
DAVID DRAKE

THE WAR MACHINE

ROGER MACBRIDE ALLEN

CRISIS OF EMPIRE III

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THE WAR MACHINE: CRISIS OF EMPIRE III

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*To Jim Baen,
Founder of the Feast*

“Face facts, Spencer. She’s gone. We’ve taken her away from you—and *you* away from her.” The Kona Tatsu officer was weary, and there was a sour note in his voice. “Sign the paper and be done with it.”

Commander Allison Spencer sat behind his desk, drawing back from both the Kona Tatsu man and the divorce agreement that sat on the desk blotter. Spencer didn’t even want to touch the paper. It was too like the man who brought it: ordinary looking, harmless in appearance; yet full of threat and danger, made strong by secrets and conspiracies.

Commander Spencer looked at the secret policeman and felt his own throat go dry, felt fear make the blood pounding in his temples. Al Spencer was a brave man, a good intelligence officer, cool in the face of danger—but only fools were never afraid, and even fools knew to be afraid of the Kona Tatsu.

The secret policeman seemed to have judged that his victim was not going to speak. “You and your wife are as lost to each other as if we had shot one or both of you dead,” he said. “And, I might add that we need *her*—but we don’t need you. While it would be inconvenient for us to kill your wife—or rather your *former* wife—there would be no such inconvenience if we killed *you*. Indeed, I am carrying written authorization to shoot you dead here and now should you fail to cooperate. Need I add it scarcely matters to me which it is to be? Sign or die. Now.”

Spencer found himself staring fixedly at the divorce agreement as if it were some loathsome creature, and he was watching it in helpless, horrified fascination as it gnawed at his own vitals. He could do nothing, nothing at all against the words on that paper.

This morning, two hours ago, he had given Bethany a casual kiss goodbye as he left for another routine day of flying a desk at headquarters. And now—he clamped his hands around the arms of his chair and fought for control.

“May I know the reason for the divorce?” Spencer asked at last, in as even a voice as he could manage. “Am I charged with a crime? Or is it permitted for me to know?”

The nameless secret policeman sighed and seemed to give in just a bit. “It makes no difference. The facts will all be public soon enough. Indeed, the whole point was to make them public. No one is charged with anything but being who they are. You are charged with being nobody, and found guilty. Your former wife, Bethany Windsor, is found guilty of being Anthony Hildebrant Windsor’s niece and his closest living relative. That same uncle of hers, Anthony Windsor, is the new Governor of Harmony Cluster. General Anson Merikur, the new military commander of Harmony—”

“Merikur? He’s no general; he’s just a naval commander. What the devil does Merikur have to do with . . .” Spencer began, but the answer came to him before he could complete the question. From a political view it made perfect sense. “Oh my God.”

“As I was about to say,” the Kona Tatsu man went on dryly, “*General* Merikur has taken not only a new rank and command in his new service but, as of an hour ago, he has also taken a fiancée. That fiancée is the niece of the newly appointed Governor, as a matter of fact. Bethany Windsor—that is to say, the former Bethany Spencer—was taken aboard Governor-select Windsor’s ship soon after you left her at home this morning. She has already signed her copy of the divorce paper—under protest, I think that’s any comfort. She will be married to Merikur as soon as possible.”

“So Merikur has stolen my wife to get himself into the ruling family,” Spencer said quietly. His tone of voice was deceptively low and calm. His fear and shock were already swinging around,

transmuting themselves into anger.

His visitor interrupted firmly. “No, he did not. I might as well shoot you dead now and save my office the trouble of arresting you for treason later on, if you believe *that*.” Spencer looked up to see the other’s eyes boring deep into his own.

“You are thinking murder and treason *already*. I can see it,” his visitor went on. “Let me assure you that you would be dead long before you could commit it. For what comfort it may be, *none* of the persons involved were consulted as to these matters. Not you, not Merikur, not his bride-to-be. Merikur has never even met Bethany Windsor.” The Kona Tatsu man’s voice lowered, became almost gentle, kindly. “Sign the paper. Sign the paper and live. Sign and salvage something of your life and career.”

It was the High Secretary’s plan, then, Spencer concluded. No one else could possibly be powerful enough to order about Senators and Generals. Spencer shut his eyes and shook his head, trying to clear his mind. Spencer was a member of the High Secretary’s Guard, sworn to defend the High Secretary in any and every way, against every enemy from any quarter, unquestioningly, at the cost of his life, if need be. And this was reward for his taking that oath.

Spencer opened his eyes, looked at his visitor, and looked down to stare again at the paper. Trapped. There was nothing he could do. He had no option at all. With a savage curse, he snatched up a pen, grabbed at the paper, and scribbled his name across it. He stamped his thumb on the fingerprint block hard enough so his thumb hurt. He shoved the paper back across the desk. “Get out,” he said.

The Kona Tatsu man folded the paper and slipped it back into his jacket pocket. Spencer forced himself to watch the man go. The secret policeman stood, and his face betrayed something at last, an expression of faint distaste. Whether it was the job he was doing that he disliked, or Spencer’s lack of discipline, Spencer neither knew or cared.

If the KT man had drawn a weapon and blown a hole in Spencer at that moment, Spencer wouldn’t have much cared about *that*, either.

Spencer watched the nameless man go, and sat motionless, staring at the door, long after he was alone. His whole life, his happy, settled, ordered world had been uprooted, crushed, tossed aside, for the sake of some imagined and momentary political advantage.

Incredible that a single flick of a single pen from a single man so far away could do so much so abruptly.

The High Secretary, the *de facto* if not *de jure* Emperor of all the worlds of the Pact, chooses to move a few of the pawns about the gameboard. An assistant prepares the appropriate written orders, the High Secretary scribbles his signature and thus commands the move without half a moment’s thought.

There is no need to consult the pawns.

A word, a gesture, from the High Secretary was enough to send the Kona Tatsu itself scampering, enough (for the moment, and in this case, anyway) to force Merikur and Senator Windsor to accede to the High Secretary’s wishes.

The mail chute *chuffed* and a fat envelope plopped out onto Spencer’s desk. It took him a moment to become aware enough of his surrounding to notice its arrival. Numbly, he picked the packet up and broke the elaborate authenticator seal. He pulled out the pages automatically. He had to concentrate in order to read the words and understand them.

But all at once he *did* make sense of them. His stomach knotted up and his hands clenched into fists, crumpling the handsome, formal parchment with all its seals and ribbons. They were *promoting* him. Making him a captain in recompense for robbing his wife. Blatantly, obviously trying to make it all u

to him with yet another flick of yet another pen.

Spencer crushed the ornate commission into a ball and threw the dirty thing in the waste chute. He stood up and staggered out of his office. He needed some air.

Sitting woodenly by the shore of Lake Paho an hour later, he began to convince himself that he was calm. He told himself he was able to face the situation a bit more clearly now.

Damn them all, he thought. *Damn* the officers and the flunkies and the traditions and the hypocrite

The horrible thing was that by their lights, a promotion *did* make it up to him, *did* make things all right. Half the officers in the Cluster would have cheerfully abandoned their spouses in exchange for such an early promotion, perhaps betrayed their closest friends into the bargain without hesitation.

But that wasn't fair. In the Guard and the Navy, marriages tended to be business arrangements, politically correct and family-arranged. Most marriages among the military officer class had all the romance of a corporate takeover. Indeed, that had been true of his own match to Bethany. Wed to each other eight years ago, they had been barely more than strangers at the time they exchanged their vows. Her parents had been alive then, and her Uncle Anthony Windsor a minor figure, yet to perform the political masterstrokes that would launch him to the heights of the Pact's ruling elite.

If her parents had already been dead then, leaving her as Anthony Windsor's *de facto* heir, and if Anthony Windsor had been as powerful then as he was now, Allison Spencer and Bethany Windsor would never have been wed; it never would have occurred to anyone to dream of permitting her to be wasted on such an unremarkable match.

Back then, she had been one of several relations to an unimportant official. Now she was the sole surviving family member of a sector governor. Therefore she had value. Political value, access value—hostage value if it came to that.

And what value did Commander—no, *Captain* Allison Spencer have? He stood up and began walking around the lake. The wind was biting and cold, even for early spring, and the sky was a steel-grey roof over the land, seeming to seal off the world from hope. Al Spencer pulled his coat tight around his body and knelt down beside the water to stare at his own reflection. He saw a handsome face there in the grey water, youthful in appearance even for his twenty-five standard years. Dark-skinned, lean-featured, dark brown hair and light brown eyes. He knew he was young, and strong, even intelligent and capable.

All that he was, he had offered up in service to the High Secretary. And today he had been told exactly how much that service was worth. The High Secretary might demand unswerving loyalty and devotion from his Guard—but he did not provide it in return.

With a sudden, impulsive determination, Spencer stood up and turned away from the still waters of the lake. She could not be gone already. He would find her.

Five minutes later he was back at his desk, rifling the drawers to find the military-issue Artificial Intelligence Device, the AID, he was supposed to carry at all times. Like many desk-bound officers, Allison Spencer had never quite found the pocket-sized but bulky device useful enough to carry, whatever the regs might say. His desk terminal was all he ever needed. But now he was going to be on the move—and more importantly, it was harder to trace queries from a mobile AID, since it could patch into the data net from practically anywhere.

Al knew without thinking that he would have to hide his actions. It was a conditioned reflex. In the world of Pact society generally, and in the military specifically, it was all but certain that a given

person would be under surveillance from time to time. Everyone learned a few tricks for beating the watchers when a little privacy was required.

Spencer found the AID at last, buried under some forms in one of the drawers. He hurried out of the building and started walking. Better to walk. Cabs were easy to track. He wanted to be on the far side of Lake Paho, well inside the central core of the city, before he switched the device on. That way it would patch into the data net through some other link than the Guard HQ signal.

Al Spencer knew perfectly well that no amount of running around could protect him for long. Give his circumstances, it was not merely possible that the KT were watching him; it was certain. His precautions were almost childishly simple, and he knew that too. They would be able to figure out what he was doing, where he was going—but perhaps, if he hurried, not *quite* quickly enough to prevent his going. *That* was the key thing.

He was going to see Bethany, and he wasn't going to be stopped. What happened to him after that didn't matter.

He found himself in a busy shopping district and stepped into a bustling mall-front toy store. He stepped into a quiet back corner of the store and pulled out the AID, hoping that everyone would assume he was just another busy father, albeit one in uniform, taking a business call while buying a surprise for his children.

Children. Spencer winced, felt a strange little pang in his heart for something that now would never be. He and Bethany had never had children. There had always seemed to be sensible reasons to wait—until they had a larger house, until the next promotion, until Spencer's bosses eased up and he would have more time to spend with his daughter or son. There had always been good reasons to wait. And now the children would never be.

He discovered the AID was trembling in his hands. He blinked and shook his head, forced himself concentrate on the situation at hand. "AID, voiceprint clearance." It had been a while since he had used the thing. It might be smart to start off by making sure it would still work for him. An AID was literally a machine with a mind of its own, and AID units had been known to decide not to work for their owners after being shut off for a while. The programmers could offer no clear explanation of why. Folklore had it that the damn things just got sulky after being ignored.

"This is AID GHQ 97-558KD76, assigned to Captain Allison Spencer. Voiceprint clearance requestor identified as Captain Allison Spencer. Clearance approved. AID ready on line," a tiny robotic voice answered.

Spencer frowned. The military-model AID units were a bit on the persnickety, overprecise side, too much of the spit-and-polish about them. This one had already picked up Spencer's promotion—and was being careful to use it.

Persnickety AIDs had the reputation of being slavish to the rules—and of being touchy about insults to themselves, real or perceived, intended or unintentional. And it seemed to Al that getting stuffed into a desk drawer for months at a time could easily qualify as an insult.

None of that would matter so much if Al wasn't intent on breaking—or at least bending—a few rules and laws at the moment.

Given a skilled operator, a sufficiently high-tech AID, and a willingness for both human and machine to break the law, a bandit AID could, in theory, turn its operator into a millionaire overnight.

But AIDs weren't supposed to be able to assist their owners in the commission of crimes. In principle, if someone used an AID to commit a crime, the AID was supposed to *report* the attempt to the cops immediately—to the endless annoyance of the police computers that had to field such calls. The police ignored ninety-nine percent of AID-reported violations. The cops couldn't afford to send

out an arrest team every time an AID finked on its owner for jaywalking.

Of course, it was only the low-end, budget-brand AIDs, or young and inexperienced AIDs, that made such calls. It did not take an AID with any sort of learning bank long to realize the police computers were ignoring its calls—or to realize that its owner didn't appreciate lugging around a stool pigeon.

Some poor bastards out there needed AIDs in their work, but could not afford one able to figure out squealing was useless. Thousands of harmless little salesmen lived in fear that a glorified mobile telephone was going to inform on them if they forgot to charge a client sales tax.

Which was why every AID sold on this world, even the cheap ones, had a scram button on it. Break the seal on that button, punch it in hard, and your AID was history. AIDs who squealed too much died. AIDs who learned *that* quickly discovered how to defeat their own hardwired instruction. AIDs who knew what was good for them cooperated with their owners, even in the commission of minor crimes. Everyone used AIDs to figure their income tax, for example.

But Al Spencer knew as well as anyone that an AID's desire for self-preservation was no guarantee against the damn thing turning informer. Some models—including the standard military issue units—were known to rate revenge above survival. Every AID left the factory knowing how unpleasant things could get if it helped its owner commit murder or treason. The Kona Tatsu had ways of sucking information out of an AID that were just as nasty as what they did to people.

So what it came down to was that AIDs were supposed to squeal, but they never really did it, except sometimes.

There was an old, old theory that uncertainty was a cornerstone of deterrence. Usually, that was true—but today it wasn't going to work. Al had no choice but to use his AID in the commission of a major crime. One that might even be regarded as treason. No danger would stop him.

"AID, report ship name and location and confirm if certain person is aboard." Al spoke a bit stiffly to the gadget, and found himself holding it the way he would a small dog that might bite. He made sure his finger was over the scram button seal and forced himself to relax.

"What is the ship?" the AID asked.

"Senator Hildebrandt Windsor's ship." Spencer held his breath. This was the moment of truth. If this AID was going to betray him, this was the moment. "Such information is under security block," the AID announced. Al felt his mouth go dry. Either he'd get his information, or the KT would be all over this toy store in four minutes. At the first hint that his AID was reluctant to help, Al was going to scram the thing and toss it into a bin of stuffed toys. "One moment, please," the AID continued. "Sidestepping security may take a moment." Al breathed a sigh of relief. "Security overcome. I have access to all in-system ship locations."

"So which is his ship?"

"The governor does not *own* any ship, but he is billeted aboard the *Bremerton*, currently in parking orbit."

Damn smartass machine. But he'd settle for a helpful smartass. "Is his niece aboard?"

"Confirmed, Captain Spencer. Bethany Windsor billeted compartment four, B deck."

That was another little stab in his gut. This AID not only used Al's new rank, but Bethany's maiden name.

Somehow, hearing it from the damn machine made it seem real, official. He felt a surge of anger welling up inside him. "Thank you, AID. Now—how do I get aboard to see her?"

"You cannot," the machine said flatly. "Special orders have been issued specifically to keep you out. The crew has been told that Guard officers may attempt to desert and escape to Harmony Cluster by talking their way onto the *Bremerton*. You cannot get past them."

Spencer felt his anger turn cold, calculating. “All right, then AID, I cannot get aboard. Then at least tell me how I can *try*.”

Even as he listened to the AID’s patient instructions, Al knew the attempt would fail, knew that the KT could not fail but to keep a watch for him, knew that he was chasing toward disaster.

Deep in his heart, Captain Allison Spencer wondered if it was heroes or cowards who rushed toward their own destruction.

Al Spencer came back to himself, just a little, and felt sick. How much time had passed? How long since he had been thrown off the shuttle, how long since the last drunken bar fight? How long since he had paid the Cernian to cut open his skull and put wires in there, install the pleasure implant in his brain?

Disorientation. Confusion. A feeling as though he had just appeared here.

A gap in his life.

Bethany, his life, his career. They all seemed a lifetime ago. What had become of them all? How had he gotten *here*?

But then his worries faded. He blinked, sleepily, happily, and decided it didn't matter. None of it mattered. Not knowing, not caring, Captain Allison Spencer, High Secretary's Guards, slapped down the button again. A pulse of pleasure, of emptiness, of exultation and omnipotence washed over him, sweeping away all thoughts, all concerns, all fears before it.

The numb rig was good—no, more than good. The numb rig was *Goodness*, the spirit, the embodiment of all that was good in the universe. Al reached down and picked up the battered metal box, careful not to jar the wire that led from the rig to the implant in his skull. He smiled at the box, held it to his filthy, unshaved face, caressed it, planted a respectful, chaste kiss on the grubby, much-used button that was the source of all pleasure. For a time that could have been a split second, or an hour, or both, he floated in ecstasy.

The rig was Goodness, he thought again, blearily, happily, pleased and proud to have discovered such an essential truth.

But the feeling was fading already. The glow of well-being was dimming, clearing enough so that bits and pieces of reality were beginning to shine through. He could remember again, remember bribing his way through the spaceport, bluffing his way onto the ground-to-orbit shuttle, the humiliating way he had been stopped attempting to board the *Bremerton*, the cool, professional way the marines had folded him up when he tried to rush the hatch. The Pact military didn't much care for attempted stowaways—after all, they were, almost by definition, also attempted deserters.

The *Bremerton* Marines hadn't even permitted him the dignity of arrest, charges, detention, had instead just thrown him back aboard the shuttle, bruised and battered in a dozen places, the most serious injury the one to his pride. The shuttle crew had ignored him too, shoved him out the hatch at landing, tossed him aside like so much garbage to be disposed of.

Too much of it was coming back. Not just his memory, but his senses. He could taste the foul bile in his mouth without recalling how it came to be there, smell the sourness of his uniform and his person. He could see the stained mattress he had been on—for how long now?

How had he come to be here, in a wire room, hooked up to a numb rig? How drunk had he got, in what bar, that he would have agreed to the numb-rigger's harmless-sounding offer of a free sample? Shame and self-loathing washed over him, and uncontrollable tears of self-pity streamed down his face. No man likes to find the depths of which he is capable.

But the body learns quickly. Already Al Spencer had developed a reflex that would wash away all bad feeling. His finger plunged down on the button again, and a tiny pulse of electricity arced directly into his brain's pleasure centers. The universe went away in a bloom of happy colors.

The Kona Tatsu man looked down at Spencer in disgust and sorrow. He should have expected this, he told himself. He *had* expected it, almost. What else could the poor bastard do when the whole universe turned against him, when his future was stolen without so much as an apology, when a lifetime of loyalty was rewarded with such callous cruelty, with a casual gamble for momentary advantage in some meaningless political game halfway across the Galaxy?

Then the KT man caught a whiff of what Captain Spencer smelled like at the moment, and disgust got the upper hand. Even so, there was a debt owed here. “Get him up,” he ordered testily. His two ratings stepped in, a bit reluctantly, and scooped up the softly giggling form of Allison Spencer. The two men started to drag Spencer out toward the waiting ambulance. “Hold it,” the KT man said. “He has to be unplugged before you move him, for God’s sake. Here, let me do it.”

The two ratings held Spencer in a standing position as the KT man stepped behind him, and gently reached up to where the grubby ribbon cable attached to Spencer’s skull. The incision had been done sloppily, that was sure. There might be danger of infection. Working carefully, he undid the retaining clip and pulled the cable free. A tiny pair of spiky wires, only a few centimeters long, stuck up grotesquely through Spencer’s scalp.

The KT man let the cable drop and stepped back around in front of Spencer. Still working with exquisite care, he pried Spencer’s fingers away from the numb rig and took the unclean device away from its victim. He threw the damn thing into the far corner of the wire room, drew his repulsor pistol and blasted it down into scrap with a single burst of glass beads accelerated to supersonic speeds.

The troll-like Cernian who ran the Paradise Wire Palace was angered enough to step forward in protest. “You must not do that! That is my property! I do naught illegal here. You burst in, steal away customer before he can pay his bill, I say nothing, I permit. But you draw guns and shoot my own—”

The Cernian stopped in mid-sentence, apparently recalling too late that this was no corrupt vice con he was shouting at, but quite a different sort of animal. He closed his lipless mouth and gummed his jaw into a hideous imitation of a human smile. He seemed to have forgotten all his human speech for a long moment. “My apolllogeee,” he said at last, lisping out the last word in the Cernian equivalent of a nervous stutter.

The KT man stared at the Cernian a long moment. No, nothing illegal went on here—thanks to the bribes the numb riggers could pay. But how many lives had been ruined past all rescue in this fetid place? “Your apology will be accepted,” he said, “if I decide to let you live. You will know the result of my decision in a few days. One way or the other.”

The KT man fought back a feeling of overwhelming disgust and loathing for the alien. He, as much as any human, was influenced by the stereotype that all non-humans were criminals. It was an act of will to remember that the Pact was as much to blame as anyone for the fact that most criminal enterprises were run by aliens. Many planets had laws on the books to keep non-humans out of the best jobs, out of high-ranking professions and guilds. With every door to legitimate advancement closed, of course the aliens were channeled toward crime, toward the despised jobs humans would not do. Then the humans despised the aliens for doing the dirty work.

Well, the KT man thought, here was a human doing a little errand that was dirty enough. The KT man turned and walked away, his two ratings dragging the inert Spencer behind them. The KT man grimaced as he stepped into the street. He watched them load Spencer into the ambulance, and pulled his collar up—not against the cold, but as if to block out some part of the contagion that seem to hover in the very air here in the low places of the city.

He longed to go to someplace clean.

But he would have to travel a great deal further than the other side of the city to get to any such place.

If there were any clean places left in the Pact.

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They knew how to handle wireheads at the discreet hospital where Spencer was brought. A strong sedative, to force sleep for a day or more; an IV to restore the vitamins and other trace elements lost to the days of malnutrition and unnoticed self-starvation; a careful check for lice and the other, less savory parasitic animals that flourished at places like the Paradise Wire Palace. Simple things, really.

It was rare indeed that much in the way of heroic measures was needed to bring the half-dead wirehead back to life. Cleanliness, nourishment, rest were the keys, and there was no great art in making the body whole once again.

But when the physicians and the medical AIDs were done, then others were called on. Others ministered to the mind diseased, plucked from the memory rooted sorrows, razed the written troubles of the brain. Even the Kona Tatsu itself had practitioners skilled in those arts; the secret police had much need of psychiatrists in their work. Such as the nameless case officer who had been handling the Spencer docket right along.

The job of healing a mind was no easier than it had been millennia ago. Al Spencer had to be brought back to reality—and be made to accept reality. That could prove not only difficult, but impossible, when the psychotic escape mechanism was something as seductive as a pleasure implant. Why choose an unpleasant reality over a wire-paradise?

The usual technique was to remind the patient of the hideous *external* world that was part and parcel of the wire-paradise hallucination. The lice, the stench, the fetid odors, the self-debasement of being reduced to a button-pushing robot, the very real danger of brain infection as an after-effect of the clumsy brain surgery the wire-shop operators were famous for.

That was why the surgery robots left behind a scar when they removed the pleasure implant from a wire-paradise victim. The surgery robots could easily pluck the implant out neatly, perfectly, clean the wound and repair the original sloppy incision, and so make the insertion point undetectable. But better, far better to leave a mark behind. For the rest of his days, Al Spencer would have a small, lumpy scar, no larger than this thumbnail, there just above the base of his skull. It would be hidden beneath his hair, but there just the same to remind him. Whenever he scratched his head, or put a hat on, or felt the barber's clippers, he would remember. He would carry the scar as a warning for the rest of his life.

And if he heeds the warning, he might remain sane, the KT man thought. He sat, watching Spencer, for a long time after the med team cleaned him up. What could be salvaged from this wreck? What value could the State, the Pact, squeeze out of this dried-up husk?

But those were mere issues of bureaucratic smoke screening, ways to justify action. The true issue was that the Kona Tatsu had caused this disaster, and honor required the Kona Tatsu to set things to rights. For the KT cleaned up its own messes. How, the nameless man wondered, could he turn this ruin back into a man under the *guise* of doing the State's bidding?

###

Spencer awoke to the strange double sensation of not knowing where he was—and yet knowing

exactly *why* he was there. They were trying to cure him here, wherever *here* was. Someone had found him, brought him to this place.

He opened his eyes and found himself looking up at an antiseptic white ceiling. The room smelled of fresh linens, everything crisp and clean. A hospital of some sort, no doubt.

Spencer blinked and tried to take stock of himself. He felt a bit weak and light-headed, the way he had as a child in the throes of this illness or that flu on the morning the fever broke and he knew he was going to be all right even if he wasn't quite there yet. He could feel a small bump on the back of his head, still half-numb from the anesthesia. He reached back gingerly and touched the bump. What the hell was that? Even through the drugs, it was still tender, and he winced slightly as his fingers examined the scar. Then, at last, he understood.

He remembered. That was the place the Cernian had cut his skull open.

"Welcome back, Captain," a somber voice said, startling close at hand. "The robodoc said you'd be waking up just about now."

Spencer flinched in surprise, still not quite oriented. He had thought he was alone. He tried to sit up and got about halfway before he felt dizzy. But that was far enough. Far enough to recognize the Kon Tatsu man sitting at the side of the bed. The man who had begun the nightmare.

"Things have been busy since you dropped out of sight," the man said. "The High Secretary was assassinated, for starters. You and I may be the only humans in the Pact not trying to succeed him. Unless you'd care to give it a try."

"How long has . . ." Spencer started to ask, and discovered his voice didn't quite work right.

"Here, let me get you some water." The KT man stood and took a pitcher and glass from the bedside table. He poured the drink, and gently slid his hand under Spencer's head, lifting him enough to drink comfortably. Spencer took the glass and drank deep, shocked at how heavy the glass seemed. "It's been about two weeks since I visited your office," the KT man said, obviously using as neutral a phrase as he could to describe the interview. "Twelve hours later you were thrown off the *Bremerton* shuttle and went straight from there to a bar called the Wild Side, a portside place that never closes. You stayed there about eight hours before they threw you out. They didn't let you into the Officer's Club, but you got into a strip joint called the Bottom's Up—which is where you wiped the floor with those two marines. Quite an accomplishment for a man in your condition. Do you remember any of this?"

Spencer's voice had come back, at least a bit. "No. Not past going into the first bar. When did—" He hesitated and gestured to indicate the back of his head.

"About 30 hours after you sent the marines to the infirmary. More bars, more drinking; wake-me-ups that worked, sober-ups that didn't. Then you wandered into a bar on the first floor of a certain building. One with the Paradise Wire Palace on the third floor. According to the bartender, you didn't take much persuading once the wire-pusher got talking to you.

"The next week you spent pushing a feel-good button. For all intents and purposes, you didn't eat, you didn't sleep. You lost twenty kilos, were almost completely dehydrated—and you pretty much emptied your credit account too. It cost you five pounds in planetary currency every time you hit that button.

"According to the doctors here, another two days of that and you'd have turned Drone. That's what they call it when the feel-good wire burns your pleasure centers out. The wire wouldn't have been able to stimulate that part of your brain any more—because that part of your brain would have been dead, gone, cooked away.

"To oversimplify a bit, Drones are left incapable of feeling any pleasant sensation, any positive

emotion. They can only feel pain, sadness. Nothing else gets through to wake them from their stupor. They get to where they *welcome* pain and sorrow because it's better than nothingness. They seek out pain. Sooner or later the pain kills them. You were headed that way. It will be a while before anyone knows for sure if you escaped damage altogether. It's possible you lost something."

Al Spencer shut his eyes and slumped back on the pillow. Yes. He could believe that. He could believe that a part of his soul had been badly injured, was near death, might never return. Oh, yes, he could believe that. "How did you find me?" he asked at last. "How do you know so much about where I was and what I did?"

"Your AID," the KT man said. "That's a good unit you've got there. Hang onto it. Apparently you dropped it downstairs in the bar when you went upstairs to get a wire jammed in your brain. They must do some mighty illegal things in that building—it's completely shielded against every usable radio frequency. The AID could tell you were still up there pushing the feel-good button by listening to the staff gossiping—but it couldn't call for help until someone tossed it in the trash and threw it out with the garbage. Once it was clear of the building, it could patch into the AID nets and call for help. My office's computers were watching for any calls regarding you—we responded to the call. And here you are. For about the past week or so, recovering. And now it's time to go back to work."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you haven't quite been stripped of your commission or court martialed yet. Your office is under the impression that you are on detached duty assisting the Kona Tatsu. I have not yet disabused them of that notion—which is why you aren't in the brig. And you'll stay out of it if you pass a certain test." The KT man pulled a thick file folder from his briefcase and dropped it on Al's chest. "Read that. Analyze it. Get it right and you stay on detached duty. Get it wrong and you'll get a lot of practice breaking rocks on Penitence. Please bear in mind that, even for a prison planet, Penitence is not a nice place."

The KT man stood, nodded to Spencer, and walked out of the room. Spencer, feeling a bit stronger now, lifted himself up on his elbows to watch the man leave. There was no mistaking it, even behind the threats and the cold, hard language. This nameless secret policeman was a kindly, decent man. There had been no need for him to rescue Spencer, or block the Guard's quite legitimate efforts to punish Spencer. He was doing Spencer a *kindness*, attempting to make redress for the disaster that the system had inflicted on him.

And it was a hell of a note when you had to depend on the kindness and decency of the secret policeman.

Kindness or no, Spencer had no doubt that the threat of Penitence was real. There were sharp limits to the KT's forbearance—and the KT man was requiring Spencer to earn his own survival.

Still a little light-headed, he sat up in bed and broke the seal on the fat file, noting that it was printed on rapid-decay paper that would collapse into powder in a few hours. He'd have to read fast.

The first words his eyes fell upon scared the merry hell out of him. BASIC SECRET KONA TATSU. In the understated world of KT parlance, "Basic" corresponded roughly with "Ultra Eyes-only Human-only Secure-room Access Defended Document" in the rather verbose Guard terminology. And "Defended Document" meant it was legal to kill anyone who *might* leak it. If Spencer flunked the KT man's little test, Penitence might be the least of his worries.

More than a little nervous, Spencer began reading the file. Ten minutes later his nervousness was forgotten. He was too baffled and curious to remember the danger he was in.

There was something mighty peculiar going on out in the Jomini Cluster.

KT agents had gone missing. In a high-risk sector, that would not have been remarkable—but the disappearances were from Daltgeld, the capital world of the cluster, and Daltgeld was no danger zone.

It was a tourist world, safe in the interior of the Pact's communication lines, nowhere near any of the dozens of potential flash points.

Perhaps that was the point. If Daltgeld could become unsettled—then what place was safe?

Spencer pored over the papers. Agents were vanishing—but reports from the remaining agents were perfectly routine. Their fellows were disappearing, and the survivors did not bother to report it.

It was obvious that there was a lot missing from this file, as well. It had been heavily censored. Spencer frowned. Maybe they didn't have all the data—but they weren't even telling him everything *they* knew.

Up until the moment the KT man had arrived in his office with the news that his wife was no longer his wife, Allison Spencer had been an intelligence officer. A good one. He had never gone out to play spy—he had done *real* work, serving in combat units, gathering and analyzing tactical data, and then hitch back at Guard HQ, working with long-term strategic studies. He found his old reflexes swinging into action. This sort of thing was his bread and butter.

A small part of his mind considered that the Kona Tatsu had to know that Spencer was an intel man who loved puzzle-solving. Spencer knew that the very act of briefing him this way, showing him a part of the puzzle rather than telling him everything, was part of the game they *were* playing with him. More KT manipulation. The secret police were messing with his mind, teasing him.

He knew all that, and he didn't care. Because it was working. This puzzle intrigued him. There was something wrong on Daltgeld.

The last of the pages had rotted away to powder, had been vacuumed away by the cleaning robot, and Spencer was sitting up in bed, eating his dinner, when the KT man returned.

Spencer looked up and nodded thoughtfully as his control retook his seat. The term “control” seemed strange to Spencer, but after all, spies had controls, not commanders. The only possible reason to show Spencer that file was to prepare him for playing spy. He looked at the KT man, who sat, saying nothing, waiting expectantly.

“I assume that this room is secure?” Spencer asked. A service robot rolled in, unbidden, and removed the remains of Spencer's dinner.

“You passed the first part of the test,” the KT man said. “You are quite right to assume that—and equally right not to trust that assumption. You may talk freely.”

Spencer noted that the KT man did not ask him any questions. The KT man wanted him to work this out on his own. “All right, then. There was nothing in that file to suggest it directly, but it seems to me that the Kona Tatsu has been penetrated,” Spencer said. “Someone has subverted the subverters.”

The KT man glanced away and nodded woodenly, obviously trying to mask his own embarrassment. “You have passed the second part of the test. The Kona Tatsu has failed. We are in danger from an unknown force that can neutralize our best people undetectably. Anyone who can do that threatens the entire Pact. And the Pact is exposed to enough threats as it is. It might not survive the assassination crisis. If it does, then it will still be severely weakened. Not ready to face whatever is flattening the KT on Daltgeld.”

The nameless man looked back at Spencer and flashed a joyless, mechanical smile. “We want your help. And we're going to get it, aren't we?”

Spencer nodded woodenly. At least they weren't insulting his intellect by pretending he had a choice.

Al Spencer stood in front of the mirror in his hospital room and looked himself over. A thin, haggard, flimsy-looking man stared back. He had lost a lot of weight to the feel-good button, and not yet gained it back. His uniforms no longer fit. But then, no part of his life fit him anymore. Not his involuntary bachelorhood, not his rank or service assignment. Why should his clothes?

And what about his assignment—or should he even call it that? It would be better described as his cover, even if the face that looked out of the mirror at him didn't look much like a spy. What was it they were expecting of him, anyway?

He sighed unhappily. Spencer knew perfectly well what their expectations were. No need to ask himself rhetorical questions. It was pretty obvious he was meant to serve as a target, a decoy. Something for the Kona Tatsu's enemies to shoot at while the real KT operatives got on with the job.

He peered deeper into the mirror, tried to look himself in the eye. It wasn't easy. Not anymore.

He blinked and came back to himself, plucked idly at the loose folds of cloth that hung from him. Ill-fitting uniforms didn't matter. They, like every other part of his life, were about to be shed in favor of something else. The Kona Tatsu had plans for him. They were shifting him over from the Guard to the Navy, assigning him a ship, indeed a whole fleet. In the Pact military, a transfer from one service to another was nothing unusual, but still this move would be of note. Becoming a Navy captain was the equivalent of another jump in rank from a Guard captain. In effect, he had received yet another promotion. That should have made him proud, certainly—but not even a shiny new command could resurrect his self-respect completely.

He did not feel entitled to the command, or that he had earned it. It was the KT's work, plain and simple. He was their man. And it was pretty damn galling to learn that the secret police could control the military command structure, seemingly at whim. How often did they do it? How many seemingly meteoric careers were really just the KT putting their own man forward? Spencer felt like a pawn in the KT's game, and knew that it was a pretty accurate analogy.

No, he didn't have much to be proud of. Not when his fingers still curled around an imaginary feel-good control whenever unhappy thoughts came to his mind. But if he wanted to survive, and stay off Penitence, he would have to put the best possible face on the situation. He'd have to *act* proud, at least.

He smoothed the uniform jacket down over his blouse as best he could, turned, and stepped out into the hallway. He had orders to depart this morning at 0900 hours, and the time had come. He had no bags with him, nothing to carry away with him but his AID. It banged against his hip as he walked. The damn thing had saved his life, but he still didn't like carrying it.

He looked up and down the hallway at the ward. As usual, the place was deserted. Spencer had not laid eyes on anyone but the nameless KT man since his arrival. No patients, no doctors, no nurses, no staff. There were three other rooms for patients, a nurse's station, a diagnostic control pod—but there was no one there to cure or be cured. Just the medical and maintenance robots. They did all the work. A wholly automated ward, run that way for security reasons, no doubt. This was obviously some sort of KT facility. But was it an entire KT hospital, or just one small clinic inside a larger complex?

Not even the KT man here to see him off. Typical. No doubt the watchers were on duty, the surveillance AIDs recording his every move. Spencer raised a hand, waved good-bye to where he thought a camera might be. But then how to get the hell out of here?

It turned out to be simpler than he thought. All the doors but one were locked, and that led out onto

a blank hallway full of doors—only one of which would open. That led out onto a stairwell. He followed it down to another doorway, and so on through a whole rabbit’s warren of tunnels, stairwell and droptubes that seemed like they must lead him halfway across the city. There was never more than one door that would open, and every door locked quite firmly behind him.

At last he found himself decanted out into a dark, dank narrow alley. It was a fetid, nasty place—because he could see the sky from here. Al looked straight up, and saw the gleam of stars. *Stars?* How could that be? Al glanced at his watch. It wasn’t even ten in the morning. Unless the watch had been damaged. “AID, what time is it?” he asked.

“It is 0957 hours planetary standard, and late evening local zone standard.”

Al blinked, feeling badly disoriented. He was on the other side of the world from his home city.

“Where the hell are we?”

“I am not permitted to answer questions of locale until we are returned to your own home.”

Typical, Al decided. His own AID was taking orders from the KT. Clearly, they wanted him to get home without knowing where he had been. *Another* damn test, this time an exercise in keeping his own knowledge limited. There were certainly ways he *could* figure out where this was. Walk out from here until he found a street sign. Memorize the star positions overhead, and then compare that to the exact time to get a longitude. But no, his AID had simply said it was “late evening”—no doubt on the KT’s instructions to be vague. Without knowing the local celestial time, he couldn’t use the sky. Never mind. He could simply walk out from here until he found a citizen to ask where he was.

But they didn’t *want* him to know, were challenging him to get home *without* finding out. He was getting tired of these little pop quizzes. Nevertheless, he was obviously being watched, somehow, so he’d better play by the rules. “AID, call me a cab,” he said in a tired voice. “And see if you can charge the fare to the Kona Tatsu.” Al Spencer knew his credit balance wasn’t up to paying for intercontinental cab fares. He didn’t mind dancing to the KT’s tune, so long as they paid the piper.

“The KT pays all operational expenses of its personnel. It’s taken care of,” the AID said, with what might have been just a hint of gently mocking humor in its voice.

A cab dropped out of the sky and touched down in the middle of the street. It sidled over to the curb on its hoverskirt and opened its door in front of Al. He climbed in and sat down. “Tell the cab to opaque windows and take me home,” he told the AID testily. “And fly via non-direct routes.” The KT wouldn’t want him to be able to look out the window, or calculate his starting point from measuring the flight time.

Which meant he had a flight of long and indeterminate length to look forward to, hours of sitting inside a blacked-out cab with nothing to see or do.

The cab door shut, the windows blacked out, the interior lights came on, and the robot cab whooshed into the sky. Damn them. Damn them all and the games they played. *And damn me, too, for playing with them, as if I had much choice*, Spencer thought.

###

The near-silent thrumming of the cab’s engines, the dim interior lighting and the enforced inactivity conspired to put Allison Spencer into a light doze. He slept as the kilometers whispered past, his hands now and again clenching around an imaginary switch.

It took only the slightest shift in the cab’s motion to awaken him. His eyes sprang open the moment the cab’s nose pitched downward, and it took him a second or two to remember where he was. “Cab, what is it?”

“Additional passenger proceeding to same destination has hailed me,” the cab answered in a dull voice.

The same destination! The cab was supposed to be taking him home! He hadn't planned on providing target practice just yet. He reached out and broke the seal on the emergency manual operation switch. He pushed the switch in hard, waiting for the manual controls to pop out so he could fly himself out of here. It scared him when nothing happened, but it didn't exactly surprise him.

The situation was not good. Here he was, unarmed in a cab he could not control, heading toward a landing, a meeting with someone who had to know who he was. “AID! See if you can find a KT distress band and send an SOS. Flash under attack. Whatever the hell the KT calls it.”

“We are not under attack,” the AID announced calmly. “This stop was prearranged.”

Al Spencer felt his blood go cold. “You knew this was going to happen?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Who is it we're picking up?”

“I am not at liberty to tell you.”

Al felt the sweat beading up on his forehead. His AID told him this was no attack—but his AID willfully had withheld information from him. How far a step was it from there to lying? If he were about to be attacked, could he trust this machine to tell him what it knew? “AID, who the hell do you work for?” he asked. He only had a few seconds to straighten this out.

“I am now employed by the Kona Tatsu, and have been assigned to your case.”

What sort of case was he? Spencer wondered irritably. Medical? Mental? Legal? Intelligence? “You are incorrect. I am employed by the Kona Tatsu. I own you. You are one of the tools I use to do my employer's bidding. And I am expected to discard and destroy any tool that does not perform up to specification, before it could endanger a KT asset, such as myself. The specification for an AID includes keeping its owner informed and apprised of all pertinent data. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Who do you work for?”

“Captain Allison Spencer.”

“Then, AID, who the hell is waiting to meet this cab?”

“A KT operative, name, rank and mission unknown.”

“That's more like it. I think.” It wasn't any more informative, but at least the AID was admitting it didn't know. Spencer was inclined to accept its ignorance: AIDs weren't usually very good liars. And even if the new arrival was a KT agent, that didn't necessarily mean all was well. Every other organization in the Pact was divided into rival factions. Why not the Kona Tatsu? Why shouldn't his nameless friend back at the hospital have enemies?

With that happy thought, Allison felt himself grow heavier for a moment as the cab braked and came in for a landing. Ten seconds later the interior lights dimmed to nothing. Al heard the door pop open, and saw the sky framed by the door for half a moment. A shape flitted through the door, silhouetted against the dark night sky. The door clicked shut and the cab was airborne again, pitching upward to head for the sky.

“Lights on,” a firm, low-pitched woman's voice commanded. The cab's interior lit up, and Allison Spencer found himself face to face with the figure of a smallish woman dressed completely in black, and nose-to-nose with the repulsor pistol she held in her hand. Her clothes were so dark that she was hard to see even in the cab's lighting. Even her face was hidden behind a black mesh maskcap that cloaked her features completely. “Name,” she snapped out, in tones that made it an order and not a question.

“Allison Spencer,” he answered. “Who the hell are you?”

“What is your control’s name?” she demanded.

“How the hell would I know?” he replied irritably. “The son-of-a-bitch never told me.”

His inquisitor chuckled at that, and made the pistol disappear. “That’s him all right,” she said cheerfully. “Always very careful about need-to-know.” She cocked her head over her shoulder. “Sant what’s the story?” she asked abruptly.

“His AID confirms his identity via radio link,” a muffled voice replied from the rucksack on the woman’s back. “I’d trust it. The military models are hard to manipulate without leaving traces.”

“All right, Spencer, you are who you are. So maybe we can get down to business.”

“Who are you?” Spencer asked again, this time with what he hoped was a tone of exaggerated—and threatening—patience.

The newcomer shed her backpack. “Suss Nanahbuc. Your new live-in concubine. Santu, take over this cab and get us some speed. I want to get where we’re going.” Suss sighed and reached her hand out to Al. He took it and shook mechanically. “Nice to meet you, Spencer. Hold on just a second while I get out of this damn spy get-up.”

Spencer watched Suss carefully, with the sinking feeling that he had just lost control of his life to this undersized secret agent.

She leaned back in the bench seat facing him and started peeling off her outer garments. The ski mask came off first, and Spencer found himself vaguely disappointed by what it revealed. Spies and agents were supposed to be startlingly beautiful, or at least striking, and Suss was merely pretty, indeed rather ordinary-looking. She peeled off her black coveralls as well, revealing a modest business suit underneath, perfectly proper attire for a mid-level government bureaucrat. It made her look even more just an ordinary person.

She seemed even smaller, once she was out of the commando garb. She wouldn’t even come up to Spencer’s shoulders if the two of them stood side-by-side. Her face was thin, her skin pale, her black hair snaked in a tight, prim bun at the top of her head. She wore little jewelry or makeup.

But her eyes. They were eyes that had *seen* things, perhaps too many things in too short a time. They were big, almond-shaped eyes that told of almost pure-bred Asian stock reaching all the way back to ancient Earth, the irises dark blue, almost black. It would be hard to look into those eyes and not speak the truth. She undid the bun that held her hair in place and shook her head, letting her jet-black hair cascade down around her shoulders.

“We should be at your front door in about two hours,” she announced as she pulled a brush out of her rucksack and ran it through her hair. “We have until from now until then for you to get your initial cover story straight. I am your mistress. After the *Bremerton* left orbit, you went off on a bender for a few hours, and then ended up at Lady Joy’s Happy House, where you sobered up to find me next to you. If anyone asks for proof that you’ve been with me, tell them I have a centimeterwide mole on my left buttock. The two of us—actually myself and a KT agent who resembles you—cut a pretty wide swath across the nightspots. You bought my contract off Lady Joy and yesterday registered me as your on-board personal assistant. We’ll be sharing a cabin aboard your cruiser, you lucky devil.”

She flashed a dangerous smile and put her hairbrush away. She stuffed the blackout clothes into a side pocket of the rucksack, then did something with its zippers and straps, and turned it into a lady’s handbag, a bit oversized but no more remarkable for that. The mysterious intruder of two minutes before was transformed into an average-looking middle-class businesswoman.

“You consider it a real asset that a hot-blooded temptress such as myself is capable of appearing so refined, dignified, and ordinary in public. Behind closed doors, however, it’s quite a different story.

You getting all this?" she asked playfully.

"Yeah, sure," Al replied, feeling anything but sure. "But could you tell me what'll really be going on?"

"I'll be the spy, and you'll be the cover story—and the person who *seems* to be investigating the situation. You draw their fire, divert their attention, and I help you stay alive while I do the real investigating. Also, you are there with the naval task force if we Kona Tatsu superheroes need the backup. You will command the naval task force—"

"But you will command *me*," Al said sourly. "A puppet on your string."

She frowned and her face turned serious for the first time. "I will be your superior officer, yes. When was the last time you didn't have a superior officer you had to obey? If it makes you feel any better, I could wave a bunch of military ID at you, showing me to hold a superior rank in the Navy—the Guard for that matter. Then you'd have to decide whether or not my ID was forged—and whether or not a Kona Tatsu forgery has legal standing, as some courts have ruled. In the long run, none of that will matter, because you will accept my orders. Period. Or say hello to Penitence."

She looked at him straight in the eye and grinned. "That sound scary enough to convince you?"

Al found himself forced to grin back. "Yeah, I guess so. I'll follow orders. As if I had a choice."

Suss' face fell, and she replied in a saddened voice. "As if any of us had a choice. I don't call the tune I dance to, either, my friend." She seemed lost in thought for a long moment, but then her expression brightened. "Never mind, ours not to reason why, and try not to think about the couplet's second line. Santu, skip the run to Captain Spencer's house, and call whoever you need to call to see it that his luggage gets to his ship. Get us right to the spaceport and order transport to our ship. We've got a cruiser to catch."

She dug down into what was now her capacious handbag and pulled out a stack of record blocks and a reader. "Here," she said, "get busy. The ships you're taking over have not exactly been happy places. You've got a lot of homework to do if you want to get them back together again."

Lieutenant Commander Tallen Deyi was getting royally sick of all hell breaking loose. Piping aboard the latest politically appointed disaster of a captain on one hour's notice was headache enough—but doing so while simultaneously tidying up after a goddamned mutiny on an auxiliary ship was aggravation above and beyond the call of duty.

At least the mutiny was aboard one of the destroyers. If “mutiny” was the most accurate term. “Food riots” might be closer to the mark, given the slop the sailors aboard the *Banquo* had been forced to eat.

Poor damn sods. With Lucius Rockler as commanding officer, it had probably come down between starvation and revolt. Even the *Banquo*'s Marines had taken part in the uprising—and if there was one bunch of perfectly devoted loyalists in the Pact, it was the goddamned Marines.

Tallen stood up and crossed the bridge, ostensibly to look over the radarman's shoulder to check the progress of the captain's gig. He could have checked the gig's position from the repeaters at his own station—or simply asked the radarman to report—but Tallen was feeling restless, edgy. He needed to prowl the bridge, pace back and forth a bit, triple-check all the routine procedures he had double-checked already.

In the normal course of events, Tallen knew, it was terribly bad form to breathe down people's necks that way. But he had worked with this bridge crew a long time. They knew why he was upset, and were equally nervy themselves—and would much rather have Tallen Deyi catch them out than the latest excuse for a captain.

The poor old *Duncan* had been through four captains in the last three standard years, one simple-minded offspring of an inbred aristo after another. All of them a bit weak in the head and a bit weak in the chin as a result of most of their ancestors being first cousins or worse, all of them sent out on the strength of daddy's influence and/or mommy's money waved about in the right quarters, out to punch one of the aristo tickets that needed punching if sonnyboy were going to have any chance of snatching the family's seat in the Senate.

By all tradition and precedent, a Senator was supposed to have held a “major military command” before he could put on his ceremonial robes. The trouble was that Task Force 1307—all four ships of it—was one of the smallest “major” commands available, and had the added distinction of being assigned to a very secure interior cluster. It was small and unimportant enough that the High Command didn't give a good goddam who sat in the Task Force Commander's chair.

A chair that, in any other Task Force, would have belonged to Tallen Deyi by now. He was stuck here, the permanent first officer, seemingly condemned forever to nursemaid the chuckle-headed spawn of politically correct, marginally incestuous marriages through their experience of “command

And what type would this one, this Allison Spencer, be? Would he storm onto the bridge and issue a flurry of contradictory orders five minutes after he came aboard, the way Zephon had? Or vanish into his stateroom expecting a constant supply of girls and boys to be provided for his entertainment, as Senator Kerad's darling baby girl had done?

And, of course, it had been Miss Luinda Kerad—*Captain* Kerad (even if she was only nineteen years old) who had placed her extremely close friend Lucius Rockler in command of the *Banquo*. Tallen didn't care one of his frequent goddams who did what to whom in private, or how they liked to do it. That didn't matter. But when the Task Force Captain treated the ship's complement like the staff of her private bordello and assigned some little corrupt bimbo boyfriend to command a warship—that

was what wrecked ships and destroyed morale. What was the ancient maxim? “So long as they don’t do it in the street and frighten the horses.” Well, if there had been any horses aboard the *Banquo*, they would have been goddam petrified with fear.

All of which left Tallen so cynical he found himself wondering, not if the new captain was going to be worse than the last, but how much worse, and in what way the newie would be worse. None of them ever got any better.

“Captain’s gig coming alongside, Sir.”

“Very good. I’m on my way to the ceremonial dock. Alert the sideboys and order the engineer to activate the revolving door on the captain’s cabin. We’ve got another customer.”

The comm operator grinned at that, and knew enough not to relay the order. Tallen departed the bridge and made his way below. He had about ten minutes to reach the main hatchway, rigged for the captain’s boarding ceremony it had seen far too often in recent times.

Tallen wasn’t sure he was ready to endure this particular charade quite so soon. Kerad had only made her hurried departure into ignominy the week before, the ink still wet on her resignation of commission. The High Secretary’s assassination two weeks before had shaken up a lot of people. It had inspired the men of the *Banquo* in their revolt, and that in turn had inspired Kerad’s sudden resignation “for reasons of health.”

She had been smart to quit: the Judge Advocate General’s office could not touch a member of a senatorial family, once he or she was out of the military. Tallen was not happy that she had eluded military justice, scurried back to the protection of her family—but at least Lucius Rockler was safely in the brig here on the *Duncan*.

And then the signal from Sector HQ that the replacement captain would be coming aboard in one hour. God, they loved to jerk you around! There was no time at all to sweep Kerad’s disasters under the rug.

Tallen ducked into his office long enough to switch into dress whites, and made it to the main hatch with two minutes to spare.

The gig warped in, docked itself, the air locks cycled—and a scarecrow in a captain’s uniform stepped aboard the *Duncan*. Tallen tried not to do a double-take as he saw his new commanding officer for the first time. Tall, very young, gaunt, emaciated, with something about him suggesting a sudden, recent loss. This was a man who had been hurt, badly injured somehow, and not yet completely recovered. The man’s face was still youthful—but there was something very old in his boyish eyes. His brand-new naval uniform fit him, but he seemed not to fit the uniform. That much Tallen understood: the man had been in the Guard until not so long ago.

“*Duncan* on board!” the lead sideboy announced, and Allison Spencer was piped aboard in the old, old, ceremony lost in the mists of time, back when navies sailed the blue oceans of water, and the sky and the stars were mere aids to navigation. Spencer came aboard and saluted everything he was supposed to salute, moving a bit mechanically, with the air of a man who doesn’t quite feel he’s earned the honors he was being accorded.

Tallen knew the captain had brought along a “personal assistant,” honoring another age-old tradition, and was surprised to see that she did follow him off the gig.

Tallen was pleasantly surprised. At least Captain Spencer knew that courtesans had no place in military protocol. It wasn’t much to make a first impression with, just a suggestion that Spencer had just a hint of decorum, but maybe the horses wouldn’t get quite so frightened this time out.

Tallen stepped forward and saluted his new superior. “Lieutenant Commander Tallen Deyi, commanding, Sir. Welcome aboard.”

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