One box contained

a small, frail old book written in some incomprehensibly ancient alphabet. The other box held a carved white jade statue of a nearly naked four-armed woman dancing atop a skull, a sight that wasn't very shocking after the sight of the tortured man lashed to the tree.

Martinez supposed the book and the statue were valuable, so he decided to keep them in his own safe once Gawbyan finished repairing the damage he'd just inflicted. "Make a note," Martinez told Marsden, "that I've kept in my own possession a small book, and a small statue of a woman."

"Very good, my lord," Marsden said, and wrote on his datapad. He took the objects to the safe in his own office, and

on his return encountered Doctor Xi coming up the companion, climbing amid the faint scent of disinfectant. Xi braced rather apologetically, then said, "I was on my way to report to Lady Michi."

"Yes?"

His sad eyes contemplated Martinez for a moment, then grew hard. "Join me if you like."

Martinez led the doctor to Lady Michi's anteroom, and stepped in to find Lady Ida Li behind the desk. "Captain Martinez and Doctor Xi to see the squadron commander," Martinez said.

They were shown in. Xi made another unpracticed salute.

"I've performed the autopsy," he said, "but it was hardly necessary, since it

was obviously murder nearly from the start.”

Michi pressed her lips together in a thin line, then said, “Obvious? How?”

“I put a sensor net around the lord captain’s head and got a three-dimensional image of the skull. Captain Fletcher’s right temple was struck by three separate blows, grouped closely together—the multiple blows weren’t obvious from the superficial examination I was able to conduct this morning, but on the three-dimensional image they were very clear.”

“His head was driven into the desk three times?” Michi asked.

“Or hit with a blunt object twice, then slammed into the desk to make it look

like an accident.”

Michi spoke to her desk. “Page Rigger First Class Garcia to the squadcom’s office.” She looked at Martinez. “Who’s Military Constabulary Officer?”

“Corbigny, my lady.”

Michi turned to her desk again. “Page Lieutenant Corbigny as well.”

Martinez turned to Xi. “I don’t suppose Lieutenant Kosinic’s body is still on the ship.”

Xi looked at him. “As a matter of fact, the body’s in a freezer compartment. We didn’t cremate.”

“Perhaps you ought to take a look at it.”

Xi turned away, his gaze directed at

the wall over Michi's head. His lips pursed out, then in. "I should," he said. "I wish I had when he died."

"Why didn't you?"

Michi answered for him. "Because the cause of death seemed so obvious. In the fighting at Harzapid, Kosinic suffered broken bones and head injuries. When he came on board he insisted he was fit, but his medical records stated he was subject to blinding headaches, vertigo and fainting spells. When he was found dead, it seemed obvious that he'd fainted and hit his head."

"Where was he found?"

"In the Flag Officer Station."

Martinez was surprised. "What was he doing there alone?"

Michi hesitated. “Li and Coen told me he sometimes worked there by himself. It was less distracting than the wardroom.”

“Was he working on anything in particular?”

“He was tactical officer. I’d had him plan a full schedule of squadron maneuvers, concentrating on the defense of Zanshaa.”

Martinez turned at the sound of someone entering. Rigger Garcia came into the room and braced.

“Rigger/First Garcia reporting, my lady.”

“Thank you. Stand at ease, and take notes if you need to.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Corbigny arrived a few seconds later,

looking a little intimidated in the presence of the squadron commander. The slim, dark-haired young woman was the most junior lieutenant on the ship, and therefore got the jobs none of the other officers wanted. One of these was Military Constabulary Officer, which put her in theoretical charge of the ship's police. If nothing else, supervising the constabulary would give Corbigny a rapid education in the varieties of vice, depravity, and violence available to the average Fleet crouchback, an education desirable and probably necessary for her further development as an officer. Garcia adjusted his sleeve display. "I'm recording, my lady."

Michi spoke in quick, clipped

phrases, as if she wanted to get over this quickly. “The lord doctor’s autopsy showed that Captain Fletcher was murdered. You’ll be taking charge of the investigation.”

Garcia’s eyes went wide at this, and Corbigny turned pale. Michi continued.

“Captain Fletcher’s office should be sealed off and subject to a minute examination. Look for fingerprints, traces of fabric or hair, anything that may have been carelessly dropped. Take particular care—”

“My lady!” Garcia said almost desperately.

Michi paused. “Garcia?”

“Fingerprints—hair analysis—I don’t know how to do any of that!” Garcia

said. “The Investigative Service is trained for that sort of thing, not the Constabulary!”

Martinez looked at the man in sympathy. The Military Constabulary investigated cases of vandalism or petty theft, broke up brawls, or arrested crouchbacks drunk on wine brewed up in plastic bags they'd hidden in their lockers. Any technical investigation was well outside their strengths. Michi's lips thinned to a line, and then she relaxed. “Perhaps I've been watching too many *Doctor An-ku* dramas,” she said. “I thought there were professionals who handled this kind of thing.”

“There are, my lady,” Garcia said. “But none on this ship, I guess.”

Michi rubbed her forehead under her straight bangs. "I still want the office examined very carefully," she said.

Doctor Xi had a smile behind his little white beard. He turned to Garcia. "I might be able to create some fingerprint powder out of materials I have in the pharmacy," he said. "I'll do the research and see what I can manage."

"Good," Michi said. "Why don't you do that now, my lord?"

"Certainly." Xi straightened his slouch slightly in salute, and turned to leave. He hesitated, seeming to remember something, and then reached into his pocket and took out a clear plastic box, the sort in which he probably kept samples.

“I took the captain’s jewelry from his body,” he said. “To whom should I give it?”

“I’m having an inventory made of the captain’s belongings,” Martinez said.

“I’ll take the box, if you like.”

Martinez took the box and looked through the plastic lid. Inside were a pair of rings, a heavy signet of enameled gold with the Fletcher and Gomberg crests interlinked, a smaller ring made of a kind of silver mesh, wonderfully intricate, and a pendant on a chain. Martinez held the box to the light and saw that the pendant formed the figure of an Ayaca tree in full flower, and shimmered with fine diamonds, rubies, and emeralds.

“We should try to make a list of where everyone was during the critical hour,”

Michi continued. “And if anyone was seen moving about.”

Again Garcia looked as if despair had him by the throat. “There are over three hundred people aboard *Illustrious*, my lady,” he said. “And I only have two staff.”

“Most of the crew would be asleep,” Michi said. “We’ll have the department heads make the reports, so you don’t have to interview everyone personally.”

“I’ll send the department heads instructions later today,” Martinez added. Michi gave Garcia a level look. “Start now with a careful examination of

the scene,” she said.

“Very good, my lady.”

He braced in salute and left, clearly relieved to have made his escape. Michi watched him go, then turned to Martinez. There was irony in the set of her smile.

“Any thoughts, captain?”

“Three deaths,” Martinez said, “and I don’t see the connection. It would be better if there were only two.”

Her eyebrows rose. “How do you mean?”

“If it were only Kosinic and Fletcher killed,” Martinez said, “then I’d say the killer was someone with a grudge against officers. If it were only Thuc and Fletcher, I’d say that Fletcher had been killed by someone wanting revenge for

Thuc. But with all three I don't see anything to link them."

"Perhaps there *is* no connection."

Martinez considered this notion. "I'd rather not believe that," he decided. Michi slumped in her chair and looked sideways, at the serene bronze seminude woman in the corner, the one offering a bowl of fruit. Apparently she found no answers there, so she turned back to Martinez.

"I don't know what else to do, so I'm going to have a cocktail," she said.

"Would you to join me?"

Martinez began to accept, then hesitated. "Perhaps I'd better supervise Garcia in his efforts."

"Perhaps." Michi shrugged. "Let me

know if you find anything.”

Martinez braced in salute, turned to leave, and then saw Sub-Lieutenant Corbigny, who had stood without speaking for the entire interview.

“Any questions, lieutenant?” he asked.

Her eyes widened. “No, my lord.”

“You may leave,” Michi said. Corbigny braced and fled.

Martinez walked to the door, then turned back. “Are we still doing the maneuver tomorrow?” he asked.

“Postpone.”

“Very good, my lady.”

Very little was found in Fletcher’s office: Narbonne and the other servants simply kept it too clean. Crawling on hands and knees, Garcia and Martinez

found several hairs that were placed in specimen flasks sent them by Doctor Xi. When Xi turned up with a squeeze bottle of his homemade fingerprint powder, they blanketed every solid surface and produced a few dozen prints, most of them of sufficient quality to be read by an ordinary fingerprint reader they procured from Marsden's desk.

While they worked Michi Chen made an announcement to the ship's company, confirming that Captain Fletcher had died and that Martinez had been appointed to fill his place. Martinez, on his knees peering at an eyelash that he'd just picked up with tweezers, failed somehow to be overcome by the sudden majesty of command that had just

officially dropped onto his shoulders.

“I regret to inform *Illustrious*,” Michi continued, “that Captain Fletcher’s death was the result of foul play. I ask any crew with knowledge of this event to report to the Constabulary, or to an officer. As the lord captain was murdered between 03:01 and 05:01, the testimony of anyone with knowledge of unusual movement or activity around that time would be very useful.”

A new firmness, almost a ferocity, entered Michi’s voice. “The squadron is alone, moving deep in enemy territory. We are too vulnerable to the enemy to permit any kind of disorder and lawlessness in our own ranks. Any weakness on our part only makes the

enemy stronger. I am *determined*—” The word was almost a shout.

“ — *determined* that the killer or killers of Captain Fletcher will be found and punished.

“Once again,” more subdued now, “I ask anyone with information to come forward before any more crimes are committed. This is Squadron Commander Chen, in the name of the Praxis.”

Martinez was impressed. The cocktails had done her good, he decided. Before long Martinez began to envy Michi her cocktails. If anything were going to be solved this way, with fingerprint comparison and hair and fiber analysis, it would be through long

and tedious work, and Martinez had no time for that. He had a warship to command.

When the job was finished, he rose to his feet and looked at the office, the fine tile and elegant paneling, the martial statues of men in plate armor and the glass cabinets holding objects of beauty, all of it smudged with fingerprints and covered with powder. If he'd set out to disfigure all the grace and perfection with which Fletcher had filled his life, he could scarcely have done a better job.

“Lord captain,” Xi asked. “May I have the codes to the ship’s fingerprint file?”

“Yes. As soon as I can find them.” Martinez was happy to have Xi do the

job.

“I’ll return to my office,” Xi said, “and proceed as best as I can.”

Martinez thought again about Michi’s cocktails. “May I offer you a drink first?”

Xi accepted. Martinez paged Alikhan and told him to serve Xi in his old office. “I have a brief errand,” he told the doctor. “I’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

He brought Narbonne and the others into the office to finish packing Fletcher’s belongings. Martinez got a signed copy of the inventory from Marsden, then had the captains’ possessions transferred to a locker. Martinez locked the door with his

captain's key, and put it under his key and password, so that only he could open the locker.

He remembered the captain's rings and pendant only after he'd returned to Fletcher's office, and so he had Marsden make another note to the effect that he'd taken them into his own possession.

He dismissed Fletcher's servants to clean the captain's office, a task he did not envy them, and went to his own cabin to find Xi sitting comfortably amid the *putti*, his forensic samples on the desk and a glass of whisky in his hand. Alikhan had thoughtfully left a tray on the desk with another glass, a beaker of whisky, and another beaker of chilled water, its flanks covered with glittering

gems of condensation. Martinez poured his own drink and settled into his chair.

“Interesting whisky, my lord,” Xi said. “Very smoky.”

“From Laredo,” Martinez said, “my birthplace.” His father sent him cases of Laredo’s best, in hopes exposure would boost the export market.

“What it lacks in subtlety,” Xi said, “is more than regained in vigor.”

Martinez inhaled the fumes lovingly, then raised his glass. “Here’s to vigor,” he said, and drank.

The whisky blazed a trail of fire down his throat. He looked at the smoky fluid through the prisms of the crystal glass and contemplated his long, singular day.

“My lord,” he said, “do you have any

idea? Any idea at all?"

Xi seemed to understand the point of this vague question.

"Who's responsible, you mean? No. Not the slightest."

"Or why?"

"Nor that either."

Martinez swirled whisky in his glass. "You've known Captain Fletcher for a long time."

"Since he was a boy, yes."

Martinez put the glass down and looked at the white-bearded man across his desk. "Tell me about him," he said.

Xi didn't answer right away. His thumbs pressed hard against the wall of his whisky glass, pressed until they turned white. Then the thumbs relaxed.

“Lord Gomberg Fletcher,” he said, “was exceptionally well-born, and exceptionally wealthy. Most people born to wealth and high status assume that their condition isn’t simply luck, but a result of some kind of perfect cosmic justice—that is, that any person as fine and virtuous as themselves should naturally take an exalted place in society.” His brows knit. “I would guess that Captain Fletcher found his position more of a burden than a source of pleasure.”

Martinez was surprised. “That—that was hardly my impression,” he said.

“Living up the worlds’ expectations is a difficult job,” Xi said, “and I think he worked very hard at it. He made a very

good job of it. But I don't think it made him happy.”

Martinez looked at the pink-cheeked winged children who fluttered around his office wall. “The art collection?” he asked. “All this?” He waved a hand vaguely at the flying children. “That didn't make him happy?”

“There are a limited number of roles suitable for someone of his status,” Xi said. “That of aesthete was perhaps the most interesting available.” He frowned, a narrow X forming between his brows. “Aestheticism took up the part of his life that wasn't taken up by the military. Between the two of them he didn't have time to think about being happy or unhappy, or to think about much at all.”

He looked up at Martinez.

“Did you wonder about all those inspections, those musters? All the rituals—dressing formally for every meal, sending notes to people he could as easily have called on the comm? If you ask me, it was all to keep him from thought.”

He's as dull as a rusty spoon. Chandra's words echoed in Martinez's head. Martinez took another sip of whisky while he tried to make sense of Xi's words. “You're saying,” he said carefully, “that Captain Fletcher wasn't precisely a human being.”

“Not a fully-realized one,” Xi said. “People realize themselves in adversity, or by encountering opposition, or

through the negative consequences of their decisions. For Fletcher there was no opposition or adversity or negative consequences. He was given a part and he played it, more or less convincingly.” Xi lowered his head and contemplated the whisky glass that rested on his pot belly. “He never questioned his role. I often wish that he had.”

Martinez put his glass on the table. It made more noise than he intended, and Xi gave a start.

“There were no negative consequences for Fletcher,” he said, “until he killed Engineer Thuc.”

Xi said nothing.

“Was that something he did to fill his empty hours?” Martinez asked. “Cut a

man's throat?"

Xi peered at Martinez from under his white eyebrows, his dark eyes glittering.

"I asked him, you know. The day it happened, at Lady Michi's request. I believe she was hoping I could find Captain Fletcher insane and she could remove him from command." He made the pursing movement of his lips. "I disappointed her, I'm afraid. Captain Fletcher was perfectly rational."

Martinez tried to avoid shouting. "So why did he kill Thuc?" he demanded. Xi licked his lips quickly. "He said that he killed Engineer Thuc because the honor of the *Illustrious* demanded it."

Martinez stared at him. Words died on his tongue. He took a drink.

“What did he mean by that?” he managed finally.

Xi shrugged.

“Were you his friend?”

Xi shook his head. “Gomberg didn’t have any friends. He was very dutiful in the way he kept to his sphere, and he expected others to keep to theirs.”

“But you followed him.”

Xi smiled lightly and rubbed his thigh with his hand. “The job has its compensations. My practice on Sandama was successful but dull, and it turned me so dull that my wife left me for another man. The children were nearly grown and weren’t going to need me on hand. When young Gomberg got his first command and made his offer, I realized I

hadn't ever seen Zanshaa, or the Maw, or Harzapid Grand Market. Now I've seen all those things, and a lot more besides."

Martinez felt a sudden flash of anger. All these questions had done nothing but draw him farther into the riddle that was Lord Gomberg Fletcher, and the only thing he really cared about the captain was who had killed him. He didn't even care why, he just wanted to find out who'd done it, and deal with that as efficiently as possible.

"What is that thing in Fletcher's sleeping cabin?" Martinez asked. "The man tied to the tree?"

A half-smile played on Xi's lips. "A part of his collection that could not be

shown to the public. Captain Fletcher had a special license from the Office of the Censor to collect cult art.”

Martinez was speechless. Cults were banned for the public good, and were defined in the Praxis as any belief or sect that made irrational or unverifiable claims about the universe. Banned as well was any art such cults had managed to inspire. Generally such work could only be seen in the Museums of Superstition that had been erected in the major cities of the empire.

Of course there were also private collectors and scholars, those considered reliable enough to deal regularly with such explosive material. That one such might be aboard

Illustrious, and might have part of his collection aboard, was beyond all credence.

“Was he interested in any cult in particular?” Martinez finally asked.

“Those that produced good paintings and sculpture,” Xi said. “I don’t know if you know anything about ancient Terran art—”

“I don’t,” Martinez said shortly.

“A lot of it, particularly in the early days, was the product of one cult or another.”

“Really.” Martinez drummed his fingers on the table. “Do you have any idea why Captain Fletcher put that—that thing—on his wall, where it was the last thing he’d see before going to sleep?”

Xi's expression was frank. "I don't know. I'd like to know the answer myself, lord captain."

"It wasn't part of some kind of erotic game, was it?"

Xi was amused. "I doubt very much that Gomberg was interested in homoerotic flagellation fantasies." He shrugged. "But human variety is infinite, isn't it?"

Thwarted again. Martinez found his anger simmering once more.

"If you say so," he said.

Xi returned his empty glass to the tray. "I thank you for the drink, lord captain. I wish I could have been more useful."

Martinez looked pointedly at the samples. "*Those* are what's going to be

useful, I think.”

“I hope so.” Xi rose and collected the little plastic boxes. “I’ll get to my investigations, with your permission.”

Martinez sighed. “Carry on, lord doctor.”

Xi slouched out without bothering to salute. Martinez looked after him for a moment, then paged Alikhan.

“Tell Perry he can bring in supper if he’s ready,” Martinez said. “Also, I won’t be moving into the captain’s quarters till tomorrow—unpack just enough to get me through breakfast.”

“Very good, my lord.” Alikhan leaned over the desk and to freshen Martinez’ drink. “Anything else, my lord?”

Martinez looked at him. “What are

they saying in the petty officers' lounge?"

Alikhan tone was regretful. "I've been here all day, my lord, packing and so on. I haven't had a chance to speak to anyone outside the household."

"Right," Martinez muttered. "Thanks."

Alikhan withdrew. Martinez looked through the files newly unlocked by his captain's key and thumbprint, and sent Xi access to the fingerprint file. Perry arrived a few minutes thereafter with Martinez' supper. Martinez ate left-handed, while his right hand worked with his stylus on his desk top, drawing up one list after another. All things he needed to do or think about as he assumed command. After Perry carried

the dishes away, Martinez sent messages to all the senior petty officers, the heads of departments, ordering them to account for the movements of all their juniors for the critical hours of the morning. He thought it a job best done soon, while memories were still fresh. This done, he called Fulvia Kazakov, the first lieutenant.

“Are you on watch at the moment, lieutenant?”

“No, my lord.” She seemed surprised at the question.

“I’d be obliged if you’d stop by my office, then.”

“Of course, my lord.” She hesitated, then said, “Which office would that be, my lord?”

Martinez smiled. "My old office. And yours, too."

When he'd come aboard, as the third-ranking officer on the ship he'd taken the third-best cabin, which had turned out to be that of the first lieutenant. Kazakov had then displaced the lieutenant next junior to her, and each lieutenant had shifted in turn, with the most junior having to bunk with the cadets. Tomorrow, he supposed, would be a relief for them all, with everyone restored to his proper place. Except, of course, for Captain Fletcher, whose body was slowly crystallizing in one of *Illustrious*' freezers.

Kazakov arrived wafting a cloud of a rather metallic perfume. She wore full

dress, and the tall collar emphasized the long neck below the heart-shaped face. Mother-of-pearl inlay gleamed on the handles of the chopsticks she'd thrust through the knot at the back of her head.

“Sit down, my lady,” Martinez said as she braced. “Would you care for wine? Or something else, perhaps?”

“Whatever you're having, my lord, thank you.”

He poured from the bottle of wine that Perry had opened for his supper. She took the glass and sipped politely, then returned the glass to the desk.

“I am a very different person from Captain Fletcher,” Martinez began. Kazakov was unsurprised by this analysis. “Yes, my lord,” she said.

“But,” Martinez said, “I’m going to try very hard to *be* Captain Fletcher, at least for a while.”

Kazakov gave a thoughtful nod. “I understand, my lord.”

Continuity was essential. Fletcher had commanded *Illustrious* for years, and his habits and idiosyncracies had become a part of the ship’s routine. To change that suddenly was to risk disturbing the equilibrium of the vast organic network that was the ship’s crew, and that network had been disturbed enough already by events of the last few days.

“I intend to continue Captain Fletcher’s rigorous series of inspections,”

Martinez said. “Can you tell me if he inspected the different departments on a regular rotation, or if he chose them randomly?”

“Randomly, I think. I didn’t see a pattern. But he’d call the department head before he left the office to let them know he was coming. He wanted the inspections to be reasonably spontaneous, but he didn’t want to interrupt anyone in the middle of some critical work.”

“I see. Thank you.”

He took a sip of his wine. It tasted vinegary to him—Terza had shipped the best stuff to him from clan Chen’s cellars in the High City, but he didn’t see what was so special about it.

“Can you give me a report about the state of the ship?” Martinez asked.

“Informally, I mean—I don’t need all the figures.”

Kazakov smiled and triggered her sleeve display. “I actually have the figures if you want them,” she said.

“Not right now. Just a verbal summation, if you please.”

The state of *Illustrious*, not surprisingly, was good. It had suffered no damage in the mutiny at Harzapid or the Battle of Protipanu. Food, water, and fuel stocks were more than adequate for the projected length of the voyage. Missile stocks, however, were down: between battle and the enemy shipping destroyed so far on the raid, the

cruiser's magazines were depleted by two-fifths. Which was going to be a problem if Chenforce were ever obliged to fight an enemy either more numerous or less cooperative than the Naxid squadron at Protipanu.

“Thank you, Lady Fulvia,” Martinez said. “Can you give me a report on the officers? I know them socially, but I’ve never worked with them.”

Kazakov smiled. “I’m happy to say that we have an excellent set of officers aboard. All but one of us were chosen by Captain Fletcher. Some of us were friends before this posting. We work together exceptionally well.”

Being chosen by Fletcher wasn’t necessarily a recommendation in

Martinez'

opinion, but he nodded.

“And the one who wasn't chosen?” he asked.

Kazakov thought a moment before she replied. “There's no problem with the way she performs her duties,” she said. “She's very efficient.”

Martinez gave no indication of his awareness that this was a less than wholehearted appraisal. He liked the fact that Kazakov felt sufficient loyalty to the other officers not to put a knife into Chandra's back when she had the chance.

“Let's take the lieutenants one by one,” he said.

From Kazakov's report Martinez

gathered that three of the lieutenants were Gomberg or Fletcher clients, following in their patron's wake up the ladder of Fleet hierarchy. Two, Husayn and Kazakov herself, had benefitted from those complex trades of favor and patronage so common among the Peers: Fletcher had agreed to look after their interests in exchange for their own families aiding some of Fletcher's friends or dependents.

Perhaps Kazakov thought that this genealogy of relationships and obligations was all that was required to explain the lieutenants to her new captain, or perhaps she was looking into the future and letting Martinez know that her relations were ready to assist

Martinez' friends in the same sort of arrangement they'd had with Fletcher. Martinez was gratified, but insisted on knowing how well the officers did their jobs. According to Kazakov they did their jobs very well. Lord Phillips and Corbigny, the two most junior, were inexperienced but promising; and the others were all talented. Martinez had no reason to doubt her judgments.

"It's a happy wardroom?" Martinez asked.

"Yes." Kazakov's answer came without hesitation. "Unusually so."

"Lady Michi's lieutenants are fitting in? Coen and Li?"

"Yes. They're amiable people."

"How about Kosinic? Was he a happy

member of the wardroom mess?”

Kazakov blinked in surprise. “Kosinic? He wasn’t aboard for very long, and—I suppose he agreed well enough with the others, given the circumstances.”

Martinez raised his eyebrows. “Circumstances?”

“Well, he was a commoner. Not,” Kazakov was quick to add, aware perhaps that she’d put a foot wrong, “not that being a commoner was a problem, I don’t say anything against *that*, but his family had no money, and he had to live off his pay. So Kosinic had to take an advance on his pay in order to pay his wardroom dues, and he really couldn’t afford to club together with the other

lieutenants to buy food stores and liquor and so on. The rest of us were perfectly happy to pay his allotment, but I think he was perhaps a little sensitive about it, and he severely limited his wine and liquor consumption, and avoided eating some of the more expensive food items. And he couldn't afford to gamble—not," she added, catching herself again, "that there's high play in the wardroom, nothing like it, but there's often a friendly game going on, for what we'd consider pocket money, and Kosinic couldn't afford a place at the table."

Kazakov reached for her wine and took a sip. "And then of course the mutiny happened, and Kosinic got wounded. I think perhaps the head injury

changed his personality a little, because he became sullen and angry. Sometimes he'd just be sitting in a chair and you'd look up and see him in a complete fury—his jaw would be working and his neck muscles all taut like cables and his eyes on fire. Sometimes it was a little frightening. This is extremely good wine, my lord.”

“I'm glad you like it. Do you have any idea what made Kosinic angry?”

“No, my lord. On those occasions I don't think the wardroom conversation was any more inane than usual.” She smiled at her own joke, and then the smile faded. “I always thought getting blown up by the Naxids was reason enough for anger. But whatever the

cause, Kosinic became a lot less sociable after he was wounded, and he spent most of his time in his cabin or in the Flag Officer Station, working.”

Martinez sipped his own wine. He thought he understood Kosinic fairly well. Martinez was a Peer, and blessed with a large allowance from his wealthy family. But he was a provincial, and marked as a provincial by his accent. He knew very well the way high-caste Peers could condescend to their inferiors, or deliberately humiliate them, or treat them as servants, or simply ignore them. Even if the other officers intended no disparagement, a sensitive, intelligent commoner might well detect slights where none existed.

“Do you happen to know how Lady Michi came to take Kosinic on her staff?” Martinez asked.

“I believe Kosinic served as a cadet in a previous command. He impressed her and she took him along when he passed his lieutenants’ exams.”

Which was unusually broad-minded of Michi, Martinez thought. She could as easily have associated herself only with her own clients and the clients of powerful families with whom she wished to curry favor, as had Fletcher. Instead, though she came from a clan at least as ancient and noble as the Gombergs or Fletchers, she’d chosen to give one of her valuable staff jobs to a poor commoner. Though it had to be

admitted, in retrospect, that Michi's experiment in social mobility hadn't been very successful.

"Was Kosinic a good tactical officer?" Martinez asked.

"Yes. Absolutely."

Martinez sipped his wine again. In spite of Kazakov's praising the vintage, it still tasted vinegary to him.

"And the warrant officers?" he asked.

Kazakov explained that Fletcher had his pick of warrant and petty officers, and chosen only the most experienced. The number of trainees had been kept to a minimum, and the result was a hard core of professionals in charge of all the ship's departments, all of whom were of exemplary efficiency.

“But Captain Fletcher,” Martinez said, “chose to execute one of those professionals he had personally chosen.”

Kazakov’s expression turned guarded. “Yes, my lord.”

“Do you have any idea why?”

Kazakov shook her head. “No, my lord. Engineer Thuc was one of the most efficient department heads on the ship.”

“Captain Fletcher had never in your hearing expressed any ... violent intentions?”

She seemed startled by the question. “No. Not at all, my lord.” Her brows knit. “Though you might ask...” She shook her head. “No, that’s ridiculous.”

“Tell me.”

The guarded look had returned to her

face. “You might ask Lieutenant Prasad.” She spoke quickly, as if she wanted to speed through the distasteful topic as quickly as she could. “As you probably heard, she and the captain were intimates. He may have said things to her that he wouldn’t have...” She sighed, having finally got through it. “To any of the rest of us.”

“Thank you,” Martinez said. “I’ll interview to each of the lieutenants in turn.”

Though he couldn’t imagine Fletcher murmuring plans for homicide along with his endearments, assuming he was the sort of man who murmured endearments at all. Neither could he imagine Chandra keeping such an

announcement secret, especially in those furious moments after she and Fletcher had their final quarrel.

“Thank you for your candor,” Martinez said, though he knew perfectly well that Kazakov hadn’t been candid throughout. On the whole he approved of the moments when she’d chosen to be discreet, and he thought he could work with her very well.

They ended the interview discussing Kazakov’s plans for her future. Her career had been planned so as to minimize any possible intervention by fortune: in another one of those trades so common among Peers, a friend of her family would have given her command of the frigate *Storm Fury*, a plan that had

been detailed when both the friend and the frigate had been captured by the Naxids on the first day of the mutiny.

“Well,” Martinez said, “if I’m ever in a position to do something for you, I’ll do my best.”

Kazakov brightened. “Thank you, my lord.”

The Kazakovs seemed a useful sort of clan to have in one’s debt. After the premiere left, Martinez stoppered the wine bottle and gulped whatever was left in his glass. With his captain’s key he opened the personnel files, intending to look at the lieutenants’ records. Then the idea struck him that Fletcher might have made a note in Thuc’s file explaining why the engineer had been

executed, and Martinez went straight to Thuc's file and opened it. There was nothing. Thuc had been in the Fleet for twenty-two years, has passed the exam for Master Engineer eight years ago, and had been aboard *Illustrious* for five of those years. Fletcher's comments in Thuc's efficiency report were brief but favorable.

Martinez read the files of the other senior petty officers and then went on to the lieutenants, looking through the files more or less at random. Kazakov, he discovered, had been fairly accurate in describing their accomplishments. What she hadn't known, of course, were the contents of the efficiency reports Fletcher had made personally. For the

most part they were dry, terse, and favorable, as if Fletcher was too grand to dole out much praise, but instead dribbled it out tastefully, like a rich sauce over dessert. About Kazakov he had written, “This officer has served as an efficient executive officer, and has demonstrated proficiency in every technical aspect of her profession. There is nothing that stands in the way of her further promotion and command of a ship in the Fleet.”

A note that “nothing stands in the way” was not quite the same as Fletcher’s endorsement that Kazakov would be a credit to the service, or would do a fine job in command of her own ship; but carefully guarded

enthusiasm seemed to be Fletcher's consistent style. Perhaps Fletcher hadn't thought that praise was necessary, given that his officers were so well-connected that their steps to command had been arranged ahead of time.

After the dry asperity of Fletcher's views of the other officers, Chandra's report came like a thunderbolt. "Though this officer has not demonstrated any technical incompetence that has reached her captain's attention, her chaotic and impulsive behavior has thoroughly befouled the atmosphere of the ship. Her level of emotional maturity is not in any way consistent with the high standards of the Fleet. Promotion is not indicated."

The curiously-worded first sentence

managed to insert the word

“incompetence” without justifying its inclusion, and the rest was pure poison. Martinez stared at this for a long moment, then looked at the log to check the date at which Fletcher had last accessed the file. He found that Fletcher had last looked at Chandra’s file at 27:21 hours the previous evening, a mere six hours before he was killed.

His mouth went dry. Chandra had ripped apart her relationship with Fletcher, and after thinking about it for two days, Fletcher fired a rocket at Chandra with every intention of blowing up her career.

After which, some hours later, Fletcher was killed.

Martinez thought the sequence through carefully. For this to be anything other than a coincidence, Chandra would have had to have known that Fletcher had put a bomb in her efficiency report. He checked Fletcher's comm logs for the evening, and found that he'd made only one call, to Command, possibly for a situation report before going to bed. Martinez checked the watch list and found that it hadn't been Chandra on watch at the time, but the sixth lieutenant, Lady Juliette Corbigny. So there was no evidence that Chandra would have known the contents of her efficiency report. Not unless Fletcher had made a point of looking for her and telling her in person.

Or unless Chandra had some kind of access to documents sealed under Fletcher's key. She was the signals officer, and she was clever. Martinez decided that this theory had too much whisky and wine in it to make any sense, and he failed in any case to successfully imagine Chandra wrestling the fully-grown Fletcher to his knees and then banging his head repeatedly on his desk. Martinez rose and stretched, then looked at the chronometer. 27:21. At this exact time, Fletcher had made his last cold-blooded alterations to Chandra's fitness report.

The coincidence chilled him. He left his office and took a brief march along the decks, circling back to his own door.

He passed the door of the captain's cabin, which was closed, and then found himself turning back to it. It opened to his key. He stepped in and called for light.

Fletcher's office had been returned to its pristine state, the fingerprint powder dusted away, the desk dark and gleaming. There was a scent of furniture polish. The bronze statues were impassive in their armor.

The safe sat silvery and silent in its niche. Apparently Gawbyan had repaired it after his break-in.

Martinez passed into the sleeping cabin and stared at the bloody porcelain figure with its unnaturally broad eyes. He looked at the pictures on the wall and

saw a long-haired Terran with blue skin playing a flute, a man dead or swooning in the arms of a blue-clad woman. a monstrous being—or possibly it was a Torminel with unnaturally orange fur—snarling out of the frame, its extended tongue pierced by a jagged spear.

Lovely stuff to see at bedtime, he thought. The only picture of any interest showed a young woman bathing, but what might have been an attractive scene was spoiled by the creepy fact of elderly men in turbans who watched her from concealment.

“Comm,” he said, “page Montemar Jukes to the captain’s office.”

Fletcher’s pet artist ambled into the office wearing non-regulation coveralls

and braced half-heartedly, in a way that would have earned a ferocious rebuke from any petty officer. To judge from Jukes and Xi, Fletcher was willing to tolerate a certain amount of slackness among his personal following. Jukes was a stocky man with disordered gray hair and rheumy blue eyes. His cheeks were unnaturally ruddy, and his breath smelled of sherry. Martinez gave him what he intended to be a disapproving scowl, then turned to lead into Fletcher's bedroom.

“Come with me, Mister Jukes.”

Jukes followed in silence, then stopped in the doorway, leaning back slightly to contemplate the great porcelain figure strapped to the tree.

“What *is* this, Mister Jukes?”

“Narayanguru,” Jukes said. “The Shaa tied him to a tree and tortured him to death. He’s all-seeing, that’s why his eyes wrap around like that.”

“All-seeing? Funny he didn’t see what the Shaa were going to do to him.”

Jukes showed yellow teeth. “Yes,” he said. “Funny.”

“Why’s he here?”

“You mean why did Captain Fletcher put Narayanguru in his sleeping cabin?”

Jukes shrugged. “I don’t know. He collected cult art, and he couldn’t show it to the public. Maybe this is the only place he could put it”

“Was Captain Fletcher a cultist?”

Jukes was taken aback by the

question. “Possibly,” he said, “but which cult?”

He walked into the room and pointed at the snarling beast. “That’s Tranomakoi, a personification of their storm spirit.” He indicated the blue-skinned man. “That’s Krishna, who I believe is a Hindu diety.” His hand drifted across the scarred paneling to indicate the swooning man. “That’s a pieta, that’s Christian. Another god killed in some picturesque way by the Shaa.”

“Christian?” Martinez was intrigued. “We have Christians on Laredo—on my home world. On certain days of the year they dress in white robes and pointed hoods, don chains, and flog each other.”

Jukes was startled. “Why do they do that?”

“I have no idea. It’s said they sometimes pick one of their number to be their god and nail him to a cross.”

Jukes scratched his scalp in wonderment. “A jolly sort of cult, isn’t it?”

“It’s a great honor. Most of them live.”

“And the authorities don’t do anything?”

Martinez shrugged. “The cultists only hurt each other. And Laredo is very far from Zanshaa.”

“Apparently.”

Martinez looked at Narayanguru with his bloody translucent flesh. “In any

case,” he said, “I’m neither a cultist nor an aesthete, and I have no intention of sleeping beneath that gory object for a single night.”

The other man grinned. “I don’t blame you.”

Martinez turned to Jukes. “Can you ... rearrange ... the captain’s collection?”

he asked. “Store Narayanguru where he won’t disturb anyone’s sleep, and put something more pleasant in his place?”

“Yes, my lord. I’ve got an inventory of what items of his collection Fletcher brought aboard, and I’ll peruse it tonight.”

Martinez was amused by the word *peruse*. “Very good, Mister Jukes. You’re dismissed.”

“Yes, my lord.” This time Jukes managed a halfway creditable salute, and marched away. Martinez left Fletcher’s quarters and locked the door behind him. The interview had cheered him. He went to his own cabin and was startled to find that one of his servants, Rigger Espinosa, had laid cushions on the floor of his office and had stretched out on them fully clothed.

“What are you doing there?” Martinez asked.

Espinosa jumped to his feet and braced. He was a young man, muscular and trim, with heavy-knuckled hands that hung by his side.

“Mister Alikhan sent me, my lord,” he said.

Martinez stared at him. “But why?”

Espinosa’s face was frank. “Someone’s killing captains, my lord. I’m to keep that from happening again.”

Killing captains. Martinez hadn’t thought of it that way.

“Very well,” Martinez said. “As you were.”

Martinez went into his sleeping cabin, where Alikhan had laid out his night things. He picked up his toothbrush, moistened it in his sink, and looked at himself in the mirror.

Captain of the Illustrious, he thought.

In spite of the deaths, in spite of Narayanguru hanging on his tree and the unexplained deaths and the unknown killer stalking the ship, he couldn’t help

but smile.

After breakfast Martinez put on his full dress uniform with the silver braid and the tall collar, now without the red staff tabs that Alikhan had removed overnight. Martinez drew on his white gloves, and called for Marsden and Fulvia Kazakov to join him. While waiting he had Alikhan fetch the Golden Orb from its case. The empire's highest military decoration was a baton topped by a transparent sphere filled with a golden fluid that, when disturbed, swirled and eddied like the clouds surrounding a gas giant. It was a magnificent award, and Martinez was the first to be awarded the decoration in

hundreds of years.

Martinez hadn't even considered strapping on the curved ceremonial knife. The situation would be tense enough without that.

Marsden and Kazakov arrived, each wearing full dress. "My lady," Martinez said to the premiere, "please let Master Machinist Gawbyan know that we are about to inspect his department."

Kazakov made the call as Martinez led the procession to the machine shop, where Gawbyan, breathless because he'd rushed from the petty officers' mess just ahead of them, braced at the door.

Martinez gave the machine shop a thorough inspection, questioned the machinists on their work, and made note

of carelessness in the matter of waste disposal. If the ship had to make a course change, cease acceleration, or otherwise go weightless, the trash would go all over the shop.

Gawbyan accepted the criticism with a grim set to his fleshy features that suggested that he was going to fall on one of his recruits like an avalanche the second Martinez was out of the room.

When the inspection was over, Martinez found that he'd taken up very little of his morning, and so he called a second inspection, this time of Missile Battery Two. This review lasted longer, with time spent examining missile loaders and watching damage control robots maneuver under the command of

their operators. Despite the presence of officers and the stress of the inspection the mood of the crew was nearly cheerful, and Martinez couldn't help but compare it with the foreboding and terror that drenched the atmosphere during Fletcher's inspection two days earlier. Seeing the sunny spirits among the crew, he felt a suspicion that they might be taking him too lightly. He wanted the crew to view him seriously; and if they weren't, he was prepared to become a complete bastard until they did. Intuition suggested, however, that this wasn't necessary. The holejumpers just seemed pleased to have him in charge.

He was a winner, after all. He'd

masterminded both of the Fleet's victories over the Naxids. The crew understood a winner better than they understood whatever it was that Fletcher was.

Martinez found the inspections valuable. He realized this was the best and fastest way he had of finding out about his ship.

"I'd like to see the lieutenants after supper," Martinez told Kazakov as they left the battery. "We'll have an informal meeting in my dining room. Please arrange for a qualified warrant officer or cadet to take the watch."

"Yes, my lord."

"Feel free to move into your old quarters. I thank your hospitality,

involuntary though it was.”

She returned his smile. “Yes, my lord.”

He went into his old office, opened the safe, removed its contents, and left the door of the safe open for Kazakov. He cast a farewell glance over the *putti*, hoping he would never see their sweet faces again, and then went into the captain’s office—

his office—and looked at the statues, still stolid and arrogant in their armor, and the display cabinets, and the murals of elegant figures writing in scrolls with quills or reading aloud from open scrolls to a rapt audience. Martinez opened his new safe, changed the combination, and put his papers in it

along with Fletcher's book and the little statue of the woman dancing on the skull.

In the sleeping cabin he found a welcome change. The gruesome Narayanguru was gone, as was the pieta, the snarling beast, and the bathing woman. The blue-skinned flute player remained, though he'd been shifted to a brighter-lit area. Next to him a seascape showed a ground-effect vehicle thundering over a white-topped swell in a blast of spume. Over the dressing table was a landscape of snow-topped mountains standing over a village of shaggy Yormaks and their shaggier cattle.

Pride of place went to a dark old picture that showed mostly murky empty

space. The composition was unusual: a sort of frame had been painted around the edges; or perhaps it was meant to be the proscenium of a stage, since a painted curtain rod stretched over the whole scene, with a painted red curtain pulled open to the right. Against the darkness on the left were the small figures of a young mother and the infant she had just taken from her cradle. The woman's dress, though hardly contemporary, nevertheless gave the impression of being comfortably middle-class. The infant wore red pajamas. Neither were paying much attention to the little cat that squatted next to a small open fire at the center of the picture. The cat bore a sullen expression and was

looking at a red bowl, which had something in it that didn't seem to please him.

Martinez was struck by the contrast between the elaborate presentation, the painted frame and red curtain, with the ordinary domesticity of the scene. The red curtain, the red bowl, the red pajamas. The young mother's round face. The sulky cat with its ears pinned back. The odd little fire in the middle of the room, presumably on an earthen floor. Martinez kept looking at the picture while wondering why it seemed so worth looking at.

There was a movement in the corner of his eye, and he turned to see Perry in the door.

“Your dinner’s ready, my lord,” he said, “whenever you’re ready.”

“I’ll eat now,” Martinez said, and with a last glance at the painting made his way to the dining room, where he ate alone at Fletcher’s grand table with its golden centerpiece and its long double row of empty places.

After dinner Martinez reported to Michi for a report on the status of the investigation. Kazakov was there already, still in full dress, sitting next to Xi, who looked even more ruffled and abstracted by comparison. Garcia arrived a few minutes later with a datapad and his notes.

Xi began with a report on the

fingerprints found in Fletcher's office. "Most belonged to the captain," he said. "The rest were those of Marsden, the secretary, and the captain's servants Narbonne and Buckle, who had cleaned and tidied the room the previous day. Three prints belonged to Constable Garcia and were presumably left in the course of his investigation."

Xi's face screwed into an expression that probably intended to express wry amusement.

"Five stray prints belonged to me. And four prints, the fingers of the left hand, were found pressed under the rim of the desk top at the front of the desk." He made a movement with his hand, palm up, in the direction of Michi's desk

to show how this could happen.

“The prints belonged to Lieutenant Prasad. Of course they could have been left at any time, since the servants wouldn’t necessarily polish daily under the rim of the desk.”

Or, Martinez couldn’t help thinking, the prints could have been made when Chandra held onto the desk with her left hand while slamming Captain Fletcher’s head into it with her right.

Michi betrayed no evidence that this idea might have occurred to her. “Make anything of the hair or fiber evidence?”

“I haven’t had time, but it’s not going to prove anything unless we already have a suspect.”

Michi turned to Garcia.

“Any information on the movements of the crew?”

Garcia consulted his datapad, an unnecessary gesture considering the contents of his report.

“My lady, aside from the few on watch, most of the crew were asleep. Those on watch in Command vouch for each other. Of those in bed, the only people who admit moving at all say they were visiting the toilet.”

“No reports of anyone moving outside the crew compartments? None at all?”

“No, my lady.” Garcia’s tongue flicked anxiously over his lips. “Of course, we only have their word for it, and that’s all we’re going to get...” He cleared his throat. “Unless we find an

informant.”

Michi's eyes hardened. She turned to Kazakov.

“Lieutenant?” she said.

Kazakov's tone was faintly apologetic. “It's the same situation with the lieutenants and warrant officers, my lady. Those on duty vouch for one another, and those asleep were—” Martinez saw the motion of Kazakov's shoulders that began a shrug, then saw her consciously suppress it. “—were asleep. I have no information that contradicts their stories.”

“*Damn!*” Michi's right hand made a petulant clawing motion in the air. She glared at each of them in turn. “We can't leave it at this,” she said. “There's got to

be something else we can do.” She gave a snarl. “What would Doctor An-ku do?”

She didn't mean it as a joke.

“We can search the ship,” Martinez said. “And search the crew.”

Michi frowned at him.

“There was a little blood,” Martinez continued. “Not much, but some. It just occurred to me that the killer might have got some on a shirt cuff or a trouser leg. Or he might have wiped blood off his hands with a handkerchief. He might have used a weapon on the captain and only slammed the captain's head into the desk afterward, and the weapon might be found. Or the killer might have taken a souvenir from the captain's room and

hidden it.”

“The captain might have fought,” Garcia said, “at least a little. He might have marked someone.”

“Alert the people in the laundry,” Kazakov said. “They need to check every item.”

Michi stood very suddenly. She looked at the others as if surprised to find them still in their seats.

“What are we waiting for?” she said. “We should have done this yesterday.”

Searching *Illustrious* and its crew took the rest of the day, and uncovered nothing. Alikhan was waiting in his cabin to take his trousers, shoes, and uniform tunic for their nightly

rehabilitation. “What are they saying in the petty officers’

lounge?” Martinez asked.

“Well, my lord,” Alikhan said, with a kind of finality, “they’re saying you’ll do.”

Martinez suppressed a grin. “What are they saying about Fletcher?”

“They aren’t saying anything at all about the late captain.”

Martinez felt irritation. “I wish they were.” He handed Alikhan his tunic. “You don’t think they know more than they’re saying?”

Alikhan spoke with the utmost complacency. “They’re long-serving petty officers, my lord. They *always* know more than they tell.”

Martinez sourly parted the seals on his shoes, removed them, and handed them to Alikhan.

“You’ll tell me if they say anything vital? Such as who killed the captain?”

Alikhan dropped the shoes into their little carrying bag. “I’ll do my best to keep you informed, my lord,” he said. Deftly, with the hand that wasn’t holding Martinez’ clothing, Alikhan opened a silver vacuum flask of hot cocoa and poured.

“Thank you, Alikhan. Sleep well.”

“And yourself, my lord.”

Alikhan left through the door that led to the dining room. Martinez changed into pajamas and sat on his bed while he drank the cocoa and looked at the old

dark painting. The young mother held her infant and the little fire glowed and the cat crouched with his ears pinned back, and it all took place inside a painted frame or maybe a stage.

He kept seeing the painting for a long time after he turned out the light.

In the morning Martinez printed a series of supper invitations on Fletcher's special bond paper, and sent them via Alikhan to all the senior petty officers. He didn't know whether Fletcher would have invited the enlisted to supper—he suspected not—and he was certain Fletcher wouldn't have used the fancy bond invitations.

He didn't care. It wasn't his bond

paper anyway.

The maneuver began shortly afterward. The ships of Chenforce were linked by communications laser into a virtual environment, and while the ships themselves continued on their way a virtual Chenforce maneuvered against a virtual enemy squadron of superior force, a squadron that was meeting them head-on in at Osser, the system into which Chenforce would pass after Termaine. The system was largely uninhabited, with a pair of wormhole relay stations and some small mining colonies on some mineral-rich moons, but nothing else, nothing that would complicate an engagement between two forces.

For the first time Martinez commanded a heavy cruiser in combat, even though it was a combat that took place only in simulation. The crew in Command were disciplined and well trained, long practiced at their jobs and at working with one another, and they obeyed Martinez' orders with perfect understanding and efficiency.

Chenforce didn't come through the battle unscathed: out of seven ships, three were destroyed and one severely damaged. Of the Naxid force, all ten were wiped out.

Martinez ended the maneuver pleased with himself and with his ship. The pleased feeling lasted until he returned to his office, where Marsden presented

him with a vast number of documents, all requiring his attention, or his judgment, or at the very least his signature.

He ate his dinner at his desk while he worked his way through the documents, and sent Marsden to his own meal.

Chandra Prasad arrived half a minute after his dinner, as if she were waiting for him to be alone. He looked up at her knock, lowered his stylus to the desk, and told her to come in. As she approached the desk he wondered in a curiously offhand way whether she'd come to murder him, but decided against it. The sunny smile on her face would have been too incongruous.

“Lieutenant?” he said, raising his eyebrows.

“The lady squadcom just told me that I was the new tactical officer,” Chandra said. “I guessed you had something to do with that, so I thought I’d come by and thank you.”

“I mentioned your name,” Martinez said. “But last I heard it was a temporary appointment. I think she’s going to try a series of people.”

“But I’ll be first,” Chandra said. “If I impress her, she won’t need the others.”

Martinez smiled encouragingly. “Good luck.”

“I’ll need more than luck.” Chandra bit her lower lip. “Can you give me a hint about how best to impress the squadcom?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Martinez said. “I

don't think I've managed it lately.”

She looked at him with narrowed eyes, as if trying to decide whether or not to get angry. He picked up his stylus and said, “Come to dinner tomorrow. We'll discuss your ambitions then.”

Her long eyes turned calculating. “Very good, captain.”

She braced and he sent her away and went back to reviewing his office work, and nibbling on his dinner between paragraphs. He had no sooner finished both papers and the meal when Kazakov arrived with a new series of documents that, as executive officer, she was passing to him for review.

It was midafternoon before he finished all that, and went into the

personnel files to acquaint himself with the petty officers he would be having to supper. They were as Kazakov had said: long-serving professionals, with high scores on their masters' exams and good efficiency reports from past superiors. All received high marks from Fletcher—including Thuc, the man he'd executed. Martinez then checked the documentary evidence that should have corroborated Fletcher's good opinions, and almost immediately found something that appalled him.

His supper, he thought darkly, would be more than social. He opened the supper with the traditional toast to the Praxis, and then gave a preamble to the effect that he was counting on the petty

officers to maintain continuity in a ship that had just suffered a series of shocks, and he knew from their records and their efficiency reports that they were all more than capable of giving all that was required.

He looked from one of the eight department heads to the next—from round-faced Gawbyan to rat-faced Gulic, from Master Rigger Francis with her brawny arms and formidable jowls to Cho, Thuc's gangly replacement—and Martinez saw pleased satisfaction in their faces.

The satisfaction stayed there for the entire supper, as Perry brought in each course and as Martinez questioned each of his guests about the state of their

department. From Master Data Specialist Amelia Zhang he learned the condition and the capacities of the ship's computers. From Master Rigger Francis he received a myriad of details from the stowage of the holds to the state of the air scrubbers. From Master Signaller Nyamugali he had an informative discussion on the new military ciphers introduced since the beginning of the war, a critical task since both sides had started with the same ciphers and the same coding machines. It was a pleasurable, instructive meal, and the satisfaction on the faces of the department heads had only increased by the time Perry brought in the coffee.

“In the last days I've come to see how

well managed a ship we have in *Illustrious*,” Martinez said as the scent of the coffee wafted to his nostrils. “And I had no doubt that much of that excellent management were due to the quality of the senior petty officers here on the ship.”

He took a slow, deliberate sip of coffee, then put his cup down in the saucer.

“That’s what I thought, anyway,” he added, “at least until I saw the state of the 77-12s.”

Their satisfaction on the petty officers’ faces took a long, astounded moment to fade.

“Well, my lord,” Gawbyan began.

“Well,” said Gulic.

“The 77-12s aren’t even remotely current,” Martinez said. “I don’t see a single department that can give me the information I need in order to know the status of my ship.”

The department heads looked across the long table at one another. Martinez read chagrin, exasperation, embarrassment.

And well they should be mortified, Martinez thought. The 77-12s were a maintenance log supposed to be kept by every department. The petty officers and their crews were supposed to make note of all routine maintenance, cleaning, replacing, lubricating, checking the status of filters, of seals, of fluids, of the airtight gaskets in the bulkheads and

airlocks, of the stocks of replacement parts. Every item on *Illustrious* was designed to a certain tolerance—overdesigned, some would have thought—and each was supposed to be replaced or maintained well before that tolerance was ever reached. Every part inspection, every replacement, every routine maintenance was supposed to be recorded in a department's 77-12.

Keeping the records current was an enormous inconvenience for those responsible, and they all hated it and tried to avoid the duty whenever possible. But the 77-12s, properly maintained, were the most effective way for a superior to know the condition of his ship, and to a newly-appointed

captain they were a necessity. If a piece of equipment failed, the 77-12 could tell the captain whether the failure had been due to inadequate maintenance, human error, or some other cause. Without the record, the cause of a failure would be anyone's guess, and finding out the correct reason would take time and could distract an entire department. In wartime, Martinez felt that *Illustrious* couldn't afford the time and distraction of tracking the cause of any failure of a critical piece of equipment, not when lives were potentially in the balance. And he simply *detested* not knowing the condition of his command.

“Well, my lord,” Gulik began again. There was a nervous look in his sad

eyes, and Martinez remembered the sweat on his upper lip as he stood at the end of the line of weaponers, all passing under Fletcher's gaze. "Well, it all has to do with the way Captain Fletcher ran the ship."

"It's all the inspections, my lord," said Master Rigger Francis. She was a brawny woman, with broken veins in her cheeks and hair that had once been red but was now the color of a dishrag. "You saw how thoroughly Captain Fletcher conducted an inspection. He'd pick a piece of equipment and ask about its maintenance, and we'd have to know the answers. We wouldn't have a chance to look it up in the records, we'd have to *know* it."

Master Cook Yau leaned his thin arms on the table and peered around Francis' broad body. "We don't have to write the information down, my lord, because we have it all in our heads."

"I understand." Martinez gave a grave nod. "If you have it all in your heads," he added, "then it should be no trouble to put it all in the 77-12s. You should be able to give me a complete report in, say—two days?"

Martinez found himself delighted by the bleak and downcast looks the department heads gave one another. *Yes, he thought, yes, it's absolutely time you found out I was a bastard.*

"So what's today, then?" he asked cheerfully. "The nineteenth? Have the

77-12's to me by the morning of the twenty-second.”

He'd have to continue the inspections, he thought, because he'd have to check everything against the 77-12s to make sure the forms weren't pure fiction.

“Yarning the logs,” as it was called, was another time-honored custom of the service.

One way or another, Martinez swore he would learn *Illustrious* and its workings, human and machine both.

He let them drink their coffee in the sudden somber silence, bade them farewell, and went to his sleeping cabin intending to sleep the sleep of the just.

“How did I do, Alikhan?” he asked in the morning, as his orderly brought in his

full dress uniform.

“The petty officers who aren’t cursing your name are frightened,” Alikhan reported. “Some were up half the night working on their 77-12s, and kept a number of recruits up running from one compartment to the next confirming their recollections.”

Martinez grinned. “Do they still think I’ll do?” he asked. Alikhan looked at him with a tight little smile beneath his curling mustachios. “*I think you’ll do, my lord,*” he said.

As Martinez was eating breakfast he received a written invitation from the warrant officer’s mess for dinner. He read the invitation and smiled. The warrant officers had learned something

from the petty officers. They weren't going to wait for their invitation to dine with Martinez and find out all the things he thought were wrong with them, they were going to bring Martinez onto their home ground and then take it on the chin if they had to.

Good for them.

He accepted with pleasure, then sent a message to Chandra saying he would have to postpone their dinner for a day. He knew the message would not make her happy. He followed this with a message that none of the lieutenants would find to their liking, his request that all up-to-date 77-12s be filed in two days. He then called for Marsden and the fifth lieutenant, whose title was Lord

Phillips and whose personal name was Palermo.

Sub-lieutenant Palermo, Lord Phillips was a tiny man whose head didn't even reach Martinez' shoulder. His arms and legs were thin, his body slender, almost frail. His small hands were beautifully proportioned and his face was pale, darkened slightly by a feeble mustache. His voice was a quiet murmur. Phillips commanded the division that embraced the ship's electronics, from the power cables and generators to the computers that navigated the ship and controlled its engines, so Martinez started by inspecting the workshop of Master Data Specialist Zhang. The shadowy little room with its glowing screens was kept

in immaculate order. Martinez asked Zhang if she had made any progress at her 77-12, and she showed him the work she'd managed since the previous evening. He checked two items randomly and found that they'd been logged correctly.

“Excellent work, Zhang,” Martinez said, and marched with his party to the domain of Master Electrician Strode.

Strode was a little below average height but broad-shouldered and heavily muscled, with symbols of his sexual prowess tattooed on his biceps. His hair was brown and cut in a bowl haircut, with his nape shaved and pale hairless patches around the ears. Martinez expected to find it in spotless condition,

since Strode would have had warning that the captain was on the prowl since he'd arrived in Zhang's domain. Martinez wasn't disappointed.

“Have you made any progress with your 77-12?” Martinez asked.

“I have, my lord.”

Strode called up the log on one of his displays. Martinez copied it to his sleeve display and asked Strode to accompany him to on a brief tour to a lower deck. He paused by one of the deck access panels, marked by a trompe l'oeil niche on the wall, with Juke's painting of a graceful one-handled vase. Martinez looked again at the annotation in the 77-12..

“According to your log,” Martinez

said, “you’ve replaced the transformer under Main Access 8-14. Open the access, please.”

Not looking the least bit pleased, Strode tapped codes into the access locks and the floor panel rose on its pneumatics. An electric hum shivered up through the deck. The scent of grease and ozone rose from the utility compartment, and lights came on automatically.

Martinez turned to Lord Phillips. “My lord,” he said, “would you be so kind as to go into the compartment and read me the serial number on the transformer.”

Without offering a word Phillips took the deck access and slid his feet beneath. Crouched in the narrow space, Phillips found the serial number and read it off.

The number wasn't the same as that in Strode's 77-12.

“Thank you, lord lieutenant,” Martinez said, staring hard into Strode's fixed, angry face. “You can come up now.”

Phillips rose and brushed grime off his dress trousers. “Close the access, please,” Martinez said. Strode did so.

“Strode,” Martinez said, “you are reprimanded for yarning your log. I *will* check the 77-12s, and from this point forward I will check yours in particular.”

Sullen anger still burned in Strode's eyes. “My lord,” he said. “The serial number was ... provisional. I hadn't had the chance to check the correct number.”

“See your logs are less provisional in

the future,” Martinez said. “I’d rather have no information at all than information that’s misleading. You are dismissed.”

He walked off while Marsden was still noting the reprimand on his datapad. Phillips followed.

“You’ll have to check those logs yourself, lieutenant,” Martinez told him.

“Those forms are going to be full of yarns otherwise.”

“Yes, my lord,” Phillips murmured. Martinez couldn’t tell if his voice was so soft because he was chagrined by the situation, intimidated by the presence of a senior officer, or if that was his normal voice.

“Come to my office for coffee,”

Martinez said.

The coffee break was not a success. Martinez knew that Phillips was one of Fletcher's protégés, that the Phillips clan were clients to the Gombergs and that Phillips, like Fletcher, had been born on Sandama, though like the captain he'd spent most of his life on Zanshaa. Martinez hoped to discuss Fletcher, but Phillips'

responses were barely audible, and so terse and monosyllabic that Martinez gave up the task as hopeless and sent Phillips about his business. He would have to be satisfied with sending a pair of signals, the first to the petty officers that he was serious about the 77-12s, the second to the lieutenants that they had

better supervise the department heads very closely. Dinner with the warrant officers was much more cheerful, and the table was well provided, thanks to Warrant Officer/First Toutou, who headed the commissary. The warrant officers were specialists, pilots or navigators, supply officers or sensor technicians or the commissary, and didn't run large departments like the senior petty officers. Their own 77-12s would be much easier to complete. Some didn't have to fill 77-12s at all, as was attested by Toutou's broad smile and laughing demeanor.

The mess orderly was pouring little glasses of a sweet trellin-berry liqueur at the end of the meal when Martinez'

sleeve display gave a chime. He answered.

“Captain, I need you in my office.” Michi’s voice told him that she would brook no delay.

“Right away, my lady,” Martinez said. He rose from his chair, and before he could stop them the others rose, too.

“Be seated,” he told them. “And many thanks for your hospitality. I’ll return it some day.”

Doctor Xi waited with Michi in her office. Martinez looked for Garcia and didn’t find him.

“Tell him,” Michi said, without bothering to tell Martinez to relax his salute. Xi turned his mild eyes to Martinez. “When I was looking through

my references for methods of lifting fingerprints, it mentioned that prints left on skin can fluoresce under laser light. So I asked Machinist Strode to provide a suitable laser, and he had one of his minions assemble one for me.”

Martinez, still braced with his chin lifted, looked at Xi from the corner of his eye.

“You found fingerprints on the captain?” he asked.

Michi looked up, and an expression of annoyance crossed her face. “For all’s sake, Martinez,” she said, “relax and have a seat, will you?”

“Yes, my lady.”

Xi politely waited for Martinez to take a chair, and then continued as if

there had been no interruption.

“There were fingerprints on the captain, yes. Mine, and Garcia’s, and those of my orderlies. No others that I could find.”

Martinez had no reply to this, and made none.

“I then got Lieutenant Kosinic’s body out of the cooler, and I put a sensor net over his head and got a three-dimensional map of his injuries. He died from a single blow to the head, perfectly consistent with his losing his balance, falling, and hitting his head on the rim of the hatch.”

One fewer murder, anyway, Martinez thought.

“When I looked for fingerprints with

the laser,” Xi continued, “I found my own, and my assistants’. And I also found one large thumbprint on the underside of the jaw on the right side.” He pressed his own thumb to the point. “Right where a thumb might sit if a person were grabbing Kosinic’s head and slamming it into the hatch rim.”

He gave a little grin. “It was quite a job to read that print properly,” he said. “I couldn’t use a normal print reader, and so I had to take several close-up photographs while the print was fluorescing, and then convert the format to—”

“Skip that part,” Michi instructed.

Xi seemed a trifle disappointed that he was not getting the chance to fully

reveal the scope of his cleverness. He licked his lips and went on.

“The thumbprint was that of Master Engineer Thuc,” he said. Martinez realized his mouth was open, and he closed it.

“I’ll be damned,” he said.

Thuc was enormous and covered with muscle, Martinez thought, and certainly strong enough to smash Kosinic’s head on the first try. He looked at Michi.

“So Thuc killed Kosinic,” he said. “And Fletcher found out about it somehow and executed Thuc.”

She nodded. “That seems likely.”

“He said he killed Thuc for the honor of the ship. He was very sensitive on points of rank and dignity, and maybe he

thought it would be an affront to his own pride to order a formal inquiry to reveal the fact that one of his enlisted personnel killed an officer, and so he decided to handle it himself.”

Michi nodded again. “Go on.”

“But if that’s true,” Martinez said, “then who the hell killed *Fletcher*?”

Michi gave him an odd, searching look. “Who benefits?” she said. Irritation rasped along Martinez’ nerves. “If you’re expecting me to break down and confess,” he said, “you’re going to be disappointed.”

“Others may benefit besides you,” Michi pointed out. “For example someone who knew that Fletcher would never favor her ambitions, but who

thought you might.”

Martinez suspected that Michi’s choice of pronoun was not accidental.

“Thuc might have had an accomplice,” he suggested. “An accomplice who thought he was next on Fletcher’s list.”

“Did you know,” Michi said, “that Lieutenant Prasad excelled in Torminel-style wrestling at the Doria Academy?”

“No,” Martinez said, “I didn’t. I haven’t had time to review her file.”

Even if Torminel wrestling didn’t quite allow bashing an opponent’s head in, Martinez knew it was an aggressive style that included strangulation and all sorts of unpleasant, painful joint manipulation and pressure point attacks.

He could now see Chandra immobilizing Fletcher long enough to hustle him to his desk and slam his head against its sharp edge, in the process leaving her fingerprints on the underlip.

“I also see,” Michi said, “that you and Lieutenant Prasad shared a communications course some years ago.”

“That’s true. While she was there, she didn’t murder anyone that I know of.”

Michi’s lips twitched into a grim smile. “I’ll take your enthusiastic character reference under advisement. Did you notice that Captain Fletcher gave Prasad a venomous efficiency report?”

“I saw that, yes. But I know of no

evidence that she was aware of it.”

“Perhaps she wanted to prevent it from being written, but was too late.” Michi tapped her fingers on her desk top. “I’d like you to inquire, as discreetly as possible, about Prasad’s movements during the watch that Captain Fletcher was killed.”

“I can’t possibly be discreet with such an inquiry,” Martinez said. “And besides, Garcia already accounted for everyone on the ship.”

“Garcia is an enlisted man and experiences a natural diffidence when interrogating officers. An officer is best for these things.”

Martinez decided he might as well concede. When he thought about it, he no

longer knew why he was defending Chandra in any case.

“Well,” he said, “I’m interviewing the lieutenants one by one anyway. I’ll ask them about that night, but I don’t think any will give me a story different from anything they’ve already told Garcia.”

“I mess in the wardroom,” Xi said. “I could make a few inquiries as well.”

“We *must* find an answer,” Michi said.

On his way to his office Martinez contemplated Michi’s choice of words: she had said an answer, not *the* answer.

He wondered if Michi was willing to sacrifice *the* answer—the *real* answer—in favor of *any* answer. An answer that would end the doubts and questions

on the ship, that would help to unify *Illustrious* under its new captain, that would put the entire incident to bed and let *Illustrious*, and the entire squadron, get on with their job of fighting Naxids.

It was a solution that would sacrifice an officer, that was true, but an officer who was an outsider, a provincial Peer from a provincial clan, isolated from the others who had all been hand-picked by Fletcher. An officer who no one seemed to like very much anyway.

An officer who was very much like the officer Martinez had been just a year ago.

He didn't like Michi's solution on these grounds, and on others as well. There had been three deaths, and

Martinez thought Michi was too quick to consider the first two solved. He had a sense that the deaths all had to be related some way, even though he couldn't guess at anything that might connect them. In his office he found Marsden waiting patiently with the day's reports. Martinez called for a pot of coffee and worked steadily for an hour, until a knock on the door interrupted him. He looked up and saw Chandra in the doorway. He tried not to envision a target symbol pinned to her chest as she stepped into the room and braced.

“Yes, lieutenant?” he said.

“It was unfortunate that we couldn’t discuss...” Her eyes cut to Marsden, whose bald head was bent over his datapad. “That matter we wanted to talk about at dinner today.”

“We can talk about it tomorrow,” Martinez said.

“It would be a little late.” Her hands clenched and unclenched at her sides.

“The lady squadcom had asked me to conduct my experiment tomorrow.”

She wants to find out how much you’re worth before deciding on your arrest

. The bitter thought rose in Martinez’ mind before he could stop it. He sighed. “I don’t know how I can help you,

lieutenant.” She opened her mouth to speak, but he held up his hand. “In order for this to be what you want, it can’t be anything standard. Either *my* standard or *their* standard, if you see what I mean. It has to be something that’s completely yours, and something that hadn’t been done before, or at least not recently.”

Her hands clenched into fists, and this time did not unclench. “I understand, my lord.” From the sound, her teeth were clenched, too.

“It’s not easy, I know.” Martinez made a conciliatory gesture. “I’m sorry, but I have no useful ideas for you.” He mentally reviewed the last few days. “I don’t have useful ideas for anyone, it seems.”

Her fists still clenched, Chandra braced, executed a military turn, and marched away.

Martinez looked after her, and a morbid part of his mind wondered if Chandra was angry enough to kill him.

Martinez was killed the next morning, during Chandra's maneuver. Martinez spent the time passing command of the ship to Kazakov in Auxiliary Command, so that his crew in Command could devote themselves entirely to the maneuver.

“The experiment assumes that we are six hours into the Osser system.”

Osser again, Martinez thought. It was almost as if Chandra were repeating

Martinez' last maneuver, not a good sign if she wanted to impress Squadron Commander Chen.

“Chenforce has entered hot, and we've been able to search the system a little more than three light-hours out. No enemy force has been detected. Are there any questions?”

Apparently there were none, because Chandra went on. “The exercise will commence on my mark. Three, two, one, mark.”

A new system blossomed on the navigation displays.

“My lord,” said Warrant Officer Pan, one of the sensor operators, “we're being painted by a tracking laser.”

“Where?”

“Dead ahead, more or less. A rather weak signal—I don’t think it’s anywhere near— *My lord! Missiles!* ” Pan’s voice jumped half an octave in pitch.

“Power all point-defense lasers!” Martinez said. “Power antiproton beams!”

But by that point they were all dead, and within seconds Chenforce was a glowing cloud of radioactive particles spreading itself into the cold infinity of space, and Martinez’ heart was thumping to a belated charge of adrenaline. Naxid missiles, Martinez realized, accelerated to relativistic velocities outside the system, then fired through the wormhole along the route they knew Chenforce had to take. The reflection of a tracking laser

fired from somewhere in the system provided last-instant course corrections.

Through his shock he managed a grim laugh. Chandra had impressed the squadcom, all right.

Michi's voice came into Martinez's headphones. "I'll want all officers in my quarters for dinner at fifteen and one."

The mood at dinner was sober. The officers looked as if they'd been beaten flat by hours of high-gravity acceleration.

The meals that had been prepared in the wardroom, and in the captain's and squadcom's kitchens, were combined—casseroles mostly, that could cook quietly away in the ovens while everyone was at quarters. Michi had

several bottles of wine opened and shoved them across the table at her guests, as if she expected the depressed company simply to swill them down.

“I should like the tactical officer,” she said, “to comment on this morning’s experiment.”

The tactical officer. Triumph glimmered in Chandra’s long eyes as she rose.

“The attack was something I’d been worried about all along. I know that we were following standard Fleet doctrine for a squadron in enemy territory, but I wondered how useful that doctrine was in reality.” She shrugged. “I guess we found out.”

She turned on the wall display and

revealed that in her simulation she'd launched thirty missiles from Arkhandohg, the next system after Osser.

“It was possible to make a reasonable calculation of when we'd enter the Osser system. Since our course would be straight from Wormhole One to Wormhole Two, the missiles' track was obvious. Our course and acceleration could be checked by wormhole relay stations and any necessary corrections sent to the missiles en route. All the Naxids would need would be a targeting laser or a radar signal to give the missiles' own guidance systems last-second course corrections.”

She shrugged. “And if our course and speed are very predictable they won't

need even that.”

“Obviously,” Michi said, “we need to make our course and acceleration less predictable.” She looked at the assembled officers. “My lords, if you have any other suggestions, please offer them now.”

“Keep the antimissile defenses powered at all times,” Husayn said.

“My lady,” Chandra said, “I had thought we might keep our own targeting lasers sweeping dead ahead and between the squadron and any wormholes. If they pick up anything incoming, we might gain a few extra seconds.”

“Decoys,” Martinez said. “Have a squadron of decoys flying ahead of us.

The missiles might target them instead of us, particularly since they'll have only a few seconds to pick their targets.”

Decoys were missiles that could be fired from the squadron's ordinary missile tubes, but were configured to give as large a radar signature as a warship. They were less convincing the longer an observer had to view them, but with a relativistic missile having only a second or two to make up its mind, that was hardly a problem. Michi seemed dubious. “How large a cloud of decoys are we going to need?”

Martinez tried to make a mental calculation and failed. “As many as it takes,”

he said finally.

Michi turned to Chandra. “I want you to try all these tactics in simulation.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Give me regular reports.”

“Of course, my lady.” Chandra turned to at the others. “The danger signal will be entering a system where the radars are still operating, or where we’re painted by a targeting laser from what will probably be a distant source. That’s how we’ll know we’re running into danger.”

Ever since Chenforce had plunged into enemy space, the Naxids had been turning off all radars and other navigation aids in any system the loyalists had entered. Chandra was perfectly right to say that radar would be

a danger signal. Michi poured a glass of amber wine and contemplated it while she tapped her fingers on the tabletop. “The best way to prevent this kind of attack is to blow up every wormhole station we come across,” she said. “That way they can’t relay course corrections to any incoming missiles. I’d hate to blow those stations; it’s uncivilized. But to preserve my command I’ll kill anything on the enemy side of the line if I have to.”

She reached out a hand and picked up her glass of wine.

“Isn’t anyone drinking but me?” she asked.

Martinez poured himself a glass of wine and raised it in silent toast to

Chandra.

He thought she had just made herself too valuable to be blamed for Fletcher's death.

Chandra and Martinez finally had their long-postponed dinner the following day. Even though Martinez thought it was probably no longer necessary, he instructed Alikhan not to leave them alone for too long a space of time. Martinez was probably no longer necessary to Chandra's plans. Chandra entered the dining room looking splendid in her full dress uniform, the silver braid glowing softly on the dark green tunic and trousers. Her auburn hair brushed the tall collar that now bore the red

triangular tabs worn by Michi's personal staff.

“Congratulations, lieutenant,” Martinez said

Alikhan arrived with a warm, creamy pumpkin soup, fragrant with the scent of cinnamon. Chandra tasted it and said, “Your cook has it all over the wardroom chef, good as he is.”

“I'll tell him you said so.”

“That was one of the small compensations of being with Fletcher,” Chandra said. “He'd always give me a good meal before boring me to death.”

Martinez considered this as he sampled the soup and decided that Chandra could at least *pretend* to be a little more stricken by the death of an ex-

lover.

“What did he bore you with?” Martinez asked.

“Other than the sex, you mean?” When Martinez didn’t smile at her joke, she shrugged and went on. “He talked about everything, really. The food we were eating, the wine we were drinking, the exciting personnel reports he’d signed that day. He talked about his art. He had a way of making everything dull.” A mischievous light came into her eyes. “What did you think of what he had hanging in his sleeping cabin? Did it give you sweet dreams?”

“I got rid of it,” Martinez said. “Jukes found some less depressive stuff to hang.” He looked at her. “Why did

Fletcher have Narayanguru there? What did he get out of it?"

Chandra gave an elaborate sigh. "You're not going to make me repeat his theories, are you?"

"Why not?"

"Well," she said, "he said that if he ever joined any cult, it would be the Narayanists, because they were the only cult that was truly civilized."

"How so?"

"Let me try to remember. I was trying not to listen by that point." She pursed her full lips. "I think it was because the Narayanists recognized that all life was suffering. They said that the only real things were perfect and beautiful and eternal and outside our world, and that

we could get closer to these real things by contemplating beautiful objects in this world.”

“Suffering,” Martinez repeated. “Gomberg Fletcher, who was filthy rich and born into most privileged caste of Peers, believed that life was suffering. That *his* life was suffering.”

Chandra shook her head. “I didn’t understand that part, either. If he ever suffered, he didn’t do it when I was looking.” A curl of disdain touched her lip. “Of course he felt he was more refined than the rest of us, he probably thought his suffering was so elevated that the rest of us didn’t understand it.”

“I can see why the Shaa killed Narayanguru, anyway,” Martinez said.

“If you maintain that there’s another world, which you can’t prove exists, where things are somehow better and more real than *this* world, which we *can* prove exists, you’re going to run afoul of the Praxis for sure, and the Legion of Diligence is going to have you hanging off a tree before you can spit.”

“Oh, there was more to it than the invisible world business. Miracles and so on. The dead tree that Narayanguru was hung on was supposed to have burst into flower after they took him down.”

“I can see where the Legion of Diligence would take a dim view of those stories, too.”

That night, sitting on his bed while he drank his cocoa and looked at the picture

of the woman, her child, and the cat, he thought about Fletcher sitting in the same place, contemplating the ghastly figure of Narayanguru, and thinking about human suffering. Martinez wondered what Fletcher, a prominent member of two of the hundred most prominent Terran families in the empire, had ever suffered, and what comfort he received by looking at the bloody figure strung on the tree. Doctor Xi had said Fletcher found his position a burden, for all that he worked dutifully at what was expected of him. He wasn't really an arrogant snob, according to Xi, he was just playing a part.

Fletcher had been empty, filling his hours with formal ritual and aesthetic

pleasure. He hadn't created anything; he hadn't ever made a statue or a painting, he just collected them. He hadn't done anything new or original with his command, he'd just polished his ship's personnel and routines the same way he'd polish a newly-acquired silver figurine.

He had suffered, apparently. Perhaps he had known all along how hollow his life had become.

He had sat where Martinez was now sitting, and contemplated objects that other people considered holy.

Martinez wasn't going to figure Fletcher out tonight. He put the cocoa aside, brushed his teeth, and rolled beneath the covers.

Time passed. Martinez dined with Husayn and Mersenne on successive days, and the next day spent eight hours in Command, taking *Illustrious* through the wormhole to Osser. Squadrons of decoys were echeloned ahead of the squadron, in hopes of attracting any incoming missiles. Along with the decoys flew pinnaces, painting the vacuum ahead with their laser range finders. Every antimissile weapon was charged and pointed dead ahead.

Chenforce made some final-hour maneuvers before passing the wormhole, checking their speed and entering the wormhole at a slightly different angle, so as to appear in the Osser system on a

course that wouldn't take them straight on to Qupyl, the next system, but slightly out of the direct path. Martinez lay on his acceleration couch, trying not to gnaw his nails as he stared at the sensor displays, waiting for the brief flash that would let him know that missiles were incoming. His tension gradually eased as the returning radar and laser signals gradually revealed more of the Osser system, and then a new worry began to possess him.

The Naxids would have to wonder why Chenforce had changed its tactics, particularly when they hadn't met any genuine opposition since Protipanu, at the very beginning of their raid. If the Naxids analyzed the raiders' maneuvers,

then reasoned backwards to find what the tactics were intended to prevent, they would be able to see that Michi Chen and her squadron was very, very concerned about a missile barrage fired at relativistic velocities.

If the tactic hadn't yet occurred to the Naxids, Chenforce might now be handing them the idea.

But that was a worry for another day. For the present it was enough to see that the ranging lasers were finding nothing, that more and more of the system was being revealed without an enemy being found, and that Chenforce was as safe from attack as it was ever going to be.

Days passed. Martinez conducted regular inspections to learn his ship and

crew, and to confirm the information reported on the 77-12s. He dined in rotation with Lord Phillips, who was scarcely more talkative than he had been at their previous meeting, with Lieutenant the Lady Juliette Corbigny, whose volubility more than made up for Phillips' silence, and with Acting Lieutenant Lord Themba Mokgatle, who had been promoted to the vacancy left as Chandra shuttled to Michi's staff.

Gazing at the painting of the woman, child, and cat, he realized that there was another figure, a man who sat on a bed opposite the fire from the woman and her baby. Martinez hadn't noticed him because the painting was dark and needed cleaning, and the man wasn't

illuminated by the fire. One moment he wasn't there, and the next Martinez suddenly saw him, head bent with a stick or staff in his hands, appearing like a ghost from behind the painted red curtain. Martinez couldn't have been more surprised if the cat had jumped from the picture into his lap.

The dim figure on the canvas was the only discovery Martinez managed during that period. The killer or killers of Captain Fletcher remained no more than a phantom. Michi grew ever more irritable, and snapped at Martinez and Garcia both. Sometimes Martinez caught a look in her eye that seemed to say, *If you weren't family...*

In time, after the first breathless rush

of taking command was over, Martinez was reminded that there were too many captains' servants on the ship. He had Garcia take Rigger Espinosa and Machinist Ayutano into the constabulary, with the particular duty of patrolling the decks on which the officers were quartered. Buckle the hair stylist was sent to aid the ship's barber. Narbonne was taken onto Martinez'

service as an assistant to Alikhan, a demotion that Narbonne seemed to resent. That left Baca, the fat, redundant cook that no one seemed to want, and Jukes. Baca was eventually taken on as an assistant to Michi's cook, a post he wasn't happy about, either, and that left Martinez with his own personal artist.

Martinez called Jukes into his office to give him the news, and the man turned up in Fleet-issued undress, and managed to brace rather professionally in salute. Martinez decided he must have got to Jukes before Jukes got to the sherry.

“What did Fletcher rate you, anyway?” he asked.

“Rigger First Class.”

“I don’t suppose you know anything about a rigger’s duties?”

The artist shook his head. “Not a damn thing, my lord. That’s why I need a new patron.”

“Good luck in finding one.”

There was a moment of silence. Jukes looked as if he’d been hit with a hammer.

“Thank you for changing the pictures in my cabin,” Martinez said. “It’s a considerable improvement.”

“You’re welcome.” Jukes took a breath and made a visible effort to re-engage with the person sitting before him. “Was there a piece you particularly liked? I could to locate other works in that style.”

“The one with the woman and the cat,” Martinez said. “Though I don’t think I’ve seen any painting quite in that style, anywhere.”

Jukes smiled. “It’s not precisely typical of the painter’s work. That’s a very old Northern European piece.”

Martinez looked at him. “And North Europe is where, exactly?”

“Terra, my lord. The painting dates from before the Shaa conquest. Though I should say the *original* painting, because this may be a copy. It’s hard to say, because all the documentation is in languages no one speaks anymore, and hardly anyone reads them.”

“It *looks* old enough.”

“It wants cleaning.” Jukes gave a thoughtful pause. “You’ve got a good eye, my lord. Captain Fletcher bought the painting some years ago, but decided he didn’t like it because it didn’t seem one thing or another, and he put it in storage.” His mouth gave a little twitch of disapproval. “I don’t know why he took it to war with him. It’s not as if the painting could be replaced if we got

blown up. Maybe he wanted it with him since it was so valuable, I don't know."

"Valuable?" Martinez asked. "How valuable?"

"I think he paid something like eighty thousand for it."

Martinez whistled.

"You could probably buy it, my lord, from the captain's estate."

"Not at those prices, I can't."

Jukes shrugged. "It would depend on whether you could get a license for cult art, anyway."

Martinez was startled. "Cult art. *That's* cult art?"

"*The Holy Family with a Cat*, by Rembrandt. You wouldn't know it was cultish except for the title."

Martinez considered the painting through his haze of surprise. The cult art he remembered from his visits to the Museum of Superstition, and the other pieces he'd seen on Fletcher's cabin walls, made its subjects look elevated, or grand or noble or at the very least uncannily serene, but the plain-faced mother, the cat, and the child in red pajamas merely looked comfortably middle-class.

“The cat isn't normal with the Holy Family?”

A smile twitched at Jukes' lips. “No. Not the cat.”

“Or the frame? The red curtain?”

“That's the contribution of the artist.”

“The red pajamas?”

Jukes laughed. “No, that’s just to echo the red of the curtain.”

“Could the title be in error?”

Jukes shook his head. “Unlikely, my lord, though possible.”

“So what makes it cult art?”

“The Holy Family is a fairly common subject, though usually the Virgin’s in a blue robe, and the child is usually naked, and there are usually attendants, with some of them, ah—” He reached for a word. “—floating. This particular treatment is unconventional, but then there were no hard and fast rules for this sort of thing—Narayanguru, for example, is usually portrayed on a ayaca tree, I suppose because the green and red blossoms are so attractive, but Captain

Fletcher's Narayanguru is mounted on a real tree, and it's a vel-trip, not an ayaca."

A very faint chord echoed in Martinez' mind. He sat up, lifting his head.

"—and Da Vinci, of course, in his *Virgin of the Rocks*, did a—"

Martinez raised a hand to cut off Jukes' distracting voice. Jukes fell silent, staring at him.

"An ayaca tree," Martinez murmured. Jukes wisely did not answer. Martinez thought furiously, trying to reach into his own head. Mention of the ayaca tree had set a train of associations cascading through Martinez' mind, and he had reached conclusions; but it had all

happened in an instant, without his having to think through a single step. He now had to consciously and carefully work backward from his conclusions through the long process to make certain that it all held together, and to find out where it had started.

Without speaking he rose from his desk and walked to his safe. He opened a tunic button and drew out his captain's key on its elastic, inserted the key into his safe, and pressed the combination. Airtight seals popped as the door swung open, and Martinez caught a whiff of stale air. Martinez took out the clear plastic box in which Doctor Xi had placed Fletcher's jewelry, opened the box, and separated from the signet ring

and the silver mesh ring the gold pendant on its chain. He held the chain up to the light, seeing the tree-shaped pendant dangling, emeralds and rubies glittering against the gold.

“An ayaca tree like this?” he asked.

Jukes squinted as he looked at the dangling pendant. “Yes,” he said, “that’s typical.”

“Would you say that this pendant is particularly rare or unusually beautiful or stands out in any way?”

Jukes blinked at him, then frowned. “It’s very well made and moderately expensive, but there’s nothing extraordinary about it.”

Martinez flipped the pendant into his hand and returned to his desk. “Comm,”

he said, “page Lieutenant Prasad.”

A shadow fell across his door, and he looked up to see Marsden, the ship’s secretary, with his datapad.

“My lord, if you’re busy...”

“No. Come in.”

“Lord captain.” Chandra’s face appeared in the depths of Martinez’s desk.

“You paged me?”

“I have a question,” Martinez said. “Did Captain Fletcher wear a pendant in the shape of a tree?”

Chandra was taken aback. “He did, yes.”

“Did he wear it all the time?”

Chandra’s look grew more curious. “Yes, so far as I know he did, though he

took it off when he, ah, went to bed.”

Martinez raised his fist into view of the pickups on the desk, and let the pendant fall from his grasp so that it dangled on the end of its chain.

“This is the pendant?”

Chandra squinted, and her face distorted in the camera pickups as she stared into her sleeve display. “Looks like it, my lord.”

“Thank you, lieutenant. End transmission.”

Chandra’s startled face faded from the display. Martinez looked at the pendant for a long moment as excitement hummed in his nerves, and then became aware of the silence in his office, of Jukes and Marsden staring at him.

“Have a seat for a moment,” he said.
“This may take a while.”

He was still reaching deep into his own head.

He called up a security manual onto his desk display, one intended for the constabulary and Investigative Service. Included was a description of cults and the methods of recognizing them.

Narayanism, Martinez read, a cult based on the teachings of Narayanguru (Balambhoatdada Seth), which were condemned for a belief in a higher plane and for the founder’s alleged performance of miracles. Narayanguru’s teachings show a kinship to those of the Terran philosopher Schopenhauer, themselves condemned for nihilism.

Though cult tradition maintains that Narayanguru was hanged on an ayaca tree, historical records show that he was tortured and executed by more conventional methods in the Year of the Praxis 5581, on Terra. Because of this false tradition, cultists sometimes recognize one another by carrying flowering branches of the ayaca on certain days, planting ayacas about the home, or by using the ayaca blossom on jewelry, pottery, etc. There are also the usual variety of hand and other signals.

Narayanism is not a militant cult and its adherents are not believed to pose an active threat to the Peace of the Praxis, except insofar as they promote false beliefs. The cult has recently been

reported on Terra, Preowin, and Sandama, where entire clans sometimes participate secretly in cult activity.

Martinez gazed up at Jukes, and held out the pendant dangling from his fist.

“Why would Captain Fletcher wear this pendant?” he asked. “It’s not a particularly rare or precious form of art, is it?”

Jukes looked blank. “No, my lord.”

“Suppose he was actually a believer,” Martinez said. “Suppose he was a genuine Narayanist.”

A look of pure horror crossed Marsden’s face. Martinez looked at him in surprise. Marsden took a few moments to find words, but when he spoke his voice trembled with what

Martinez supposed was fury.

“Captain Fletcher, a cultist?” Marsden said. “Do you realize what you’re saying? A member both of the Gomberts and the Fletchers? A Peer of the highest possible pedigree, with noble ancestors stretching back thousands of years...”

Martinez was taken aback by this rant, but was in no mood for a pompous lecture on genealogy. He cut Marsden off in mid-tirade.

“Marsden,” he said, “do you know where the personal possessions of Thuc and Kosinic have been stored?”

Marsden larynx moved in his throat as he visibly swallowed his indignation, “Yes, my lord,” he said.

“Kindly bring them.”

Marsden rose, put the datapad on his seat, and braced. “At once, lord captain.”

The secretary marched away, his legs stiff with anger. Jukes looked after him in surprise.

“An odd man,” he said. “I had no idea he was such a snob.” He turned to Martinez and raised an eyebrow. “Do you really think Captain Fletcher was a cultist?”

Martinez looked at the pendant that still dangled from his hand.

“I don’t know why else he’d wear this.”

“Maybe it’s was a gift from someone he cared for.”

“ *A cultist* he cared for,” Martinez muttered.

He leaned back in his chair and followed his chain of reasoning again, piece by piece. No part of it was implausible by itself, he decided, and therefore his ideas were better than any other theory that had come his way.

Much of it had to do with the way the Praxis viewed cults, and the way that the servants of the Praxis had interpreted their duty.

The Shaa had believed in many things, but they did not believe in the numinous. Any cult that promoted a belief in the supernatural was, by definition, a violation of the Praxis and was illegal. When the Shaa conquered Terra, they

had found the place swarming with cults, and had acted over time to suppress them, moving gradually over several generations. Meeting houses of the faithful had been torn down, turned to secular use, or converted to museums. Believers were dismissed from government and teaching posts. Cult literature was confiscated and its reproduction forbidden. Cult organizations were disbanded, any professional clergy dismissed, and schools of instruction shut down.

Any believer determined on martyrdom was given ample opportunity to exercise his choice.

Cults had never vanished, of course. The Shaa, who were not without their

own shrewd intelligence, had perhaps never expected they would. But by forbidding the spread of doctrine, by forbidding professional clergy and houses of worship, by forbidding the reproduction of literature and cult objects, they had turned what had been by all accounts a thriving business into a strictly amateur affair. If there were meetings, they were small meetings that took place in private homes. If there were clergy, they had no opportunity for specialized study, and had to hold regular jobs. If there was literature, it was copied clandestinely and passed from hand to hand, and errors crept in and many texts were incomplete.

Believers were usually not harassed

as long as they did not practice in public or proselytize, and in time learned discretion. Though belief was not destroyed, its force was reduced, and in time cults became indistinguishable from superstition, a set of arcane and irrational practices designed to achieve the intervention of who knew what against the inflexible workings of an unknowable fate. Over the centuries the supernatural had simply ceased to be a threat to the empire. Marsden returned within a few moments, carrying a pair of grey plastic boxes.

“I assumed you wanted possessions other than clothing, my lord,” he said. “If you want to examine the clothing as well, may I requisition a hand truck?”

That would be for Kosinic's trunks containing the amazing number of uniforms required of an officer, plus his personal vac suit. Thuc would have had fewer uniforms, and used a vac suit from the ship's stores.

"The pockets would have been emptied, and so on?" Martinez asked.

"Yes, lord captain. Pockets are looked through, and other places where small items might be found, and anything discovered put in these boxes."

"I won't need the clothing, then. Put the boxes on my desk."

Martinez opened Kosinic's box first. He found a ring from the Nelson Academy, from which Martinez had graduated before Kosinic arrived, and a

handsome presentation stylus, brushed aluminum inlaid with unakite and jasper, and engraved "To Lieutenant Arthur Kosinic, from his proud father." There was a shaving kit, a modestly-priced cologne, a nearly-empty bottle of antibiotic spray that a doctor had probably given him for his wounds. Martinez found some fine paper, brushes, and watercolor paints, and looked at several finished watercolors, most planet-bound landscapes of rivers and trees, but including one recognizable impression of Fulvia Kazakov sitting at a table in the wardroom. To Martinez' unpracticed eye none of the watercolors seemed particularly expert. In a small pocketbook were a series of

foils, neatly labeled, that held music and other entertainments. At the bottom of the box was a small pocket-sized datapad, which Martinez turned on. It asked for a password, but Martinez wasn't able to provide one. He slotted his captain's key into it, but the datapad was a private one, not Fleet issue, and wouldn't recognize his authority. Martinez turned it off and returned it to the box.

The few belongings, the cologne and the academy ring and the inexpert watercolors, seemed to add up to an inadequate description of a life. Whatever had most mattered to Kosinic, Martinez thought, it probably wasn't here: his passions remained locked in his brain, and had died with him.

Martinez looked again at the stylus, sent by the father who might not yet know that his son had been killed, and closed the box on Kosinic's life.

He turned to the box labeled *Thuc, H.C., Master Engineer (deceased)*, and found what he was looking for right on top.

A small enameled pendant in the form of a tree with green and red blossoms, hanging from a chain of bright metal links.

“I think there was a group of Narayanists on *Illustrious*,” Martinez explained to Michi Chen. “I think Captain Fletcher was one of them. He wore a Narayanist symbol around his

neck, and he had a huge statue of Narayanguru in his sleeping cabin. I think he adopted the pose of a collector of cult art so that he could collect Narayanist artifacts legally, and he covered his activities by collecting artifacts from other cults as well.”

“If you insist on that theory,” Michi said, “You’re going to have trouble with the Gombergs and Fletchers, maybe even a suit in civil court.”

“Not if I’m right, I won’t,” Martinez said. “If there are Narayanists in either of those families, we won’t hear a word from them.”

Michi nodded silently. “Go on,” she said.

He had asked Michi into his office on

a confidential matter, and she had been surprised on her arrival to find Marsden and Jukes present.

“I think I know why Captain Fletcher was killed, but you’ll have to be patient,” Martinez began.

“I’ve been patient so far,” Michi said. Martinez could have quibbled with that, but decided against it. He called to Perry to bring out coffee and snacks, and ordered Marsden to record the meeting and take notes.

“I think there were, perhaps still are, a number of Narayanists aboard,”

Martinez said. “Captain Fletcher protected them. Somehow Kosinic found out about at least some of this, though possibly he didn’t know the captain was

a part of the arrangement. As Kosinic's knowledge was now a menace to the cultists, one of them—Thuc—killed Kosinic.”

Michi nodded. “Very well,” she said.

“It was a masterfully done murder, and we would never have found out about it if Captain Fletcher wasn't killed the same way and made us suspicious.”

Perry and Alikhan arrived at that moment with coffee and little triangular pastries, and Martinez fell silent while everyone was served. He took an appreciative taste of the coffee and felt heat flush at once to the surface of his skin. He could feel his theories boiling in his skull, and he wanted to let them escape; he was so impatient that it took

an effort to compliment Perry on the coffee. Finally the two left the room and he was able to continue.

“We know that Thuc was a Narayanist because he, too, wore a Narayanist medallion. I think that once Kosinic was killed, Captain Fletcher began to realize that he was in a bad spot. All it would take would be a little indiscretion on the part of a petty officer, and Fletcher would be implicated in the death of a fellow officer—and not just *any* officer, but a member of the squadron commander’s staff.

“He couldn’t indict Thuc, because any public proceedings would expose his own membership in the cult. So he used his officers’ privilege and executed

Thuc during the course of an inspection. You didn't see him do it, but I did—and it was very clearly premeditated, and very cold-blooded. He'd obviously practiced cutting Thuc's throat many times before he performed it.”

Michi's eyes flickered as Martinez said this, and she turned to Marsden.

“You were there, Mister Marsden. Do you agree with this assessment?”

Marsden had been listening with his bald head bent over his datapad, and his stylus poised to make corrections on the transcription of the conversation that his pad was automatically making. He looked up with a face that might have been carved of flint.

“The lord captain was not accustomed

to leave anything to chance,” he said. Michi listened to this, and slowly nodded. She turned back to Martinez.

“Go ahead, my lord.”

Martinez gave a little shrug. “Everything from this point is completely speculative,” he said. “I think Captain Fletcher was intent on eliminating every member of the cult in order to protect himself, but I can’t be certain that he wasn’t just after Thuc. In any case, one or more other cult members *assumed* that Fletcher was going after them, and they acted to kill him first.”

Michi absorbed this quietly. “Do you have any idea who those other cult members might be?”

Martinez shook his head. “No, my lady. The only people I’m inclined to exempt from suspicion are Weaponer Gulik and the crew of Missile Battery Three. Fletcher inspected them on the day of his death and didn’t execute any of them.”

“That still leaves something like three hundred people.”

“Though I would start with those among the crew who are from Sandama, like the lord captain, or who are Fletcher’s clients. Doctor Xi, for example.”

“Xi?” Michi was startled. “But he’s been helpful.”

“He helpfully explained away his own fingerprints that were found in Captain

Fletcher's office."

"But he was the one who proved that Captain Fletcher was murdered in the first place. If he'd been part of the conspiracy, he would have kept silent."

Martinez opened his mouth, then closed it. *Doctor An-ku I'm not*, he thought.

"Well," he said, "let's *not* start with Doctor Xi, then."

She held his eyes for a moment, and then her shoulder slumped as she seemed to deflate slightly. "We're no better off than we were. You've got an interesting theory, but even if it's true, it doesn't help us."

Martinez took the two pendants, Fletcher's and Thuc's, in one large hand

and held them dangling over his desk. “We searched the ship once, but we didn’t know what we were looking for. Now we do. Now we’re looking for these. We look in lockers and we look around necks.”

“My lord.” Martinez and Michi both turned at the sound of Marsden’s flat, angry voice. “You should check me first, my lord. I’m from Sandama, and I was one of Captain Fletcher’s clients. That makes me a double suspect, apparently.”

Martinez gazed at Marsden and his annoyance flared. Marsden was offended on Fletcher’s behalf, and apparently on behalf of the crew as well. A search of the crew’s private effects was an insult to their dignity, and

Marsden had taken it to heart. He was going to insist that if Martinez was going to violate his dignity, he was going to violate it personally, and right now.

“Very well,” Martinez said, having no choice. “Kindly remove your tunic, open your shirt, and empty your pockets.”

Marsden did so, a vein in his temple throbbing with suppressed fury. Martinez sorted through the contents of Marsden’s pockets while his secretary pirouetted before him, arms held out at the shoulder, showing he had nothing to hide. No cult objects were detected.

Martinez clenched his teeth. He had degraded another human being, and for nothing.

And the worst part of it was that he

felt degraded himself for doing it.

“Thank you, Marsden,” Martinez said. *You bastard*, he added silently. Without a word the ship’s secretary turned his back on Martinez and donned his tunic. When he had buttoned it, he resumed his seat and put his datapad on his lap and picked up his stylus.

“The last inspection was too helter-skelter,” Michi said. “And it took too long. This next has to be more efficient.”

The two of them discussed this matter for a while, and then Michi rose. The others rose and braced. “I’m going to dinner,” she told Martinez. “After dinner we’ll confine the crew to quarters and begin the search, starting with the officers.”

“Very good, my lady.”

She looked at Marsden and Jukes, who had spent the entire meeting sipping coffee and eating one pastry after another. “You’ll have to dine with these two in your quarters. I don’t want news of this getting out over dinner conversation in the mess.”

Martinez suppressed a sigh. Marsden was not going to be the most delightful of dinner guests.

“Yes, my lady,” he said.

Michi took a step toward the door, then hesitated. She looked at Jukes, her brows knit.

“Mister Jukes,” she said, “why exactly are you here?”

Martinez answered for him. “He

happened to be in the room when I had my brainstorm.”

Michi nodded. “I understand.” She turned away for a moment, hesitated again, then returned her gaze to Jukes.

“There are crumbs on your front, Mister Jukes,” she said. Jukes blinked. “Yes, my lady,” he said.

The officers’ quarters were searched first, by Martinez, Michi, and the three lieutenants on Michi’s staff. The officers’ persons were also searched, with the exception of Lord Phillips, who was officer of the watch and in Command.

“This is what you’re looking for,” Martinez told them then, showing them

the two pendants. “These are cult objects, representations of ayaca trees. They need not be worn around the neck—they could be a ring or a bracelet or any kind of jewelry, or they could be on cups or plates or picture frames or practically anything. *Everything needs to be examined.* Do you understand?”

“Yes, my lord,” they chanted. Kazakov and Mersenne looked determined. Husayn and Mokgatle were uncertain. Corbigny seemed worried. None spoke.

“Let’s go, then.”

The lieutenants and Martinez and Michi and Michi’s staff marched off in a body to inspect the warrant officers and their quarters. No ayaca trees were

found, on jewelry or anyone else. Now reinforced by the warrant officers, the party moved on to the petty officers' quarters.

The petty officers stood braced in the corridor, out of the way, and did their best to keep their faces expressionless. Lady Juliette Corbigny held back as the other officers began going through lockers. Her white, even teeth gnawed at her lower lip. Martinez ghosted up to her shoulder.

“Is there a problem, lieutenant?”

She gave a little jump at the question, as if he'd startled her out of deep reflection, and she turned to him with her brown eyes open very wide.

“May I speak to you privately, lord

captain?”

“Yes.” He looked over his shoulder and saw precious little privacy to be found, only the row of narrow cabins being searched by a gang of officers.

“Come with me,” he decided.

Corbigny followed him to the companionway, where he walked to the shadow of the steep stair and turned to her.

“Yes?”

She was gnawing her nether lip again. She paused in her champing to say, uncertainly, “Is this a bad cult we’re looking for?”

Martinez considered the question. “I’m not an expert on cults, good or bad. But I think the cultists are responsible

for Captain Fletcher's death."

Corbigny began to gnaw on her lip some more. Impatience jabbed at Martinez' nerves, but instinct told him to remain silent and let Corbigny chew on herself for as long as she needed to.

"Well," she said finally, "I've seen a medallion like that on someone."

"Yes? Someone in your division?"

"No." Her eyes looked wide into his. "On an officer. On Lord Phillips."

The first thing Martinez thought was, *Palermo Phillips? That can't be right.* He couldn't imagine little Phillips banging Fletcher's head against his desk with his tiny hands.

His second thought was, *Maybe he had help.*

“Are you sure?” Martinez asked.

Corbigny gave a nervous jerk of her head. “Yes, my lord. I got a good look at it. I remember him running out of the shower that day you paged him and inspected his division. He was in a hurry to get his tunic on and the chain of the pendant got caught on one of his buttons. I helped him untangle it.”

“Right,” Martinez said. “Thank you. You may rejoin the others.”

Martinez collected Cadet Ankley, who was qualified to stand watches, and Espinosa, his former servant who had been shifted over to the military constabulary, then walked straight to Command.

“The lord captain is in Command,”

Lord Phillips called as he entered. Phillips rose from his couch to let Martinez take his place if he so desired. Martinez marched forward until he stood before Phillips, who even fully braced failed to come up to his chin.

“My lord,” Martinez said, “I’d be obliged if you’d open your tunic.”

“My lord?” Phillips stared up at him.

Suddenly Martinez didn’t want to be there. He had begun to think the whole day had been a mistake. But here he was, having joined the role of detective to his authority as captain, and he could think of nothing but following the path he’d set himself, wherever it took him.

“Open your tunic, lieutenant,” he said. Phillips looked away, suddenly

thoughtful. His hand came slowly to the throat of his tunic and began undoing the silver buttons. Martinez looked at the rapid pulse beating in Phillips' throat as the collar came open, as the gold links of a chain were revealed.

Anger suddenly boiled in Martinez. He reached out, took the chain, and brutally pulled until the pendant at the bottom of its loop revealed. It was an ayaca tree, red and green jewels glittering.

Martinez looked down at Phillips. The chain was cutting into his neck, and he was on his toes. Martinez let go of the chain.

"Please accompany me, lieutenant," he said. "You are relieved." He turned

and addressed the room at large. “Ankley is the officer of the watch!” he proclaimed.

“I am relieved, my lord!” Phillips repeated. “Ankley is the officer of the watch!”

As Ankley came forward, Martinez bent to speak in his ear.

“Keep everyone here,” he said. “No one is to leave Command until a party arrives to search them.”

Ankley licked his lips. “Very good, my lord.”

Cold foreboding settled into Martinez’ bones as he marched to the ship’s jail. Phillips followed in silence, buttoning his tunic, and Espinosa came last, a hand on the butt of his stun baton.

He walked through the door into the reception room of *Illustrious*'s brig, and the familiar smell hit him. All jails smelled alike, sour bodies and disinfectant, boredom and despair.

"I'll need your tunic, belt, shoes, and your lieutenant's key," Martinez said when he came to the brig. "Empty your pockets here, on the table." He had been Military Constabulary Officer on the *Corona*, and he knew the drill. The stainless steel table rang as Phillips emptied his pockets. He rolled an elastic off his wrist, one that had his lieutenant's key on it, and handed that to Martinez.

The sense that this was all a horrible mistake continued to hang over

Martinez'

head like a dense grey cloud. He couldn't imagine shy, tiny Phillips committing a crime as serious as stealing a candy bar, let alone killing his captain. But it had been Martinez' idea that the deaths were cult related, and that cult symbols would mark the killers. He had begun this. Now Fate would finish it.

"All your jewelry, please," Martinez said.

Phillips took off his academy ring with some effort, then opened his tunic and reached for the chain with both hands. He looked at Martinez.

"May I ask what this is about?"

"Two people wearing that medallion have died," Martinez said. Phillips

gaped at him. “Two?” he said.

Martinez’s sleeve comm chimed. Martinez answered and saw Marsden’s frozen face resolve on his sleeve’s chameleon weave.

“The lady squadcom was wondering where you went,” he said.

“I’m in the brig, and I’m about to report to her. Have there been any developments?”

“None. We’re about to finish here.”

“Tell Lady Michi that I’ll be right there.”

Martinez ended the conversation, and looked at Phillips to see bewilderment still on his face.

“I don’t understand,” Phillips said.

“Your jewelry, lieutenant.”

Phillips slowly took the chain from around his neck and handed it to Martinez. Martinez issued him a pair of the soft slippers worn by prisoners and showed him to his narrow cell. The metal-walls were covered with many thick layers of green paint, and the single light was in a cage overhead. The room was almost filled with the toilet, the small sink, and the acceleration couch used for a bed. Martinez closed the heavy hatch with its spy hole and told Espinosa to remain on guard. He put the ayaca pendant in a clear plastic evidence box and returned to the petty officers' quarters. The cabins had all been searched, and the search party had gone on to the body search, women

searching women in the petty officers' mess while men searched men in the corridor.

Nothing was found. Martinez approached Michi and handed her the box with the ayaca pendant inside. She looked up at him in silent query.

“Lord Phillips,” he said.

At first Michi was surprised, and then her expression hardened. “Too bad Fletcher didn't get him first,” she said.

Michi's expression didn't soften throughout the rest of the search, and Martinez could tell she was thinking hard, particularly after the search of the enlisted, and those on duty in Command and Engine Control, produced no cult symbols, no murder weapons, and no

suspects.

“Page Doctor Xi to the brig,” Michi told her sleeve display. She looked up at Martinez. “Time to interrogate Phillips,” she said.

“I don’t think he killed Fletcher,” Martinez said.

“I don’t, either, but he knows who did. He knows who the other members of the cult are.” Her lips drew back from her teeth in a kind of snarl. “I’m going to have the lord doctor use truth drugs to get those names out of him.”

Martinez suppressed a shiver. “Truth drugs don’t always produce the truth,”

he said. “They lower a person’s defenses, but they can confuse a prisoner as well. Phillips could just babble

names at random for all we know.”

“I’ll know,” Michi said. “Maybe not this first interrogation, but we’ll keep up the interrogations day after day, and in the end I’ll know. The truth always comes out in the end.”

“Let’s hope so,” Martinez said.

“Get Corbigny here as well. I’ll take her to the brig with me. You and—” With a look at Marsden. “—your secretary can get back to running the ship.”

Martinez was startled. “I—” he began. “Phillips is my officer, and—”

I want to watch as you use chemicals to strip away his dignity and his every last secret. Because it’s my fault you’re putting him through this.

“He’s not your officer any more,” Michi said flatly. “He’s a walking dead man. And frankly I don’t think he’s going to welcome your presence.” She looked at him, and her look softened. “You have a ship to run, captain.”

“Yes, my lady.” Martinez braced.

He and Marsden spent the rest of the day in his office dealing with the minutiae of command. Marsden was silent and hostile, and Martinez’ mind kept running into blind alleys instead of concentrating on his work. He supped alone, drank half a bottle of wine, and went in search of the doctor.

As he approached the pharmacy he encountered Lady Juliette Corbigny leaving. She was pale and her eyes were

wider than ever.

“Beg pardon, lord captain,” she said, and sped away, almost in flight. Martinez looked after her, then walked into the pharmacy, where he found Xi slumped over a table, his chin on one fist as he contemplated a beaker half-filled with a clear liquid. The sharp scent of grain alcohol was heavy on his breath.

“I’m afraid Lieutenant Corbigny isn’t well,” Xi said. “I had to give her something to settle her tummy. Part way into the interrogation she threw up all over the floor.” He raised the beaker and looked at it solemnly. “I fear she isn’t cut out for police work.”

Savage, pointless anger roiled in Martinez. “Did *anything* go well?” he

asked.

“The interrogation wasn’t a success, particularly,” Xi said. “Phillips said he hadn’t killed the captain, and didn’t know who did. He said he doesn’t belong to a cult. He said the ayaca pendant was given to him by his sweet old nurse when he was a child, and by the way the story can’t be confirmed because she’s dead. He said he had no idea that the ayaca had any significance other than being a pretty tree that a lot of people put in their gardens.”

Xi slumped over his table, and took a drink from the beaker.

“When the drug hit him he kept to his story until his mind got the addles, and then he started to chant. Garcia and the

squadcom and Corbigny, when she wasn't spewing, tried to keep him on the subject of the captain's death, but he kept going back to the same chant. Or maybe there were different chants. It was hard to tell."

"What was he chanting?"

"I don't know. It was in some old language that nobody recognized, but we heard the word *Narayanguru* all right, so it's a cult ritual language and when the Investigative Service hears the recording they'll find someone to identify it, and that will be the end of Lord Phillips, and if the IS is on speaking terms with the Legion that week and passes the information, the Legion will probably arrest half the

Phillips clan and that will be the end of *them*, because the Legion have many more methods of interrogation than are available to us here, and doctors who are far more bad than I am, and who are very proud that their confession rate is nearly one hundred percent.” He looked at the beaker again, and then raised his head to look at Martinez.

“Captain, I have been remiss. I am a bad doctor and a bad host. Will you share my beverage of consolation?”

“No thanks, I’ve had enough already. And you’re going to have a hell of a hangover.”

Xi gave a weary grin. “No, I’m not. A dose of this, a dose of that, and I will rise a new man.” His face fell. “And

then the squadcom will turn me into a bad doctor again, and have me shoot chemicals into the carotid of a harmless little man who didn't hurt anybody, if you ask me—which nobody did—but who's going to die anyway, and I wish I'd kept my damn mouth shut about the captain's injuries."

He poured more alcohol into his beaker. "I thought I was going to be a brilliant detective, tracking clues like the police in the videos, and instead I find myself involved in something soiled and disgusting and sordid, and frankly I wish I could throw up like Corbigny."

"Keep this up and you will," Martinez said.

"I shall do my best," Xi said, and

raised his glass. “Bottoms up.”

The taste of defeat soured Martinez’ tongue. As he left the pharmacy, he swore that the next time he had a brainstorm, he’d keep it to himself.

A call from Garcia brought Martinez out of bed and running to the brig while still buttoning his undress tunic over his pajamas. “There was a guard here all night, lord captain,” Garcia said in a rapid voice as soon as Martinez entered the room.

“There’s no way anyone could have got to him.”

Martinez walked to Lord Phillips’ cell and looked inside and wished he hadn’t.

Sometime over the course of the night Phillips had torn open the acceleration couch that served as his bed, pulled out fistfuls of the foam padding, and then filled his mouth with the foam and kept packing it in until he choked. Choked to death. Phillips was half off the couch and his mouth was still full of foam and his face was black. His eyes were open and gazed overhead at the light in its cage. Bits of the foam floated over the room like motes of dust. Doctor Xi knelt by him. His eyes were red-rimmed and his hands trembled as he made a cursory examination.

“He knew he’d crack,” Michi said after she arrived. “He knew he’d give us the names sooner or later. He decided to

die first to protect his friends.” She shook her head. “I wouldn’t have thought he had the nerve for it.”

Martinez turned to her, rage poised on his tongue, and then he turned away.

“We’re still no better off than we were!” Michi cried, and slammed her fist into the metal door.

Later that morning Martinez conducted vicious, mean-spirited inspections of Missile Battery One and the riggers’ stores, but it didn’t make him feel any better.

“General quarters! General quarters! This is not a drill!”

From the panic that clawed at the amplified voice of Cadet Qing, Martinez

knew this wasn't a drill from the first word. By the time the message began to repeat he had already vaulted clean over his desk and was sprinting for the companion that led to Command, leaving Marsden sitting in his chair staring after him. Martinez sprang for the companion just as the gravity went away. The distant engine rumble ceased, leaving the corridor silent except for the sound of Martinez'

heart, which was thundering louder than the general quarters alarm. Martinez had no weight but he still had plenty of inertia, and he hit the companion with knees and elbows. Pain rocketed through his limbs despite the padding on the stair risers. He bounced away from the

companion like an oversized rubber eraser, but he managed to check his momentum with a grab to the rail.

His feet began to swing out into the corridor, and that meant *Illustrious* was changing its heading. He had to get up the companion and into Command before the engines fired again. His big hand tightened on the rail and he began to swing himself back to the steep stair so that he could kick off and jump to the next deck. No good. The engines fired without warning and suddenly Martinez had weight again. His arm couldn't support his entire mass and folded under him, and the rail caught him a stunning blow across the shoulder. He flopped onto his back on the stair. Risers sliced

into his back.

Martinez tried to rise but the gravities were already beginning to pile on. (*Two gravities. Three ...*) Pain lanced through his wrist as he seized the rail to try to haul himself upright. The stair risers were cutting into him like knives. (*Four gravities at least ...*) He gasped for breath. Eventually Martinez realized he wasn't going to be able to climb.

He realized other things as well. He was on a hard surface. He hadn't taken any of the drugs that would help him survive heavy gravity. He could die if he didn't get off this companion, cut by the stairs like cheese by a slicer. A sort of crabbing motion of his arms and legs brought him bumping down the stairs,

each step a club to his back and mastoid, but once his buttocks thumped on the deck it was harder to move, and the risers were still digging into his spine. (

Five gravities ...) His vision was beginning to go dark. Martinez crabbed with his arms and legs and managed to thump down another stair. Comets flared in his skull as his head hit the tread. He clenched his jaw muscles to force blood to his brain and dropped down another step. It was Chandra's nightmare, he realized. Relativistic missiles were inbound *and he needed to get to Command*. It would be the height of stupidity to die here, vaporized by a missile or with his neck broken by the sharp edge of a stair. Martinez thumped

down another stair, and that left only his head still on the companion, tilted at an angle that cramped his windpipe and strained his spine. (*Six gravities ...*) His vision was totally gone. He couldn't seem to breathe. Without the drugs Terrans could only rarely stay conscious past six and a half gravities. He had to get off the stair or his neck was going to be broken by the weight of his head. With a frantic effort he tried to roll, his palms and heels fighting for traction against the tile, fighting the dead weight that was pinning him like a silver needle pinning an insect to corkboard. Vertigo swam through his skull. He fought to bring air into his lungs. He gave a heave, every muscle in his body straining. With

a crack his head fell off the stair and banged onto the tile. Despite the pain and the stars that shot through the blackness of his vision he felt a surge of triumph.

Gravity increased. Martinez fought for consciousness.

And lost.

When Martinez woke he saw before him a window, and beyond the window was a green countryside. Two ladies in transparent gowns gazed at the poised figure of a nearly naked man who seemed to be hovering in a startlingly blue sky. Above the man flew a superior-looking eagle, and on the grass below the two ladies were a pair of

animals, a dog and a small furry creature with long ears, both of whom seemed to find the floating man interesting.

It occurred to Martinez that the man in the sky wasn't alone, that he, Martinez, was also floating.

His heart was going like a triphammer. Sharp pains shot through his head and body. He blinked and wiped sweat from the sockets of his eyes. The man still floated before him, serene and eerily calm, as if he floated every day.

It was only gradually that Martinez realized that he was looking at a piece of artifice, at one of the trompe l'oeil paintings that Montemar Jukes had placed at intervals in *Illustrious'* corridors.

The engines had shut down again. Now weightless, Martinez had drifted gently from the deck to a place before the painting.

He gave a start and looked frantically in all directions. The companion leading to Command was two body-lengths away. So far as he knew the emergency, the battle or whatever it was, had not ended.

He swam with his arms to reorient himself, and kicked with one foot at the floating man to shoot himself across the corridor. Striking the wall he absorbed momentum with his arms—pain shot through his right wrist—and then he did a kind of handspring in the direction of the companion.

He struck the companionway feet-first and folded into a crouch, which enabled him to spring again, this time through the hatch atop the companion. From there it was a short distance to the heavy hatch to Command. The door was armored against blast and radiation and would have been locked down at the beginning of the emergency. Martinez hovered before the hatch, his left hand clutching at the hand grip inset into the door frame, his right stabbing at the comm panel.

“This is the captain!” he said. “Open the door!”

“Stand by,” came Mersenne’s voice.

Stand by? Martinez was outraged. Who did the fourth lieutenant think Martinez was, some snotty cadet?

“Let me into Command!” Martinez barked.

“Stand by.” The irritating words were spoken in an abstract tone, as if Mersenne had many more important things on his mind than obeying his captain’s orders.

Well, Martinez thought, perhaps he did. Perhaps the emergency was occupying his full attention.

But how much attention did it take to open a damn hatch?

Martinez ground his teeth while he waited, fist clamped white-knuckled around the hand grip. Lieutenant Husayn floated up the companion and joined him. Blood floated in perfect round spheres from Husayn’s nose, some of

them catching on his little mustache; and there was a cut on his lip.

There hadn't been the regulation warning tone sounded for high gee—or for no gee, for that matter. Probably there hadn't been time to give the order. Martinez wondered how many injuries Doctor Xi was coping with.

With a soft hiss, the door slid open after Martinez had been waiting nearly a minute. He heaved on the hand grip and gave himself impetus for the command cage.

“I have command!” he shouted.

“Captain Martinez has command!” Mersenne agreed. He sounded relieved. He was already drifting free of the command cage, heading toward his usual

station at the engines display.

Martinez glanced around the room as he floated toward his acceleration cage. The watch were staring at their displays as if each expected something with claws to come bounding out of them.

“Missile attack, my lord,” Mersenne said. as he caught his acceleration cage. The cage swung with him, and he jackknifed, then inserted his feet and legs inside.

“At least thirty. I’m sorry I didn’t let you into Command, but I didn’t want to unseal the door until I was certain the missiles had all been dealt with—didn’t want to irradiate the entire command crew.”

It grated, but Martinez had to admit

Mersenne was right.

“Any losses?” Martinez asked.

“No, my lord.” Mersenne floated to a couch next to the warrant officer who had been handling the engines board, then webbed himself in and locked the engine displays in front of him. “We starburst as soon as we saw the missiles incoming, but when we hit eight gravities when there was an engine trip.”

Martinez, in the act of webbing himself onto his couch, stopped and stared.

“*Engine trip?* ” he said.

“Number one engine. Automated safety procedures tripped the other two before I could override them. I’ll try to get engines two and three back online,

and then work out what happened to engine one.”

So now Martinez knew why he'd suddenly found himself floating. The engines had quit, apparently on their own, and in the middle of a battle. He pulled his displays down from over his head, heard them lock, began a study of the brief fight.

The Battle of Arkhan-Dohg, from the first alarm, when a targeting laser had painted the squadron, to the destruction of the last incoming missile, had taken a little less than three minutes.

“One failure in the point-defense array,” Husayn reported from the weapons station. “Antiproton gun three failed after one shot.”

“Just like Harzapid,” muttered Mersenne.

“How many decoys do we have in the tubes?” Martinez asked Husayn.

“Three, my lord.”

“Fire them immediately. We want to get decoys ahead of the squadron in case the Naxids have a followup attack.”

The Command crew looked a little hollow-eyed at this possibility.

“Decoys fired, my lord. Tubes cleared. Decoys proceeding normally under chemical rockets to safety point.”

“Replace them in the tubes with another set of decoys,” Martinez added. Primary command crew were drifting through the hatch and quietly taking up their stations. Alikhan arrived lugging

Martinez' vac suit by a strap. Martinez told him to report to the weapons bays after putting the suit in one of the vac suit lockers: he didn't have time to put it on right now.

"I've commenced a countdown on engines two and three," Mersenne reported. "We're at five minutes twenty-one."

"Proceed."

"My lord," Husayn said, "decoys' antimatter engines have ignited. All decoys maneuvering normally."

"My lord," said Signaler Roh, "*Judge Arslan* queries our status."

"Tell them we experienced a premature engine shutdown," Martinez said.

“Tell them we expect no long-term problem.”

“Yes, lord captain. Ah—Squadcom Chen wants to speak with you.”

“Put her on my board.”

“Yes, lord captain.”

Martinez hadn't strapped on the close-fitting cap that held his earphones, virtual array, and medical sensors, so Michi's voice came out of the speaker on Martinez' display, and was audible to everyone in command.

“Captain Martinez,” she said, “what the *hell* just happened?”

Martinez reported in as few words as possible. Michi listened with an intent, inward look on her face. “Very well,” she said. “I'll order the rest of the

squadron to take defensive positions around us until we're maneuverable again."

Martinez nodded. "May I recommend that you order more decoy launches?"

"Lieutenant Prasad's already taken care of that." Michi's head tilted as she looked into her display. "Captain," she said, "you look like you got run over by a herd of bison."

"Acceleration threw me down a companion."

"Are you all right? Shall I page Doctor Xi to Command?"

"I'm sure he's busy enough where he is."

She nodded. "Find out who painted us with that laser," she said, "and blow him

the fuck up.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“And take out the wormhole stations as well. I’m not having them spotting for the enemy.”

It’s uncivilized, Michi had said when she’d first raised the possibility of destroying wormhole stations. She’d occasionally done it in the past, to preserve secrecy concerning Chenforce’s movements, but she’d left most of them alone. Nothing like being shot at, Martinez thought, to rub away these refined little scruples.

The orange end-stamp came onto the display, signaling that Michi had broken the collection.

“Sensors,” Martinez said, “are we

still being hit by that laser?”

“No, my lord,” Pan said. “They switched off as soon as the last missiles were destroyed—and because their information is limited by the speed of light, they don’t *know* what happened here yet. So they must have had advanced warning concerning exactly when to light us up, and when to stop.”

“Did you get a bearing?”

“It would help if I could communicate with the other ships and triangulate.”

“Do so.” Martinez turned to Husayn. “Weapons, target wormhole stations one, two, and three. Take them all out, one missile each. Don’t wait for my command, just do it.”

“Yes, lord captain.”

Martinez let himself float for a moment in his harness and considered the order he'd just given. It *was* uncivilized. The wormhole stations not only maintained communication between the worlds, they acted to stabilize the wormholes by balancing the mass moved through them in either direction. Commerce would be slowed to a crawl through wormholes that were in danger of becoming unbalanced. With the destruction of its wormhole stations, Arkhan-Dohg would in effect be blockaded. It was a blockade that would continue until new stations were both built and equipped with the massive asteroid-sized chunks of matter they used to keep the wormholes in balance. The

war might have been over for some time before Arkhan-Dohg saw another merchant vessel.

“One minute to engine ignition, my lord,” Mersenne said.

“Hold at ten seconds.” Martinez hesitated, then said, “We can proceed on two engines without trouble?”

Mersenne’s tone was confident. “Yes, my lord.”

“Missiles launched and proceeding on chemical rockets. Tubes clear.”

“Roh, put me through to the squadcom.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Ida Li’s face appeared on Martinez’s display. “You have a message for Lady Michi?”

“Just that we’ll have two engines online in less than a minute. Does the lady squadcom have a heading for us?”

“Stand by.”

The screen blanked, and when an image returned it was that of Chandra Prasad. “I’m sending course coordinates to your pilot’s station now. Acceleration one-tenth of a gravity, until we’re sure the engines don’t cut out again.”

“Understood. Mersenne, sound the warning for acceleration.”

There were a few moments of genuine suspense waiting for the engine countdown to conclude, and then there was a distant rumble and a slight kick that sent the acceleration cages slowly tumbling until they settled at their

deadpoints. Computers balanced the angle of thrust of the two engines to compensate for the loss of the third. Acceleration was gradually increased until one constant gravity was maintained.

“Engines performance normative,” Mersenne said.

“Very good.”

“My lord.” It was Pan. “We’ve tracked the origin of that targeting laser. It was Arkhan Station Three.”

Arkhan, with its relatively small population, didn’t rate a full accelerator ring around the planet, but instead had three geosynchronous stations tethered to the planet’s equator by elevator cables. Station One had a modest-sized

accelerator ring grappled to it, like a gold band attached to a diamond.

“Husayn,” Martinez said, “one missile to target Station Three, please.”

As the missile was launched he supposed the Naxids had no right to be surprised. Squadcom Chene had made it clear that anything that fired on it would be destroyed, be it ship, station, or ring.

He hoped the Naxids had evacuated the station’s thousands of civilians before putting them in a crossfire, but he suspected they hadn’t. The Naxids, so far as he could tell, never had a Plan B—if Plan A didn’t work, they just tried Plan A all over again, only with greater sincerity.

“My lord,” said Roh. “I have a

message from Rigger Jukes.”

“Yes?” Martinez couldn’t imagine what the artist wanted.

“He asks permission to enter your quarters and inspect the paintings for damage.”

Martinez suppressed a smile. The artworks were in highly intelligent frames that should have guarded them against acceleration, but nevertheless the impulse to protect the eighty-thousand-zenith painting showed Jukes had his priorities straight.

“Permission granted,” he said.

“My lord,” Mersenne said, after the missile went on its way. “I’ve tracked the origin of the engine shutdown.”

“Yes?”

“It was a high pressure return pump from the number one heat exchange system. It failed, and set off a cascade of events that led to complete engine shutdown.”

“*Failed?*” Martinez demanded. “What do you mean, failed?”

“I can’t tell from this board. But for some reason when the pump failed, the valve on the backup system failed to open, and that led to the engine trip. The computer wasn’t a hundred percent confident that it could keep the ship balanced with only two engines firing at all of eight gravities’ acceleration, so it tripped the other engines as well.”

“Right,” Martinez said. “Thank you, Mersenne.”

This was going to take some thought. And as soon as the ship secured from general quarters, he was going straight to the engine compartment and find out just what had happened.

“Yarning the logs.” Martinez spoke in a cold fury. “You yarned the logs to hide fact that you hadn’t been doing scheduled replacements, and as a result the ship was driven into danger.”

Master Rigger Francis stared expressionlessly at the wall behind Martinez’

head and said nothing.

“Didn’t I give you enough advanced warning?” Martinez asked. “Didn’t you guess what would happen if I caught you

at something like this?”

Rage boiled in Martinez, fueled by the murderous aches in his head and wrist. For the first time in his career he understood how an officer could actually use his top-trimmer, could draw the curved knife from its sheath and slash the throat of a subordinate.

The evidence that damned Francis was plain. The huge, sleek turbopump designed to bring return coolant from the heat exchanger to the number one engine had been partly dismantled by Francis and her riggers. The plain metal-walled room reeked of coolant, and Martinez' shoes and cuffs were wet with the stuff. The finely-machined turbine that was the heart of the pump had disintegrated,

sending metal shards downstream that jammed the emergency valve designed to shut off coolant flow in the event of a problem with the pump. With the first valve jammed open, a second valve intended to open the backup system had refused to open, and the result was an automatic shutdown for the engine.

It was difficult to understand how such a critical pump could suffer so catastrophic a failure. The pump and other pieces of crucial equipment were deliberately overdesigned, intended to survive well beyond their official lifespan. The only way a pump would crash in so terminal a fashion was because routine maintenance had been neglected.

That much was deduction. But what was the final nail in the master rigger's coffin was the fact that the serial number on the pump and the number recorded in the 77-12 were different. So far as Martinez could tell, the number in the 77-12 was pure fiction.

“Well,” Martinez said, “Rigger Second Class Francis, I suggest that you get your crew busy replacing this pump.”

Francis' eyes flashed at the news of her demotion, and Martinez saw the firming of her jowls as her jaws muscles clenched.

Martinez turned to Marsden, who stood with his feet meticulously placed on a piece of dark plastic grate so as not to get coolant on his shoes.

“Who’s the senior rigger now?” Martinez asked.

“Rigger/First Patil.” Marsden didn’t even have to consult his database for the answer.

Martinez turned back to Francis. “I will require the new department head to check every one of your entries in the 77-12. We don’t want any more mysterious failures, do we?”

Francis said nothing. The humid atmosphere of the room had turned her skin moist, and droplets tracked down either side of her nose.

“You are at liberty to protest your reduction in rank,” Martinez said. “But I wouldn’t if I were you. If Squadron Leader Chen finds out about this, she’s

likely to have you strangled.”

He marched out, shoes splashing in coolant, his head and wrist throbbing with every step. Marsden followed, far more fastidious about where he put his feet. Martinez next visited the weapons bay where Gulik and Husayn were both examining the guts of the antiproton projector that had failed in the Naxid attack. The whole mechanism had been pulled from the turret and replaced, and now a post-mortem was under way, parts scattered on a sterile dropcloth that had been spread on the deck.

Gulik jumped to his feet, bracing with his chin high as Martinez approached. There were dark patches under his arms, and sweat poured down his face.

Martinez hadn't seen him this nervous since Fletcher's final inspection, when he'd slowly marched past Gulik and his crew with the knife rattling at his waist. Martinez wondered if word had already passed to Gulik about what had just happened to Francis. The noncommissioned officers were wired into an unofficial communications network, and Martinez had a healthy respect for its efficiency, but he could hardly believe it worked this fast.

Perhaps, Martinez thought, Gulik was always this nervous around higher officers.

Or perhaps he had a guilty conscience.

He called up Gulik's 77-12 on his

sleeve display and quietly checked the serial numbers. The serial numbers matched, so at least Gulik wasn't yarning his log.

“Do we know what happened?” Martinez asked.

“The electron injector's packed up, my lord,” Gulik said. “It's a fairly common failure, on this model particularly.”

The antiprotons piggybacked on an electron beam, which kept the antiprotons contained until they hit the target, so the electron injector was a critical component of the system.

“I'll do further tests,” Gulik said, “but it's probably just a matter of tolerances. These parts are machined very

precisely, and they're stuck in the turret where they're subject to extremes of temperature and cosmic rays and all knows what. The turrets are normally retracted but we're keeping every point-defense weapon at full charge now, with the turrets deployed. Critical alignments can go wrong very easily.”

Martinez remembered what someone had said in Command, and he said, “So it's not what happened at Harzapid?”

Gulik gave a start. Husayn answered for him, and firmly.

“Decidedly not, my lord.”

Martinez sensed that a significant moment had just slipped by, somehow, but he had no idea why it was significant.

“What *did* happen at Harzapid?” he asked.

There was silence as both Husayn and Gulik seemed to gaze for a moment into the past, neither of them liking what they saw there.

“It was bad, my lord,” Husayn said. “The Naxids were outnumbered five to one, so they tried to bluff us into surrender. They occupied Ring Command and ordered us all to stand down. But Fleet Commander Kringan organized a party to storm Ring Command, and he ordered the loyal squadrons to prepare a fight at close range with antiproton weapons.

“None of us kept the antiprotons on our ships when we were in dock—you

know how touchy they can be—so Lieutenant Kosinic was sent with a party to bring antiprotons in their containment bottles. He did, but when we hooked them up to the antimatter feeders we discovered that the bottles were empty.”

Martinez looked at him in surprise. “Empty?”

“The Naxids must have got into our storage compartment and replaced the full bottles with empty ones. The squadcom sent Kosinic was out again to get bottles from *Imperious*, which was berthed next to us, but that’s when the shooting started. That’s when the docking tube was hit and Kosinic was wounded.”

Husayn’s mouth stretched in a taut,

angry grimace beneath his little mustache.

“The Fourth Fleet blew itself to bits in a few minutes of close-range fire. All the Naxids ships were destroyed, but most of the loyalists were hurt, too, and some ships completely wrecked. There were thousands of deaths. But *the Naxids didn't shoot at us!* They knew *Illustrious* was helpless.”

Frustration crackled in Husayn's voice. Martinez could imagine the scene in Command, Fletcher calling for firepower that simply wasn't there, the weapons officer—Husayn himself—pounding his console in fury. Kusinic racing along the docking tube with a party of desperate crouchbacks and the

hand carts that carried the antiproton bottles. The long moments of helpless silence as the battle started and the crew waited for the fire that would rend their ship and kill them, followed by the horrid realization of the insult that the Naxids were flinging in their teeth, that the enemy *knew* that *Illustrious* could be of no assistance to their own side, and disdained so much as to target them.

The feeling of helplessness, Martinez thought, must have been at least as frustrating and terrifying as that of the captain of a ship pinned to a stair by heavy gee while his ship fought for its life without him.

“Captain Fletcher cast off from the ring, my lord,” Husayn continued, “and

maneuvered as if to attack. We were hoping draw their fire away from the others, but the Naxids still refused to respond. We hit them with our lasers, but the lasers really can't do the sort of damage antimatter can in those conditions, and..." He grimaced again. "Still they wouldn't attack us. We watched the whole battle from the sidelines. Captain Fletcher was in a perfect rage—I'd never seen him like that, never saw him show emotion before."

"Where was Squadron Commander Chen?"

"On the planet, my lord. Dinner party."

Martinez couldn't imagine Michi

being happy about what had happened to *Illustrious*, either.

“We were very glad to finally get a swat at the Naxids at Protipanu, my lord,”

Husayn said. “It was good to pay them back.”

“Yes,” Martinez said. “*Illustrious* did very well at Protipanu. You all did very well.”

He looked from Husayn to Gulik, who was still standing rigid, the sweat pouring down his face, his eyes staring into some internal horror. No wonder they hadn't talked about it, Martinez thought. He had thought *Illustrious* had won a hard-fought victory alongside the other loyalists of the Fourth Fleet, and

had assumed the cruiser had just been lucky not to suffer any damage. He hadn't known that *Illustrious* and its crew hadn't been a part of the fighting at all, all except for Kosinic and his little party who had been caught out of their ship.

“Very good,” Martinez said softly. “I think we might institute a series of test firings and inspections to make sure the point-defense weapons won't fail when we need them.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Carry on then.”

As he left Martinez felt Gulik's wide-eyed stare boring into his neck, and wondered what it was that Gulik was really looking at.

Martinez' next stop was the sick bay, where he received Doctor Xi's report on the twenty-two crew with broken bones, and the twenty-six more with bad sprains or concussions, all as a result of the unexpected high accelerations. The failure of engine number one had probably saved the ship from more casualties, and very possibly from fatalities.

Xi examined the back of Martinez' head and prescribed painkillers, and a muscle relaxant before bed. He scanned the wrist and found a minor fracture of the right pisiform carpal. He taped the wrist and gave Martinez a shot of fast-healer hormones, then gave Martinez a med injector with more fast-healers.

“Three times a day till you run out,” he said. “You should be healed in a week or so.”

Martinez toured the sick bay, speaking to each of the injured crouchbacks, then returned to his office to find Jukes waiting, happy to report that the artworks had survived the accelerations without damage. Martinez sent Jukes on his way, then made official his demotion of Francis, added a furious couple of paragraphs to Francis’ efficiency report, and had supper.

He remained awake for the countdown that started engine number one, and made certain that the new turbopump was performing up to specs before calling for Alikhan to bring him

his nightly cocoa.

“What are they saying now, Alikhan?”
Martinez asked.

Alikhan was looking with great disapproval at Martinez’ shoes, spattered with engine coolant and the muck of the heat exchange room.

“Francis is furious,” he said. “She was planning on retiring after the war, and now she’ll have a much smaller pension.”

Martinez held his cup of cocoa under his nose and inhaled the rich, sweet scent.

“So she’s gathering sympathy, then?”
he asked.

Alikhan drew himself up with magisterial dignity, and dropped the

soiled shoes into their bag. “Fuck her,” he pronounced, “she put the ship in danger. You could have cut her throat, and maybe you should have. As it is, you hit her where she hurts. With Francis it’s always about money.”

“Right,” Martinez said, and concealed a smile. “Thank you, Alikhan.”

He swallowed his muscle relaxant, and then slid into bed and sipped his cocoa while he looked at the painting of the woman, child, and cat. Day by day, *Illustrious* was becoming his ship, and less something that belonged to Fletcher, or the petty officers, or the Fourth Fleet. Today had been an important step in that process.

Another couple months, he thought

pleasantly, and the cruiser would fit him like a glove.

Chenforce made a high-gravity burn around Arkhan-Dohg's sun and hurled itself for Wormhole Three, its presence marked by the radioactive dust that had been its relay station. No Naxid missiles barred their way.

On the other side of Wormhole Three was Choiyn, a wealthy world with five billion inhabitants and considerable industry. Four uncompleted medium-sized warships, large frigates or light cruisers, were cast adrift from its ring and destroyed, along with half a dozen merchant ships that had been unable to clear the system in time.

No Naxid attack threatened, but to be safe Michi vaporized all the wormhole stations anyway, lest they provide tracking data to the enemy. Martinez' life was busy with drills, inspections, and minutiae. Patil, Francis'

replacement, produced revised 77-12s that corrected Francis' elisions, and Martinez' inspections showed that Patil's data were not in error. Cadet Ankley, who had been made acting-lieutenant after Phillips' suicide, had spectacularly lost his temper when an inspection of his division had turned up some chaotic inventory, and had to be returned to the ranks of the cadets while Cadet Qing was promoted in his place.

This failure was balanced by Chandra

Prasad's success. Her exercises had Chenforce pelted by relativistic missiles from all directions, and also compelled the squadron to confront an assortment of Naxid attacks, the enemy converging on Chenforce on a variety of headings, and with a wide variation in velocity. Doctor Xi told Martinez that his wrist had healed, and discontinued the fast-healers.

After Choiyn came Kinawo, a system that featured a main-sequence yellow star orbited by a blue-white companion so furiously radioactive that the system was bereft of life except for the crews of a pair of heavily shielded wormhole stations, both of which were quickly destroyed. Chenforce would transit

Kinawo in six days and then enter El-bin, a system with two habitable planets, one heavily industrialized and the other covered with grazing, herdsman, and their beasts. After El-bin was Anicha.

For the most part *Illustrious* settled into a routine, inspections and drills and musters. The officers invited one another to dinner parties, but behind the gaiety was a kind of weariness: it was clear that everyone had been on the ship too long. Martinez now found the 77-12s perfectly reliable. Because they gave him ways of knowing his ship, and because *Illustrious* was performing so well in the squadron exercises, Martinez reduced the number of inspections and hoped the crew were grateful. He also

abandoned the full-dress formality at least part of the time: on occasion he arrived at an inspection in Fleet-issue coveralls and crawled into conduits and access tunnels, places where Fletcher would never have gone lest he soil his silver braid.

There began to be more disciplinary problems among the crew, fights and occasional drunkenness. They had been on the ship too long and were getting on each other's nerves. They also had too little to occupy their time. It would have taken only thirty-odd people to con the ship from one place to another, and another thirty weaponers to manage the fighting. The rest were partly for redundancy's sake, in the event of

casualties, and many of the crew were intended to support the dignity of the officers, acting as their servants; but mainly crew were needed for damage control. In an emergency hundreds of pairs of well-trained hands might be needed to keep the ship alive. The rest of the time the officers had to invent work for them, cleaning and spit-polishing, playing parts in rituals and ceremonies and performing and re-performing routine maintenance.

Everyone, officers and crew alike, were growing tired of it all.

Perhaps it was the boredom induced by the long days of the ship's routine, but Martinez began to think about the

killings again. And after thinking for several days, he asked Chandra to come to his office in the middle of one long, dull afternoon.

“Drink?” he asked as she braced. “By which I mean coffee.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Sit down.” He pushed a cup and saucer across his desk, then poured from a flask that Alikhan habitually left on his desk.

A rich coffee scent floated into the room. Chandra sat expectant, eyes bright beneath the auburn hair.

“I wanted to ask you about Kosinic,” Martinez said.

Chandra, reaching for the coffee, pulled her hand back and blinked in

surprise. “May I ask why?”

“Because it occurred to me that all our thinking about the killings has been exactly wrong. We’ve been looking at Captain Fletcher’s death and trying to reason backwards about what might have motivated it. But Kosinic’s death was the first—

he was the anomaly. Thuc’s death followed from his, and I think Fletcher’s followed as well. So if we can just work out why Kosinic was murdered, everything else will fall into place.”

Chandra frowned as she considered this reasoning, then gave him a searching look. “You don’t think it’s all down to Phillips and the cultists?”

“Do you?”

She was silent.

“You knew Kosinic,” Martinez said.
“Tell me about him.”

Chandra fiddled with the powdered creamer—*Illustrious* had long ago run out of fresh dairy. She took a sip, frowned, and took another.

“Javier was bright,” Chandra said finally, “good-looking, young, and probably a little more ambitious than was sensible for someone could be in his position. He had two problems: he was a commoner and he had no money. Peers will mingle with commoners if they’ve got enough money to keep up socially; and they’ll tolerate Peers who have no money for the sake of their name. But a commoner with no money is

going to be buried in a succession of anonymous desk jobs, and if he gets a command it's going to be a barge to nowhere, an assignment that no Peer would touch.”

She took another sip of her coffee. “But Javier got lucky—Squadron Commander Chen was impressed by a report on systems interoperability that happened to cross her desk, and she took him on staff. Javier wasn't about to let an opportunity like that slide—he knew she could promote him all the way to captain if he impressed her enough. So he set out to be the perfect bright staff officer for her, and at that moment war broke out and he was wounded.”

She sighed. “They shouldn't have let

him out of the hospital. He wasn't fit. But he knew that as long as he stayed on Chen's staff he could have a chance to do important war work right under the nose of someone who could promote his career—and of course by then he was in a perfect rage to kill Naxids, like all of us but more so.”

“He had head injuries,” Martinez said. “I've heard his personality changed.”

“He was angry all the time,” Chandra said. “It was sad, really. He insisted that what had happened to *Illustrious* at Harzapid was the result of a treacherous Naxid plot—which of course was true—but he became obsessed with rooting out the plotters. That made no sense at all,

because by that point the Naxids were all dead, so what did it matter which of them did what?”

Martinez sipped his own coffee and considered this. “*Illustrious* was the only ship that wasn’t able to participate in the battle,” he said. “Was that what Kosinic was obsessing about?”

“Yes. He took it personally that his load of antiproton bottles were duds, and of course he was wounded when he went back for more, so that made it even more personal.”

“The antiproton bottles were stored in a dedicated storage area?”

“Yes.”

A ship in dock was usually assigned a secure storage area where supplies,

replacement parts, and other items were stockpiled—it was easier to stow them there, where they could be worked with, rather than have the riggers find space for them in the holds, where they wouldn't be as accessible when needed. Those ships equipped with antiproton weapons generally stored their antiproton bottles there, in a secure locked facility, as antiprotons were trickier to handle than the more stable antihydrogen used for engine and missile fuel. An antiproton bottle was something you didn't want a clumsy crouchback to drop on his foot.

“The Naxids had to have gained the codes for both the storage area and the secure antiproton storage,” Chandra

said. “I don’t see how we’ll ever find out how they did it, and I don’t see why it matters at this point. But Javier thought it *did* matter, and if anyone disagreed with him he’d just turn red and shout and make a scene.” Sadness softened the long lines of her eyes. “It was hard to watch. He’d been so bright and interesting, but when he was wounded he turned into a shouter. People didn’t want to be around him. But fortunately he didn’t like people much, either, so he spent most of his time in his quarters or in Auxiliary Control.”

“He sounds a bit delusional,” Martinez said, “but suppose, when he was digging around, he found a genuine plot? Not to help the Naxids, but

something else.”

Chandra seemed surprised. “But any plot would have to be something Thuc was involved in, because it was Thuc who killed him, yes?”

“Yes.”

“But Thuc was an *engineer*. Javier was on a flag officer’s staff. Where would they ever overlap?”

Martinez had no answer. Suddenly Chandra leaned forward in her seat, her eyes brilliant with excitement. “Wait!” she said. “I remember something Mersenne once told me! Mersenne was somewhere on the lower decks, and he saw an access hatch open, with Javier just coming out from the underdeck. He asked Javier what he was doing there,

and Javier said that he was running an errand for the squadcom. But I can't imagine why Lady Michi would ever have someone digging around in the guts of the ship.”

“That doesn't seem to be one of her interests,” Martinez murmured. “I wonder if Kosinic left a record of what he was looking for.” He looked at her. “He had a civilian-model datapad I didn't have the passwords for. I don't suppose that by some miracle you know his passwords?”

“No, I'm afraid not.” Her face grew thoughtful. “But he didn't carry that datapad around with him all the time. He spent hours in Auxiliary Control at his duty station, so if there were records of

what he was looking at, it's probably still in his logs, and you can—”

His mind, leaping ahead of her, had him chanting her conclusion along with her.

“— *access that with a captain's key!*”

A quiet excitement began to hum in Martinez' nerves. He opened his collar and took out his key on its elastic. He inserted the narrow plastic key into the slot on his desk and called up the display. Chandra politely turned away as he entered his password. He called up Javier Kosinic's account, and scanned the long list of files.

“May I use the wall display?” Chandra asked. “I could help you look.”

The wall display was called up and the two began a combined search, each examining different files. They worked together in a near-silence interrupted by Martinez' call to Alikhan for more coffee.

Frustration built as Martinez examined file after file, finding only routine paperwork, squadron maneuvers that Kosinic had planned as tactical officer, and a half-finished letter to his father, a letter dated the day before his death but filled only with mundane detail, and containing none of the rage and monomania that everyone else had described.

“He's hiding from us!” he finally exploded.

His right hand clenched in a fist. The captain had hid from him too, too, but he'd finally cracked the captain's secret.

Kosinic would crack too, he swore.

“Let me check the daily logs,” Chandra said. “If we look at his activity, we might be able to see some patterns.”

The logs flashed on the wall screen, the automatic record of every call that Kosinic had ever made on the computer resources of the ship. Tens of thousands of them. Martinez' gaze blurred as he looked at the long columns of data.

“Look at this,” Chandra said. She moved a cursor to highlight one of Kosinic's commands. “He saved a piece of data to a file called ‘Rebel Data.’ Do you remember seeing that file?”

“No,” Martinez said.

“It’s not very large. It’s supposed to be in his account, in another file called ‘Personal.’” Chandra’s cursor jittered over the display. “Here’s another save to the same file,” she said. “And another.”

Though he already knew it wasn’t there, Martinez looked again at Kosinic’s personal file and found nothing.

“It must have been erased.”

“Or moved somewhere,” Chandra said. “Let me do a search.”

The search through the ship’s vast data store took about twelve seconds.

“If the file was moved,” Chandra concluded, “it was given a new name.”

Martinez had already called up the log files. “Let’s find the last time anyone gave a command regarding that file.”

Another five seconds sped by. Martinez stared in shock at the result.

“The file was erased,” he said.

“Who by?” Chandra said. When he didn’t answer she her neck to read his display upside-down, and then gave a soft cry of surprise.

“Captain Gomberg Fletcher,” she said.

They stared at one another for a moment.

“You can’t suppose,” Chandra began, “that Fletcher was somehow part of the Naxid plot, and that Javier found out about it, and Fletcher had him killed.”

Martinez considered this, then shook his head. “I can’t think anything the Naxids could offer Fletcher to make him betray his ship.”

Chandra gave a little laugh. “Maybe they offered to give him a painting he really wanted.”

Martinez shook his head. “No, I think Kosinic must have discovered the Narayanist cult. Or he discovered something else that got him killed, and Fletcher suppressed the information in order to protect the Narayanists.” He looked the data glowing in the depths of his desk, and his heart gave a surge as he saw the date.

“Wait a moment,” he said. “The date shows that Fletcher erased the file the

same day he died.” He looked more carefully at the date. “In fact, he seems to have erased the file around the time he was killed.”

Chandra surged out of her chair and part way across his desk to confirm this. Her perfume, some kind of deep rosewood flavor with lemony highlights, suddenly floated into his senses. Glowing columns of data reflected in her eyes as she scanned for information. “The erase command came from this desk,” she pointed out. “Whoever killed him sat in your chair, with the body leaking blood on the floor next to him, and cleaned up the evidence.”

Martinez scanned along the log file. “Fletcher logged in three hours earlier,

and never logged out. So he was probably looking at Kosinic's file when the killer arrived."

"What *other* files was he looking at?"

Chandra slid off the desk and onto her own chair. She gave a series of rapid orders to the wall display.

"That night he made entries in a file called 'Gambling,'" she said. Martinez looked at her in surprise. "Did Fletcher gamble?"

"Not in the time I knew him."

"Did Kosinic?"

"No. He couldn't afford it."

"Lots of people gamble who can't afford it," Martinez said.

"Not Javier. He thought it was a weakness, and he didn't think he could

afford weakness.” She looked at Martinez. “How else do you think he exposed himself to hard gee acceleration when he had broken ribs and a head injury? He couldn’t afford to be wounded, and he did his best to ignore the fact he should have been in hospital.” She returned her attention to the display. “The gambling file was erased at the same time as Javier’s rebel file.”

Martinez scanned the files that Fletcher had been accessing in the two days before his death. Reports from the department heads, statistics from the commissary, reports on the status of a damage control robot that had been taken offline due to a hydraulic fault, injury reports, reports on available stores ... all

the daily minutiae of command.

Nothing was unusual except those two files, “Rebel Data” and “Gambling.”

And those had been erased by the killer.

And erased very thoroughly, as Martinez discovered. Normally a file was erased by simply removing it from the index of files, and unless the hard space had been overwritten with some other data, it was possible to reconstitute it. But the two missing files had been erased through a method of overwriting their hard space with a series of random numbers. There was no way to find what had been in those files.

“Damn it!” Martinez entertained a brief fantasy of hurling his coffee cup

across the room and letting it go smash on the nose of one of Fletcher's armored statues. "We got so close."

Chandra gave the wall display a bleak stare. "There's still one chance," she said. "The system makes automatic backups on a regular schedule. The automatic backups go into a temporary file and are erased by the system on a regular basis. The files aren't there any longer, but the *tracks* might be, if they haven't been written over in the meantime."

"The chances of finding those old files must be..."

"Not *quite* astronomical." She pursed her lips in calculation. "I'd be willing to undertake the search, my duties

permitting, but I'm going to need more authority with the system than I've got as a staff lieutenant."

He warmed his coffee while he considered Chandra's offer. He supposed that she was still theoretically a suspect. But on the other hand it was unlikely she'd offer to spend her time going through the ship's vast datafiles track by track. Unless of course she was covering up her own crimes.

Martinez thought were interrupted by a polite knock on the dining room door. Martinez looked up to see his cook, Perry.

"I was wondering when you'd be wanting supper, my lord."

"Oh." Martinez forced his mind from

one track to the next. “Half an hour or so, then?”

“Very good, my lord.” Perry braced and withdrew, closing the door behind him.

Martinez returned his attention to Chandra and realized, a little belatedly, that it might have been the polite thing to invite her to supper. He also realized he’d made up his mind. He didn’t think Chandra had killed anybody—had never believed it—and in any case he had to agree with Michi that the squadron couldn’t spare her.

If she wanted to spend her spare hours hunting incriminating tracks in the cruiser’s data banks and erasing them, he didn’t much care.

“If you’ll give me your key,” he said, “I’ll see if I can give you more access.”

He awarded her a clearance that would enable her to examine the ship’s hard data storage, then returned her key. She tucked the key back into her tunic and gave him a provocative smile.

“Do you remember,” she said, “when I told you that I’d be the best friend you ever had?”

Martinez was suddenly aware of her rosewood perfume, of the three tunic buttons that had been undone, and of the fact that he’d been living alone on the ship for far too many months.

“Yes?” he said.

“Well, I’ve proved it.” Chandra closed the buttons, one by one. “One day

the squadcom talked to me about whether or not you could have killed Fletcher, and I talked her out of the idea.”

Martinez was speechless.

“You shouldn’t count too much on the fact that you married Lord Chen’s daughter,” Chandra went on. “The impression I received was that if you died out here, it might solve more problems for Lord Chen than it would cause. He’d have a marriageable daughter again, for one thing.”

Martinez considered this, and found it disturbingly plausible. Lord Chen hadn’t wanted to give up his daughter, not even in exchange for the millions the Martinez clan were paying him, and Martinez’

brother Roland had practically marched Lord Chen to the wedding in a hammerlock. If Martinez could be executed of a crime—and furthermore a crime against both the Gomberts and the Fletchers—then he couldn't imagine Lord Chen shedding many tears.

“Interesting,” he managed to say.

Chandra rose and leaned over his desk. “But,” she said, “I pointed out to Lady Michi that you'd played an important part in winning our side's only victories against the Naxids, and that we really couldn't spare you even if you *were* a killer.”

The phrasing brought a smile to Martinez' lips. “You might have given me the benefit of the doubt,” he said. “I

might *not* have killed Fletcher, after all.”

“I don’t think Lady Michi was interested in the truth by that point. She just wanted to be able to close the file.” She perched on his desk and brushed its glossy surface with her fingertips. A triumphant light danced in her eyes. “So am I your friend, Gareth?” she asked.

“You are.” He looked up at her and answered her smile. “And I’m yours, because when Lady Michi was trying to pin the murder on you—with far more reason, I thought—I talked her out of it using much the same argument.”

He saw the shock roll through Chandra like a slow tide. Her lips formed several words that she never actually spoke, and then she said, “She’s

a ruthless one, isn't she?"

"She's a Chen," Martinez said.

Chandra slowly rose to her feet, then braced.

"Thank you, my lord," she said.

"You're welcome, lieutenant."

He watched her leave, a little unsteadily, and then paged Mersenne. When the plump lieutenant arrived, Martinez invited him to sit.

"Some time ago," Martinez said, "before I joined the squadron, you found Lieutenant Kosinic leaving an access hatch on one of the lower decks. Do you happen to remember which one?"

Mersenne blinked in utter surprise. "I haven't thought about that in months," he said. "Let me think, my lord."

Martinez let him think, which Mersenne accomplished while pinching his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger.

“That would be Deck Eight,” Mersenne said finally. “Access Four, across from the riggers’ stores.”

“Very good,” Martinez said. “That will be all.”

As Mersenne, still puzzled, rose to his feet and braced, Martinez added, “I’d be obliged if you mention my interest in this to no one.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Tomorrow, Martinez thought, he would schedule an inspection, and something interesting might well come to light.

After breakfast Martinez staged an inspection in which Access Four on Deck Eight was opened. The steady rumble of ventilations blowers rose from beneath the deckplates. Martinez descended with Marsden's datapad, squeezed between the blowers and a coolant pipe wrapped in bright yellow insulation material, and checked the serial numbers on the blowers against the numbers on the 77-12 that had been supplied by Rigger/First Patil.

The numbers matched.

Martinez crouched in the confined space and checked the numbers again. Again they matched.

He straightened, his head and

shoulders coming above deck level, and looked at Patil, who looked at him with anxious interest.

“When were these blowers last replaced?”

“Just before the war started, my lord. They’re not due for replacement for another four months.”

So these were the same blowers that Kosinic had seen when he’d gone down the same access. If it wasn’t the serial numbers, Martinez thought, what had Kosinic been looking for?

Martinez ducked down the access again and ran his hands along the pipes, the ductwork, the electric conduit, just in case something had been left here, a mysterious message or an ominous

warning. He found nothing but the dust that filled his throat and left him coughing.

Perhaps Mersenne had been wrong about from which he'd seen Kosinic emerge. Martinez had several of the nearby access plates raised, and he descended into each to find again that everything was in order.

It was hours later, while he was eating a late supper—a ham sandwich made of leftovers from the meal he'd given Michi—that a memory burst on his mind. *With Francis it's always about money.*

That had been Alikhan's comment on the cruiser's former master rigger, and suddenly, days after they'd been spoken,

the words suddenly seemed to echo in Martinez' skull.

Gambling, he thought.

Martinez carried his plate from the dining room to his desk, where he called up the display, then used the authority of his captain's key to access the commissary records and check the files of the commissary bank.

Actual cash wasn't handed to the crew during the voyage: accounts were kept electronically in the commissary bank, which was, technically anyway, a branch of the Imperial Bank which issued the money in the first place. Crew would pay electronically for anything purchased from the commissary, and any gambling losses would be handled by

direct transfer from one account to another. The crew were paid every twenty days. Martinez looked at the account of Rigger Francis, and saw that it totaled nearly nine thousand zeniths, enough to buy an estate on nearly any planet in the empire.

And this was only the money that Francis had in *this account*. She could have more in accounts in other banks, in investments, in property. Martinez called for Alikhan. His orderly came into the dining room first, was surprised to find Martinez in his office, and approached.

“Would you like me to take your plate, my lord?”

Martinez looked in surprise at the plate he'd brought with him.

“Yes,” he said. “No. Never mind that now.”

Alikhan looked at him. “Yes, my lord.”

“I want to know about the gambling that’s going on among the petty officers.”

Martinez looked at him. “Do they cheat?”

Alikhan considered his answer for a long moment before speaking.

“I don’t think so, my lord. I think they’re very experienced players, and at least some of the time they play in concert.”

“But they gamble with recruits, don’t they?”

Martinez thought he saw an angry tightening of Alikhan’s lips before the

answer came.

“Yes, my lord. In the mess, every night.”

It's always about money. Again Alikhan's words echoed in Martinez' head. Gambling was of course against Fleet regulations, but such regulations were applied with a degree of discretion. If the petty officers played cards in their lounge, or the lieutenants wanted to play tingo in the wardroom, or the recruits roll dice in the engine spaces, action was rarely taken. It was a minor vice, and nearly impossible to stop. Gambling games and gambling scams were almost universal in the Fleet. But the gambling could become dangerous when it crossed lines of caste.

When petty officers gambled with recruits, serious issues of abuse of power came into play. A superior officer could enforce a vicious payment schedule at extortionate rates of interest, and could punish recruits with extra duties or even assault. A recruit who owed money to his superior could not only lose whatever pay he happened to possess at the time, but could lose future salary either in direct losses or interest payments. The recruit might be forced to pay in other ways: gifts, sexual favors, performing the petty officers' duties, or even being forced to steal on behalf of his superior.

It had been months since Chenforce left Harzapid, and it would be months

more before *Illustrious* would stop in a Fleet dockyard. A recruit in the grips of a gambling ring could lose his pay for the entire journey, possibly the entire commission.

“Who’s taking part in this?” Martinez asked.

“Well, my lord,” Alikhan said, “I’d rather not get anyone in trouble.”

“You’re not getting them in trouble,” Martinez said. “They’re *already* in trouble. But you can exclude those who aren’t a part of it by naming those who are.”

This logic took a few seconds to work its way through Alikhan’s mind, but in the end he nodded.

“Very well, my lord,” Alikhan said.

“Francis, Gawbyan, and Gulik organize the games. And Thuc was a part of it, but he’s dead.”

“Very good,” Martinez said. He turned to his desk, then looked back at Alikhan. “I don’t want you talking about this.”

“Of course n—”

“Dismissed.”

Martinez’ mind was already racing to the next problem. He called up the accounts of Francis, Gawbyan, Gulik, and Thuc, and saw that they jumped on every payday—but when he looked at the figures, Martinez saw they were being paid far more than their salary. Nearly two-thirds of their income seemed to be coming in the form of direct

transfers from other crew. Martinez backtracked the transfers, and found no less than nine recruits who regularly transferred their entire pay to the senior petty officers. They'd been doing it for months. Others were paying less regularly, but still paying.

Anger simmered in Martinez. *You people like playing with recruits so much*, he thought, *maybe you should be recruits*. He would break them, he thought. And he'd confiscate the money, too, and turn it over to the ship's entertainment fund, or perhaps to Fleet Relief to aid distressed crew.

He checked the totals and found that Gulik was losing the money practically as fast as he was making it. Apparently

the weaponer was truly devoted to gambling, and eventually lost every bit of his earnings to his friends. At the moment he had practically nothing in his accounts.

The scent of coffee wafted past his nose, and he looked up from the accounts to find that someone had placed a fresh cup of coffee by his elbow, next to a plate of newly-made sandwiches. Alikhan had made the ghostly delivery and Martinez hadn't even noticed.

He ate a sandwich and drank a cup of coffee.

Always about the money, he thought.

He opened the 77-12 that he'd viewed just that morning and looked again at the serial number of the ventilation blowers.

He backtracked through the record and found that Patil had corrected the serial number from the purely fictional one that Francis had originally recorded in the log.

Every item in Martinez knew, came with its own history. Every pump, every transformer, every missile launcher, every robot, every processor, and every waste recycler came with a long and complex record that recorded the date of manufacture or assembly, the date at which it was purchased by the Fleet, the date at which it was installed, and each date at which it was subject to maintenance or replacement. Martinez called up the history of the air blowers on Deck Eight and discovered that,

according to the records, the blowers had been destroyed with the *Quest*, a Naxid frigate involved in the mutiny at Harzapid. *Rebel Data*, he thought.

He checked the history of the turbopump that had failed at Arkhan-Dohg, and found that the turbopump had been decommissioned three years earlier, sold as scrap, and replaced by a new pump fresh from the factory. His mouth was dry. He was suddenly aware of the silence in his office, the easy throb of his pulse, the cool taste of the air.

He knew who had killed Kosinic and Fletcher, and why.

Invitations went out in the morning, sent to all the senior petty officers. An

invitation for drinks with their new captain, set for an hour before supper, was not something the customs of the service would let them decline, and decline they did not. The last affirmative reply came within minutes of the invitations being sent out. The petty officers entered the dining room more or less in a clump: round-faced Gawbyan with his spectacular mustachos, Strode with his bowl haircut, burly Francis, thin, nervous Cho. Some of them were surprised to find the ship's secretary Marsden waiting with his datapad in his hands.

The guests sorted themselves out in order of seniority, with the highest-ranked standing near Martinez at the

head of the table. Gulik was on his right, across from Master Cook Yau, with Gawbyan and Strode the next pair down, each with a grand set of mustachios; and then Zhang and Nyamugali. Near the bottom of the table was the demoted Francis.

Martinez looked at them all as they stood by their chairs. Francis seemed thoughtful and preoccupied, and was looking anywhere but at Martinez. Yau looked as if he had left his kitchens only reluctantly. Strode seemed determined, as if he had a clear but not entirely pleasant duty before him; and Gulik, who had been so nervous during inspections, was now almost cheerful.

Martinez picked up his glass and

raised it. Pale green wine trembled in Captain Fletcher's leaded crystal, reflecting beads of peridot-colored light over the company.

"To the Praxis," he said.

"The Praxis," they echoed, and drank.

Martinez took a gulp of his wine and sat. The others followed suit, including Marsden, who sat by himself to the side of the room and set his datapad to record. He picked up a stylus and stood ready to correct the datapad's transcription of the conversation.

"You may as well keep the wine in circulation," Martinez said, nodding to the crystal decanters set on the table. "We'll be here for a while, and I don't want you to go dry."

There were murmurs of appreciation from those farther down the table, and hands reached for the bottles.

“The reason this meeting may take some time,” Martinez said, “is because like the last meeting, this is about record-keeping.”

There was a kind of collective pause from his guests, and then a resigned, collective sigh.

“You can blame it on Captain Fletcher, if you want to,” Martinez said. “He ran *Illustrious* in a highly personal and distinctive way. He’d ask questions during inspections and he’d expect you to know the answers, but he never asked for any documentation. He never checked the 77-12s, and never had any

of his officers do it.”

Martinez looked at his wine glass and nudged it slightly with his thumb and forefinger, putting it in alignment with some imaginary dividing line running through the room.

“The problem with the lack of documentation, though,” he said, keeping his eyes on the wine glass, “is that to a certain cast of mind, it means *profit*.” He sensed Yau stiffen on his left, and Gulik gave a little start.

“Because,” Martinez continued, picking carefully through his thoughts, “in the end Captain Fletcher only knew what you told him. If it looked all right, and what he was told was plausible, then how would he ever find out if he’d

been yarned or not?

“Particularly because Fleet standards require that equipment exceed all performance criteria. Politicians have complained for centuries that it’s a waste of money, but the Control Board has always required that our ships be overbuilt, and I think the Control Board’s always been right.

“But what *that* meant,” he said, “is that department heads could, with a little extra maintenance, keep our equipment going far longer than performance specs required.” He looked up for the first time, and he saw Strode watching him with a kind of thoughtful surprise, as if he was recalculating every conclusion he’d ever drawn about Martinez. Francis

was staring straight ahead of her, her gray hair partly concealing her face. Cho seemed angry.

Gulik was pale. Martinez could see the pulse beating in his throat. When he saw Martinez studying him, he reached for his glass and took a large gulp of the wine.

“If you keep the old equipment going,” Martinez said, “and if you know where to go, you can sell the replacement gear for a lot of money. Things like blowers and coolers and pumps can bring a nice profit. Everyone *likes* Fleet equipment, it’s so reliable and forgiving and overbuilt. And they were getting *this* stuff new, right out of the box.”

He looked at Francis’ scowling

profile. “I checked the turbopump that failed at Arkhan-Dohg—using the *correct* serial number, not the number that Rigger Francis tried to yarn me with—and I found out the pump was supposed to have been retired three years ago. Someone had been keeping it going long after it should have been sold as scrap.”

Martinez turned to Gulik. Sweat was pouring down the weaponer’s face. He looked as deadly sick as he had been on the morning of Fletcher’s last inspection, as the captain stalked toward him with the knife dangling at his waist.

“I also checked the serial number of the antiproton gun that failed in the same battle, and that was supposed to have

been retired thirteen months ago. I hope that whoever sold the replacement wasn't selling it to someone who was intending to use it as a weapon."

"It wasn't me," Gulik croaked. He wiped sweat from his upper lip. "I don't know anything about this."

"Whoever did it," Martinez said, "didn't intend to endanger the ship. We weren't at war. *Illustrious* had been docked in Harzapid for years without so much as shifting its berth. The heavy equipment was going on and off the ship all the time, moving through the locked storage room where substitutions could be made without anyone being the wiser."

Martinez turned to look down the line

of petty officers. "In order to work this scheme," he said, "you'd need that storage room. You'd also need the services of a first-rate machinist, with access to a complete machine shop, so that the old equipment could be rehabilitated before it was reinstalled."

Strode turned his head to look at Gawbyan. The master machinist's lips had thinned to a tight line across his fleshy face. His mustachios were brandished like tusks. One large, fat-fingered hand had closed into a fist around the stem of his wineglass.

"So far, so good," Martinez said. "Our happy band of felons were making a profit. But then they took on some partners. And the partners were

Naxids.”

That surprised some of them. Yau and Cho stared. Strode’s mouth dropped open.

“Specifically,” Martinez said, “the Naxid frigate *Quest*, which was berthed next to *Illustrious* on the ring station. I expect the gang knew the Naxid petty officers informally before anyone mentioned the possibilities of mutual profit. And then they began using one another’s facilities and swapping parts with one another, which is how equipment from the *Quest* ended up aboard *Illustrious*.

“Now in order to exchange parts, the codes for the storage areas had to be exchanged as well. And that didn’t work

out so well, because the Naxids involved somehow got the *extra* codes for the antiproton storage areas—maybe they came up with a plausible story of needing to exchange antiproton bottles, or maybe they just hid a camera where they could get a view of the lock—but the result was that shortly before the Naxid rebellion, all of our antiproton bottles were exchanged for empty ones.”

The *our* was deliberate, even though Martinez hadn't been there. In war there was us and them, and Martinez wanted to make it clear who was which.

“The result was that *Illustrious* was helpless to defend itself in the battle, and unable to aid our comrades. I'm sure you all remember what that was like.”

They did. He watched as they relived their helplessness, as anger blotched their faces, as jaw muscles clenched at the memory of humiliation.

“The bastards,” Nyamugali said. Hatred burned in her eyes. “The bastards,”

she repeated.

Us and *them*, Martinez thought. Very good, signaler.

“*Illustrious* survived the battle,” Martinez said, “no thanks to the thieves. But the Naxid rebellion left them with a problem. Before the war, they were felons; but once shots were fired, they were *traitors*. And while the penalty for theft from the state can be dire under the Praxis, the cost of being found a traitor

is much, much worse.

“The thieves’ problems increased,” Martinez said, “when an officer launched his own, personal investigation of how the antiproton bottles turned up empty. Maybe his injuries had turned him into an obsessive, or maybe when he was running into the storage area to fetch the bottles, he’d seen something that made him suspicious. But once Kosinic started conducting his own equipment inspections—lifting access plates and checking the machine spaces—it was clear that he was going to find the evidence that would condemn our ship’s clique. So Kosinic had to die.”

“It was Thuc.” Gawbyan’s voice came out in a half-strangled croak.

“Thuc killed Kosinic because of the cult. You said so yourself.”

“I was both right and wrong,” Martinez said. “Thuc *did* kill Kosinic. But not because Thuc was a cultist. Kosinic was killed because Thuc was a thief, and Thuc may not have acted alone.”

There was a moment of silence. Somewhere down the table, Master Data Specialist Zhang tossed back her glass of wine, then reached for a bottle and refilled it.

“Kosinic’s death was ruled accidental, as it was meant to be,” Martinez continued. “All continued well for the conspirators, until the worst possible thing happened. Captain

Fletcher himself grew suspicious. Maybe it was his turn to wonder how only *his* antiproton bottles, of all those in the Fourth Fleet, had turned up empty; or maybe he began to realize the weakness in his own system of inspections; or maybe he grew offended when he discovered that a gambling ring composed of high-ranking petty officers was skinning a group of recruits in the mess hall every single night.”

That accusation struck home, Martinez saw. Even those who weren't a part of the gambling had to know about it, and most of them had the decency to look embarrassed.

“Captain Fletcher was a proud man,” Martinez said. “His pride had already

been offended when his ship was disarming in a crucial battle. That was the sort of thing that would have launched an official investigation if *Illustrious* hadn't been so badly needed in the emergency—and maybe there would have been an investigation anyway if Fletcher hadn't been so well connected, I don't know.

“That his ship had not only been humiliated at Harzapid, but was also home to a gang of traitorous thieves was a further blow to the captain's pride. Any kind of official investigation would reveal how badly Captain Fletcher had let things get out of hand. *That* would be a black mark that neither his career or his pride would be able to survive.

“So Captain Fletcher decided to handle the situation on his own. He executed Thuc and claimed captain’s privilege. No doubt he intended to execute the rest as well.”

“I wasn’t a part of any ring,” Gulik said suddenly. “Fletcher had the chance to execute me, and he didn’t.”

Martinez looked at the weaponer and slowly shook his head. “Fletcher looked at your current bank account and saw that you were broke,” he said. “He didn’t think you were a thief because he couldn’t find the profits. But when I looked at a running total of your bank account, I saw that you were very clearly a member of the ring, but that you’re also a compulsive gambler

whose money slips through your fingers almost as soon as you earn it.”

Desperation shone in Gulik's eyes. There was a strange odor coming off of him, sweat and fear and alcohol ghosting out of his pores.

“I never killed anybody,” he said. “I didn't have anything to do with that.”

“But you know who did,” Martinez said.

“I—” Gulik began.

“*Quiet!*” Francis barked. She glared down the table at Gulik. “Don't you see what he's doing? He's trying to get us to turn on each other.” Her fierce gaze looked at each of the petty officers in turn. “He's trying to divide us! He's trying to get us so frightened that we start

make accusations against each other!” She looked at Martinez, and her lip curled. “We know who *really* killed Fletcher, don’t we? The man who stepped into his place as captain!”

Martinez fought to control the surge of adrenaline that poured into his veins at the accusation. He pressed his hands carefully to the tabletop to control any trembling. With deliberation he looked at Francis and gave her a sweet smile.

“Nice try, Rigger Francis,” he said. “You’re at liberty to file that accusation if you wish. But you’d better have evidence. And you’d better have an explanation for how air blowers from the *Quest* ended up on Deck Eight, Access Four.”

She stared at him for a moment, hate-filled eyes locking his, and then she turned away. “Fucking officers!” she said. “Fucking Peers!”

Martinez spoke into the ringing silence, and tried to keep his voice level.

“So Fletcher had to die. And once the killers disposed of him, they must have again congratulated themselves again on a narrow escape. Except that then I stepped into Fletcher’s place, and I insisted on every department completing its 77-12.”

Martinez permitted himself a thin smile. “The conspirators must have had a debate among themselves as how best to handle the new requirement. If the 77-

12s had accurate information, it would point to obsolete equipment and the *Quest*. But if the logs were yarned, an inspection could reveal the deception.”

He looked at Francis. “Rigger Francis’ misadventures with the turbopump demonstrated the folly of yarning the log. So the others gave correct information and hoped that no one ever checked the hardware’s history.” He shrugged. “Last night I checked.”

He swept the others with his eyes. “I’m going to assume that any department with equipment from the *Quest* is run by someone who’s guilty. I’ve checked enough to see that there’s machinery from the *Quest* in the Thuc’s old

department, and in Gulik's, and in Francis'."

Francis made a contemptuous sound with her tongue and turned her head away. Gulik looked as if someone had just thrown a poisonous snake in his lap. Martinez turned to Gawbyan. "They couldn't have done any of it without you. So you're guilty, too."

Gawbyan's lips emerged from the thin line into which he'd pressed them.

"Naxids," he said. "Naxid engineers could have done that work."

Martinez considered this idea and conceded that it was possible, if unlikely.

"Your account at the commissary will be examined closely," he said, "and

we'll see if you share any mysterious payments with your mates. That'll be proof enough as far as I'm concerned."

A contemptuous look entered Gawbyan's eyes.

"I didn't kill anyone," Gulik said rapidly. "I didn't want to be a part of any of it but they talked me into it. They said I could earn back some of the money I'd lost at cards."

"Shut up, you rat-faced little coward," Francis said, but she said it without concern, as if she'd already lost interest in the proceedings.

"Gawbyan and Francis killed the captain!" Gulik cried. "Fletcher had already shown he wasn't going to kill me, I had no reason to want him dead!"

Francis flashed the weaponer a look of perfect disdain, but said nothing. Martinez saw Gawbyan's big hands closing into fists.

If this were one of the Doctor An-ku dramas that Michi enjoyed, this would have been the moment at which the killers would have produced weapons and made a murderous lunge for Martinez, or taken hostages and tried to bargain their way out. But that didn't happen.

Instead Martinez called for Alikhan, and Alikhan entered from the kitchen with Garcia and four constables, including Martinez' servants Ayutano and Espinosa. All, even Alikhan, were armed with stun batons and sidearms.

“Gawbyan, Gulik, and Francis,” Martinez said. “Lock them up.”

All three were cuffed from behind. There was no resistance, though Francis gave Alikhan a scornful look.

“Wait, captain!” Gulik said as he was manhandled out the door. “This isn’t fair! They *made* me!”

Alikhan remained behind, hovering behind Martinez. Martinez felt a great tension begin to ebb. He picked up his wine glass and took a long drink and put the glass back on the table.

It wasn’t as if he didn’t deserve a drink right now.

He looked at the remaining petty officers. “There were lines crossed on this ship,” Martinez said. “Four senior

petty officers conspired to rob recruits of their pay, and no one complained, no one talked, and no one did anything about it. Those same recruits branched out into sale of Fleet property, and they put the ship in danger over and over. People died at Harzapid because of those four.

“And it wasn’t just the petty officers,” Martinez said. “Captain Fletcher crossed some lines, too, and maybe that made others think it was acceptable.”

He looked at his remaining guests and saw them staring at nothing, or perhaps looking inward. Cho and Zhang seemed angry. Patil looked as if he were ready to weep.

“If any of you were involved with any

of these schemes,” Martinez said, “I need to know *now*. I need to know what you know. Believe me, it will go better with you if you turn yourselves in than if I find it out on my own. Right now I haven’t done anything more than spot-check the logs, and I haven’t look at financial records in any kind of detailed way. But I *will*. Now that I know what to look for, I’ll have that information very soon.”

There was silence, and then Amelia Zhang turned to Martinez and said, “You won’t find anything wrong in my department, my lord. And you can look at my finances and see I live on my pay and that most of it goes to my kids’ school fees.”

“My department’s clean,” said Strode. He brushed one of his mustachios with a knuckle. “I yarned my log, I admit that, but I didn’t like those others, Thuc and Francis particularly, and whenever they talked to me about ways of making money I wouldn’t listen.”

Martinez nodded.

“*Illustrious* depends on you all,” he said. “You’re more important to this ship than the officers. You’re all professionals and you’re all good at what you do, and I know that’s the case because Captain Fletcher wouldn’t have had you aboard otherwise. But those others—they’re the *enemy*. Understand?”

He has a feeling he’s made better

speeches in his career. But he hoped he'd succeeded in creating a dividing line, the kind that is necessary in war, between us and them. Those he'd just labeled as *us* were people he needed very badly. *Illustrious* had been scarred, not in combat but in its heart, and the remaining petty officers were going to be a vital part in any healing. He could have had the killers arrested in their beds and dragged to the brig, but that wouldn't have had the same effect on their peers. It could have been put down to arbitrary action on the part of an officer, and that wasn't what Martinez wanted. He wanted to demonstrate in front of their peers how guilty the killers were, and exactly how long and detailed

their treachery was, and how badly it had put the ship in danger. He had wanted to separate *them* from *us*.

Martinez felt a sudden weariness. He'd done everything he'd set out to do, and said far more than he'd intended to say. He pushed back his chair and rose. Chairs scraped as they were pushed back, and the others jumped to their feet and braced.

Martinez reached for his glass and raised it.

"To the Praxis," he said, and the others echoed him. He drained his glass, and the others drained theirs.

"I won't keep you," he said. "I'll talk to the new department heads tomorrow morning."

He watched them file out, and when they were gone he reached for a bottle and refilled his glass. He drained half of it in one long swallow, and then he turned to Alikhan.

“Tell Perry I’ll have supper in my office after I report to the squadcom.”

“Very good, my lord.”

Alikhan turned and marched, adjusting the belt with its sidearm and baton. Martinez looked at Marsden.

“Did you get all that?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Turn off your record function, please.”

Marsden did so, and stood bald and impassive, waiting for Martinez’ next order.

“I’m sorry about Phillips,” Martinez said.

Surprise fluttered in the other man’s eyes. He turned to Martinez.

“My lord?”

“I know you would have saved him if you could.”

There was an instant of surprise on Marsden’s face, and then he mastered it, and his face was impassive again.

“I’m sure, my lord, I don’t know what you mean.”

“You people have hand signals and so on, don’t you?” Martinez asked. “You would have given Phillips a warning if he hadn’t happened to be on watch in Command.” He took a breath and sighed it out. “I wish you had.”

Marsden looked at him with intense brown eyes, but said nothing.

“I worked out a while ago,” Martinez said, “that Thuc may have been a killer, but he wasn’t a Narayanist. The tree pendant was found in Thuc’s belongings because you put it there, Marsden, when I sent you to collect his things. You knew that I was about to launch an investigation into cult affiliations, and you wanted to get rid of the evidence. So you took the pendant from around your own neck and put it in with Thuc’s jewelry.”

Marsden’s neck muscles twitched. He looked stonily at Martinez.

“My lord,” he said, “that’s pure speculation.”

“I couldn’t work out why you were behaving so strangely,” Martinez said.

“You were very angry when I first mentioned Narayanists—and then you denounced me for daring to insult the Gomberg and Fletcher clans. You forced me to search you right then and there, though of course that was after you’d ditched your pendant. I thought you were some extreme kind of snob. What I didn’t realize was that I’d just insulted your most deeply-held beliefs.

“The problem is,” Martinez said, “that pendant helped to condemn Phillips. You didn’t know that one of Thuc’s fingerprints was found on Kosinic’s body. That linked murder and Narayanism in my mind, and I charged

off on a campaign to find cult killers. That's the way cultists are always portrayed in video dramas—killing people and sacrificing children to false gods. I was misled by a lifetime of watching that sort of drama. I forgot that Narayanism isn't a killing sort of belief.”

“I wouldn't know, my lord,” Marsden said.

Martinez shrugged. “I wanted you to know I was sorry about the way I handled things. You won't forgive me, I'm sure, but I hope you'll understand.” He took a long drink of his wine. “That's all, Marsden. If you can copy me that recording, and append a transcription as soon as you can, I'd be very much

obliged.”

Marsden braced. “Yes, my lord.”

“You are dismissed.”

Marsden turned and walked away, his back straight, his head facing rigidly forward. Martinez watched the door close behind him.

Apology not accepted, he thought.

He took another long drink of his wine, and then he walked to his office, put the wine glass on his desk, and walked out into the corridor. It was time to report to Lady Michi.