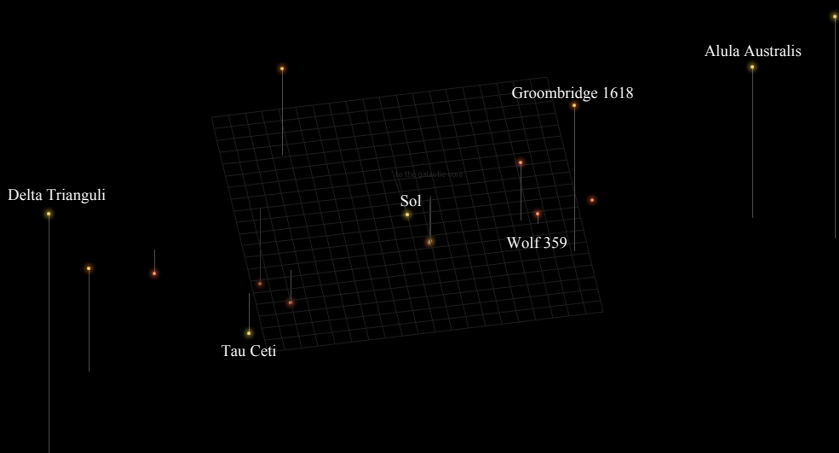


All Shall Go to Wrack



Book 1 of The Laughing Lip

By

Gregory P. Lee

The Laughing Lip

All Shall Go to Wrack

Gregory P. Lee



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The events described are imaginary,
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Books by Gregory P. Lee

Le Tour de Pudge: Lance Need Not Apply

Woods of Memory

Getting Through Your Massachusetts Divorce or Paternity Case
(Revised Edition)

Coming in Spring, 2011:

The Laughing Lip: Demand the Debt That's Due

Credits and Acknowledgements

Fran V. Hutton Lee, my wife, encouraged me to write and publish this beast of fiction. She has also suffered through the writing process and its frequent interruptions by such silliness as my day job.

My two sons, Brendan and Ceallach, read an early version of the boarding action. At that time, a very different story was planned. Their encouragement helped me get further and write the story that emerged. Brendan and his wife, Jayme, further encouraged me, though Jayme speaks critically of my excessively liberally overflowing use of modifiers. My daughter, Rebecca, also gets a nod. Another first reader was Karen Gehm. Rob Eaglestone is responsible for significant typo resolution.

Marc Miller and all of those who ever worked on or played the Traveller® Role Playing Game helped in ways I can't fully write out in the space allotted. The kernals of Cuchulain "Murphy" O'Meath, B. P. Avinashini, and Urwah Grunon began as non-player characters IMTU ("in my Traveller® universe") in the early 1980's. I still have the original "little black books" to prove it. The characters and assumptions have changed and grown, but I cannot deny a passing resemblance to a short, extro-

verted Irish nuisance-at-large, his taller, then-Scandinavian wife, and a pair (then) of extra-tall Marines available to pull the characters out of unwise firefights.

A vast number of Internet resources have also made this novel possible, written the way I wanted to write. I wanted real stars and consistent assumptions, not “Matter doesn’t matter” nor “Let’s plunk a star *here* for convenience.” “Flat” space was unacceptable. Solstation.com and the associated program “ChView” assisted substantially in defining the space I would use. This also means that author C. H. Cherryh gets a nod, because she got some geeks interested enough to make such data accessible to non-mathematicals like myself. Other programs and resources were also consulted to cross-check and get additional information.

The cover art was designed using Krystian Majewski’s three-dimensional star map located at <http://kisd.de/~krystian/starmap>. His kind permission to adapt the program for my purposes is deeply appreciated.

Finally, I would be a horrific ingrate if I failed to acknowledge all human mythology, literature, and history. In my inept way, I have tried to show that history repeats itself, because we remain human. I would be a particular ingrate if I failed to acknowledge Yeats’ “The Green Helmet,” my first introduction to Cuchulain of Muirthmne.

DEDICATION

To the memory of Harry Lennox Lee

Chapter 1

January 10, 2390 (Five Years Ago) – Vicinity of Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

The carrier loomed ahead. Lt. B. P. Avinashini keyed comm, brushed a single stray hair back. “*Hibernia*, Gandiva-H23. On approach for docking. Dockside, advise.” The pilot made a slight correction in vector.

“Gandiva-H23, pylon 18 is clear for you. Uplink for approach control.”

“Uplink set.” Avi keyed the passwords. “Approach control ceded to flight deck.” She glanced over the displays, confirmed that all weapons were locked down, the main drives idling. The Gandiva-class fighter was ready to dock.

She keyed for visual. Cameras on the forward hull clarified the visual ahead: *Hibernia*’s massive cylindrical hull, its hyper-drive generators and docking probes branching off the trunk. All but eleven of the forty-eight docking probes were currently empty.

The carrier was not at all sleek. Sleek was reserved for boats like the Gandivas, long needles suited for both atmospheric and space operations. With its full complement of Gandivas and smaller craft, *Hibernia* was as formidable as any single sphere the zhīzhū had set against Fleet. Her task was simple: bring the

Gandivas to the fight. Powerful computers, powerful weapons, and more than enough power to boost acceleration gave the Gandivas a significant advantage in combat.

No matter what the Jin Jun naysayers argued, the spidery zhīzhū would be foolish to challenge Fleet over Groombridge 1618 II. This planet, harsh and barely habitable, was reserved for humans. The zhīzhū marker had orbited for decades with no sign of a nest. A vacant claim was no claim at all.

Fleet had sent the task force to reinforce that message. The presence of a carrier, her escorts, and her heavy fighters was a message the zhīzhū could and would heed. If the zhīzhū chose to fight, they would lose. Pilots like Avi would see to that.

The zhīzhū seemed to have gotten the point. They had not sent a single scout-sphere skidding through the system in over two months. They sent regular forays through the longer-populated Wolf-359. The mission assessments appeared to be correct, Avi reflected: Fleet's primary base on this side of Sol was more likely to be attacked than this new outpost.

Her Gandiva sidled itself up to the docking pylon. Whirring motors and the snap-click of clamps announced the seals before the light went green and the computer put a message on the main display. Avi double-checked, then shut down the main drives. Gandiva-H23 was again cargo.

She worked through her checklist quickly, but with all proper attention to detail. As she did, she heard someone from the deck crew coming down through the docking pylon. Others would follow, supervising maintenance and weapons checks. There was nothing to reload; patrol had been quiet.

The computer agreed that shut-down was complete. With a whirr and a click, the memory core slid out from its slot. Avi retrieved the lock-box from the mesh to the right of her seat and inserted the core. That done, she loosed her harness and squeezed around her seat into the rear cylinder of the compartment. She passed through the small sleeping area provided for long patrols, glad that she would have a night in her own bunk. The airlock, two meters behind the seat, chuffed open; she ducked through. The outer hatch was already open.

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Avi pushed off into the weightless pylon. She squirmed past the maintenance tech coming down the tube and continued to Chaos Deck. Crews and bots pushed modules back and forth through the weightlessness. Hoses and equipment snaked through the air. Avi was comforted by the activity. It kept the Gandivas pushing safely.

The ensign on duty at Pilot Debriefing greeted her with a proper salute. She returned the gesture. He looked a little long at her; Avi hid her annoyance. He was yet another American Euro who had a crush, for reasons she could not understand. She was not a spectacular beauty, like some of the girls raised in Bangalore. She did not attempt to live within Euro standards of beauty – she did not tweeze away every bit of hair, shave what needed no shaving, paste her face with make-up. On and off duty, she was herself and no one else.

Why did the Americans and other Caucasian Euros insist on infatuation? Why did they seek her out, argue against her insistence that she would eventually marry a Hindu at the very least, most likely one of her own caste? Why did they chase her because she was somehow “exotic?”

Why was she pleased that some questioned her sincerity and continued to pursue?

No matter; she was here to keep humanity safe, not to find a husband. She had tried romance outside her culture without success. She was by no means prepared to accept the Admiral’s preferred choice of Ramachandra, but she understood that a proper marriage would best be made with her parents’ assistance.

Avi handed the too-young Ensign the lock-box, thumbed the log, and let him salute her out of the small compartment, back onto the main deck.

Weaving her way through the confusion, she pulled her way to the lock-bank. She slid up into a cylindrical personnel lock, sealed the lower hatch, opened the hatch. She stepped out into the artificial gravity field. It took only a moment to adjust to bearing weight vertically, then stride down the corridor toward pilot quarters.

She came quickly to her own cabin. As soon as the door was

locked shut behind her, she stripped out of the light piloting vacc-suit. *Hibernia's* stale air felt almost fresh through the thin layer of ship-suit remaining. She pulled down her seat and sat at her terminal, scanning for orders, letters, other communications.

Avi passed by the letter from the Admiral, looked in vain for a letter from the Parent. There was none to be found. She contained her disappointment.

There would be time to read the Admiral's letter later. It would most likely again urge her to accept Ramachandra as a potential husband. She would once again refuse.

A scheduling note appeared on the display. She was once again urged to report to the Officer's Mess for a Humanitas service. She deleted the message efficiently, as she always did. The proper gods looked over her. She preferred the old gods, despite their inability to match Humanitas in conjuring promotions out of vacuum. She had reached her present rank less rapidly than she might have. Donal MacPherson already commanded an octet on *Sinai*; he attended services. In his occasional private letters, though, he admitted his discomfort with the necessity.

Nothing else demanded her attention. Avi gathered her showering necessities. She left her cabin, winding down the narrow corridors to the plumbing cluster. Choosing the first shower, she entered the changing cube, closed and locked the door behind her.

Avi let down her guard, put aside disciplined severity. The iffy system recalled her cleansing preferences and sought her assent. Avi tapped the green square on the touch screen. Steam poured out of the shower head into shower cube, rapidly humidifying the room to a near-tropical state.

She pulled off her shipsuit and undergarments, rolled them for cleaning and set them down. The steam wafted against her skin, insinuated itself into the pores. She freed her black hair, put the ties on a shelf, and stepped into the shower stall.

The water jets kicked on. Avi stood with head bowed, hot water streaming down her hair and back. Her muscles relaxed. She remained still for long minutes, almost meditating, before finally taking up the soap. Avi washed vigorously, ridding her-

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self of several days' sweat and grime.

A prolonged, cooling rinse brought her to final relaxation. Avi shut off the shower and went back to the changing cubical. She dried, pulled on her clean shipsuit, and pulled together her personal kit.

January 10, 2390 (Five Years Ago) – O'Sullivan Settlement, Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

The air was thin, the vegetation reddish. Most of the animal life here was fairly simple – insects and slugs. So the eggheads said. This world wouldn't be really Earth-like for a century at least, and that would require a great deal of engineering. Jannah's domes and tunnels, filled with lush greens from Earth, were far more natural and normal, especially to the tall, dark marine.

But then, Urwah Grunon had been raised in Wolf-359's Jannah asteroid cluster. He'd found the deep blue sky of Earth disturbing, the first time he had seen it.

Urwah strode up to the Sergeant. "Sergeant."

Sergeant Wacjkowsky looked up into Urwah Grunon's faceplate. "You're too damned tall, you know that? You cost the Corps a hell of a lot to feed and clothe."

"Aye, Sergeant." His height and bulk required personalized attention in the armoring department, though he was by no means the only 191-centimeter marine. His older brother Jibral, for one, was two centimeters taller. Good genes and good nutrition were standard issue in Jannah.

"So report, Urk. How's it going?" The sergeant seemed irritable, not her usual approach.

"All in place, Whack. The shelters are tight, and the bunks are together."

"Good job, Corporal. Your squad's first again. How's Knacker's squad doing on the mess dome?"

Urk shook his head slightly. "If the Lieutenant's guts are growling, we're all in for extra push-ups."

“We’re in for them.” Whack looked up at the pink sky. “Need to move Knacker the hell out. She’s a spreadsheet-filler, not a field grunt.”

“She’s trying, Whack. Her squad doesn’t listen well. Swap us a week. They’ll decide to work harder for her after a taste.”

“Maybe. More likely, they’ll all want you to stick. We have any reports overdue right now?”

“Brassholes always want a pile of stats. She’ll know they’re not really urgent, though. Worse than telling her face-to-face that she’s not pulling her weight. Straight talk.”

Whack tightened her lips. “You’re going to be a sergeant too damned quick, you keep thinking like that.”

“I’m staying where I am, Whack. Just enough responsibility to write home about.” He paused, looked around. “If mess isn’t ready, it’s time to write home.”

“False laziness, false modesty. Worse than Jin Jun Bullshit.”

Urk chuckled. Whack hardened her face. “Get your marines on the mess dome, and then move them to the comm dome.” She keyed her channel on a wrist tablet. “Knacker, Urk’s on his way. Don’t let him big-brother you too much, but pay attention. Got it?”

Knacker sounded relieved, rather than annoyed. “Aye, sir.”

January 10, 2390 (Five Years Ago) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Fahnisht)

Fahnisht sat comfortably in the saddle as the beast loped down the wooded ridge. The itch that had plagued the base of his horn for the last several days demanded scratching. He acceded, reluctantly, fleetingly feeling the cold steel band that had long been nailed to the base. It reminded him that he had been Clanlord almost as long as he had known Kameef.

Kameef was not the name the alien gave himself. He used different words. Koo-hoo-len Ooh-Meef, he had said, many years ago. Hoo-mahn. The words were difficult to shape for the

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Horns of the Plains. The hornless white-faced, red-haired being had accepted the Horns' best effort, the shortening to Kameef..

Years ago, Kameef had walked out of the higher hills. It had been just weeks before Fahnisht had finally accepted Irthasht's waning. Had Irthasht been strong, and Fahnisht not been curious at the brash, hornless oddity, Kameef would likely have been killed right away. Instead, he had proved his willingness to be adopted, to learn, to serve as a warrior and then a Tentlord. Kameef was unlike the other hornless, pale ones hiding in the hills, peering through the floating metal balls. He might as well have come from the plains, not some far-off place above the sky.

Kameef listened to the Bards. He gazed into the Fires that spoke to the ancestors, the Fires that bound and unbound a Horn's spirit. He laughed in his odd way, served, and fought. He fought well. Though his kind were not blessed with proper skulls, he was certainly not Townfolk. He was not one who would cut away his horn, hide behind high walls, accept the protection of one clan or another. The face was albino-pale and wrongly shaped, the eyes too narrow and blue, the hair atop his head too brightly red-orange.

Despite all, Fahnisht had come to trust Kameef as well as any who had been born to the Clan. He had Fahnisht's leave to serve his other Clanlord, somewhere in the dark stars, and he often left to do so. Indeed, his absences had grown longer over the seasons. Nonetheless, Kameef was Fahnisht's most valued Tentlord. He fought hard and well. He laughed well, told stories, served as required. Kameef's soul was one with the soul in the Fire.

Klysira, Fahnisht's own Firekeeper, had pointed out some of the unmated younger females who would be willing to become Kameef's own Firekeeper, despite Kameef's strangeness. Fahnisht would raise the question to Kameef again when they reached the Standing Stones. It might not be a full mating; Kameef claimed inability to sire a child with a Horn. Nonetheless, an unmated Tentlord was more an oddity than a childless one. A Firekeeper would draw Kameef closer to the clan. It might even keep him here from one season to the next.

Pelest, himself newly and finally a Tentlord, spurred his

beast to a faster clip, brought himself up beside Fahnisht. "The detour will delay us, Clanlord. We should rejoin the Clan."

"We will only be a few hours delayed," Fahnisht responded. "We are close enough to Town Lyrt to pay respects."

"We paid respects ten days ago," Pelest responded.

"Lyrt makes our swords, Pelest. She grants tithe without complaint. She is worthy of our time when we are close."

"Town Hortensk gave us more than its tithe," Pelest insisted. "Hortensk has not been given the same high courtesy."

Fahnisht looked straight ahead. "You are eager to rein my beast for me, Pelest. Do you have the blood debt and experience to put my body to the Pyre?"

Pelest paused. "Challenge was not my intent."

"You have blood already gathered, I know, Pelest. Remember that you came to us from a Town. You still have much to prove, and much to learn. You are already an exception – from hornless Townfolk to Tentlord." He moved his head to indicate Kameef, still behind them. "Kameef also came from outside, Pelest."

"I know that well," Pelest replied.

"Yes, you do." Kameef had taken first blood from Pelest himself. Some days, Pelest admired Kameef. On other days, rivalry deepened into resentment. For all of that, when it was raised, Kameef simply made the human gesture of shoulders, gave the human smile, left it alone. "He has much more blood debt than you, and has not yet challenged."

"He might himself die quickly did he challenge." Pelest pulled at his beast's skin-flaps. It shook its head, snorted, but slowed pace a little. Fahnisht kneed his beast gently; the beast obeyed and pulled ahead. Pelest eventually fell in behind Kameef.

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January 11, 2390 (Five Years Ago) – Vicinity of Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

The ship's gym was as well equipped as any base facility. *Hibernia* was more spacious than most Fleet vessels. Ships-of-the-line had improved since the Admiral's days in space. Defending Jannah and pushing out to Ross 128 had occurred in cramped quarters.

Avi went to an individual cycling pod and keyed in her preferences. The white sphere's hatch slid open. The bicycle had already configured itself to the traditional racing style she preferred. She took hold of the downbars, swung her right leg over the rear, clicked her cleat into the pedal. The hatch closed.

The temperature inside the pod quickly rose to a dry thirty-five degrees, hot summer. The preserved pre-Pandemic highways and reddish rock of Utah appeared around her as she pushed off, clicking the left cleat into the pedal. The animation began, allowing her to follow the old highways used for initial training in Fleet's pilot school. She knew the highways well.

Once her muscles were warmed up and loose, she began the ascent to Soldier Summit. Video, gravitic generators and compensators, and simple air flow created the illusion of movement. The projection showed the mountains and valleys as she moved up the cuts, riding parallel to the even older train rails. The Americans had resurged in their use of ground-based mass transit during and after the Pandemics, long before Fleet had brought its pilot training to Utah.

In under two hours, she climbed to the high point, saw the scrub vegetation all around. The simulation chose high, fluffy clouds. The scenery was simply preparation for the next stage of the ride.

Avi pedaled forward into the rapid descent between the canyon walls. She pushed as hard as she could, barely keeping the bicycle under control. The rock walls rose high to either side. The computer would put random obstacles in her way as she pushed the descent. She held the bars tight, feeling the illusion of speed as she peered ahead.

The pavement was old, rough, damaged by weather and rock-slides. Avi dodged frost heaves and potholes, feathering the brakes and pedaling as she avoided each obstacle. She sped around a curve. A boulder had come down, smashed through the highway surface. She tried to avoid it, could not, felt her shoulders tense for the inevitable collision.

The bicycle passed through, with just a gravitic ripple of a suggestion that she should have been catapulted over the bars to crash down, slide and break against the pavement. Avi exhaled, stopped pedaling. Artificial gravity would bring her in to the stopping point, if she decided to complete the ride.

Instead, she keyed the reset, found herself midway up the ascent to Soldier's Summit. As she pedaled the miles to the crest, she increased the difficulty level. She would not let herself take such a mistake easily, as other pilots might. Reaction time was the key to flying the Gandivas, even in the expansive three dimensions of space.

Avi pedaled hard as the simulation allowed her to again descend into the canyon.

January 11, 2390 (Five Years Ago) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV) (Murphy)

The sun was hot on his bare arms and neck, but a cool breeze dissipated the heat. The scents were sweet, not those of a ship in space, or the ancient closeness of the Forbidden City. Most of Murphy reveled in the return to Shānhé-Wòtu, the freedom of riding with Fahnisht and the Clan.

Murphy O'Meath's duties here, though, kept him from being part of the teams finally more closely observing the radially symmetrical zhīzhū. The First Jin Jun, Zhaohui, had refused to clear him for *Hillary's* observation mission to Alula Australis. She had refused all logic. She knew he was the Jin Jun's best linguist, the most likely to break through zhīzhū communication abstinence, but kept him away.

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She had refused his more personal persuasion as well. She'd enjoyed the hours in her private chambers as much as always, but had not budged. She had sent him back here to continue building ties with the biped Cetians. Other Jin Jun could be allowed to find places within the Clans now. Murphy itched for a chance to tackle zhīzhū communication in a direct way.

For that matter, he could be observing Fleet, almost as incomprehensible to the Jin Jun. The Cetian Horns had been easy to understand, in comparison. For all that they were human and citizens, Fleet had insisted on planting a new colony on a world long claimed by the zhīzhū. The lack of an actual zhīzhū presence was Fleet's "strong" argument. Possession would be nine-tenths, the admiralty had insisted. "Boots on the ground." Settlers.

Human possession was supposed to make the difference on a barely habitable rock. The admiralty insisted that the zhīzhū would not contest a clear human presence. The zhīzhū had come to respect human weapons and tactics. Volunteer colonists, most of them from that foolish growing Humanitas Church, were already erecting domes and huts. In the admiralty's delusional thinking, the zhīzhū would back away, as they had "backed away" from Jannah and Ross 128. The admiralty considered a zhīzhū orbital marker to be a mere hope.

Fleet's admiralty was too damned full itself to comprehend that the zhīzhū didn't *hope*. They set plans, mostly to expand, and they seemed unwilling to alter a set course. They could not help but colonize the same way they bounced out of hyperspace: high-vector, ready to fire off their mass drivers, unwilling to vector around so much as a dust spec.

The zhīzhū had conceded once – only once – over Jannah. If that could be called "concession." Fleet had fought long and hard there in the colony's early days. For the zhīzhū, "concession" included occasional scouting forays through the system. The projectiles they occasionally still fired at the Jannah domes during these "friendly visits" might be no more than neighborly greetings.

The zhīzhū had by no means conceded Ross-128. Fleet's

toehold remained precarious. Nukes set a high price for hit-and-run attacks by spheres firing mere mass-projectiles. The zhīzhū, though, were merely biding their time over a stepping-stone system. They would take Ross 128 back any time the Fleet outpost showed a weakness.

Or if the zhīzhū ever finally decided to use nukes and heavy energy weapons.

Why the hell had Parliament voted to allow Fleet and its Humanitas colonists to proceed to Groombridge? Sure, Commons was full of Manifesters — the damnable Manifest Destiny Party was trouble. Lords was full of snot-nosed aristocrats like his sister, who wouldn't mind opening a new source of fiefdoms. Fleet thought it could stretch itself thin and still be effective.

Why hadn't the House of Knights used its veto? The Imperial Family had the votes in Knights. Had Zhaohui for once miscalculated, or was losing that vote part of her larger chess game? Did Zhaohui think she knew something about the zhīzhū that Murphy didn't know? If she did, she had hidden it so deep in her computers even he couldn't dig it out.

Why the *hell* was he back on Shānhé-Wòtu, without a ship under his control, when a new and ugly bit of zhīzhū contact was almost certainly looming at Groombridge?

Murphy knew he could learn to communicate with the zhīzhū. He had learned to do so with the Horns, in one of the few ways that really worked: immersion. It would be harder to manage that with the zhīzhū, but there was always a chance of finding a common ground. Communication was essential to resolving the territorial conflict between humanity and zhīzhū.

On the other hand, conflict would spur communication, and conflict at Groombridge was certain. Zhaohui should have let him go to Groombridge. He could be there, in deep space, monitoring Fleet, keeping a lookout for the zhīzhū. Better yet, she could have put him on *Hillary*, the first Listening Post, on its cometary path inbound to Alula Australis.

He loved coming back to the Clan, but someone with some damned sense had to be in the vicinity of Alula Australis and Groombridge when all hell broke loose. The little bit he'd man-

aged to slide by Zhaohui wasn't nearly enough.

Fahnisht's call brought him back to the surface of Shānhé-Wòtu.

Murphy kneed the beast slightly, tugged the skin-flaps on its neck. It was enough like a horse for human or Horn to ride, despite the horn growing out of its skull. It picked up the pace, cantering to fall in beside the Clanlord.

Fahnisht, slightly taller than O'Meath even before his own mainhorn took over, looked intently ahead. "We will pass close to Lyrt on this path, Kameef."

"I know that, milord," Murphy responded. "I have learned the paths well."

Fahnisht signified his sardonic amusement. "You know the paths from above. Even you study through the metal eyes and your devices. You do not ride a lifetime to know the Clan's circles."

Murphy shrugged, a gesture he knew Fahnisht had come to understand. "I still prefer your circles."

"You return when it suits you, or your other Clanlord. You are not truly of the Clan."

"Those are not your words," Murphy responded. "You and I know each other too well. You repeat words from my brother-at-arms Pelest."

Fahnisht displayed indulgent amusement for a moment, then sobered. "Pelest is not the only who would say such, Kameef. Some believe I give you too much, for too little in return."

Murphy considered carefully, analyzing the phrasing in Clan Fahnisht's particular dialect. Fahnisht was leading to some larger topic. "What more may I offer?"

Fahnisht made a facial expression that was the Horn equivalent of a human pursing lips. "No other warrior has ever been made Tentlord without a Keeper to tend his fires and sing his deeds to the Bards, Kameef. More than one worthy fighter your junior has already given the Clan its future."

Murphy knew better than to give way to full laughter. Fahnisht had learned little human language, but he had come to know human emotions, at least O'Meath's. Fahnisht might well

be offended by laughter, even if he understood the deeper emotions hiding behind it. Murphy allowed himself a contained, wry expression. "The young Keepers do not want a sterile, Hornless oddity to warm their bedding, milord."

"Klysira says otherwise. And, Kameef, a Tentlord who cannot seed the womb accepts the honor of assistance from his peers. A father imparts his experience more than his face."

How true was that? Murphy tried to recall a Horn history focused on the betrayal of casual bastardy. None came to mind. Chengen would be interested in that tidbit.

Bridget O'Meath, Lady Ren-Ma, would think it poetic justice for her bastard half-brother to live as an alien's cuckold. She had never forgiven their father's relationship with Dechtire, nor his legal recognition of their son. Bridget's own mother's honor and the rules of the Church tended to overwhelm her rationality.

On the other hand, Bridget Lady Ren-Ma would be horrified to have a Horn "savage" presented at Court as Murphy's lawful wife. It would be almost worth it to agree, just to see Bridget's face.

Tweaking Bridget wasn't the main point, though. Murphy understood what Fahnisht wanted: a tighter connection. He wanted closer ties between the "Hornless Albino Tentlord" and the Clan. Fahnisht wanted more blood-debt. There could be little doubt that a proposed mate would be related to Fahnisht, Klysira, or both. Fahnisht would benefit in the longer term.

For that matter, Zhaohui had also tried to get him married off recently. Who she couldn't own legally, she would own another way. Everyone seemed to be after him for that, recently.

Fahnisht brought him back to the moment. "Tell me, Kameef, how you would think of this."

"You know that Zhaohui forbids it," Murphy said.

"She is not your mate."

"She's my first Clanlord," Murphy reminded.

"You disobeyed her to know us better. If you were prepared to agree, you would disobey her now." Fahnisht's expression displayed his certainty in the statement.

"Perhaps, Fahnisht." Murphy shifted in his own saddle.

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“Fahnisht, I am more like the Bards. I am free to roam.”

Fahnisht laughed. “You are no Bard, Kameef, free to walk all paths through all circles. You are a warrior for Bards to sing. A warrior may stray, may even serve Clan allies, but is always *of* a Clan.”

“As you say, Milord. Still, I am not certain.” Murphy’s handheld chirped quietly via his earpiece implant. He keyed via the neural link. Floaters were reporting unusual movement not far ahead. He keyed again to expand the information, tap into the particular floaters’ data streams. The neural heads-up projected its image directly along his optical nerves. He saw an aerial view of a mounted troop of Horn warriors in blue-green leathers – eight to ten of them. They were moving from their own paths toward Town Lyr.

“Invaders, Milord.” Murphy pulled out the handheld, passed it over to his Clanlord. “Lanna’s. A raiding party.” He keyed off the neural display.

Fahnisht studied the handheld’s external display for a moment, then passed it back. “Lanna’s. He has been jealous of Lyr’s metal for a long time. The Hornless in the fields will not see these in time. We cannot be there in time to warn them. There will be deaths.”

Was emotion hidden in Fahnisht’s voice, or did Murphy merely wish that? One of Fahnisht’s brightest daughters had been given over to Lyr. Born with an arm that never grew properly, she could not bear a blade – not even a Firekeeper’s knife. The Bards had refused her as well; both arms were needed to properly convey a history. Town life had been the only choice for Wesht.

Pelest had caught the change in tone. He sped his beast up. “Milord?”

Fahnisht gestured. “Ride hard. Muster half the Tentlords and warriors, and ride hard back to Lyr. Kameef and I will ride to Lyr to see what may be done.”

“How many are there?”

“Ten, perhaps more. Riding is now! Go!”

Pelest looked disappointed. He would not have the chance to

ride to certain death against a superior force. Nonetheless, he wheeled his beast and gave it firm directions through skin flaps and ribs. The beast snorted, complained, and shot off through the trees.

Murphy smiled grimly. He understood Pelest's disappointment. None of the damned floaters had speakers or other output, or he would be glad to send a message to the Clan that way, keep Pelest with them. Pelest was good with a sword. He would have improved the odds.

Fahnisht set his beast into a trot. Murphy followed, one hand in the skin flaps, the other sliding the handheld back. Murphy again keyed for his display, blinked at the optic nerve stimulator's annoying itch at the back of his eyeballs.

Murphy closed his eyes and hunched low, trusting the beast to follow Fahnisht's own while its rider skipped through views from the floaters that had discovered the invaders. Two against ten would need all the advantage the bots could provide.

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(Fahnisht)

The beast galloped unevenly, exhausted from the hard push of the last mile. It keened in pain – but also in anger. It could smell the invaders' beasts. Its flanks trembled, ready to give up. Fahnisht suspected that fires would be lit in its honor after this battle, and for O'Meath's beast.

He and Kameef would likely be sung around the same flames.

They burst onto the cultivated fields surrounding the town. Hornless Townfolk scattered as the beasts stamped through their crops. Kameef's voice rose above the tumult. "Lanna comes! Get into the city! Warn Lyr! Lanna comes!"

Town Lyr was ahead, its walls high enough to protect those inside. The Hornless field workers, male and female both, began running toward the nearest gate. Fahnisht scanned them, looking

for one youth.

He cursed himself for the lapse. She was Hornless now, no longer of the Clans. What mattered was the Town itself, its stores of metal, the blood between the Clan and its Hornless. He pulled hard on the skin flaps, urging the beast to a last burst of speed. They had to get around and beyond the Town to meet Lanna's warriors.

Kameef, consulting his devices, had persuaded him to ride to the south of the Town, hoping to take advantage of the slightly higher lay. The beasts strained and groaned through the fields. Kameef was right to give his Clanlord every advantage, though some small part wondered if the information reduced the glory.

Fahnisht heard the distant pounding of Lanna's beasts, bent on getting to Lyrt before those inside could be warned. They were younger warriors, seeking to collect reputation and blood debt. Attacking a Town under Fahnisht's protection, in Fahnisht's own circles, would boost them with Lanna.

The beast wheeled around the corner, burst into the open road. Fahnisht pulled the skin flaps, slowed his mount. Field hands were already running toward him, chased by mounted warriors in blue-green leathers. Swords slashed out, hacking at the fleeing Hornless.

He saw the now-Hornless child he had brought here only a few seasons ago. She ran with her familiar uneven gait, one leg less supple than the other. One of Lanna's warriors, sword ready, bore down on her. The screaming growl erupting from Fahnisht's throat was beyond his control, beyond honor. She was no part of Clan Fahnisht, but his anger erupted as if she was.

Kameef's beast burst out of the field between Fahnisht and Lanna's troop, careened and stumbled. The Tentlord pulled hard on its skin flaps. His mount regained its footing as it scrambled, head down, its curved horn angling for its opponent's throat.

Kameef was suddenly up on the beast's back, one hand holding tight to the skin flaps, the other swinging his sword. His blade bit into the enemy's own sword-arm. The enemy sword spun away.

Fahnisht lost sight of O'Meath as he urged his own mount

forward. He sliced high at the next enemy in line as the warriors behind scattered and went to either side, beasts rearing and screaming. His own target's head spun off and away into the grass.

Fahnisht's beast stumbled again, collapsed. The Clanlord jumped off, landing on his feet and running. He sliced at an enemy rider bearing a Tentlord's hornband. The rider moved to defend. Fahnisht's sword caught the enemy in the side. The Clan Lanna tentlord fell as his beast reared and circled. The beast trampled her former rider as Fahnisht scurried to the side, sought another enemy warrior.

He long since lost track of Wesht as she ran into the cultivated field.

The rest of the battle was a blur. Fahnisht fought hard, skillfully, accounting for another warrior. He caught glimpses of the enraged Kameef swinging and slashing. The alien face had contorted with human anger. Kameef's blade took four more of the remaining warriors. Only one of Clan Lanna's men broke and turned his beast.

Kameef started to chase the survivor on foot, cursing in his alien words as the beast took its rider out of his range. Fahnisht joined, reminding the warrior that his comrades had at least stayed to die honorably. His breathing slowly came under control. He slowed.

Kameef continued the chase until the beast was well away. he stood for several moments more, shouting ineffectively. Finally he seemed to come back to reality. He turned, coming back, somehow reduced.

The Clanlord ignored his own pain from a minor wound, ignored the blood of Lanna's Horns staining his own leathers. "Kameef," he called in a raw whisper. "Wesht?" Kameef might not shame him in his concern, as a true Horn would.

"I saw her get to the gate," his albino Tentlord responded. His own voice was strained. "She's safe."

Fahnisht felt relief, then deeper shame. Try as he might, he could never completely consider his firstborn dead. She had merely gone to Lyrt. To Kameef, this was not weakness to be

hidden.

“More of Lanna’s men may come to die,” Fahnisht pointed out. The satisfaction grew inside. “We will take them all with us to the pyre. Already, the Bards have a deed to sing.”

“You will be sung long,” Kameef agreed with that human mouth-shape that indicated amused joy.

“You more so, Kameef.” He looked at the oddly malformed head, the bright red hair that did not belong. “You are my finest warrior, my Tentlord of Tentlords. Long may we feast together.”

“Long may we feast.”

Kameef settled in for the necessary watching, sword ready. Fahnisht turned to face the walls of Town Lyrt. “Drink for two warriors and their mounts!” he shouted out. “Lyrt, send out a meal that we may keep watch.” He went to his beast, still panting on the ground. The mare would recover, he saw, though she had been ridden too hard. He gave it the comfort he would be unable to show to Wesht.

Chapter 2

January 19, 2390 (Five Years Ago) – Vicinity of Groombridge
1618 II (Avinashini)

“Set return course in one hour,” the Gandiva’s computer reminded Avi. She scanned her controls and readings. Her relief on deep patrol had been late in launching, computers glitched. Avi was overdue for her return to *Hibernia*. She did not mind being out here, though, doing her job.

As expected, there had been nothing to see. The zhīzhū were respecting the human presence.

A small bubble of gravity appeared on the sensors, fading away almost before it registered. By the bubble’s size, something small and probably unmanned had just squeezed out of hyperspace. It fit the pattern of a messenger torpedo.

So far as anyone knew, the zhīzhū made no use of messengers or other automated interstellar probes of any kind. They seemed insistent on presence for every traverse of hyperspace. The exobiologists had developed a theory that hyperspace was so pleasurable to the zhīzhū that they would not leave it to a computer alone.

That might well be foolishness, or might be true. The grav-ripple pattern posed a riddle: it suggested that the torpedo had come from Alula Australis. Zhīzhū space.

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She had never heard even a rumor that Fleet had penetrated into zhīzhū space. If the Jin Jun had done so, they certainly would not advise Fleet. The Jin Jun would not tell Fleet of any new mess until well after it was created.

Was there a new species to contend with, or was this a human messenger? No one in Fleet would be surprised if the Jin Jun were further out than they claimed to be, still foolishly looking for ways to speak with the brain-suckers. They might send a messenger here.

Her ROEs were clear. She was to stay “dark,” using passive sensors only. Avi keyed the sensor array, focusing toward the bubble’s coordinates, looking for the first hint of EM signal.

It came reasonably quickly: a data stream. The codes were decidedly human, Imperial. Security and ID cods checked. It was a Jin Jun unit.

It was genuine, unless the zhīzhū were more subtly tricky than anyone had suggested. The zhīzhū certainly were intelligent enough to steal, copy and work out human codes. If anything, they were far more computer-able than humans. If this was some sort of attempt to break into her system, providing it with a responsive code would give it ample opportunity.

Fortunately, the zhīzhū did not tend toward subtle tricks.

The messenger’s surface-level files were not heavily ciphered. Her own display showed that her security clearance codes were sufficient to open them. They were almost begging to be opened.

Nav confirmed that she was a good fifteen minutes away from receiving instructions from the main body of the Fleet. She was out here, on her own, on deep patrol, and an improbable messenger was begging. She might well be opening her own systems to a trap.

Avi keyed in her codes, added her vocal key.

The main file decoded itself, became a simple head-shot video. The face of a Mediterranean Euro peered into the comm cam.

“Xiaros, Lead Jin Jun, Cruiser *Hillary*, in cometary orbit of Alula Australis. We’re stationed here, doing a language study.”

Avi allowed a scowl; no one was here to see her. The Jin Jun were not likely to be merely listening to chitter.

“The zhīzhū are dispatching a massive task force to Groombridge 1618. Massive. There are at least two carrier groups, four to six major spheres each. At least fifty escorts, many smaller. My navigator says this torpedo will beat them there by at best three hours. Repeat, three hours. Key up the sensor readings files for specifics on their jump patterns. Repeat again, you have at best three hours. Assuming that this torpedo comes in close to you, you may be able to get a bead on their entry point.”

The Jin Jun paused. “We’re defenseless. Not refueled yet. We’re hiding on a comet head, and our damned ice miner failed. A zhīzhū destroyer is bearing on us. We estimate mass-driver range in thirty-six minutes. We’ll be dead long before this gets to you.

“Final reports and data files are included for delivery to Lady Zhaohui, First Jin Jun. These are the Emperor’s Own Business, not for decoding, not for interference. Confirmation encrypted in the deep codes. A separate messenger is also carrying a copy via another route.”

Suddenly, the man looked weary. “Final messages to family are included. Please forward them at – at Fleet’s convenience.” He paused, glowered, went from weariness to anger. “And tell that bastard O’Meath – *thanks*. Hell, *you* thank the disobedient son-of-a-bitch, too, if you get out alive. The son of a bitch is saving *Fleet* lives, not ours.

“Xiaros, Lead Jin Jun, *Hillary*, message ends.” The display faded out.

Avi pulled up the data file with the gravitic sensor scans. If this was not a zhīzhū trick, the gravitic ripple patterns recorded days ago at Alula Australis were clear. An overwhelming force of zhīzhū spheres was on its way. It would have taken days, perhaps weeks, to gather all of the ships from other parts of zhīzhū space.

Why had the Jin Jun waited so long to break silence? This torpedo should have come far sooner. If they saw this force gath-

ering, they should have known that an attack was imminent, at Ross-128, Wolf-359, or here at Groombridge.

Avi took a breath, sobered herself before the anger raced away. She had no time to waste by speculating on Jin Jun arrogance and unconcern for Fleet's backbone of mere commoners. Keying gracefully, she diverted the data to her own navigational computer, hoping that it would be able to estimate the jump-entry point. The Gandiva's systems were rudimentary in that regard, needing no such calculations.

The Jin Jun data stream might make it to the task force on its own, but it was low-powered and omni-directional. It would be weak. Avi keyed her own comm to re-transmit the files on a full-power tight beam to punch through any interference. She added a layer of Fleet security routines over the Jin Jun codes.

That done, she coded her own message. "Gandiva H-23 to *Hibernia* and all Gandivas. I have a Jin Jun warning of an incoming zhīzhū task force. Arrival within three hours. It may be a decoy warning from the zhīzhū, or a real attack. I am correcting course to intercept. I will engage and delay any enemy units in my range. My own calculations and coordinates follow. I request that all other Gandivas on this patrol trajectory be ordered to converge."

The first rough entry calculations came up on the navigation display. If this was accurate, zhīzhū ships would be in-system sooner than the Jin Jun had estimated. She had only two hours.

No other Gandiva was closer. *Hibernia* and her escorts were too far away to be of immediate assistance.

The only good information was that her own vector was near-perfect for a head-on intercept. Avi refined the calculations, beamed them back toward *Hibernia*. Without awaiting instructions, she brought the reactors up to full power and pushed additional power into the grav-drive. After minor course adjustments, she began running checks on all of her ordnance, all of her energy weapons. Gandiva H-23 prepared itself for its first battle with zhīzhū vessels.

It would likely be the craft's last battle, as well.

With all weapons ready, all Avi could do was begin scanning

for signs of zhīzhū ships inbound. She began sweeping the passive gravitic sensors, looking for some sign of expanding bubble-ripples of gravity.

Fifteen minutes passed slowly, then another fifteen. Finally, a Fleet signal acknowledging her information caught up with her. “*Hibernia* to all Gandivas. There is no human presence at Alula Australis system. Repeat, there is no human presence at Alula Australis. The transmissions forwarded by Gandiva-H23 are presumed fraudulent, possibly a zhīzhū feint. Apart from Gandiva-H23, do *not* break your patrol or scan patterns. Gandiva-H23, continue to close on the projected entry coordinates, report, and engage at will.”

Avi frowned.

Could she have been so wrong? Was there something in the signal she had not seen that marked it as a fraud? Had some Jin Jun comm protocol unknown to her been lacking? Was there data on the bridge that was not shared in the pilot’s briefings? Certainly no one on the bridge was fond of the Jin Jun, but they might well have better clearance.

Smooth calmness flowed through. If she had been hasty, she had been hasty for good cause. Avi did not hesitate keying in the next coordinates to scan, and the next. She took her time, chose locks on various stars, handled her sweeps.

Almost an hour later, she found with evidence of light refracting, just slightly. A pinprick-sized gravitic bubble was forming. She ran a check on the data. All of the systems agreed.

She had caught the earliest harbinger of a hyperspace-exit. The zhīzhū were an hour earlier than the Jin Jun’s best hopes.

The computer spewed more calculations. The zhīzhū would be bursting out of hyperspace almost on top of her. Avi adjusted her thrust. She would be in a position to take ships on as they popped through the barrier into normal space, before even zhīzhū could aim and fire mass drivers. Unlike the zhīzhū, she had no compunction about using high-energy weapons.

The zhīzhū would still overwhelm her, eventually. Fifty vessels on fast approach were likely a match for *Hibernia* and her escorts. Avi keyed comm as rapidly as she could, hoping to send

Fleet enough information to make her sacrifice worthwhile. They needed to see what was happening as quickly as they could, plan additional interception points. The zhīzhū spheres would be spilling out at high acceleration, heading straight for the units in orbit.

The fighter lurched as gravitic ripples slammed against it. Zhīzhū spheres popped onto her scans, one after another bursting into normal space. Avi needed no blaring alarms to tell her that they were streaking toward her with the immense vector they somehow developed in hyperspace. They were almost on her.

The fire-control computer, struggling to prioritize, demanded commit-or-veto on multiple targets. She made decisions on intuition and opportunity. Missiles, shredder-cans, and bursts of energy streamed away.

Three – four – six spheres burst apart as they rushed headlong into her munitions. Avi overrode the nav system to one-eighty the fighter around its axis. She kicked the main drives to full power, wobbled the bow through repeated circles. The helix of fire took out three more ships passing her on the periphery. Grav-thrust from the aft snow-plowed a tunnel of safe passage through the growing debris field.

She quickly assessed her kills. All of the ships were small to mid-sized escorts. There were enough for two, perhaps three battle carriers. Larger escorts, and then the largest spheres, would streak out of hyperspace in the next few minutes, perhaps sooner.

Avi pivoted the fighter again. Every remaining rack and cannon committed and fired in sequence. She sprayed the fire over an arc as her munitions stores emptied.

Two large spheres – at least one a carrier – burst over the lip from hyperspace. Avi pointed the bow at the nearer of the two and adjusted the almost-collision course. She kicked over all spare power to the drives. G-force tugged at her face, the inertial dampers insufficient against the thrust. Avi keyed comm. “*Hibernia*, Gandiva-23, twenty-nine enemy ships incoming from my last location. Eight escorts already dead, one battle carrier probable. Preparing collision. Gandiva-23, omega communication.”

Avi locked down the final course. She shoved her hand through the flaps that protected the ejection lever against accidental use. Futile as it was to hope for rescue, the gods did not permit outright suicide. She pulled the lever.

The piloting cabin sealed and blasted free from the rest of the Gandiva, becoming an escape capsule. Small thrusters pushed. Leaving behind the inertial compensators, she felt every thrust, every yaw, every changing pitch. The cabin spun slowly, rotating to give her a view.

The zhīzhū carrier rushed in out of the blackness, slammed into the Gandiva, twisted and blew apart. Zhīzhū bodies spilled out into space. The Gandiva simply crumpled, merged, tore itself apart – no longer distinguishable from the zhīzhū wreckage.

That wreckage swept by, all too close. Avi refused to clench her fists, refused to tense up over the likelihood that some hunk of steel or zhīzhū flesh would slam through the escape capsule, hole it and her suit, empty her into space. She was already dead. She would be denied a proper cremation. Perhaps the gods would assent to guiding her soul to the next life in return for her sacrifice.

Were the gods able to come this far away from Sol?

Somehow, the largest parts of streaming junk passed by and around the capsule. The remaining zhīzhū ships continued on, passing her by. They ignored her, if they saw her capsule at all. Avi felt momentarily slighted. The zhīzhū were reputed to always taste the dead. They should want to taste a single human who had destroyed – how many spheres?

She repressed the shudder nearly elicited by the image. Unless one zhīzhū wasted energy and time, she would be left to die as her air systems failed. She would not feel a spider bend over her, probe into her body.

Nonetheless, she was now alone, so far as she could discern. No lights flashed in the expanding wreckage, no rescue beacons begged for help in zhīzhū chitter. ROEs and proper honor prevented her from herself noisily demanding rescue. The task force would soon be in the midst of an ugly battle, despite the reduction in zhīzhū ships.

The escape capsule lazily drifted and rotated. Only minimal passive sensors operated, giving her passive EM reception and short-ranged gravitic readings. There was almost nothing active available to the capsule, save for laser and radar. The console computers worked on their own, without the assistance of the more powerful mainframe now left behind.

Avi set up a passive EM sweep pattern out of the escape capsule's rotation. Based on the dead Jin Jun's message, more zhīzhū could be expected soon. She would not activate a rescue beacon, but she could try to warn of new ships incoming. She left the active EM off but ready, maintaining near-invisibility for now.

The first battle group had followed typical zhīzhū tactics. Their ships came out of hyperspace close together, with high accumulated vector. There was a theory that the zhīzhū manipulated hyperspace differently. They obtained a push on exiting. Ramachandra had discussed this with her the last time he had tried to discuss matrimony, as if that would make her more amenable.

Regardless of how they managed it, a zhīzhū attack force with its high vector could close on Fleet units before targets could be properly assessed and targets locked. Tightly coordinated, the ships would be in formation when Fleet units exiting hyperspace would still be locating each other and correcting courses.

She was out here, giving *Hibernia* and her escorts an advantage. Avi would forward any data she could. If targets could be acquired from her efforts, fewer Fleet vessels would be lost.

Avi finished the protocols. She did not expect to have to wait long.

Eleven minutes passed before the next bubble of gravity burst and rippled through local space. It was so close that she felt a wave of disorientation and nausea. The computer determined the exit coordinates with precision.

It was followed by fifteen more exits. They came out closer together than Fleet pilots would dare. The spheres swept through, vectoring into formation, releasing smaller spheres.

The gravitic barrage on her nervous system ended. Her fingers trembling, Avi keyed for the EM sweeps. Tight beams in multiple frequencies would light up the zhīzhū. *Hibernia*'s sensor drones and big dishes should pick up the signals.

The zhīzhū certainly would. She had no doubt now that one of their probe-mouths would pike through her skull to suck out brains and blood.

Avi repressed a shudder and filtered her own readings from the EM returns. She would save *Hibernia* every computing millisecond she could. She compressed the data as tightly as possible for the send, then keyed the transmission release.

The zhīzhū would now have no difficulty triangulating on her.

Avi keyed the navigation systems. The little maneuvering grav-engine powered up. It would not push far or fast. She was too far out to reach *Hibernia* alive, much less the barely habitable planet.

The zhīzhū would have to search harder for her, though. She might just get a chance to give the *Hibernia* another set of scans before she was found, or even a more direct source of information. Speed of light would still trump zhīzhū vector.

Renewed purpose energized her. Avi keyed rapidly, shutting down the survival-based assumptions of the maneuvering systems. The thrust would eat through the fuel cells, but she did not require a week's life support, nor the thrust to break orbit for a long parachute landing.

She calculated a vector that might confuse the logical processes of the zhīzhū: an angle toward the two task forces. A ten-minute boost would be optimal. She calculated it and pushed the thruster to double its design specs. All active sensors remained down. She would not see any debris on her vector without active pinging. There was no reason to both waste power and advertise her course.

Nine minutes passed uneventfully.

At nine minutes and thirteen seconds, the abused grav thruster burned out. She would make no more course changes. Power was available for other systems now. She did not revive

life support.

Avi keyed the power controls again, preparing for an extended active EM stream. *Hibernia* should have no excuse for not noticing the scan, if they had missed her earlier bursts. They should be able to read at least thirty to forty seconds' worth of data – course, direction, number of ships, even approximate size. Even if a zhīzhū fighter were near, it was probably not close enough to shut her down before she gave *Hibernia* and the rest of the task force their best hope.

She would, in essence, shine a tight spotlight at the zhīzhū ships. Lit from behind until her systems gave out, they would be visible to the task force.

Gauging the direction one more time, she keyed the sweep.

Avi sat back to meditate, prepare herself as best she could. Even if the zhīzhū made no effort to locate her, she had an hour or two at best. The capsule would get cold before she ran out of air. A death by cold would be quiet, at least.

More likely than not, a small sphere was on its way already. Its crew would capture the capsule if possible, fire on it if necessary. There would be no cleansing fire; the zhīzhū seemed firm in their insistence on using simple, non-explosive projectiles, even in space combat. They used no energy weapons, no nuclear devices.

She would nonetheless be killed. What computer the capsule had left directed itself to interpreting the EM returns. Her curiosity was largely academic at this point.

Avi checked her seals. The light vacc suit remained tight. She shifted from capsule air to her suit supply, locked down the capsule's tank to preserve it. With an eye-flick, she keyed the medical program. Her med-pac delivered drugs to calm her, slow her body's needs. She drifted into a haze, maintaining the lowest oxygen usage she could. She would survive longer, then drift gently into cold. Rebirth would await, through the grace of the Gods.

Cold alertness streamed into her brain. Her eyes opened. For a moment, she struggled to focus. Did she manage to do so, or did the heads-up alter itself for her bleary eyes?

Why was she still alive?

Something was approaching. Given the hours that had passed, it was likely a zhīzhū fighter coming back to finally mop up.

Her hands were cold, almost numb. Struggling to unbuckle her harness, she finally freed herself to reach underneath her seat. The survival pack was where it should be, waiting. She pulled it to her lap and pressed the latch, lifted the oversized lid. The pistol rested on top, its clip full.

Avi fumbled, took it out and checked the lights. The batteries were charged, as they had been when she ran her pre-flight checks. She got out of her seat and went behind to the hatch. She found her fingers trembling as she tapped the sequence – sudden rage she contained only with effort. She was glad no one would see the momentary lack of control.

The hatch blew, taking the last of the oxygen with it. B.P. Avinashini looked out on the distant stars in all their ice-cold, pinpoint perfection. With a push of cold legs, she was outside, untethered. She began a slow drift away from the capsule. That mattered little. Death was death.

She used the EM bounce from her suit's minimal sensors to orient herself. She would have to wait until the zhīzhū sphere was close enough to see before she could fire.

Two minutes.

The light projectiles from the gauss pistol would probably do no more than foul a sensor or two. On the other hand, if they hit dead-on, a zhīzhū might find himself with a bleeding power plant. Avi chanted, centering herself, slowing her breathing and smoothing away the trembling of rage.

One minute.

Even mild recoil would propel her backwards. Avi hoped that she was in the direct path of the incoming fighter. She would do the most damage if she could get off all of her shots without going into a spin.

Something crossed a star. Or, perhaps, she blinked and thought something had.

Thirty seconds. A glint of light.

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Avi focused, aimed ahead, hoped she was correct. She concentrated on her cold, almost useless hands, pressed the trigger. The stream of projectiles pushed her gently backward. Understanding that she was merely defiant flittered through her mind then back out, as the clip emptied. The momentum pushed her further from her own rescue capsule. She strained ahead, looking for the enemy to become a full shape.

The comm light flashed in her heads-up. A short-range channel demanded her attention. “Lieutenant, I have you in sights. I’m braking. Don’t shoot again, ok? You already took out my main EM array. I’m on a tricky fly-by, the vector will be tight. I’ll be looking to grab you from the belly hatch.”

Perhaps this was a last tease from the gods. “Who is this?”

“Cardinale, Gandiva-13. We were ordered in when your data came through. Fired off all my ordnance, wooshed through their formation. Good shooting – you lit them up pretty. Things are bad, but I got ordered to search. I caught your beam. Three minutes.”

Avi waited. The sort of maneuver proposed was unlikely to work, even in training. Vector was vector. They were not perfectly matched. She was oxygen-starved, her limbs cold. If she didn’t get on board the first time, she would be dead before he could match trajectories again.

The long, sleek shape of Gandiva-class fighter loomed. It was pivoting, spinning to get the hatch oriented for the best advantage. The drives were off. She saw a suited figure, half-out of the circular belly hatch. He was holding something out – ropes or rods of some kind – to extend his reach. Avi focused on the closer arm, his right, and the extension. She turned her body slightly, reached, caught the rod.

It turned out to be a line, as she had thought. She managed to close her fingers around it and hold as it followed along with her, then became taut. Her grip loosened, slipped a few millimeters as the rope pulled her up to the slightly higher velocity of the fighter. She tightened again, suddenly panicked, held with all her will. She would not have known the grip was solid by touch; only vision supplied that information.

If she had been in atmosphere, wake would have buffeted hard enough to tear apart her vacuum suit. As it was, she waited a long time for Cardinale to reel her in, hand over hand. Her frozen fingers had the will to hold, but not to climb against vector.

She arrived at the hatch. Cardinale pulled her in and sealed the hatch behind her. The internal grav field was off, and the entire cabin was depressurized as an air lock. Cardinale clipped a drug-pack to her suit's med-port, keyed some drug or another.

Avi again faded into exhaustion.

January 20, 2390 (Five Years Ago) – O'Sullivan Settlement, Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

"We're pinned. Sergeant Whack is down." Urk scanned forward, infrared cutting through the scrubby growth and dawn fog. "Three are moving in. Send *help!*"

"Doing what we can," the Lieutenant replied. "Hold position."

Urk raised his arm, fired off his laser at the nearest zhīzhū. Burst after burst hit dead on the most forward eye. The damned briefing books said this should knock it down, at least temporarily. Enough blasts were *supposed* to fry the core lobe.

This one kept moving, straight for Whack. Whack shifted, tried to roll on her side. Urk heard her cough.

The rest of the squad – Privates Thomas, Lian and Bhakti – kept down, stiff with fear. Green troops. "You idiots, *shoot!*" Urk fired again. The zhīzhū staggered as the laser power indicator flashed amber. Two more bursts brought the zhīzhū down, also finished the gun's fuel cell. He had only a tenth of his gauss ammo, one grenade.

Whack gurgled over the comm. Urk could see blood spattered on the inside of her faceplate. "Fuck the lieutenant, fall back! *Dumas!*"

Another zhīzhū leapt forward, this one stopping over Whack's prone body. Its lower proboscis extended, searched,

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pushed through a weak point in the armor, began sucking. Whack screamed.

The third zhīzhū scuttle-ran straight at Urk.

Urk emptied the gauss needles into his attacker's upper torso and forward eyes, snatched his last grenade from the clip. The grenade arced perfectly toward Sarge, landing beside her. Whack saw, grabbed it, pushed it up against one of her attacker's four eyes.

Urk's zhīzhū fell as the grenade blew, spattering a wet mix of human and zhīzhū through the air. A mist of blood mixed with purplish ichors coated his faceplate, forcing the heads-up to compensate. Whack was dead, her arm blown off. The zhīzhū's entire upper body was missing.

Four more zhīzhū heat signatures were closing through the smoke and mist. "Spare clips! Come on, Tommo, clips! I'm out."

Tommo moved almost languidly, in a daze. "Sure, Urk." He pulled a gauss clip from his pack, handed it over. "Maybe Sarge is right."

Urk slapped the clip into place, shuddered. These three were useless, shocked beyond belief. What they had seen in the town was bad, what they were facing worse – but they had been trained and trained again. If they couldn't handle it now, they were useless.

Urk breathed deep, shrugged, let his hoarse voice become gentle. "Yeah, Sarge is right. Leave me your spare clips, I'll take rear. Grenades and power clips, too. Fall back on my mark."

"Okay." The tone was weak, sheepish. "Your mark."

Urk gathered the spare clips, fit them into place on his armor and weapons. He locked three laser power clips into his waist pack. Tommo handed him the squad's grenade launcher. Urk felt the extra weight, but it would disappear as he ran out of ammo. He repositioned into a crouch and took bearings on the closing zhīzhū heat signatures.

"And – mark. Haul ass!" Urk fired off four grenades, aiming at the closest four zhīzhū. As the other three marines began

their retreat, he emptied the launcher in an arc, ensuring confusion, hoping to kill most of the damned spidery things. Explosions mixed with zhīzhū screeches and squeals of pain.

Urk rushed forward, screaming incoherently. Pausing near Whack's body, he saw the zhīzhū's four arms still twitching. Five laser pulses straight into an intact eye ended it. The zhīzhū lay as still as the bloody mound of what was left of Whack.

Rushing forward, he fired arcs of gauss projectiles, hoping to injure and slow the tough zhīzhū assault troops. The remaining heat signatures slowed, backed away momentarily.

Urk stopped, knelt, and targeted hard on a single zhīzhū thirty meters distant. The arm-mount poured an entire clip of needles into and around the forward-most eye. Enough needles would slice up nerves and brain-lobes, possibly that coordinating lobe deeper inside. Urk loaded a new clip, chose another heat signature.

Something slammed into his right shoulder. The impact against armor drove him backward. The heads-up flashed a green on the impact point, but his shoulder would be sore. He could not be sure which of the zhīzhū had fired the slug. Urk rolled left, ending on his belly. A new clip of needles was shared out on several heat signatures.

He keyed comm. "Lieutenant, how important is this ground?"

"Hold it. *You* let your damn team bug out, so you're on point. *Hold that ground.*"

Slugs zipped directly overhead. The zhīzhū were damned good at tracking back, without having any computers that could be seen. Four-lobes thinking, the experts said. It made them the best damned ground troops around. Urk pushed himself to his knees, prepared to spring into a run.

A heat signature lunged into movement, the fastest scuttle-run he'd ever seen. Slugs whistled overhead. Urk gauged the movement, set the laser for rapid-pulse and pushed upward at the right moment. Red-dotting the most forward eye, Urk emptied the power-clip at Gatling-gun speed, getting most of the bursts in. The thing stumbled, fell, rolled to a stop, dropping both of its

machine-pistols.

The other nearby zhīzhū were already in motion, moving to overwhelm. Urk ejected the clip, reloaded, ran back to the original ridge of ground that had covered them. That was the best ground to hold. He was tired, dripping sweat, again using up ammunition. There was little left that he could do.

Hold the ground. Orders and ROEs were clear. Hold a damned rock, because it was *almost* livable. Make clear to the zhīzhū that it was a *human* almost-livable rock, not their damned feeding ground. Urk fired another burst of needles, wished he had another grenade, more power clips for the laser.

Three zhīzhū loomed out of the battle-smoke. They were taking their time. They knew that he was alone and low on ammo. One stopped over the body of the comrade Whack had taken with her. Its main proboscis slid out its lower trunk and sought an entry point. Urk's stomach twisted, but he held his fire as the other two came over, hoping to catch *him* as a live, blood-pumping meal.

He had saved two loose grenades. He readied them.

An FDC roared in overhead coming from behind. "Heads *down*, marines!" He couldn't place the voice, but did what he was told. A barrage of crackling laser-heat thunder was the nicest sound he had heard since the first zhīzhū spheres had dropped out of the pink sky. Pulses struck ground throughout the undergrowth, sparking fires and brightening zhīzhū heat signatures.

The FDC roared further ahead. At a glance, he saw that it had a personnel pod.

"I'll be two clicks back." the pilot signaled on the main channel as the craft blasted forward. The FDC swung around in an arc, its guns blazing at any hint of a zhīzhū on the ground. "Belay all 'hold ground' orders and fall back. That's from the top, Command Code 'Ahmad.' All marines, *fall back to pickup!*"

Urk checked his heads-up. One of the three closest zhīzhū was still standing. He tossed both grenades in its direction. When they blew, he ran forward one more time. In a crouch, he looked at what was left of Whack, found a way to lift and balance her shattered remains on his back. He turned and followed the

trail left by the rest of the squad, setting his onboard scan behind to warn of pursuit.

The FDC was circling, clearing the immediate area ahead. It would make zhīzhū pursuit unlikely.

Relieved or angry? Numb was all Urk could manage for the moment. They were leaving behind dead marines, dead civilian specialists, abandoning a habitable world to the zhīzhū.

Barely habitable. Had it been worth fighting for at all?

A world the damned Jin Jun had said to leave alone. Pay attention to a couple of fifty-year-old zhīzhū observation satellites circling an uninhabited world, the damned Jin Jun had said. The zhīzhū thought they owned the world because there were a couple of satellites in orbit.

Hold this ground.

Follow orders and ROEs, not to mention custom. Urk moved as quickly as he could.

The damned Jin Jun had been right all along.

The FDC roared overhead one more time, its grids blasting force downward. He stumbled against the split-second of thrust, stopped, regained his footing. The FDC landed well behind a stand of tree-like red vegetation; Urk's heads-up located the exact location. He had a kilometer to go. He adjusted his route, picked up his pace.

Urk keyed for boost. The suit computer divined his needs, punched an oxygenated stimulant in, raised the oxygen flow. Painkillers hid muscle aches. His cadence picked up. Whack's body lightened. The last kilometer passed in a lung-burning, leg-aching haze.

The FDC was pads-down on the inland sea's placid, rocky coast. Laser pulses flickered away from the FDC's emitters, targeting distant airborne zhīzhū. The side-hatch was open; battle suited marines were scrambling in. Iffy codes identified his squad-mates, more from another squad. The FDC itself was from *Hibernia* herself, not Urk's troop carrier.

Only one other marine carried a fallen comrade.

Urk got to the hatch. The other fallen marine had already been handed up. Willing hands took Whack – her broken torso

and punctured skull – and pulled her in. Urk turned to stand watch while the last of the marines clambered through the oval.

He scanned for iffies, knowing that there would be too few marines coming back.

“Lock seals in two minutes,” the pilot called. “Get a space if you want to leave.”

“That won’t be enough time,” Urk argued. He knew better than to argue. The pilot knew her available vectors and her time-tables. She knew when her last minute would run. Nonetheless, there were marines out there who could get aboard if given an extra minute or three.

The pilot was surprisingly gentle. “I’m sorry, marine. Sealing tight in a minute forty-five. The Admiral’s neck should stretch for this, but it won’t.”

The tone chilled more than the words.

Urk opened his comm to all channels. “Get your asses *in* marines! Boost your stims and max your oxy! Get *in*!”

One more soldier came, bounding through the red vegetation. A damned spider chased, gaining with its four-legged gait. Urk knelt and raised his gauss. The heads-up helped him paint the closest of the four eyes. The correct muscular twitch triggered the rifle, firing a stream of needles into the zhīzhū’s eye. It stumbled and slid.

The marine ran by him and struggled into the craft. Urwah turned and helped her in, saw the holes in her battlesuit. The zhīzhū had done some damage already.

He pulled himself back in and let the hatch close behind him. The craft was already lifting as he found a seat and pulled the harness tight. The cylindrical cabin was silent as the vessel climbed quickly through the thin atmosphere and into orbit. It remained grim, if not silent, for the half-hour needed to match and lock. Urk spent his time doing what he could through damaged suits for the wounded who would survive.

The FDC matched and docked quickly. The hatch opened. Medics poured in with stretchers and gear. Urk helped them get the wounded out, then took the end of the last stretcher and maneuvered it out of the ass-end hatch.

The troop-carrier's deck was a mess. The medic outside pointed him down the corridor. "Sick-bay's down that way."

"I know. You take him. Where's the Key marine?"

"No zhīzhū on board, marine. Stand down."

"Screw that. I need to go back down, help get people back in."

"Oh, right." The medic pointed. "Down that way. Don't know if she's actually there. Arms locker is on the honor system in this mess."

"Thanks, makes it easier." Urk handed over the stretcher and pushed off through the zero-g.

As expected, the main arms locker was unlocked, waiting for any marine with a need. Urk's iffy was recorded as he entered, he was sure; no ship-wide alarm squalled. Perhaps the Key marine was keeping track of marines from other squads and ships getting gear. More likely, she was just happy that anyone cared to continue the job.

Urk dumped his empty clips and canisters into a netted bin. Power cells and fresh ordnance waited for him in proper racks. He took what he could carry, made sure that his power was maxed out, and then noticed the prize: a fully charged grav-pack.

Urk backed into it, felt it clip it into its place below the main environment pack. His on-board computer detected the new hardware and integrated it seamlessly, as it should. He would be able to find more marines with the added mobility. Urk pulled his way back to the landing craft, slipping in just before the hatch sealed shut.

"Who the hell is that?" the pilot called back.

"Corporal Urwah Grunon. We're going to try and help get more folk in."

"You got orders?"

"You kicking me out if I forgot to log them?"

"Grunt hero *bullshit*." The lock snapped shut behind Urk. "I'm not missing my window, so hang on, I'm light and going for hard burn. Fifteen seconds."

Urk scrambled to the rack and harnessed in. The boost

pushed hard against him for several minutes, by his best guess a full six g's over the minimal compensators. The FDC then went into free-fall without warning.

While he waited, Urwah ran battle suit diagnostics. There was nothing much else he could do. He had no plan, no orders. He simply knew that the damned zhīzhū had completely overrun the small portion of the surface that he had been sent to hold. He had no way of knowing what was happening elsewhere, but had to assume that an overwhelming force had entered the system.

Urwah did not intend to sit still and wait for other people to report the extent of the losses. He keyed in to the strategic information base, but found little; he simply did not rank high enough to obtain any useful information.

The craft dipped into the upper atmosphere. The increasing hull vibrations transmitted themselves through the frame. Urwah called up a fairly simple map of the surface showing settlement locations and marine positions. He became sure of only one thing: there were simply not enough craft in orbit to rapidly evacuate those on the surface.

Urwah was pushed against the straps as the pilot applied breaking thrust, then twisted the craft into a tail-down position. The craft settled to the ground. Before the engines were shut down, Urwah had unlocked his harnesses and clambered off the rack. He gathered his weapons and keyed to open the main hatch.

The craft had settled down at the outskirts of one of the civilian encampments. Holes gaped in the pre-fab domes and other shelters. Urwah heard the whiffling buzz of a large projectile just before it slammed through one of the domes. Screams and cries followed, but of course no explosion: the zhīzhū clearly disliked their flesh burned or deeply damaged.

He boosted the gravpack toward the center dome, comm channels open. "Come *on*, people!" He got to the dome, landed at the main entrance. The door was barely hanging on its hinges. He yanked at it hard enough to finish the work the zhīzhū had done.

Two shots pounded against his chest armor, pushing him back a half-step. He raised his arm to fire, but held off. Inside, a woman – no, a girl, under 18 – stood ready to fire again. Five or six other youths were behind her, none of them armed. *Good girl.* She had not waited to see what was ripping open the door.

Urwah keyed his external speaker. “With me, sweetheart,” he said. “Your ride’s back that way.” He pointed toward the FDC, then turned to take a defensive arc. He thought he heard movement, despite the thin atmosphere.

He was right. Three zhīzhū scuttled between the shredded domes. Urwah popped off a grenade without a moment’s thought. The explosion splattered the lead zhīzhū and injured the two behind. A sweep of the gauss rifle finished them. All the while, the human youths were running toward the landing craft. He saw them board.

Urk kicked back up, scanning over the domes with infrared. Every colonist or marine still living had to be located and gotten off-world. There was movement in another dome – both human and zhīzhū. He dove closer and fired through the thin exterior. His feet crashed through the panel.

Two zhīzhū, both oozing their internal fluids, fired as he hit ground and rolled. He felt the needles impact his battlesuit without piercing. Coming out of his roll, he fired again, full-auto. The spiders stumbled backward, their sucking tubes stretching and detaching from the already dead colonists. Urwah fired again, aiming through the forward-most eyes to assure destruction of the brains.

Urk jumped again, looking for any more survivors.

January 20, 2390 (Five Years Ago) – Vicinity of Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

Something cool, pleasant, brushed across her face. She was being washed, she realized. Rebirth? Was she an infant again?

A reborn infant should not remember staring down a zhīzhū

fighter with a sidearm. She should not have long arms and legs, toes she could identify through aware nerves. She should not suddenly be all too aware that she was out of her shipsuit, covered only by a sheet, and that an all-too-young man was tending to her.

He smiled. "You're awake."

"Yes."

He tapped the comm unit hanging from the loop on his shipsuit. "Doc, she's with us."

The response was harried. "OK. Don't kill her."

"Doc's busy," the young man explained. "Hell, all the real medics are busy. They grabbed me to help out even though I washed out of medic training. It's a mess out there."

Bits of memory fell into place. "Cardinale. That was real."

"Yup. You're back on *Hibernia*. He's reloaded and back out there."

Avi looked languidly at a bulkhead pipe. "I should be there, too." She made a vague effort to sit up.

"You're good where you are, Lieutenant. You've been through a lot more than you think."

Dr. Glasgow came through the curtain, back hunched with pain, rushed. "You're not going anywhere, Lieutenant. You've been pounded and tight on air for a long time. Probably some micro-bleeds in your grey matter, definitely a concussion and a half, but the med scans are tied up with worse. You'll fly again after you rest, unless you get some damned sense." He peered at the display over her bed, keyed some notes into his handheld. "Let the other fly-boys earn a kill or two. You already took out enough spider balls to make the new record."

Avi rested back. "Are we mopping up?"

Glasgow's facial muscles tightened. "Bridge doesn't talk to me about such things," he evaded. "I've got to get back to the main ward." He turned and left.

The orderly was less circumspect. "The Gandivas are covering our retreat. The spiders have the planet. There were too many. More than we thought they could carry in the spheres that got through."

Avi closed her eyes and wished she had not awakened at all.

March 4, 2350 (45 Years Ago) – Nest Implantation,
Groombridge 1618 II (Nest)

The primary sphere was already gone. Its clusters of capsules had released themselves to descend through the thin atmosphere. Each sought to land near the mouths of the valley caves. The new Nests would plant themselves in the caves to begin preparing this world.

They would not be obviously busy. Few individuals would be bulbed. Instead, they would operate on the simplest of Musts: survival. Their initial imperative was to break down stone and digest it to produce additional atmosphere. They would also release enough material to protect against the star's occasional flares. This would make the marginal world more habitable in the longer term.

Two decades of argument among the mature Nests had preceded this new direction. Traditionalist nests had fought against such thinking as weakness, waste of time and assets. Those would push the borders further from the Mother Nests. They would prefer to continue seeking new blue-green worlds to dominate and adapt.

A few younger Nests which had adapted to new worlds had won the right to attempt their new Must of transformation. The plan had yet to be found worthwhile.

The Nest opened the capsule's silks. The fabric slowed the descent. Individuals released their umbilical organs from the placental tissues, began stretching. They would labor as soon as the capsule reached the surface, hauling the infant Nest to its final safety, deep in the closest cave. After that, they would rest, explore when the flares allowed, and gather more nutrition for the Nest.

Perhaps the individuals would multiply, though that would be decades away. The atmosphere had to protect better before that

All Shall Go to Wrack

could be allowed. For now, the Nest would at best replace, possibly allow a slight population decline.

Patience was any Nest's unique Must.

The capsule bumped to the ground, dragged a few feet in the wind. The workers prepared themselves for the thin atmosphere, protecting the Nest behind the airlock membranes. Scrambling out, they began the work of hauling the capsule toward the caves. The Nest wondered what they would feel in the different sunlight, the different air. They would share back when they could, but that might be hours or days, as the Nest reckoned real days.

The Nest rested, patient, knowing that the individuals would report and share when they were done.

Chapter 3

February 7, 2395 (Present Day) – Tau Ceti System
(Ramachandra)

Tau Ceti's sole gas giant was well behind. *Astrum Mundi's* tanks were again full. Pumps and processors were busy turning hydrocarbons and water into hydrogen, distilling out the readily available deuterium, running hydrogen through gravitic flux to produce still more deuterium. As soon as the launch was completed, he could begin the calculations to return to hyperspace.

"Boards linked," the fire control officer reported. "All systems are ready. Trajectory calculations are matched."

"Copy," Ramachandra curtly replied. His calculations did not merely match. His calculations were the basis of *all* of the gunnery team's work. No one else equaled his training or raw skill.

"Firing count. Eleven minutes, mark."

"No unusual contacts," passive scan reported.

"Last chance for an active scan," active scan reported. Her voice was laced with eagerness to play a real part in the Cause's next step.

"That will not be necessary," Ramachandra replied. "We will stay dark." He knew as well as anyone that the Jin Jun had improved the interdiction satellites since he had landed the settlers. Had they not done so, the ship would not need to be here

now. Ramachandra could just as easily land a small freighter and leave infected blankets for the savages.

The system required testing in any event. The *zhīzhū* would never allow a human freighter to import 'blankets.' The spiders were too watchful.

The eleven minutes dragged. Ramachandra scanned his board, looking for any hint of grime. There was none, of course. Still, he found a spot that did not gleam quite enough, rubbed the sleeve of his shipsuit against it. When he could no longer justify that, he ran a quick diagnostic on the hyperspatial navigation programs.

"Sixty seconds."

Ramachandra scanned over his boards. Everything was just as it should be. The converted forward missile bay was the center of activity for the moment. Last checks were being made, launchers being sealed, men and women locking down the last details. They were being busy on purpose, really; this missile launch was not being accomplished in the middle of a pitched battle against another ship. It had been long prepared, carefully calculated a number of times.

The count came down. With "zero," the hull vibrated. The vibration repeated three times over the next fifteen seconds. Four perfect mass ejections rushed away, high-powered micro-drives glaring from behind. "Missiles away," Gunnery reported. "On target."

"Confirm trajectory," Ramachandra added. "Prepare the second launch."

Ten minutes later, the process repeated, just as planned, just as perfectly. The gunnery crew was at least barely proficient. Ramachandra turned to his calculations and scans, looking for any unexpected variations. He saw none. The drives continued to push against the quantum itself, imparting vector to the projectiles.

One by one, the engines shut down as each projectile achieved the trajectory that would bring it to Tau Ceti IV at the day, minute, even second. None malfunctioned. Passive scan announced each of the eight shut-downs, annoying the pilot.

There was no need; there was no doubt that he had programmed well.

As soon as Passive Scan was perfectly satisfied that the missiles were on course, the drive units would disengage from the payloads. A gentle piston thrust – the oldest of successful space technology – would separate payload from thruster. The payloads would become the simplest of stellar flotsam, largish meteors on a cometary trajectory.

The drive units would re-orient slightly over a few minutes. They would then power back up, pushing themselves – and all evidence of the technology behind them – into a fast, starward spiral. Tau Ceti would vaporize the evidence that human hands had set the rocks in motion.

Eight rocks thrown, with no evidence that they were anything other than interstellar junk. Four would cut through the upper atmosphere of Tau Ceti IV in about five months, delivering payload to key intersections on the trails of the nomadic Tentlords. Two would break up in the upper atmosphere, releasing solar-powered floaters that would record data, then transmit it back to the last two. Each of these were ready to transmit everything recorded when a signal triggered a data-dump.

Low visibility, low power. The few Jin Jun in the system would be hard pressed to discover any of this. They would be unable to do anything for their pets. No tracks would be left here. If any flaw was detected, the next and more important part of the Plan would be executed with necessary changes.

Ramachandra finished updating his calculations. Nothing was out of place. No unexpected system debris would perturb the gravitic bubble. No unexpected ships had wandered into passive scan range. He reported readiness to the Captain and set the final count in motion.

Astrum Mundi slid unnoticed into hyperspace.

May 28, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Luyten 726-8 A to L-1159-16 (Avinashini))

Lt. Commander B.P. Avinashini stepped into the empty wardroom. Ramachandra had again forced himself onto her mind, over the long-faded but pleasant memory of Donal Macpherson. The latter, though, had not been allowed to proceed. She had regained her senses, knew that a proper marriage would be made within her own culture. Her parents would assist her in the choice.

Avi was finally resigned to this betrothal. She had resisted the Admiral's constant push for the match from its first discussion, almost two decades. The Parent had maintained his silence, for the most part. He had left that all in her mother's hands, despite his own lack of real liking for her distant cousin. Avi herself would prefer never to see her future husband at all, much less sleep beside him.

Nonetheless, her long resistance had eroded. She was not getting younger. There were no eligible Hindus in Fleet who met both her requirements and those of the Admiral. Almost thirty years old, she was becoming an embarrassment to her parents. She had built a career. The match had finally seemed to become inevitable.

And, she knew, she would only have to see Ramachandra on occasion. They were both busy with their Fleet careers. They need not often share the bed.

Avi sat, uplinked her to her earpiece. The display appeared within her vision via neural stimulation. In the rush of getting to know her new command and subordinates, she had taken little time for the personal. *Harris* and her four fighter-delivery craft were nominally a lateral move, but she considered it a demotion. She'd commanded *Hibernia*'s First Wing, keeping the zhīzhū out of Imperial space. Donal Macpherson had succeeded her on *Hibernia*; he absolutely considered himself promoted.

Avi finally had an hour free, could look at what Ramachandra had sent besides his letter. The letter itself had not impressed her. However, he'd attached a large, well protected

file. She found herself going through several layers of security, questions and answers based on their childhoods. She finally pulled the file itself up, saw that it was a compressed archive. She tried to open it, found that it was again password-protected.

She furrowed her forehead at that. It made no sense that he would send her a file she could not open. He and the Admiral had always had a close bond, though. Both maintained secrets. Some might even have been necessary.

Avi went back into his letter, looked for some sense of what Ramachandra had sent, or some further clue to the security. She stored away the self-loathing at the thought that she was marrying him. He might well be hiding something of interest.

Finding nothing obvious, she closed the letter. She called up another letter, this one from Donal Macpherson. She remembered him with an old twinge of pleasure, a feeling she immediately pushed away from her consciousness. That flirtation had broken both tradition and Fleet regulations for trainees.

On its face, the letter was light. After greetings and formalities, it discussed mostly trivialities regarding mutual activities. Finally, it noted his own promotion and assignment, already known to her. "You've probably heard that I've been given your old billet, right down to your Gandiva. I'm still second to the Queen of Helper. Thanks for leaving the wheels true and the frame polished."

Avi allowed herself a smile at the reference. She and Macpherson had trained in North America's Utah Province. The initial "bicycling" weeks of fighter-pilot training involved steep mountain roads and harsh conditions. The initial training seemed odd, but it had served to test reactions and promote fitness. Those who could handle the hard climbs and fast descents, all while handling computation and targeting simulation, could handle billions worth of fighter craft.

Footsteps interrupted her. She closed the letter and blanked the display. Lieutenant Urwah Grunon, Fleet marines, entered from the aft. He stopped, came to attention, saluted.

"At ease, Lieutenant, I am not on duty." She withheld a smile. There was no point in encouraging any man. This man

was tall, ebony-skinned, with white teeth and a friendly face. He not at all unattractive, by any standard. He was also not her betrothed; he was a junior officer; he was younger than she; and he was assuredly not Hindu.

Grunon was from one of the most liberal Muslim sects, raised on Jannah. He seemed to have no need to worry about anyone else's views on Allah or other gods. She had met him, briefly, once before. Like herself, he had been decorated after the Groombridge Rout. She recalled speaking with him after the ceremony at Jannah. He had been most respectful, and most humble regarding his own role in the retreat.

The marine took a cup from the rack and held it under the dispenser. "Coffee," he said. The local network read his iffy signal and blended the drink to his taste. The sound of coffee dispensing preceded the aroma by a brief moment.

He turned, leaned against the partition. "Ship's too quiet," he commented. "You're the only one I've seen off-duty."

Avi reached for her tea, sipped. "Many are involved in a religious service," she pointed out.

The Lieutenant made a face. "This ship is a deep-space temple to the Many in One. I can hear the drums pounding out 'Zarathustra' at all hours. My cabin's too close to the gym."

Avi nodded cautiously. "I also have noted a high number of affiliates. In fact, I thought that you would have joined. It is a way to advance. Most Muslims in Fleet see no conflict with affiliating."

She saw a flitter of displeasure in his features. His shoulders tensed. "No," he said. "My brother joined, before he took early retirement. Maybe I should. It might make some of these idiots decide that I'm not a Jin Jun spy."

"I do not understand."

"I was on Shānhé-Wòtu for the 'evacuation' of those Humanitas settlers. Came to notice of the Jin Jun who was running things – little Euro named O'Meath. He jammed through my orders to Officer School while he was playing Commodore."

"Cuchulain O'Meath." She restrained a frown. "'Zhaohui's Mistress.'"

“That’s him. But he’s no one’s mistress. He runs things his own way.” Urwah recalled a gravver operated by Zhaohui herself, under O’Meath’s orders. “He never bowed to anyone but one of the natives, and he got his way with that one, too.”

O’Meath had himself been present at the medal ceremony. She recalled a particular moment of discomfort as he stared at her from across the room. He had approached at one point. She had found an excuse to move away with no more than a word.

O’Meath had also been stirring up the zhīzhū more recently, skulking at Groombridge 1618. As if the Jin Jun hadn’t already done enough of that. “He is not an asset to the Emperor.”

“You have to love him or hate him, I guess,” the marine responded vaguely.

“Do you maintain contact?”

“You’re kidding, right? I mean, ‘No, Ma’am.’ I’ve had to take down two ‘honor boards’ over that mess. One right after, and one at Officer School. I might have to deal with one here – my top sergeant isn’t happy with me.”

“Vele. I scanned her jacket. She was also part of the evacuation.”

The Lieutenant nodded grimly. “One of my own people. We used to be close. She took a court-martial for a mistake. One of that Jin Jun pygmy’s sole saving graces – he made sure that only career Fleet officers sat on the bench. Don’t know how exactly, but he kept Zhaohui out of it, and he didn’t show up to testify. Ignored a subpoena, I heard. Lar got off easy – six months in the brig and busted back to private.”

“Pygmy? He has African blood?”

“No. He’s just short. The kind of short man who pushes hard.

“Anyway, the pygmy got after my buttocks next. He pushed for me to get into Officer School. The brass couldn’t really refuse him, I guess, but they probably wanted to. Hard to refuse a slot when a ‘commodore’ recommends it, and Lord Blackstone is sending e-mail to the Brassholes.”

“You didn’t want to be an officer?”

“I was a good sergeant. Didn’t need to go any higher. Now I

have a pile of marines I have to worry about, and I'm not getting all of the best feeling off them. I'm wondering if I got assigned here to get me either busted back or properly converted to Humanitas."

"I understand that some see it as clearing obstacles." Avi found herself reticent to discuss the possibility. She had never considered it for herself. The Admiral had pushed her to worship the false Avatar, to no avail.

Bangalore was a place of many colors, many gods, ancient and ornate buildings inviting the faithful. She had worshipped at several nearby temples. The sterile Humanitas faith pretended to honor all of the many aspects of godhood, but took most of its structure from Euro and Christian forms.

It was impossible that the transfer to *Harris* had been unknown to the Admiral. Her letter to her mother would likely not convince her to intervene, no matter how polite she had been. Had someone put her on *Harris* for a similar reason? Even her mother?

As always, she put aside the dislike of the Admiral's decision to put career over proper Hinduism. The Admiral may have displaced the gods, but Avi would not. If the Parent and the Admiral intended to insist that she marry in her own caste, like a good Hindu, she had no intention of being any less herself. There was nothing for her in Humanitas.

Urwah's words brought her back. "The Prophet doesn't really give the option, so far as I'm concerned." Urk sat back. "But there are different views on that, I suppose. Lot of different views. Jannah is full of folks facing Mecca five times a day except on Sunday. My own brother decided to get ahead in Fleet before he resigned."

Avi nodded. "Some Hindus also think that they can accept any godhead they please. I do not share that view."

"Well, we at least see eye to eye on something." Urwah finished his coffee. "I'm going to get back to learning my Grunts." He brought his cup to the sink and washed it. When it was set back in its place, he saluted and went back out the door.

The conversation left Avi with a slightly relieved feeling.

She was not entirely isolated on *Harris*.

May 29, 2395 (Present Day) – One-Half Light-Year from Nán-mén'èr (Alpha Centauri A) (Murphy)

Granuaile bounced roughly through the gravitic ripples into normal space. Murphy was tossed against his harness and back into his seat, shaken, felt the ship pitch and roll despite compensator fields. “Son of a *bitch*.”

The turbulence abated. “I’ve got to get better at that,” he muttered to himself. “The software just doesn’t cut it.” He ran system checks. The displays assured him that the navigation programs had run a near-perfect re-entry. “Goddam lying machines.”

Murphy keyed passive scans. Out here, half a light-year beyond the complicated Kentaurus Oort Clouds, *Granuaile*’s long scans would pick up all types of electromagnetic signatures. Even attenuated signals would be read and analyzed.

The location of Fleet’s “secret” deep-space anchorage of older, mothballed ships would not remain secret from the Knights Jin Jun. Hell, it was probably already well known to the zhīzhū. Murphy wondered why Zhaohui hadn’t ordered him to look earlier. She had kept him busy on enough other projects.

Politics. Wheels within wheels.

It helped that the Jin Jun already had an idea of the location from other data. Murphy would not have to spend weeks triangulating weak signals and slight energy emissions. It annoyed him that this final search had not been done years ago, though. Why in *hell* hadn’t Fleet’s secretive conduct sounded alarms? What was the point of inter-service rivalry without proper spying on one another? Fleet certainly wasn’t lax about that sort of thing.

While *Granuaile* ran the scans, Murphy went to the galley. The synthesizer had been well primed with proteins, carbs, fibers, vitamins, flavors, texturizers, and food coloring. The reconstitution nanos were ready to recycle any and all organic waste to an

edible state. He would not starve, unless he refused to eat.

Nonetheless, he squeezed past the processors and pulled open the freezer. A proper steak dinner awaited heating. He pulled it out, slit open the clear film, and opened a microwave slot. The slot recognized the pre-frozen tray and began the defrost cycle.

The Jin Jun sat. His handheld remained synched with the bridge consoles. A tap put the main data sequences on the galley's large display, built into the table. A chart of local space formed in the air, showing cometary bodies and other debris left over from the complicated formation of the Kentaurus systems.

Granuaile was already eliminating information and building a new database. Murphy studied the numbers, began making his own educated guesses. The microwave beeped. Murphy stood, half-turned, and pulled the platter from the wall slot. His palms felt the heat as he lowered it quickly to the table. He savored the meal as the scan continued to sort out electromagnetic sources.

The main computer was still obtaining information when he finished. It would require at least another hour to complete the full globular scan. He had time for his next project.

Murphy pulled up the arms lists. He began by double-checking the official ordnance list. He officially had a full store of chemical warheads. He could fight his way out of a small mess, perhaps, but nothing major. Zhaohui had left him unprepared for serious contingencies. She wasn't one to authorize a nuke lightly, much less four, and she hadn't done so at this point.

Zhaohui was holding back here, so far as he was concerned. She had put him out there without authorizing proper firepower. She had never bothered to change her personal codes, though. She knew damned well that he had the codes. She also knew damned well that he had the codes needed to alter his orders, at least to a point. Did she think he wasn't going to do any such thing when it was clear that Yi himself was threatened?

Wheels within wheels.

He couldn't give himself an actual Writ of Plenipotentiary, but his orders no longer read "cartography duty." Zhaohui had ordered him to poke around into Fleet business, but not given him much for self-defense. Murphy preferred to have that much

properly on the record, and had amended his orders. He was now officially assigned to conduct a fact-finding review on deployment of the Imperial military, including Fleet.

That was near enough to the truth, perhaps too near, but it would give him access he needed. Like any of the Jin Jun, he knew that Fleet had become vocal in its opposition to Imperial policy. Some in the Admiralty had even called for Lord Blackthorn's resignation.

His orders as improperly amended also now allowed him the two nukes he had managed to get out of the armory. He had tried for four. He didn't like being out here without a bit of self-defense.

Next, he checked the messenger torpedoes. There were four of these as well, all hard-programmed to home on Sol system. Zhaohui was taking no chances on him communicating with anyone outside of herself. The hard-programming had improved since the Listening Post debacle. She wanted him to communicate his findings to her alone.

Who the hell else would he talk to? Nonetheless, it irked him that she insisted on short-sightedness. Local and independent programming had been proven useful in the Groombridge Rout. Fleet would have lost more ships and people if *Hillary's* crew hadn't had located an independent board. Zhaohui continued to refuse to accept that, at least.

Murphy had no intention of leaving the pre-programming intact on all of the messengers. He might want to send a message elsewhere, as Xiarhos had. Murphy had made his arrangements, though it hadn't been quite as easy as getting the nukes.

Murphy went center to the main gangway, then up to the command deck. He keyed via his earpiece. The turret access hatch, aft of the conning bridge, chuffed open into a short tunnel. The chill escaped – or, more accurately, the cold air behind the hatch sucked in the warmer air of the main environment.

Murphy knelt, pulled a pair of thinsulate gloves from the storage pouch beside the hatch. Basic tools were carefully racked to the other side. He pulled the box from its clip and crawled into the access. Once his head stuck through the other open, round

hatch, he twisted to rest on his back, freed his arms, and reached up for the handholds. A moment later, he was able to pull himself out and up to a seated position. From there, he worked into a crouch.

Granuaile's messenger racks were fairly simple: four pods, four two-meter torpedoes, capable of traveling farther and faster through hyperspace than any manned vessel. One of these days, the bio-protective field would be improved to allow humans to travel at that pace. The damned zhīzhū would probably be the first to perfect it, though. Not that the zhīzhū were really as bad as all that. Hell, they would probably be fine neighbors if left alone.

Murphy focused on the task at hand. Messenger 4 was at hand, and numerically convenient. Murphy opened the tool box, selected a hex-key, and unsealed the access panel for the main computer. With that done, he pointed a light in and looked at the boards. He whistled “Liverpool” to himself and looked closely at the markings.

Third board to the left. It couldn't be simply pulled and replaced at this point. The torpedo would not function if the deeper codes weren't set to match. A firmware solution had been applied since the Groombridge Rout.

Murphy keyed the unlock sequence. Zhaohui didn't know that he had obtained *those* codes. Probably, she didn't know. He heard the quiet snick announcing the release of the board.

Murphy set his handheld down on top of the messenger. With thumb and forefinger to the corners of the board, he pulled it from its socket. The replacement board snicked properly into its place. He keyed the lock code in, reactivated the messenger. Read-outs scrolled up his peripheral vision as the on-board computer re-booted and connected to the main systems.

Everything looked right from here. The board was accepted, and the messenger fully active. Murphy sealed the torpedo, turned the screws, and put away the hex wrench. The de-commissioned board slid easily into the sleeve that had protected the newer version. He slipped that into his shipsuit pocket.

Murphy repeated the task for a second of the four messen-

gers. Two could stay homed for Earth, at least for now. He needed to be sure the replacement boards worked before he risked killing all of the messengers.

Murphy reversed his trip through the cramped space and came back out into the access. At the other side, he pulled himself to his feet. The airlocks sealed. Pumps scavenged the atmosphere from the bay. Murphy went forward, ducked through the hatch into the con. Lights came up; displays came out of "sleep" mode. Command transferred from the handheld back to the front console.

Murphy slid into the seat and keyed. "Messenger 4, active and tracking," the system reported. "Enter destination."

"Too damned easy," Murphy muttered. He was vaguely disappointed. He had hoped to have at least a slight learning curve, and perhaps to have to play with the codes.

The pre-programmed messengers were set to home straight for Earth, of course, in the shortest possible time. There seemed little point in setting that as a destination. Instead, he keyed in Tau Ceti. The screen went to "working" mode for a moment. "Accepted," it decided. "Messenger 4 will proceed on launch to Shānhé-Wòtu. Ship's logs will transfer automatically. No message will be sent on system arrival unless retrieval code 'Kameef' received."

Murphy keyed again, making a change. "Accepted. Messenger 4 will proceed on launch to Jannah. Ship's logs will transfer automatically. No message will be sent on system arrival unless retrieval code 'Kameef' received."

The replacement board seemed to be everything promised.

Murphy leaned back in the chair, pondering the display. It would be easy enough for now to set the messenger back to Earth, as he should. There was no message for Nánmén'èr, not quite a light-year away. Indeed, advertising the change to the messenger might well upset Zhaohui. She rarely allowed her serenity to be disturbed with an obvious fit of pique, but she would certainly play her chessboard differently.

Still, he wasn't really happy to trust machinery he could not test. And Nánmén'èr was on the way back to Sol.

Murphy keyed the board one more time. “Accepted. Log transfer commenced. Messenger 4 will proceed on launch to Kentaurus Oort Layer One. No message will be sent on system arrival unless retrieval code ‘Kameef’ received. Log transfer complete.”

Murphy tapped the ‘launch’ key. The deck thrummed slightly as the torpedo freed itself pushing away from *Granuaile*’s main hull of the slight gravitic perturbation of the local space-time fabric. *Granuaile*’s passive scans followed it away, tracking its slight EM signatures as it streaked away.

A gravitic sphere rippled through the quantum as the messenger launched itself into hyperspace. Assuming the board’s design was solid, Murphy would be able to pick the torpedo up on his way back to Nánmén’èr.

If it wasn’t solid, Zhaohui would be demanding to know how he managed to waste something that cost even more than a nuke.

All of that done, Murphy had a chance to relax. He went back down to the main deck. *Granuaile* and her sister ships were designed to carry up to eight crew in reasonable comfort; the common space was well equipped for both lounging and exercise. He kept the clutter to a minimum, allowing him enough room to spar.

The Cetian sword was where he had left it, on a couch pushed up against the forward bulkhead. He pulled it from its sheath and gripped it, admiring the hand-smithed beauty. Fahnisht and the other Horn warriors of Shānhé-Wòtu distrusted and pitied most Townfolk for their perceived weakness, but not the smiths who brought such beauty out of the limited metal.

Three Horn swords had left the world on which they were formed. This one, and the one held by Zhaohui, had been made for human hands. Even Fahnisht, open to human oddities, had been cautious about giving humans blades that carried some part of a prior owner’s soul.

Only the third had been won in open combat, and properly given over to the marine who had thus earned it. Murphy doubted that it had been discarded, but suspected that it was kept in a glass case somewhere, avoiding unpleasant discussion.

Chapter 4

June 2, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Fahnisht)

Fahnisht pulled the neck-flaps of the beast. It came to a halt, pawing at the hardened ground. It growled quietly at the scent of the other beasts approaching through the clearing.

The waiting Bard raised a hand. “I see your horn. I will stand witness to the trading of blood.”

“Stand witness, Keeper of Fire,” Fahnisht agreed.

Pelest and the rest of the blood party came up behind him. Further back, the rest of the clan stopped. The warriors not selected and the women stopped at their respectful distance, eager spectators.

Lanna and his blood party approached from the other side of the clearing. Lanna rode arrogantly at the van. His hornband glinted in the high sun. The Bard greeted him as well; Lanna graciously accepted the Bard’s right and obligation to sing the truth.

Lanna reached over his back and pulled his sword. “Where is your hornless albino?” the opposing Clanlord taunted. “Is he afraid?”

Fahnisht reached over his own back, removed and raised his own sword. “Kameef fears nothing. This day, he rides his other circles.” He refused to show that he would have preferred the

hidden-horn for this challenge.

Pelest was brave, strong, and skilled, but he was not Kameef. Some part of Pelest's heart remained in the towns, perhaps. He might hesitate.

Kameef was not here. Pelest was. "Pelest shall take the debt due," Fahnisht pronounced. "Unless, Lanna, you would challenge me."

Lanna twitched at the suggestion. Fahnisht had successfully turned the blade back at him. Lanna had issued the original challenge, claiming the right to lands in circles long ridden by Clan Fahnisht. He had specified the engagement of Tentlords, rather than the Clanlords themselves. Fahnisht knew the taunt sliced deep.

Lanna did not rise to the bait. "This is not a claim for the heart of the Clan lands. The deciding blood shall be of our chosen Tentlords." Lanna indicated the warrior to his left. "Jahrvek." The warrior touched the tip of Lanna's horn, then dismounted from his beast.

Lanna was no fool. He had faced Clan Fahnisht and its allies only a few years before. The combat had been decisive, yet still allowed Lanna to live and retain honor. Kameef and his kind had protected but removed the human encroachers; Fahnisht and his blood-sworn allies had taken much blood and fed the pyres.

The stakes here were lower, both in land and honor. Lanna could not risk losing a battle with Fahnisht to death. Though Lanna's own blood debt to Jahrvek required him to back this contest, it did not require him to swing his own sword. He would not risk binding his own successor to Clan Fahnisht over a small ring of land.

Fahnisht indicated the Tentlord to his own left. "Pelest." Pelest reached over, put his finger to Fahnisht's horn. Fahnisht felt him press hard, making sure he drew his own blood in proper fealty. Despite the years of proving himself, the Town-born warrior still worked too hard to prove himself worthy. Unlike Kameef, the human adopted after Pelest himself, Pelest feared losing the right to grow out his horn.

But then, Kameef had no physical horn to lose. He rode,

fought, and shared the feast solely for joy. When he sat beside Fahnisht and stared at the fire, he was as rapt as any other.

Pelest jumped down from his own beast and pulled his own sword. He squared off with Jahrvek, waited. Both clans moved in to close the circle. The excitement built.

The Bard stepped back, scanned the contestants carefully. "To Last Blood?"

Jahrvek and Pelest each confirmed their commitment.

"Begin."

The two began circling each other.

Pelest moved well. He handled the sword almost as well as a child born to the great circles. He had also learned from anyone who would teach. Loath to admit it, Pelest had gained valuable experience and skill from Kameef. Pelest fused traditional Horn swordsmanship with the subtle differences in the human's tactics and movements.

His opponent was larger, more muscular. Jahrvek used power to attack, but not enough finesse. Fahnisht joined the rest of his clan in shouting encouragement and joy as Pelest deflected one heavy attack after the next. He found himself itching to move in and finish the bout. Jarhvek opened himself again and again to a deadly thrust, but Pelest failed to make the final attack.

Was Pelest playing? Or was he actually blind to the way Jarhvek moved, exposing himself to attack? How could one know?

Jarhvek might know. He was tiring. He knew that Pelest was agile both in body and mind. He seemed to coil himself up for a battering attack. Snarling, he began to swing wildly, heavily, forcing Pelest back toward the encircling Horns. The sudden concern in clan Fahnisht could be heard, the encouragement to Pelest more desperate.

Pelest turned lightly on a single foot, drew himself upward, and deftly slid the point of his sword into the opening left by Jahrvek's movements. Lanna's warrior shook, then dropped his sword in an uncontrollable spasm. Fahnisht's clan erupted happily. Lanna and his people became grim, quiet. Pelest

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wiped and sheathed his own sword, then took the other's from the limp hand of the departed. He examined Jahrvek's blade carefully. It was a well-souled weapon. Pelest sheathed his own sword, held Jahrvek's over his head.

Fahnisht waited for the excitement and proper honoring of Pelest to die away. He went to the center of the circle, stood beside Pelest. "Lanna, you stand in my circles. You acknowledge this?"

Lanna bowed his head, growled. He was known for his rages. Fahnisht focused on the other Clanlord's horn, looking for any sudden movement. He did not raise his own sword, but prepared to do so.

Finally Lanna looked up. His face was twisted in anger. "Clan Lanna feasts in its own circles only." He sheathed his sword, re-mounted his beast. "We shall release Jahrvek's soul as a clan."

Several of Lanna's lesser Tentlords dismounted, entered the circle. Fahnisht saluted with his sword as they took up the body and slung it over the beast which had carried the warrior while still living.

Lanna turned the beast and led his troop away.

Fahnisht sheathed his sword. He indicated his honor of Pelest. "Tonight, your Clanlord serves you. Well done, Pelest." He went back to his beast and mounted to lead the clan back to its tents.

June 2, 2395 (Present Day) – One-Half Light-Year from Nánmén'èr (Alpha Centauri A) (Murphy)

Murphy scratched at the stubble on his face. Three days' growth was annoying, although there was no other reason to be anything more than clean out in the deep. The sound of his finger rasping against the hairs diverted him from the struggle to better understand the zhīzhū speech patterns he had been studying in his off-duty time.

Four brain lobes that could work separately or in parallel could communicate too many different ways. The complexity was boggling better minds than his. It would be easier if he could get a chance to sit down and quaff a beer with one of them.

Not that quasi-plants who ate raw meat through their asses were likely to understand the pleasure of a good beer. The Horns were far more similar to humanity than the zhīzhū. That had made things easy when Murphy decided to ignore the silly no-contact rules that had befuddled the anthropologists and linguists.

His hand-held signaled, distracting him from the musing. “Location extrapolated.”

Finally.

Murphy got out of his bunk, walked through the common area and went up to the con. Lights and consoles came up as he ducked through the hatch. The large display showed local space, highlighted the location of the reserve depot in green. The exact coordinates read out beside the dot.

He pulled up the full report with a tap at the keys. EM readings were lower than he had expected. Other emissions and signs were certain, down to the miniscule residual gravitic disruptions that could be detected this far away. This was no oddball comet or agglutination of dark matter.

Murphy keyed the coordinates into the hyperdrive nav systems, backing his entry point off by a light-hour more than the minimum safe range. Even there, the gravitic ripple could give him away if anyone was awake in the guard station. He would be close enough to get a real look, far enough to evade patrols if they were alerted.

The hyperdrive started ramping up, building the gravitic pulse that would bounce *Granuaile* over the lip. Murphy glanced at the boards, concluded that the computer knew its job better than he did. There might be a few truly inspired human navigators in space, but he was not one of them. A zhīzhū on board could be helpful just now, in the unlikely event that it chose to be.

Then again, the zhīzhū would probably be too interested in information so secret the damned Fleet didn’t trust the Jin Jun

with it.

“Five minutes to hyperspace entry,” *Granuaile* reported smoothly. “All safety checklists complete. Please sit and lock safety harnesses.”

The smooth politeness of the pre-programmed message nagged at a spot of perversity. “And what if I don’t?”

“Five minutes to hyperspace entry,” *Granuaile* replied. “Please sit and lock safety harnesses.”

“Goddam automation.” He would have to program some argument into the main system when he had a spare moment. For now, he went to the front of the bridge dome. Murphy slid into the center chair, buckled the harnesses and keyed in scan protocols. He intended to waste no time on the other side of the tunnel. Fleet didn’t want the Jin Jun out here. It might have a long-range surprise or two.

Murphy had a surprise or two as well. Lady Zhaohui had forbidden digging too deep into Fleet databanks during his stint as Commodore, and Fleet had done a good job securing data from such a prying Jin Jun. If it had been less diligent, this search would be unnecessary.

Fleet’s security efforts had been hasty, though. A smart Commodore had learned more than he was supposed to. He hadn’t burdened Zhaohui with the codes he’d stolen. She’d just assumed he stole them when giving out this assignment.

Granuaile began the final count. At “zero” the gravitic inversion kicked hard. “Son of a *bitch*.”

June 2, 2395 (Present Day) – About One Light Year from Nán-mén’èr (Alpha Centauri A) (Murphy)

Granuaile bounced back into normal space. As soon as he finished cursing, Murphy brought up the passive scans, locking on to various stars to fix location and vector. As the computer started running the math, he kicked on the scan for comm signals. He should find nothing – the Depot would be using tight beams –

but there was no harm in listening. Someone just might be sloppy, this far out.

The nav subsystems confirmed that he was where he should be, coasting slowly toward the Depot. Hey keyed the scan to the forward beam, looking ahead for every reflection and signal that might stray out of the mothballed flotilla that should be hiding out here.

Conflict with the zhīzhū had pushed hull, drive and weapon design forward. Older ships of the line remained powerful, but had been replaced with ships better able to match zhīzhū advantages. One missile boat had been grudgingly farmed out to the Jin Jun, and two aging carriers had been pressed into use supporting colonization efforts in Yi's Reach.

The Jin Jun ship, *Ibn Battuta II*, was presumed lost. Fleet intelligence had recently released a claim that she had been found and pressed into service by pirates. Zhaohui had expressed doubt about that, and hope that the ship would find its way back. It was time to either add or subtract doubt.

Most of Fleet's older vessels should be here, though, ready to take on reserve crews, ready to go back to battle. The zhīzhū had been convinced so far that pushing toward Sol was not worth the effort, but they might change their four-lobed minds. Extra gun platforms were worth keeping around. The zhīzhū weren't at all fond of human high explosives and nukes. They preferred their meat raw.

Something about that fact tickled at his mind. For the moment, though, he had humans to figure out.

The computer began building a schematic of the Depot. There were two carrier groups in proper formation. Destroyers, cruisers, tenders, and heavy battlewagons were there to protect the two carriers, predecessors of the *Hibernia* class. Without a full-active scan, the hints of light and EM could not give absolute identities of ships or their classes, but the information was building. He needed more, though, and needed it without advertising his presence or methods.

Murphy keyed up the missile launcher, setting two specialized probes for launch. They would fly out in a long "V" forma-

tion, each passing the depot's location. Murphy locked in the programs, then fired off the weapons.

In about three hours, the first flare would fire off a transponder-code, followed by a series of EM pulses before a final self-destructive EM pulse. The second would follow suit, from a different location,

He had the three hours to wait. Murphy continued looking through the information building via the hints of reflected starlight, not liking the conclusion he suspected he would draw.

June 4, 2395 (Present Day) – About One Light Year from Nán-mén'èr (Alpha Centauri A) (Hogajue)

The frozen twinge of a gravitic pulse brightened the mind. It was far away, or a very small vermin vessel. Nonetheless, the central lobe brought all four of the peripheral lobes to full consciousness. This merited review. The neural fibers revived, bringing information into the lobes from all zhīzhū, and from the sense extenders.

Perhaps zhīzhū would now know what had happened to the missing human vessels. It was clear that the vermin intended to use them in the future. The disappearance had been noted only after a periodic inspection. This sphere was ordered to remain, waiting, for the answer, or for further leavings.

Zhīzhū Hogajue focused one lobe on arousing the remainder of the individuals to their tasks. A second began running the too-simple electromagnetic receivers, looking for changes since the hibernation period. A third ran through the contingency instructions it had been given by the Nest.

The fourth was assigned to dampening the deep *must* from the central lobe. Expansion had waited too long. The vermin had been allowed their tenuous existence too long. They were clever with their weapons, vile and clever, but the Nests would eventually have the numbers needed to simply overrun the grazing worlds. The vermin would provide their interesting delight of

minds that did not remember, as well as the base sustenance needed for zhīzhū to move further.

This must was difficult to control. First of a new line that it was, Hogajue remembered all too well the tastesmell that it had been given from priors. It wanted the firsthand, the original.

Over time, the analyzing lobe developed further information. The vessel it detected was small. The brightness of entry had been even further away than its original estimates. This one was one of the vermin vessels that pulsed quickly through the brightness. The first had been encountered near the Home Nests, and too hastily attacked. Effective study had been impossible. The clever, vile vermin had used one of their meat-burning weapons on itself. It was no more, mere atoms like a sun itself.

Repulsive, the willingness to burn away and waste meat. Zhīzhū had learned how the weapons worked; they were unregulated fusion power generators. Only the vermin would use weapons of that sort, destroying what must be preserved for proper consumption. The most thoughtful of the Nests had asked, after that, whether it was worth moving further in that direction. Would the vermin destroy themselves and their own world to evade what was rational?

Had they already done so? Could they have developed such wasteful weapons and used them on each other at some time?

The reverie was interrupted. More signals were developing. The vermin had launched missiles, quite probably their uncontrolled fusion devices. Hogajue placed a second lobe to repressing the revulsion. The remaining two lobes turned to calculating the trajectories and devising intercepts.

Quickly, it realized that no intercepts would be needed. Neither missile was targeted toward the sphere. Indeed, each moved slowly, not constantly accelerating, perhaps maneuvering to avoid detection by the vermin who waited near the many empty vessels.

The missiles went past the empty vermin ships, well past. Hogajue calculated, considered. The lobes sorted through the hypotheses available. Without doubt, these carried instrumentation of some kind to augment EM sensors without revealing the

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precise location of the vermin vessel which launched the missiles. This suggested a weakness in the detection abilities of those who guarded the aging vermin vessels.

It also suggested that the vermin were ridiculously factional. The fewer were of the herd Jin Jun, while the more numerous were of the herd Imperial Fleet. That latter nest seemed to spawn sub-herds, though nothing was certain in the vermin manner of organization.

Finally, one of the two missiles maneuvered one time more. The weapon flared for just a moment, destroying itself in the pulse. As that flare of energy died away, the second missile copied the first.

Hogajue placed three lobes into operation, and ordered others to do the same. Together, they split apart and collated the many reflections and refractions of wavelengths. The sphere surrounding them collected even more data than the sphere's subNest could analyze in the moments available. Memory was formed to hold the information until it could be fully distilled into sure knowledge of the force that remained here.

The central datum was understood without question: herd Jin Jun was searching for information herd Fleet refused to disclose. This would be of real interest to the Nests.

June 4, 2395 (Present Day) – About One Light Year from Nán-mén'èr (Alpha Centauri A) (Murphy)

The handheld twittered. "Signals due in ten minutes," *Granuaile's* computer noted through the link.

Murphy sheathed his Cetian broadsword in the scabbard hanging on the hook. The ship's common area was large enough to spar with a hologram, though he would have preferred a live partner. It was too easy to get slack out here.

A very quick shower removed the sweat without wasting time. Murphy pulled his shorts over damp legs, and was up the gangway and into the con with two minutes to spare. He took his

usual seat, keying up displays.

Electromagnetic reflections began streaming into his passive receptors. Over the next ten minutes, the nav systems calculated the locations and likely identities of each ship based on outlines, mass, and other configuration data. The computer tallied and logged. By this data, two task forces were clustered a light-hour or so away, each supplied with food, air, and fuel. Each was ready to take on a skeleton crew. The ships could stream into Nánmén'èr (Alpha Centauri A); reserves and new trainees plucked away from Sol and other ports could be shoved into the cans and sent off to a new battle front, to support the newer ships of the Line.

The passive scan data of the EM flares was not confirming the Fleet records to which parliament, he and Zhaohui had access. Five old task forces had been retired and stockpiled.

Three whole task forces were missing – two carriers, four battlewagons, and numerous escorts and support ships. S o m e - one had stolen most of three older, but still useful combat groups. Someone had weapons, craft, small fighters, tankers, supply ships, couriers, and troop carriers.

Humanitas had more than sympathy in the Fleet. It had an ally. It had people with the clout and codes to make this happen. This was an inside job. Wholesale theft, not retail.

This *definitely* had the makings of a rebellion.

Murphy ran a search on the current Fleet command structure. He had a strong suspicion about who had the necessary codes and a known affinity for Humanitas.

Murphy got the answer he expected. He keyed for voice input. “*Granuaile*, begin calculating for jump back to Nánmén'èr, with pickup of test messenger and refueling.”

That done, he keyed for another messenger, one without the modified board. Zhaohui would want to know what he had found. He could stop at Sol and tell her himself, of course, and probably should. He certainly had achieved the main goal.

She might pull the plug, though, decide to order him to stay close. She would be concerned about her nephew, Ethan. She might want every possible Jin Jun there to protect him, once she

knew how many ships were missing.

Ethan – the entire Empire – would be safer if someone found out where those ships had gone. They might be nearby, even within a light-year or six. He'd sighted one near Groombridge, after all. He was sure that he had not seen *Ibn II*.

Another of the missile corvettes, though, had been tearing up shipping along the Reach. Fleet was happy to claim that *Ibn* and perhaps her crew had gone skullbones. There was plenty of marginally charted space out that way, plenty of room to hide. Apart from Tau Ceti, none of the systems out there were suitable for open-air colonies until Delta Trianguli. A militancy was developing, probably sheltering a rebellion.

The Reach was the place to look.

Murphy downloaded his raw data and analysis into the messenger. He keyed comm to record. "Personal message to Zhao-hui, First Jin Jun, from Cuchulain O'Meath. As you can see from the data, a lot of those ships are missing from the cache. Someone intends to use them. They may be within a light-year or two of Nánmén'èr, Sol, or Wolf. I don't think so, though.

"Someone out in the Reach is getting supplied, and supplied pretty well. An Eighmy-class ship is part of the piracy. I think it's one of the ships that are gone.

"My interpretation of your orders includes seeking any Fleet vessels missing from this anchorage. I'll be starting outbound. Not stopping in Sol, so don't bother looking for me passing through. I'll report developments when I get them.

"Catch you soon."

Murphy keyed to download the recording, then launched the messenger. A few moments later, the nav systems were preparing for the trip back to Nánmén'èr. From there, he would refuel and skip out to the Reach.

June 4, 2395 (Present Day) – About One Light Year from Nánmén'èr (Alpha Centauri A) (Zhīzhū)

The first gravity ripple was dim. The vermin had sent away one of its automated vessels. Shortly thereafter, a larger gravity ripple announced the departure of the vermin intruder. Hogajue had already determined that more information should be collected. If the vermin fought each other, they would be less able to hold back the Nests. Long-blocked expansion would resume.

The vermin vessel's unique splash-pattern matched the best hypothesis. This vermin ship intended to go to the nearest system, the trinary the vermin had reached before the Nests could claim it. Hogajue and the subNest had lurked near there before, listening to the disorganized signals the vermin used to communicate. Such disorganization defied comprehension.

Perhaps some other, more sentient species provided the vermin with their vessels and guided the usurping of worlds for zhīzhū. Many Nests considered the vermin an unlikely source of technology for space travel.

It gave instructions. Power was increased. The sphere began to bend space. Cold brightness washed into all four lobes in the fullness of joy as the sphere followed the vermin vessel.

June 6, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Ren-Ma, Nánmén'èr (Alpha Centauri A III) (Murphy)

Murphy keyed to record. “Cuchulain Padraic O’Meath, Lead Jin Jun on *Granuaile* and bastard half-brother, to Bridget O’Meath, Lady Ren-Ma, beloved sister.” His half-sister had yet to forgive Murphy for their father’s decision to have a second family during his long stints in Parliament. She’d gotten the best of the perks, of course, including the title and the lands. Most people would have gotten over it after thirty-five years.

“I have encrypted data which must be hand-delivered to you. Imperial Priority One. When you get it, put it on the next avail-

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able Jin Jun messenger to Sol. Do not, repeat not entrust this to Fleet personnel in any way, shape or form. Imperial business. I'll be matching and docking at Kentaurus Station in thirteen hours. Have your representative meet me there in person for the hand-off. ”

He encrypted the message under the personal family codes. That would annoy Bridget, who'd only reluctantly given him the codes. Their shared father's will had required her to do so; despite that, she had long resisted. Smiling, he keyed the transmission.

That done, he keyed *Granuaile's* navigation systems to match with the orbital station. He had no intention of wasting time with a grounding. Apart from the lack of a welcome he would get, it would give Bridget additional time to check his orders and credentials against records coming in from Sol. There was no point in giving her a discrepancy to use against him.

June 6, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Nánmén'èr (Alpha Centauri A) (Hogajue)

Hogajue had slipped in and out of this system several times in the past year. It knew the weak spots in the vermin's detection systems. The sphere slid gracefully into the inner system, near the vermin-infested world. It was not an ideal world, but was far better than Groombridge 1618. It needed no changing to support a proper number of zhīzhū. One day, the infestation eradicated, the zhīzhū might well be able to reside here.

It focused attention on locating the vermin vessel it had detected near the anchorage. The Jin Jun signals were soon located. The vessel was already docked with one of the orbital stations, presumably refueling. Hogajue had already managed that detail by skimming at the outermost gas world. The vermin were not yet so numerous in this system that they maintained a sufficient watch there. It was a weakness worth exploiting at some future time.

The ship was busy with data-gathering and interpreting. Though spheres often raced through Wolf 359 and past Jannah to gather information, Nánmén'èr was less often surveyed. A sphere that popped out of the brightness at high velocity in this system would be seen as escalating the threat. The vermin would then redouble their efforts to push past Ross. They might well then use their nuclear weapons – wasteful, vile weapons – against zhīzhū on blue-green worlds.

Insane, these vermin. They would happily render a world less habitable to destroy the zhīzhū. This alone gave good cause to ultimately exterminate them.

Signal analysis began to be completed. Hogajue gave two lobes' attention to the information. The information confirmed the most probable hypothesis about the vessel that the sphere had followed. It was of the Jin Jun subHerd.

In addition, there were individual self-identifications to which the vermin often gave importance. The sole individual aboard the vessel was now identified: O'Meath. Individuals were important to these vermin, at times.

With distaste, Hogajue aroused the Reality Nest observer from its isolation. Limiting the access through only one observant lobe, it queried the observer for as much information as it might hold on human Jin Jun O'Meath.

The observer twinged interest at the identification. The O'Meath was identified in a number of encounters and signals. Several in particular stood out. That identification had been heard in an open transmission at Groombridge 1618, just before the system had been cleansed of the attempted vermin infestation. The transmission had been a recorded message forwarded by the automated vessels, a warning to the human Fleet. It was later found to correspond with information gleaned from the vermin who had tried to observe the home world. The identification carried an association of closeness to the home nest.

The second also came from Groombridge 1618. This individual had been there, briefly. It had left quickly after a larger vermin vessel – an older vermin vessel – left with a number of zhīzhū captured from a lightly armed transport sphere. No

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zhīzhū information of importance had been taken, but the arrogance was nonetheless noted. The Nests had stepped up their surveillance of the anchorage as a result.

How did this information come together? What, in fact, did it actually mean? Why was this vermin here, observing its own kind in quiet secrecy?

Hogajue prepared to watch the vermin O'Meath closely. If it went on to heavily guarded Sol, the sphere would not risk following. It would accept that the information gathered so far would have to be returned to the Nests right away.

If it went elsewhere, though, it would be worth following to learn more. The movements of this one vermin had some meaning, some implicit message. Hogajue advised the rest of those in the sphere of its decision.

All but one individual accepted the decision without comment. The Reality Nest observer, of course, injected itself into the sharing. Hogajue ignored the protest, and settled in to maintain surveillance of vermin O'Meath.

June 8, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Nánmén'èr (Alpha Centauri A) (Hogajue)

The vermin O'Meath's vessel cruised outbound, away from the gravitic dimple formed by the world. Hogajue monitored silently, looking to see where it would go next. The sphere remained at the lowest possible power, only passive sensors receiving. They had evaded discovery far longer than expected.

A gravitic ripple propagated out from O'Meath's position. Hogajue calculated rapidly. It was headed toward a system beyond the vermin's star, a star rarely visited by zhīzhū spheres. The planetary body known to be there was not particularly habitable. It was far enough away that the Nests would prefer to ignore it until the human problem had been resolved. Hogajue began calculating the sphere's own entry into Bright space.

Before it had coordinated all four lobes for the task, the EM-

band sensors detected an anomaly: a tight-beam transmission. Hogajue placed one lobe on the signal. At the same time, it gave orders to those better formed for translation.

With consternation, Hogajue realized that the signal appeared to have come from O'Meath's vessel. A slight distortion in the wavelengths supported this conclusion; the transmission had been sent just before O'Meath entered hyperspace. The vessel's gravitic ripple had propagated through the signal itself, causing the distortion.

Annoyed, Hogajue opened the necessary fibers to allow the Reality observer to consider the meaning. It did so, and responded with the toneless, straight-line, one-dimensional noise-like communication. "Zhīzhū ship, either ingest yeast-spoiled fluids with me, or return to your own space. Your position is known. Fleet vessels have been alerted to your presence, and will not warn before burning your meat for ingestion. Do not make us sun your sphere out of existence."

Hogajue pondered the message. It could not be properly understood. The human should have simply attacked in appropriate self-preservation. Most human vessels would have done so.

Vermin were known to heat-damage many edibles before ingestion, ruining the sustenance and information obtained. The significance of imbibing yeast-spoiled fluids, however, was elusive. The Reality observer suggested it to be a rational ritual. Hogajue sent a searing dissent back along the fibers, and once again isolated the observer from all but the minimal required information flow.

New readings reached the sphere at speed-of-light. Several human battle vessels near the habitable world were breaking orbit. Both were vectoring toward the sphere. Hogajue gave the orders and made the calculations that were necessary. It was best to move before being scourged by nuclear weapons.

Hogajue stored the readings of O'Meath's exit burst for later analysis. For the moment, it was best to forget curiosity and bring information back to the Nests. There was little likelihood that this creature would again warn them before attacking.

In any event, the instructions did not grant it time to pursue

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one vermin. The missing vermin vessels spoke of a new threat to the Nests. The instructions had been clear. The next goal was to seek evidence of the vermin intent. One logic dictated following the vermin O'Meath, but clear instructions forbade such a detour.

Hogajue brought his four lobes into parallel and began calculating the exit toward the vermin home world.

Chapter 5

June 8, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Nánmén'èr to Luyten 726-8 A) (Murphy)

Granuaile settled into the proper groove. Murphy locked down the con and went below, whistling. He walked quickly through the engineering deck, making sure that all was running properly. The bots drifted in and out, checking and adjusting as they went.

Murphy went forward to the main lounge. It was too large for a single man. The *Lady* class could operate under the command of a single man or woman, but had been designed to carry as many as eight. He had room to spread out.

He laid back, preparing to dictate a report for eventual transmission to Zhaohui. She was going to give him more flack over his latest decision. Only *Granuaile*'s survey-class sensor array had picked out the distant speck of the zhīzhū sphere. They'd been hanging there, quietly observing. It would take some analysis to determine when it had arrived, and how it had gone undetected by Fleet's installations.

They'd been watching for a reason. For all he knew, the zhīzhū were planning an attack, and he'd warned them that he'd caught them at it. Fleet would object about that if they figured out that he'd robbed them of a kill. Fleet policy was simplistic.

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Knowing that they'd been caught, the zhīzhū would have to recalculate whatever plans they were making. They'd also have to question why he'd invited them for a beer, if they understood the invitation.

Did the zhīzhū use eating as a social occasion when they weren't finishing off their enemies?

Fleet and Zhaohui could complain all they want about his brief message. He'd tight-beamed a warning to the Fleet base as well, giving them all the information. He'd given them the chance to make an easy kill almost as soon as he could do so.

Most likely, though, both zhīzhū and Fleet were too thick-headed to understand the message underlying the messages he sent. Idiots.

June 8, 2395 (Present Day) – Earth (Sol III) (Ramachandra)

“The Jin Jun are looking closely.” Aunt Sunitha knelt, set the milk down on the edge of the preaching platform. She straightened. “Zhaohui's Mistress has been through Nánmén'èr recently. The Depot was flared a few days later.”

“You're sure it was O'Meath?” Reverend Quayle scowled. “He can't be everywhere.”

“We aren't sure, of course. How can we be certain? It could be the zhīzhū, but that would mean that they got past our pickets at Ross and Wolf. We can't believe that.”

Ramachandra spoke up. “The zhīzhū will not be an issue soon. We will still have the Jin Jun to deal with.”

“That will change when we carry out the third phase.”

“Not soon enough,” Quayle commented. “The tyranny must finally end. We'll have true democracy when the Zhangs are put out, along with their servants. We've been kept down too long.”

The North Americans still talked as if their pre-Pandemic culture of consumption had been improperly subdued by the Zhangs. Their infectious wastefulness had given rise to the necessary strict regulations. However they may have evolved into

tyrants, Ramachandra could credit the efficiency and good sense of the first Zhangs in humanity's survival. The Cause was simply returning to proper management.

"I have a message from the Prime Cell," Aunt Sunitha said. "They have told us to accelerate both programs. We are expected to strike both the Zhangs and the zhīzhū at the same time."

"That is not rational," Ramachandra responded. "The ship is not yet ready. Once it is ready, we will need it to implement the Zhīzhū Solution."

"Bartlett has what he needs for both. And you'll be passing through this system on your way."

"Aunt Sunitha, we do not plan to approach Earth. You have ordered a tanker to be in position near the Oort Zone. You know this. The Cause does not control enough Fleet units to render a deep penetration practical."

"They will follow. And the tanker is being repositioned." The Admiral's face was set in its no-argument mode, long familiar to Ramachandra. "We value your views, but Prime Cell has set this requirement. We all will follow orders. You will find your way to succeed. We will do everything possible to clear your way."

"Foolishness. It is an unnecessary risk."

"You do not *decide* necessity. There is no more discussion." Aunt Sunitha turned her head slightly away as she did to show that she would no longer participate in discussion. "Reverend, we should be getting ready for your sermon."

"Quite right," Quayle agreed. "The congregation will be drifting in soon. It isn't appropriate to discuss the Great Work in the open."

Ramachandra kept himself from seething openly. If these two weren't of great use to the Cause, he would end them both immediately. Aunt Sunitha was a fool in any event; she'd failed so far to bring Avinashini into the cause itself. The Admiral had outlived her usefulness.

He would have to do that once they circled the fire and she became properly subservient. They needed pilots, especially some who could learn the mathematics he alone had unraveled

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from the minuscule clues left by hundreds of encounters with the zhīzhū squeeze-out. She was not at his own level, but she could be taught.

If at any point he died, she would learn in any event. His will would send the extended password he'd built into the file if he was killed or lost. He'd not bothered to discuss this precaution with Aunt Sunitha or anyone else above him. They might be over him, but they were in most ways his inferiors. He knew better how to safeguard important knowledge.

June 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Outer System (Sol) (Hogajue)

Few spheres had returned from the vermin's home system. The bipeds saw no wrong in desecrating flesh by fire. That fact worked to their advantage, at least for now. The vermin would happily destroy one small sphere.

In another decade, though more young Nests would mature. They would supply sufficient individuals to crew the spheres estimated as necessary. Once secured, the blue-green world in the third orbit would provide an adequate route into the next arm of space.

The vermin were already expanding down that arm. The vermin colonies would supply the sustenance needed to move further out. The nests would finally have an ample frontier.

Hogajue began the patient observation period it had been granted. All vessels and movements, all transmissions had to be observed. Where possible, they had to be digested in advance. The missing ships were in use somewhere. Most likely, they would be used to launch a new encroachment. This could not be accepted.

June 21, 2395 (Present Day) – Allende (Luyten 726-8 A II)
(Murphy)

Murphy checked the seal on the boarding tube. It was tight. The atmosphere levels matched. He had few enough friends in Fleet, and wanted to be sure the match was solid. Damned idiots. He felt paranoid, double-checking details like this. It would have been easier to adopt a close orbit, not bother to lock with the pylon. Then at least, he wouldn't look paranoid if he wore a proper EVA kit.

There was nothing to do about it. This was a "courtesy call" on a "fact-finding tour" for the Emperor's household. He had bypassed Sol, used Zhaohui's codes to refine his rewritten orders while cruising through hyperspace. She would be irritated later, but not too irritated. She knew what she really wanted when she sent him out in the first place. "No bull in a china shop," she'd said.

Murphy was in a shipsuit coverall, carrying only his usual handheld, his side-arm, and his unique "ceremonial" sword. A full Jin Jun uniform would tell the Fleet idiots that his agenda was, in their opinion, improper. Then again, they probably already thought that his agenda was improper.

They thought right, by their standards.

He reached behind his neck, fingered the sword's hilt. So far as he knew, only three humans rightfully carried such a sword. Two of them were Jin Jun – and each of those swords had been newly forged when given, thought by the Horns to carry no remnant of prior owners' souls. For all he knew, the third had discarded his weapon, not fully understanding the great honor that had been given with that piece of metal.

No. Grunon wasn't careless about such things. Grunon at least vaguely understood what it meant to be given such a sword. Jifka's sword was well blooded over the years, both by Jifka and those who had carried the sword in the past. Grunon had it in a lockbox somewhere, perhaps his home at Wolf.

Enough dawdling. Murphy opened the outer lock, stepped into the docking tube. He had to start downloading apparently

innocuous files that wouldn't alert Fleet.

No power was wasted on full gravity in Allende's landing bays. Murphy pushed off into the clear tube, executing a lazy twist-and flip as he approached the other end. He took in the sight of the iron-rich rocky surface below the tube. Allende had become Fleet's most important base in the Reach long ago. The civilian sector's shipyards had become the production line for Fleet's carriers, beginning with *Hibernia*, leaving Wolf's facilities free for maintenance and construction of smaller vessels.

He went straight to the Base Commander's offices. Lt. Anders, the Adjutant of the Day, looked him up and down with proper suspicion as he introduced himself and proffered his handheld. "We received your download when you docked," he said. "The Commander has no time for Jin Jun today. I've been ordered to assist you in any legitimate way."

The man's tone and wording gave him away. He'd been ordered to stonewall and keep an eye on the Jin Jun. Fleet didn't want O'Meath digging too deep into the databases. "Works for me," Murphy responded. "A bunch of boring statistics to get. I pissed off Zhaohui one time too many. Got any jobs here in Fleet?"

"There are heads to clean out." Anders was unduly amused at his own humor.

"Bot work's better than downloading statistics. Where can I work?"

Anders pointed to a an unused workstation in the office. "You can hardlink there."

"Perfect." Murphy took a seat and put his handheld in the cradle. Fleet must think him entirely dull. He didn't need a wireless link to get beyond firewalls. A hardlink wasn't going to be as effective a data-dam as the base commander might think.

Meanwhile, he would be pleasant to Anders. There were more flies to be caught with honey than vinegar.

The handheld connected to the system and brought up a display. Murphy keyed in his innocuous, standard codes to get the surface-level data he was allowed and watched the data began to flow.

He swiveled the chair and leaned back, lacing his fingers behind his head. “We could get a beer while we wait, if you’d like. I’ll buy.”

Anders tried to manage a stony stare. A week with Zhaohui might teach him how to do it properly. After a moment, Anders pulled out his handheld and began keying. Murphy shrugged and turned back to his download.

The data stream surged, then trickled to nothing. Murphy removed the handheld from the cradle, tucked it into its pocket. “Thank the commander for me.” He left the room, walked the corridors back toward the docking bay. He needed a stretch, though.

Murphy found the main lift terminal for the dome above. Fleet personnel looked at him, then looked away. One woman with a petty officer’s stripe gave an active look of disdain. Murphy smiled and nodded back. She, too looked away.

The lift took them all up to the surface. The lift emerged near one edge of the vast geodesic dome. Murphy stepped out. The air smelled good, though not so clean as Shānhé-Wòtu’s. The dim red central star was visible on the horizon to his left. Light panels on the struts overhead simulated early morning.

Civilians and Fleet personnel came and went from the transportation hub. Most were walking, or on bicycles of one type or another. A few light wheeled trans-bots moved people and light freight along the paths. Principal signs and directions were in Classical Spanish, with secondary notations in Standard English. The residents took the Buenos Aires environment seriously.

Murphy hailed a trans-bot and took a seat behind the dash. “Food,” he advised the bot. “Good beef.” He would see if anything had changed since he was last here. The motor hummed, and the bot took its place in the light traffic pattern through the habitat.

Allende had been the second major dome world for the Hu Tu Projects, after Wolf. Transplanting Terran flora and fauna had been essential both for the residents and for the future of Earth herself. The Pandemics had significantly reduced population pressure and resulting damage to the Terran ecology, and

hyperspatial travel promised new worlds. The Hu Tu Projects were creating reservoirs of Terran life outside of Sol, without competing in the established ecospheres of the rare blue-greens.

Fleet had carried smaller starter initial domes out on the big teener pushers. The smaller domes had been settled and anchored. Bots built the larger domes over the smaller. Eventually, sufficient atmosphere was generated, and the smaller domes opened to the larger. The original dome was still here, somewhat off-center, though it could not be seen through the vegetation and buildings blocking the way.

The bot wove through the city. The route was familiar. He'd been here enough times before. It finally stopped at a small restaurant: Tain Bo Pub. The structure was stone, made to look like it had come straight from the Irish countryside. The doors and shutters were wood, probably grown under the dome and stained to look old. Children played nearby, though their skin was darker than usually produced among the old Celts.

Nothing much had changed here on Allende, then.

Murphy accepted the charge and let the bot go. He entered the restaurant and looked around. He saw the object of his search at the central cooking station, as he expected. "Mari! My table?"

The woman was short, plump, with dark curls. She turned and smiled, then tried to be stern. Her features were far less Irish than South American, her Standard accented. "So, you come back to me again."

"I couldn't stay away."

"Oh, you stay away plenty," she replied. "You come here when it suits you, not me."

"I forged papers just to come here," Murphy responded. That much was true. "I need a good meal to make me settle down."

"Two lies at once." Marisol raised her long-handled spatula and shook it with a mock threat. "You need to be careful, or you will sleep on your ship tonight."

"No lies between us," he agreed. He went over to the station itself, lifting the round counter on its hinges and stepping inside. She allowed him to get close so that she could properly welcome him.

A few moments later, she pulled away, flushed. "Fleet will close me down if they see us in here," she warned. She ushered him back into the common area. "You need to go in the back," she said. "Shift change is soon. Lots of marines. I don't need more fighting."

"Nothing I started."

Marisol flipped a hand in dismissal. "You start fights just because you're beautiful," she pointed out. "Yes, we can say that." She laughed at her own joke. "I still don't want to clean up, or buy new dishes. And no more marines getting hurt. They stayed away for *two months* after the last brawl you didn't start." She shooed him toward the back of the building. "Upstairs! Your *usual* table. I'll be up as soon as Gianna and Olga are here to run the room."

Murphy smiled and went up to Marisol's apartments above the restaurant. The door was unlocked. He entered.

Her rooms were, as usual, tidy and clean. She liked her own space, and liked it in control. Murphy took a seat on the couch and glanced at the collection of family photos and locally fired porcelain dolls. He saw no sign that she had anyone else definitively in her life, as expected. She'd always told him that she would grab on to a stable, local man at the first chance.

The local men were a little dense, in his opinion. Or perhaps highly unstable. She was a nice kid. Someone should have proposed to her long ago, and made it worth her while to accept.

Murphy pulled out his handheld and keyed into the comm system. His encrypted link pulled in *Granuaile's* passive sensors. No sign of another gravitic disturbance had been recorded in his absence. The zhīzhū sphere he'd let go at Nánmén'èr either had not followed, or had come over the lip too far outside the system to be a threat.

He keyed again. All diagnostics and checklists showed *Granuaile* ready to leave as soon as he was.

Light footsteps sounded on the stair. Marisol came through the door carrying a tray. The scent of beef filled the air. He stood and offered to take the tray. Marisol relinquished it and allowed him to bring it to the eating nook. She closed the door

behind her, turned both deadlocks.

Murphy took note. "Trying to keep me in?"

"No one can," she responded. She wasn't able to maintain the lighter façade as she sat. "People are getting tense," she said. "The Humanitas Church has many new people now." She sliced a large serving of prime rib and put it on a plate for him. "Masses are less crowded. And the sermons...I went to a few services because my sister begged. The priest or whatever she was said some nasty things. I'm not sure people like you are so welcome here."

"Murphy took the plate. "What? Black Irish?"

"Don't joke about it. There's talk. The marines and junior officers talk about changing some of the laws, and taking things into hands. Some say Yi Tan's regents went too far with the Shānhé-Wòtu settlers. Too harsh."

Murphy cut himself a bite. "You don't agree, do you?" He put the bite in his mouth, began chewing.

"You know better," Marisol replied. "But my sister, she sends money to pay off their legal fees and to help them buy things to make life easier. A lot of people do. People get tired sometimes that the sky is hexagons and plastic. They feel it's wrong. Even I feel it's wrong, sometimes."

"You grew up here."

"Sure, but I've seen pictures. And *you* don't choose to live here."

Murphy shrugged. "I've seen a bunch of worlds. A lot of them are domes. And *Granuaile* can be pretty tight, as well."

"When you go to Shānhé-Wòtu, though, you ride some animal and cook and fight under a blue sky. You don't understand what that means to people who can't do that. Some of them, a lot of them get to asking why just you?"

"You don't ask that."

"No. You're just where you are, same as I'm here. And I'm not too jealous. I've read all about the Horns. I don't think I would like a place without a hot shower every day." She laughed again. "Anyways, I know here. I like it well enough." She reached over the table and stroked his hand. "When you visit,

you bring the sky with you.” She took her hand away and took up her own eating utensils. “Now, we eat. Time to talk *after* I get you in my bed.”

June 23, 2395 (Present Day) – Beijing Station (Sol)
(Ramachandra)

“We had another ten days,” the chief engineer complained. “What the hell’s the rush?”

“Make main power ready,” Ramachandra again directed. He looked over the helm console. “We will be headed for a safe entry within the hour.”

“That’s a hell of a lot of work. I’m light on crew. What’s wrong – argue with the preacher?”

Ramachandra called up the navigation protocols. “There is no more discussion.” He cut off the comm. His engineer needed no information to give out among the ranks.

Zhaohui’s mistress, O’Meath, had been to the reserve anchorage. Messages had been rushed from Nánmén’èr in Lady Ren-Ma’s personal ship. The work had to be completed before the fools found some way to interfere.

June 25, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Guo Chun Chi Habitat
(Gliese 105) (Avinashini)

The ship dropped out of hyperspace. Avi felt the hard transition bounce. The helm officer was sloppy at best, a man who should not have been passed at all. A computer alone would have done as well.

Fleet was not putting its best out here. The best weren’t needed here. The Reach routes were relatively safe, needing minor patrolling against the slow increase of human-against-human conflict.

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Her letter should have gotten to the Admiral by now. Perhaps, just once, the Admiral would show some real care and heed the request. She should allow some other pilot to handle pirates and criminals. Avi wanted to find herself back in a Gandiva's proper cockpit.

Many of the ships that had been struck over the last eighteen months had been smaller vessels. A few had been the larger pushers carrying larger equipment and materials for the various domed colonies and stations. For the most part, these had been outbound, loaded with various kinds of technology and essential goods. One ship had been carrying agro modules. All had been destined for the systems along the route to Delta Trianguli.

Some inbound ships had been hit. These had primarily been carrying food and valuable exotics. Several had been carrying partially processed metals destined for the Fleet base at Allende.

The pattern led to an obvious conclusion: someone was operating a small colony out here, off the charts. It was an organized group, and not officially sanctioned. Whoever it was needed survival equipment.

Avi returned to the business at hand.

The main sensor scans were funneled through to her own craft. It was an FDC, not a proper fighter. She looked at the scans herself, paying no attention to the assessment from the bridge. Two contacts showed, neither too far out. Both were sized as larger vessels; both seemed to be on a slow commercial pace. Transponder codes came in, and agreed with her initial estimate. These were both niners, little more than tugs with giant fuel tanks, moving rarer metals toward the yards at Allende.

This rated a standard patrol. She prepared her orders.

June 25, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Guo Chun Chi Habitat (Gliese 105) (Urwah)

Urwah entered the ship's gym. Lt. Cmdr. Avinashini was already on the stationary bicycle. She often pedaled, sometimes

working, sometimes on a simulation. By the way she was looking ahead, her gaze improperly focused, he knew that her heads-up was running an overlay. "What course?" he asked.

"Soldier's Summit," she said. "Ascent." Her breathing was barely higher than normal.

"Utah," he commented. "One of the tough ones." He began stretching.

"It is a place for learning discipline. A pilot needs discipline."

"You have plenty of discipline. Groombridge."

"I did my job."

"You did more than your job. You gave us all a chance on the ground."

"I was at the right place at the right time," she said. There was no falsity in her modesty. "Targets presented. I fired."

"I read the reports," Urk responded. "You did more than fire off your weapons. You're one hell of a pilot. Saved grunts and colonists. You might just help clean up this part of space." Stretching done, he began his push-ups.

"I would be better used back at Wolf Base and the Ross buffer. That is more important than hunting a few human thieves."

"True. We're here for political purposes." Urwah kept his pace high. "Fleet thinks the corvette it gave to the Jin Jun has gotten into pirate hands. The Brass wants to prove it."

"It is a possibility," Avi responded. "They could have lost the ship to boarders."

Urk considered his close encounter with O'Meath himself, the First Jin Jun's pet. Arrogant, he would agree. Undisciplined, perhaps – but Jin Jun took a different view of the need for ranks and rules. The First Duty, protecting the Imperial Family, required extensive combat and security training. No space-qualified Jin Jun had avoided the mandatory three years' service in the Guard. "I doubt that the Jin Jun would give up a ship without a fight."

"One cannot say."

Urk rolled over, began his crunches. "If pirates got hold of a

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Jin Jun ship, the Jin Jun were swarmed and out-gunned. They all died before that ship was taken.

“And I can’t believe that they went pirate themselves.”

Avi said nothing. It was difficult to assess human loyalties. She finished her pedaling. “I have duty soon.” She swung off the bicycle and left the gym quickly, using her towel to absorb the sweat.

Perspiration. She was deadly, but she was a lady. The Commander did not “sweat. Urwah would not deny to himself enjoyed the receding view. If she were People of the Book, a little younger, and not also his superior officer, he might allow himself to be interested.

He stood, got his rope, began to jump. There was no point thinking about that sort of thing. Duty out here did not mix with romance, regardless of religion. Urwah worked the rope into a punishing rhythm.

June 29, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Neptune (Sol VIII)
(Hogajue)

Vermin drones orbited the blue giant, guarding against intrusion. One orbited near the desired refueling path. The weapons operators were already smothering the unit with localized communications interference. Hogajue calculated the firing trajectories itself.

Two projectiles burst out of the polar launch accelerator. As they exited, drives kicked the torpedoes further and faster. Internal guidance zhīzhū – small, limited individuals bred solely for the purpose – adjusted course as the torpedoes closed on the drone.

The drone detected the attack through the interference, but too late. It managed to outmaneuver the first projectile, which flared into the atmosphere. The second smashed through the elongated body of the craft. The shattered frame and skin tore apart, spreading along the orbital path.

Hogajue guided the sphere into its fuel dive. The intelligence gathered through surveillance had not pinpointed any single plan, but the vermin were certainly preparing some new offensive. They were maintaining secrecy, perhaps, by using older ships.

The sphere had dared much, pushing into the inner system at high velocity. Hogajue had stayed far enough away from the vermin's home world to avoid detection and attack, but been close enough to monitor communications. Ships could be detected coming and going. Most had declared themselves with transponder signals, just as a ship of the People would in the home system.

One of the old models had not done so. The Reality Observer had insisted on pointing this anomaly out, as if Hogajue could not determine that for itself. The vessel's entry had been carefully observed, likely its destination calculated based on the gravitic disruption.

Like the individual O'Meath's vessel, the older vermin Fleet ship was heading for the double-star system Luyten 726-8. The vermin plans were being prepared out along that arm, away from easy observation. It was time to let the Nests learn.

July 2, 2395 (Present Day) – Outer System L 1159-16 (Murphy)

Murphy nudged *Granuaile* into the perfect groove, then keyed the shut-downs. Muffled power-plant sounds reduced to almost nothing in the background.

He went down the two levels to the forward airlock. His battlesuit, specially equipped for Jin Jun purposes, waited. Murphy slid into the suit, donned his helmet, and locked it down. The onboard computer came up, assured him that the suit was tight.

His quarry was to Granuaile's rear. He strode back, feeling the equipment adjust to him. He opened the inner hatch to the cargo bay, stepped inside, and sealed it again. "Scavenge the air."

"Scavenging air," the computer replied. "Two minutes until

vacuum.”

Murphy went to the rear cargo hatch and looked over the collected equipment while the pumps ran. The sound diminished as the air thinned to vacuum. He knelt and checked the line guns while the hold decompressed.

“You are now in vacuum.”

“Open the hatch.”

The rear bulkhead divided in the center, each side sliding silently into its wall recess. The secondary hatch swung out and downward on its hydraulics, stopping when it was level with the deck. The heads-up adjusted to the black beyond.

The buoy satellite waited twenty meters off, apparently motionless against the star field. Solar panels and sheathing made it difficult to see against the dark of the outer system. Murphy clipped one end of each line to a stay, the other to a suit ring. “Hold gravity off.”

He felt the artificial field reduce to nothing. Murphy pushed off. The line guns extended their thin cables behind him while the heads-up superimposed a targeting mode. It showed no need for any course correction.

He knew a fair amount from the data he’d accessed from the buoys orbiting Luyten 726-8 A. There was more ship movement out here than he should have detected, and redactions in the recorded data. That was a beginning. With a little luck, he’d have more shortly.

A hand-hold waited for his grip as he almost passed. Murphy reached and closed his hand on the bar, arresting his motion. The satellite’s rotation changed slightly. Pulling himself hand-over-hand, the Jin Jun found the deployment and service unit.

The oversized touchpad allowed him to key in a pass code. A panel unlocked. Murphy slid it fully open, then opened a pouch in his suit leg. The short-range link unit fit properly into the slot inside the access panel.

“Link achieved,” *Granuaile* reported. “Provide code for access.”

Murphy easily shifted mental gears to Court Mandarin. “*Seek refuge in the Buddha’s unutterable wisdom.*”

“First code accepted. Provide second code.”

He switched to Greek. “*Know yourself. Nothing in excess.*”

“Second code accepted. Provide third code.”

Damned Fleet paranoia. This, at least, was Standard. “Four score and seven years ago.”

“Third code accepted. Link established.”

“About damned time. Download all data via encrypted low-power direct link.”

Murphy turned to look in-system. The red dwarf was far enough away to view safely. The few planets, including Allende, were invisible to the eye from this distance, and amounted to little more than rocks suitable as anchors for habitat domes. The locals were at least able to live in the domes full-time, unlike the unfortunate trogs underneath Jannah’s surface. The locals mined, manufactured, and serviced ships going further down the Reach.

How would it feel to spend a lifetime on a rock in a stepping-stone system?

The download began. Murphy watched the encrypted file names stream across his heads-up display. *Granuaile* rapidly decrypted and organized them for him. Many were unimportant: shipping manifests, passage codes, and the like.

The few key files were more heavily encrypted. Fleet was foolish in letting this information hang in a buoy in space, encrypted or not. A zhīzhū wouldn’t need all four lobes to get this data decrypted. When the reforms started rolling, he would point this flaw out.

Within a few minutes, Murphy had all of Fleet’s ship movements for six months, along with the names of key officers. He scanned down the lists, looking for names he recognized. He had a few friends out here, he hoped.

None showed up. Those officers must all be assigned to Wolf or Ross. They were commanding scows, most likely.

One name caught his eye, though: Lt. Commander B. P. Avinashini, commanding *Harris’* fighter contingent.

Why the *hell* was the admiralty wasting her out here in the Reach? She should be on *Hibernia* or *Nippon*, keeping the

damned zhīzhū on their side of the line until reasonable communications could finally be worked out. She might not count herself a friend of the Jin Jun, but she was sure as hell an asset to humanity.

Harris wasn't all that far ahead of *Granuaile*. Her convoy patrol had her following the crawling jumps the inner and teener freighters. She or one of the other seven ships in the group swept the systems for the nuisance ships of the Reach.

Murphy dug deeper into the file. None of the other regular ship's officers were familiar to him. He hadn't had enough time during the evacuation of the Manifesters from Shānhé-Wòtu to punch through the layers of resistance. Fleet had followed the orders from Parliament and the Regency, but made sure that his subordinates were unsympathetic.

A final name came up on a tangential branch of *Harris'* command tree. Lt. Urwah Grunon commanded the ship's marine contingent.

That couldn't be a coincidence, could it? Two of the heroes of the Groombridge Rout posted together on an underpowered, under-gunned commerce patrol? One of them the daughter of a powerful member of the Admiralty? The other a friend of the Jin Jun?

The math wasn't adding up here. For one thing, he hadn't heard from Grunon since he'd gotten him into officer school.

The download completed. Murphy would have more time to analyze the information, but he suspected that he would be looking for *Harris* along with a missing antique task force. *Harris*, at least, should be easy enough to find. She patrolled up and back along the pusher routes.

Granuaile disconnected. Murphy pulled the short-range network unit and re-sealed the access panel. Within a few more minutes, he was back on the hold deck, the hatch sealing behind him. "Pressurize," he ordered. "And put all your spare processing on the records. I want to know what's moving along the Reach.

Chapter 6

July 9, 2395 (Present Day) – Allende (Luyten 726-8 A II)
(Ramachandra)

The aging courier moaned and creaked as he increased the thrust for final matching with the orbital station. As the vessel came alongside, he cut main thrust. Maneuvering units gave short bursts as he played over the controls, bringing the ship into perfect position. “Idle the main power,” Ramachandra ordered. “Call up the fueling boom. We are to be ready for immediate departure.”

“My crew expects to go down,” the chief engineer responded over comm. “We plan to get some good steaks. There’s a little place in Buenos Ares dome – ”

“You will revise your plans,” Ramachandra cut him off. “Have the ship ready to go.”

“You still haven’t told me what the rush is.”

“I have told you what you need to know each time you have asked.” Ramachandra quashed the desire to decompress the engineering section. He could not afford to run on a skeleton crew at this juncture. “Prepare the ship.”

He checked the comm settings before he closed down and locked the boards. The courier was properly identifying itself as a small, private trader running barely in the black. At the same time, it was already digging into the local computers and planting

worms that would erase all records once the courier was gone. Even the base's records of a jump ripple would be removed to leave no hint of his passage.

Anyone viewing the courier on a cam or out one of the station's few ports before she left would know what she was. Those few, though, were loyal to the Cause. They were allowed to know.

Ramachandra reviewed the comm records. The computer had sent the proper signal to the base as soon as the ship had come in over the lip. The response had been prompt and efficient, sent only a minute after the original hail had been received. The representative should be on the fuel station. Ramachandra keyed another pre-recorded comm burst.

The base's representative, one Lt. Anders, was already suited up and waiting in the nearest lock. Ramachandra went aft to the lock and cycled it. The man who exited the lock wore a maintenance suit with a gravpack for thrust. He had already removed his helmet and was starting on the torso seals as Ramachandra spun the wheel and pulled the airtight hatch open.

"Keep it on. We will not be long. Follow me." Ramachandra led him forward to the courier's small wardroom. Taking a seat, he keyed his handheld for a download of the lieutenant's data, then wiped the suit computer. His handheld immediately searched for the critical answer.

Yes, the damned Jin Jun O'Meath had come into the system. He'd accessed base information, though not at a deep level. The records gave no indication that he had gotten into critical information. He had been kept at surface and summary levels, though he'd made attempts.

He had then somehow managed to evade any accidents or entanglements that would have prevented him from going further down the Reach. O'Meath had gone on, most likely down the pusher routes. Ramachandra keyed for analysis of the exit route *Granuaile* had taken.

The handheld churned the data a few moments before providing him the information. Anders stood, obviously becoming uncomfortable at the long silence.

The data summary appeared on the display. Ramachandra leaned back, dissatisfied with what he saw. He was even more dissatisfied with what anyone with sense would surmise from it.

The fools here had somehow let O'Meath access a relay buoy. They hadn't forced a purge and reboot when he came in-system, and their own data had told him where the buoys were. They had assisted him in obtaining unedited data.

There would be redactions, of course. The buoys had long been programmed to redact the data on the comings and goings of vessels associated with the Cause. Those automated redactions still left evidence. The blank spots themselves could not be removed without a full system purge. The systems had been designed and built to keep enemies and privateers from hacking the buoys and deleting all evidence of their existence.

The Cause had been unable to alter that fact. It depended on its operatives within Fleet to regularly download, purge, and rebuild the database without the obvious deletions.

Ramachandra checked one more fact through his links. Anders was a member of the Cause. He was partially responsible for the buoy data, and for its revisions. He was one of those who had failed.

Ramachandra finally looked up at the young officer. He nodded. "You have done good work. I will take you back to the lock." He would not have bothered lying if he'd had more than a skeleton crew on board. He rose from the table and followed Anders back through the corridor.

The young man stepped into the lock and sealed his helmet. Ramachandra closed the hatch and turned the wheel until it was tight. He paused a moment before cycling the air and opening the outer hatch, however. A few keystrokes on his handheld hacked him into Anders' suit computer. The grav-propulsion settings were easy to alter. It should have been more difficult. The man was without question a fool.

Ramachandra cycled the lock, then keyed for the outer hatch to open. He keyed into an external cam and watched Anders emerge from the upper hull. The young man seemed hesitant, not entirely accustomed to EVA operations. Perhaps his cell leaders

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had already noted his error, sent him to this meeting to make their work easy.

As soon as Anders was well clear of the courier's hull, Ramachandra keyed the maneuvering orders to execute. Anders was propelled away from both ship and station. The thrusters oriented him into orbital deceleration. At the same time, all comm was blocked and shut down.

Nothing Anders could do from inside the suit would change the result. In a few hours, he would return to the inhospitable rock's surface. The impact would kill him, if he hadn't had the sense to shut down his air for a more pleasant death.

He would pursue O'Meath if he thought it was possible to catch him. The Lady-class ships, though, were much faster than the courier. There was now no time to waste. The solution had to be made ready, as the Prime Cell had ordered.

Ramachandra keyed comm. "We will immediately make way for Manifest Destiny Base. It will be a long jump. All systems must ration power."

While the rest of the crew prepared, he would prepare a new file for the buoys to upload to outgoing ships. If O'Meath was located, he would have to be dealt with. Ramachandra checked his files. *Cartwright* was about to commence the outbound trip. She would carry the orders and upload them to the buoys. She would also alert any other vessels of Fleet or the Cause. The Jin Jun would not interfere in the great work.

January 19, 2390 (Five Years Ago) – Vicinity of Groombridge 1618 (Zhīzhū)

The sphere sped inbound, coasting on its accrued momentum. The neural fibers were busy, almost frantic with data speeding to and from those in the subNest. Every available lobe analyzed the electromagnetic spectrum for every available hint of energy production. Signals included the impossible vermin language, masked energy generation signatures, light emitted by the vermin

drive systems, even reflections from a mild stellar flare.

Hogajue assembled all of the data to determine and confirm the locations of the invading vermin vessels. Most orbited the single world of interest. Its hue was not yet blue-green, but it would come to that in another century. The seeding, now fifty years past, had been a successful experiment.

The seeding had been too successful. The vermin had noted that the world was at the edge of habitability. Ignoring the claim beacons, they had brought humans to settle. They wanted the fruits born by the seeding. That theft could not be allowed.

The Nests had assessed this threat. They had considered allowing the intrusion for a time. A comfortable vermin population could be a source of food as well as information. Experience, though, had taught that these vermin were not easily domesticated.

The incoming spheres would eradicate the infestation. Hogajue reviewed its data and rearranged it slightly for more efficient transmission. It noted with amusement one small vessel nearing the expected entry point. That individual would soon be overwhelmed by incoming spheres.

The first wave of brightness washed through the system. It was early, and far too weak to be even a scouting sphere. Hogajue directed the sensory extenders in the proper direction and waited for electromagnetic radiation to catch up with the gravitic ripple.

The source was small, barely large enough to carry a single vermin. By the shape of the ripple, it was most likely one of the simplistic electronic devices the vermin sometimes sent through the brightness. The growing number of Nests studying the vermin suggested, improbably, that the vermin stored information solely in the electronics, without the interface of life.

The canister began transmitting.

The vermin's two-dimensional communications eluded Hogajue's comprehension. The navigator instead examined the ripple closely and calculated its likely origin.

The result was improbable, worthy of question. It cleared all four peripheral lobes and reviewed the calculations. Unsatisfied

with that result, it repeated and rechecked its result.

The vermin canister did indeed come from the Home world. Somehow, the bipeds had hidden themselves there. This device proved it. It was undoubtedly reporting the results of surveillance. Despite the lack of translation, it almost certainly was warning the vermin of the incoming host.

Hogajue began studying the transmission, trying to find some comprehensible pattern in it. It brought in additional assistance from those not too busy with the other necessary preparations. They wasted little time in determining that they were not well suited for gleaning this information.

Hogajue turned back to calculating the local effects of the Brightness. The Host would arrive shortly. With diligence and re-checking, Hogajue estimated the time of the Host's exit into the Dark.

One other sensory extension impinged on Hogajue's awareness. One of the human fighting craft approached the area. Amusement swelled inside the central lobe. The Host would destroy this single defender as an afterthought.

Hogajue waiting, continued refining its calculations. It accepted the passage of time.

Finally, the first ripple came. At Hogajue's signal along the neural nets, the communicators began their transmissions to the Host, warning that complete surprise had been lost.

The story unfolded before him through the sense extenders, the interpretations of those closely tied. Sphere after sphere emerged into the Dark.

The single human vessel attacked. Its operator demonstrated true understanding of mathematics, destroying sphere after sphere. Hogajue's central lobe refused to accept the carnage, even as it was permanently remembered for later consideration.

July 11, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Avinashini)

The almost-awake dream was both pleasant and troubling.

She was touched, caressed, more, in the way of husband to wife. She responded in kind. Her body responded to the dream, the desires, as a woman's body should.

The man, though, could never be husband. She couldn't bring him into focus, but he clearly was not Indian. Some moments he seemed African, like Urwah, other times non-Indian Asian, and twice he was Euro – Donal Macpherson, perhaps. Donal certainly would still have her, if she agreed. He had made that clear a number of times.

Ramachandra tried to insert himself into the dream, tried to touch her with the same intimacy. Even in her dream, she pulled back, willed the figure to change again. Once again, he became non-Hindu, Euro. It troubled her more conscious levels that this did not trouble her dreaming self at all.

Eventually, she slipped deeper into warm sleep.

Sometime later, still warm from the dreams, the alarm sounded, dragging her upright in her bunk. She was due on watch, prepared to take her marines out on a moment's notice.

July 12, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Avinashini)

Avi sat in her cockpit, monitoring the bridge and the computer feeds. Almost a minute before Main Sensor announced the find, she had seen the hints of the intruder. It was too large to be a private trade vessel, too fast to be one of the big cargo haulers run by the government. It was heading in toward the gas midget, looking for hydrogen-rich gases to fill its tanks of coolant, carbon stores, and fusion-quality hydrogen.

They had found their quarry. The skullbones that had been stalking the Reach convoys, picking off the stragglers, was in their sights. They would finally be ending a resource drain. Fleet would be able to focus on the smaller, more standard privaters.

They would also finally learn how the Jin Jun had lost a ship. Perhaps, too, she would be able to get back to *Hibernia*, or an-

other carrier out of Wolf.

Main Sensor was still catching up. "It's large. Maneuvering at high-g. Definitely military." The voice tone was incredulous. "No iffy. Permission for active scan."

Captain Dumas was matter-of-fact. "Negative. We were given a protocol." She sounded flat, controlled. "Can up Grunon's squads and launch. Avinashini, copy and confirm."

Avi keyed comm. "I am downloading data, and ready as soon as the marines are." She called up the ROEs again, frowned. She could find no loophole, no miraculously unnoticed exception. Command wanted men put on board this ship. They intended to prove that the Jin Jun had been careless, lost it to pirates.

However they had gotten the ship, they were using it. The skullbones had to be hiding a base of operations somewhere in or near the Reach. However, there were too many light years to simply look. A base could even function without a central star, with the right equipment. They knew that the right equipment had been taken. Boarding might help locate the base.

She would be much happier simply assuming Jin Jun carelessness and guiding a fusion-tipped missile. Piracy would end quickly if every skullbones was burned away. Even when boarding could produce informants and navigation logs, a missile was the answer. A scavenger that did not return was a harsh message to the hidden base.

The admiralty had drafted the orders, though. House of Knights had approved. She had no discretion.

Avi called up a view aft, in the personnel cylinder. Urwah's marines were clambering in and locking themselves to their seats. "Avinashini to Lt. Grunon. I am calculating launch in seven minutes. We will be flying a tight-trajectory intercept. No time shall be wasted."

"Copy. My grunts'll be ready."

Avi turned her attention to the last pre-flights. The intercept course was already set. The power plant was fusing smoothly. Weapons systems responded as ready. She cleared her boards, keyed external comm. "Rassmussen, report."

"I'm set, Commander. All boards are green. Sergeant Vele's marines are just about boarded. I'm downloading your course now."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Avi sat back, switched the comm settings. "Flight Deck. Wake up the second flight crew, please. Begin their pre-flights."

"Aye, Commander."

Avi watched the clock run down. At the five-second warning, she primed the grav thrusters. At zero, she punched the thrust. Her craft pushed away from *Harris*. Rassmussen followed minutes later in his own FDC.

August 30, 2385 (Ten Years Ago) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Murphy)

Murphy wished he was out in the cool, mountain air. The dome was dim, showing as little light as possible, even this far above the plains.

"I really don't see the problem," he argued. "I can keep my distance. One pair of human eyes has got to be better than those damned floaters."

"Why the hell did Zhaohui have to saddle me with you?" Chengen scowled. "You don't listen, do you? The protocols call for no contact. They were set after more than enough debate, and more than enough politicians and experts had their say. You're not going to undo that, kid. We're going to keep doing everything we can to avoid any contamination of the Horn culture."

"It's goddam silly. Some damned writers thought it up a few hundred years ago, and they thought it would actually make sense. Worse yet, some politicians and Earth-bounds with a taste for bad literature pushed it through. They're not here. They don't know how impossible it is to learn enough with those damned floaters."

"We're picking up language, culture, migration patterns."

"They're knocking down every floater they see. And they

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see them all, sooner or later. They're damned good with those throwing slings. The puff-floaters just don't get enough to make up for it. And they know those aren't natural, anyway. You can tell when they see one."

Chengen slammed a fist on the table. His teacup bounced, splashing tea into the saucer and beyond. "This is the Cetians' world. Let some wild kid like you out there, and next we'll be importing covered wagons. That's not going to happen. Not here. We'll find enough prime worlds with Magellan II."

Murphy shook his head. "An old destroyer that Fleet didn't need, and most of our Exploration arm out there on it, instead of waiting for the *Lady* class. What a waste. Hell, I think Fleet gave us that ship on purpose, just to thin us out. Tie us to an old ships. We should be out there in crews of four, high-jump. Good sensors. Get a lot of data fast."

"You'd put laxative in a civilian crewman's tea if you thought it would get you out there on that scow, and you know it. Hell, that's half the reason you got shipped here in the first place. Zhaohui was afraid you'd do something like that. She knows I can keep a watch on you."

"I don't need watching."

"Like hell you don't. You're too damned young. You've got a lot of education, a talent for languages, and no common sense. That's why you're out here with me. You're a lot of help when you listen to the recordings, but right now, you're just pissing me off." The station commander stood, pointed at the spreading brown liquid. "Clean up the tea." He walked across the main part of the dome to his private room and slammed the door shut behind.

Murphy took a cloth from the kitchenette sink. He swiped once at the spilled tea, leaving most of it there. He tossed the cloth back to the sink and went to the boards.

Nothing interesting was happening on any of the pick-ups. Three more floaters were down, though. Murphy keyed his handheld to pick up the regularly changing views of wind-swept prairie grass and occasional trees. He left the dome, going out to the grassy promontory overlooking the valleys below.

Not much was happening at this hour of the night. The Horns were bedding down in their yurt-like tents, not having anything like modern entertainment to keep them from resting at a reasonable time. A few sat around small fires and told tales too quietly for the floaters to record. The rest were already wrapped away, lusting, playing, perhaps talking, planning their blood feuds. The sound was too low, the light too dim, to get a real idea of what they were doing.

The town Cetians – “Hornless,” their spikes regularly cut away – were even less interesting at night. They locked themselves away in their walled towns. Hell, they were less interesting all of the time, apart from their apparent habit of filing down or cutting off their single horns. The Xeno-sociologists thought that was a declaration of civilization.

Who the hell wanted to get to know civilized cowards? It seemed pretty clear that they seemed to feel they owned the nomadic Horns tributes and favors. They seemed to regularly provide swords, some equipment and clothes, dried foods, and the like. They also appeared fawning and frightened when they met the nomads outside their bounded and sometimes walled villages.

Murphy replayed the regular argument with Dr. Yang. It seemed useless to continue it. Yang was not going to allow the protocols to change. Hell, he’d been grudging about allowing Murphy come down from the orbital station to take over from D’Agostino. Yang thought he could handle things with himself and just a few others – and was willing to ignore the protocols that called for a contingent of five on the ground.

This was the Horns’ world. That much was and should be obvious. Murphy would never argue that point, or try to seek any change in the deeds. This planet was deeded in full to its original occupants. There was no room to settle it and find ways to share. There was enough good, solid history to show that humans seeking new real estate killed off whatever natives could be found.

Earth-like worlds were rare, but there would be enough without prior owners found over the next few decades. Mars

was slowly becoming more habitable, and other suns had worlds close enough to Earth to stand some terraforming. The Magellan II mission would spend several years out there, scouring from the edge of the Reach and beyond. Inefficient or not, she would find worlds.

The zhīzhū were learning to leave the borders where they had been established. Sooner or later, they might even decide to communicate and even communicate with something other than a mass-driver on a fast-moving battleship. It might be possible to at least avoid turf wars, if not find ways to share good worlds. Murphy suspected that he could learn to like the zhīzhū, if they would just talk.

Keeping the Horns in charge here didn't require pretending to hide from them. That was no way to deal with honest, hard-fighting, hard-laughing folk. They were aware of the humans, that much was certain. A few of the more adventurous Horns had come part-way up the mountain.

So why continue to skulk away and pretend to be frightened, pasty worms? And that was that. Murphy knew what was necessary. Or, at least, what he really wanted to do.

Murphy went to the smaller accessory dome. Emergency equipment and rations were stored there, along with other gear. He slipped in and scoured through the shelves to locate what he needed: two hunting knives, food packs, a bedroll, a solid pack, water bottles, a spare handheld, a solar charger for the handhelds, additional memory units, a small biochem sensor, a medical kit. He would be able to function for several weeks, at least. Once "on the ground," he would be able to hunt on his own, if he could not make a native connection early enough.

He paused over a personal grav harness. That expensive toy would make his goal easy – fly to a likely location, then walk the last few kilometers. It would let him get out of a mess quickly if he had to, as well.

He wrestled with the inclination. If he ended up dead by misestimating the Horns, the others would still have learned something. He had seen recordings of several battles. The natives fought each other hard and close, but also with style and

discipline. He had yet to see a combat between Horns with a range-weapon. They used swords and sometimes knives. Horns almost always talked, argued, bellowed before they finally fought.

Being prepared to scoot out seemed wrong. It would gain their disrespect. Murphy turned the grav harness down.

He considered the implication behind the fact that the equipment was here at all. Someone had been questioning the protocols when this equipment had been sent down. Chengen was probably angling for permission to be the first out there, talking with the natives.

He had no concept of what an appearance he would make. He was pudgy, out-of shape, poorly equipped to speak the language. He just wanted a feather in his cap that no one else would be able to claim. He didn't care whether he were really the right one to claim the feather.

Murphy went back into the main dome. No one was up, it seemed. He went to his own sleeping compartment and gathered the few personal items he had down below: a few memory units holding his personal records, texts, and references; his gauss pistol and spare clips; a head-mounted cam/sensor with heads-up projection; spare clothes; and his own sword, made for him by the Jin Jun armory. He changed into a pair of sturdy hiking boots that he had broken in.

He went back into the common room, sat at the main computer. The comm satellites that had been seeded over the last few years also served as GPS transponders. Any link made from one of the handhelds would give Chengen and the rest his location. They would be able to come down in a shuttle or a gravver.

Murphy went deep into the system, re-routing those data feeds, then scrambling the output. Someone would be able to repair his changes with a little thought and a lot of tracing, but only if they thought to look for them first.

Chengen wouldn't think of it. No one else here knew how to go that deep even if he did.

The observation log was up and running at the main computer, as always. He dictated a short message: "Gone for a

hike.” Murphy walked out of the Dome, carefully locking the door behind him.

With neither of the small moons up, his only natural light came from the brilliant starlight. With little industry to generate smog, this was almost enough. He set the cam/sensor to provide an overlay based on radar and infrared. There was no point in stumbling over stones in the dark.

The best route down followed a seasonal streambed. The water was low at this time of the year, only a half-meter wide. The bed itself was two meters wide, leaving much dry path to follow. The path was steep in places, but largely accessible. He picked his way down and around various outcroppings and boulders, working his way down toward the plains. By the time dawn was approaching, he was more than halfway down.

He located a thicket a few meters away from the stream bed and took cover to rest for the day. A floater programmed solely to locate him might find him, but that would probably waste a floater. Murphy settled in for a few hours’ rest, not bothering to open his bedroll. He awoke to the sun high, local noon. The air tasted good.

An MRE went down quickly. He put the empty wrapper back in his pack. Few “sins” were actually worthy of serious consideration by anything claiming to be a god. Littering here might well make the list.

Fed and rested, nothing remained but to get back on the march. He tugged the pack straps over his shoulders and found his way back to the stream bed.

With occasional rest stops, he reached the level of more rolling hills by dusk. He could tackle the plains in the morning. There would be a trail nearby, and he would be able to consider making contact.

Once again, he found a secluded place in the brush. He considered building a fire, more for the pleasure than any real need. The clothes supplied all of the warmth needed, though, and he wasn’t interested in advertising his location just yet. The bedroll unrolled easily. Murphy pulled off his boots and socks and folded himself in for the evening.

He awoke in the predawn. Once again, he packed the camp and began moving. When the sun broke over the horizon, the early amber played against the green sea of wild grasses. Waist-high, the growth was almost indistinguishable from any Terran plains.

Murphy continued to follow the stream bed. It was easier and better than wading through the thigh-high grass and leaving a trampled wake for the floaters to follow. The maps and images he had studied over the last two months showed that one of the Horn tribes had a migration path intersecting with the stream bed perhaps fifty kilometers away. He could follow that trail north and seek a meeting with the tribe.

The day passed uneventfully. As he hiked, he catalogued a species of insect here, a bird there. He would probably catch hell for all of this, but he thought he knew Zhaohui well enough by now that she would minimize his punishments if he came back with more than could be expected. The floaters did a reasonably good job, but there were limits to the small robots.

By the end of the day, he came to the migration path. It was not wide; perhaps two abreast of the Horns on their native mounts could pass. It was enough, though. The migratory Horns in their packs and caravans used the paths regularly, staying to the rolling plains. Both small and large groups passed along the paths, keeping the soil tamped down enough that the grasses were far less dense and high. Chengen had not been wrong to compare them to the Plains People of North America in that regard. They had habits, territories.

In other ways, though, they were more like the Mongols from whom Chengen might have been descended. They clearly controlled the territory through which they passed, and the walled settlements that dotted the plains and forest outbreaks. Snatches of language learned over the years from floaters made clear that the traveling Horns considered themselves the legal and moral superior of the settled Horns.

Murphy paused for a half hour at the stream crossing, topping his water pack, resting, eating, and reassessing his plans for the next stage. He could go to the towns and perhaps face less

risk. The walled Townfolk might well be less likely to fight off an obvious stranger. Indeed, they seemed to rely on the migratory Horns for such defense.

He knew what a forge looked like, and a mill. Sitting around soaking up the vocabulary for that did not interest Murphy. He fingered the sword at his waist. It was not ornately carved, as were some of the swords he had seen in floater-videos. Still, it was a sword.

He was out here. He would look for one of the migratory clans. He set off to the north, as he had originally planned.

As he walked, he pulled out both of the handhelds. He set one to simply record at intervals. With the other, he listened to the Horn language materials already assembled. He would likely face questioning from the first Horns he encountered. If they were superstitious, they might well decide he was some kind of demon, as his own long-ago Celtic forbears would have.

If they were less imaginative, they might just decide that his odd appearance justified killing without resort to supernatural explanations. Either way, he wanted to be able to speak as well as he could fight.

The day passed to evening. Murphy chose a stopping point and set out his kit. After a brief meal, he went through the day's recordings. He chose the most interesting and useful for future surveys and contacts and compressed the files for uplink. Finishing, he made his minimal preparations for the night's sleep.

He looked eastward. The usual stars were rising. Streaks flared down every minute or so, a gift of the system's excess of rock and dust. He could get to like this sky.

A distant flickering on the horizon caught his attention. He questioned for a moment whether it was a star, and his eyes tired.

No, it was definitely fire.

All of the theory he had read considered night a bad time to risk contact with primitive natives. Terran legends of monsters in the night abounded. The theorists assumed that the same would be true of the Horns. The Horns were obviously warm-blooded, bi-pedal, their heads and faces similar enough to Earth norms to be considered human-like. Floaters had recorded them riding

beasts, and harnessing chariot-like carts behind beasts. They were known to rest at night, and to light fires. They fought one another. The less adventurous walled their settlements. The theorists would concur that it would be best to wait until morning.

Murphy rolled up his gear and packed it. He wasn't interested in theory, or in waiting. The only way to meet people was to go out and meet them.

The fire was along the general direction of the path he had been following. Murphy continued along the path for ease and speed. In any event, honest folk probably did not get far off the path to come to a campsite.

In an hour, he heard murmured hints of voices. No words were distinct as yet. Murphy continued on, keeping alert. He expected that there would be some type of watch, or at least vigilant eyes. The fire was to his right, a little higher than he was. The natives were intelligent enough to choose the high ground for a campsite.

As he closed, the voices grew more distinct. They seemed to be chanting something. The rhythms were almost human, almost distinguishable. One of the Cetians, robed rather than in the more customary leathers, was leading the chants, interjecting with rhythmic narrative. He began to recognize individual words: water, grass, spirit, fire. He slowed his pace to listen more closely.

"And so did Efrash give brother to the Pyre, though honored not, and ask the Flame to cleanse the spirit. The Flame at first declined, and Efrash asked again, offered his own blood. And so relented Flame, and took the brother's flesh, sent his spirit out." The assembled Cetians resumed their chanting, which he now recognized as a refrain.

Murphy was at the last point he might think the better of moving closer. By all standards, he should probably do so. He would end up dead, or perhaps ruin any chance of reasonable contact with the Horns. Chengen, for certain, would be appalled that he was even this close to a gathering.

He moved forward, close enough to see the assembled

Cetians in the red light of the dying fire. He scanned for the bands that had been seen on the horns. The chair-warming types had theorized that they were symbols of rank, as if that was some profound observation. The most adorned of them might well be a chief of sorts, or chieftess – the biologists were still unclear on gender and gender roles.

Continuing to observe from the damned floaters was a waste of time. There was nothing more to learn by guessing. Murphy stepped closer, knowing that he would be seen and heard. He stopped, looked.

The Cetians grew quiet. The one with the carefully adorned horn-band looked up at O'Meath, made direct eye-contact. It appraised for a moment, then looked to the Horn on his – her? – left. He spoke. Murphy was not surprised at making out the words and phrases; this language was not as complicated Court Mandarin. He had studied better than Chengen might have expected. "Fahnisht, finally one of the Hornless albinos has come down from the mountains."

The other Horn made a gesture that Murphy guessed was a form of assent. "My scouts saw this one coming – he is audacious."

"How shall we meet this one? Lanna and his Tentlords would call on us to burn away their little town and their dead husks."

"Lanna is careless with blood," the one called Fahnisht replied. "I would take care in taking on a debt in strange blood."

"Look at it," the higher-ranked Horn said, gesturing toward Murphy. "It listens, as if it knows our speech."

All of the assembled Cetians were watching, expectant. Murphy cleared his throat. "I understand you," he said, switching mental gears to think in the Horn language. "If my words are spoken poorly, it is for lack of practice."

Interest murmured through the crowd. The higher-ranked Horn said something to Fahnisht that Murphy could not hear. Fahnisht stood, pointed. "You speak well. You wear a sword, as if you might truly deserve a horn. For tonight, you may sit with the untested youth." He pointed to a section of the group. "We

shall see more tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Murphy replied. He went to take his seat. Several of the Horns moved to give him a place.

So far, he was doing better on First Contact than any silly theory would account for.

Chapter 7

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Avinashini)

The FDC was light and maneuverable. Without a weapons module, the internal guns were a little lighter than she would have liked, but that was the price paid in this type of mission. The troop module carried the payload.

Her wing-man, Rassmussen seemed comfortable out here on the smaller cruiser. He had only briefly served out of Wolf Base. He spent time in the ship's chapel during Humanitas services. Perhaps he had committed to that religion, with its apparent ability to conjure promotions out of the vacuum of space, gotten himself this posting.

The Admiral had herself taken that advantage from the Humanitas faith. Avi pushed back the bitter taste. The Admiral had talked more than once about “necessity,” about the many faces of the gods. She still prayed occasionally in the Ganesha temple. The hypocrisy had never sat well with Avi, or with the Parent.

Avi re-focused on the mission. The marines would have under three hours to get in and subdue the crew before the target ship got out of the gas midget's gravity well. After that, there were no guarantees. Already refueled, the ship could pop into hyperspace. It would take all aboard wherever it planned to go,

including her marines.

Avi repressed her irritation and checked her sensors.

Active scans off, Avi relied on the skullbones' own energy emissions to adjust her vector slightly. The old missile corvette was enough older to lack the shielding of modern Fleet vessels. The skullbones might as well have been transmitting a continuous transponder beacon.

The skullbones' power-plant emissions were consistent with the briefing speculations. She probably wasn't powering the large particle accelerators that posed the greatest threat to an attacking FDC. A lack of particle leakage from the weapons themselves seemed to confirm that conclusion. The computer assured her that enough hydrogen was fusing to keep laser turrets running, though. Even slaved banks under two or three skilled gunners might present a threat.

Full missile bays would be a real threat. When refit for the Jin Jun's "exploratory" mission, *Ibn Battutta* had been left with several operational bays out of concern that she would meet some new and hostile sentients. If she had, the Jin un would no doubt have found a way to provoke the aliens. Whoever now controlled *Ibn* likely had the ordnance in their possession.

Lt. Rassmussen and his FDC were a kilometer or so away, close enough to use laser comm without threat of detection. "Rassmussen, visual range in three minutes. Likely they won't see us until we go active. They don't seem to be running their particle weapons."

"I copy that – I get the same results."

"We'll be at kiss-and-bore in seven minutes. Final approach, and get your troops ready. Watch for active bays."

"I'd just as soon lob a nuke at the thing and get it done."

"Orders are what they are, Lt. Rassmussen."

"Yeah." He sounded surly.

"Focus, please. There need be no more complaining. Out." Avinashini cut off the comm laser and focused on her instruments. She alerted Grunon and began setting up for the skew-turns and last-minute vector changes she would need.

The FDC was rimmed with eight small weapon-mounts,

equally divided between lasers and short-range missile racks. The much larger Gandiva, devoted to deep-space combat, carried much more powerful weapons. It generated more power and carried more munitions. The FDC weapons were designed to disable enemy turrets as she approached, clamped on, and drilled her way into the ship.

She powered them all now, as the skullbones became a speck of reflected light on her main display.

Avi was pressed into her couch as she skewed the small craft around several times. Time ticked down. The last minutes of approach went quickly as she relayed messages, then insisted on quiet. Avi continued to make minor course adjustments, checking momentarily that the FDC was still uplinked to Urwah Grunon's battlecomp.

Despite relying solely on passive sensors, she was certain that it was an old *Eighmy*-class vessel. This close, the FDC's sensors could distinguish the hull both from reflected light and internally-generated signs. Power output matched, as did the gravimetric readings of density. The lack of transponder or other operating comm were not enough to hide the type.

Was it the former *Ibn Battutta*, as the admiralty expected?

The skullbones seemed oblivious of her approach. She had not been pinged by an active sweep. No evasive maneuvers had been attempted. No weapons were yet powered up.

Even the older sensors and computers of this retired type of vessel should have seen the two FDCs by now. The additional sensor suite installed by the Jin Jun for survey purposes should have guaranteed detection. The pirate crew obviously was making poor use of the old frigate that had somehow come into in their hands.

With less than fifteen seconds left, she kicked on active sensors, scanning with laser to get exact distances and topography. She already knew where she wanted to lock on to cut into the dorsal corridors.

Avi also scanned with camera views. The hull was in excellent shape. She saw only minor damage. There had been no pitched ship-to-ship fusillades for her.

That wasn't all that surprising. For the most part, her crew had been preying on poorly armed vessels. It had found no difficulty frightening and taking the small, private traders that eked out a living along the Reach. It experienced little more difficulty with the pusher transports that grumbled the long route between Sol and Trianguli. If any fired a shot at this skullbones, it did so out of foolish bravado or deep desperation.

Avi skewed around and sent full power to the grav drives. The craft trembled slightly. A quick flash of attitude-control put spin on the craft, allowing each gunpoint a chance to range and target on the turrets closest to her selected landing point. With practiced and easy sweeps, she disabled three of the four turrets that could threaten her and her marines before any returned fire.

The fourth turret fared better. *Someone* on board was awake. A single missile burst out from a turret. Avi had no time to manually target. The computer caught it easily with a flicker of laser pulse, burning out its guidance computer. The projectile zipped harmlessly past. Avi's next three pulses freed the turret from its mounts. It drifted off the scorched spot, severed power cables trailing behind.

A fusillade from a bay would have ended her flight. Were they so under-manned that they could not operate the bays?

A final twist-and-flip positioned the FDC over the dorsal hull. Avi nudged the FDC closer and fired off the grappling units. The probes struck, held with local grav effects. The motors cranked the cables taut, gently reeled the FDC down. She felt the airlock-end make contact, saw in her displays that it was tight. With grav-drive idling, she powered the main laser, located behind two layers of quartz lens. The airlock module irised open. Laser rods began their sequence of coordinated pulses, burning through hull armor to open an entrance.

Lt. Rassmussen touched his FDC down only seconds behind her. He was on the ventral hull, and further aft.

Less than two minutes later, the first marines were clambering into the enemy vessel. In under five, all were out of both FDCs. Avi sealed the airlock module from both sides, then disengaged the couplings. She quickly backed the main flight hull

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of the FDC off the personnel cylinder.

“Rassmussen, I’m off. I will take ventral and port. You take dorsal and starboard.”

“Aye, Commander.”

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Urwah)

Commander Avinashini’s voice came through the comm. “Final maneuvers, Lieutenant. We will kiss-and-bore in six minutes. I have full jamming on all their comm. Sensor jamming is at least partial. There are no evasive maneuvers as yet.”

“So they don’t see us yet.”

“I do not think so. They still likely know we are coming.”

“That won’t change anything.” Urwah checked his heads-up. Laser mount powered, gauss rifle mount powered and fully loaded, and taser fingers ready to charge. All scans were active, and the battle computer tied all of his suit functions together. All seals were airtight. “Urkers, sound off.”

Both squads reported quickly, sixteen voices coming through in order. At the same time, the battlecomp displayed green lights for each on his heads-up.

Some officers didn’t bother with the voice call. Those were the idiots who didn’t care enough about their people. Those sorts, the college boys and girls, wasted marines with careless planning and execution. Officers with NCO experience generally brought more live marines back home. Even if a Jin Jun’s temporary command had put him into this spot, with all the friction that seemed to cause, he kept his marines at the top of his list.

With any luck, they would do the same for him. This had the taste of the real thing.

“OK marines – remember, we’re going for capture, not destruction. If the Big-Brassholes wanted this ship dead, the Commander could have lobbed off her nukes without getting us out of bed. We want as many captures as possible, as many ship’s systems running as we can leave up.

“But don’t let them get you. Rules of engagement don’t mean I want to write any letters home to your folks. All Urkers come back whole, got it?”

“Sir, yes *sir*,” Sgt. Milewski replied. Fifteen other voices echoed her. Here, at least, they seemed fully professional.

Comm from Avinashini clicked on again. “Artificial gravity, off in ten. Lock on in four minutes, thirty seconds. Lieutenant, fight well.”

“Urkers fight to win, Commander. Keep your lovely legs safe.”

“Urkers will win. My legs, however, remain my concern.” Was there a slight softening in her usually serious voice?

Urk knew how *he* had rated mere convoy duty. He had been recognized by the wrong eyes, promoted for the wrong successes. He should be on Wolf-Ross point-guard himself, protecting the boundaries, perhaps expanding them. He should be where he could do real good.

Instead, he was strapped into a boarding pod, planning to take on simple human vermin. Skullbones, sucking the blood from their own. He was protecting civilian freighters.

Worse than that, Fleet wasn’t simply handling them effectively, with a nuke here and a nuke there. They were trying to capture and interrogate. Summarily wiping out enough Skullbones would cut deeply enough into their profit margins to drive them away.

Urk felt a slight thrust, probably a full twist of the ship that wasn’t fully dampened out by the safety fields. “Hey, Commander, relay to FDC Two: Urkers bet a week’s KP that they capture more skullbones than Larkers.”

“Will do.” Comm went silent for a moment, then clicked back in. “Sgt. Vele called you some very ugly names, none of which will I repeat.”

Urk frowned. Lar was back on her warpath. “Tell Lar to watch her mouth, and that’s not a suggestion – it’s a direct order. She needs to treat you like an officer, period.”

“Very well, but no further relays. I need to attend to maneuver.”

“OK, sweetie.”

Commander Avinashini’s tone again lifted from its seriousness for a moment. “*Commander Sweetie.*” The link clicked off.

Urk chuckled.

Urk was not sure if he liked working with Vele now. She had been a good soldier before their ships had been pulled from Wolf and sent to Tau Ceti. She was cocky and mouthy, but a lot of the marines had been cocky and mouthy.

She was far more damaged by the aftermath of the evacuation than he would have liked. She was deep into Humanitas now, attending the services and spilling out the literature. How much of that was the experience itself, and how much was the court-martial? She had taken a mere slap of the wrist for violating the ROEs, and then found herself in training to move up as a non-com. There was no sense of camaraderie with Vele at this point. Vele seemed to have joined in the consensus on Urk’s path to promotion.

Urk got back on the Unit channel. “I made the usual bet with the Larkers, folks. I don’t like to microwave rations, so don’t let me down.” He glanced at his heads-up, called up the FDC’s tracking and status displays through the battle-comp download. Avinashini was about to maneuver for braking. “Ten seconds to the triple-gainer – mark!” he advised his marines.

Despite inertial dampers, he felt the small craft flip on its access, skewing heavily. Thrust was never shut down; the grav-thrust plating kept up its tug-and-push against the fabric of space. Now they were slowing the craft down as they approach the enemy vessel. “High-g in five – four – three – two – one!”

The last braking thrust was double what the dampers could handle. Six g’s slammed the marines. Their acceleration frames vibrated and pulsed as Avinashini avoided incoming enemy fire. Urk kept watch on the heads-up. “Engine shut-down in ten! Everyone, prepare to move!” He didn’t bother to count this one down.

On the tick, Avinashini shut down the drive. The craft rotated again. Urk knew without seeing that the FDC’s docking

array was firing cables tipped with grav-locks and nano-primed boring hooks. They were locking onto the enemy hull to pull the FDC in tight against the hull. The docking array would seal up against the hull, ready to become a new and unplanned airlock in the enemy ship.

The heads-up flashed yellow. "Locked!" Avinashini reported.

"Breach her," Urk replied.

The cylindrical troop module's airlock sat in the center at the docking end. The airlock was sealed on the inside, but the outer hatch now would have irised open. The floor was a large, clear quartz lens. Underneath, over a hundred smaller lasers were now receiving power. Thousands of pulses of light would be flashing in alternation, firing straight at the now-exposed hull they needed to pass through.

Urk released his harness and floated over to the lock, glancing at his heads-up. "Still vacuum in the lock," he advised his marines. "This beast has solid armor."

Sgt. Milewski came up and took her position, gently easing her Lieutenant out of the way. "Sorry, sir – I have my orders."

"Whose?" Urk was annoyed, not angry.

"It's in the ROEs Lieutenant," she replied. "Can't have an officer killed being a hero."

Urk gave way. There was no point in arguing with Milewski. She was the only one of his grunts he felt sure that he could trust. At least she would let him go in third, right after Corporal Cassin.

It was comforting that she was following the ROEs. If she'd wanted to arrange a friendly-fire accident, she would let him take point, not follow the rules.

Cassin came up on the other side. His combat suit was lighter, less heavily armed than Urk's. He would be point, eyes and ears ahead. He could move quickly while the rest of the grunts backed him up.

"Just breached," Cassin said. "Hear it?"

Urk heard nothing, but his heads-up agreed. The first pin-hole was leaking the enemy's atmosphere into the lock. Urk didn't doubt that Cassin heard some small sound. Cassin's records

showed that he had a definite talent for distinguishing patterns.

A few seconds later, the entire lock shuddered to full pressure. Urk tapped the button; the main hatch irised open. Milewski ducked in, pointing a disposable grenade-launcher tube upward. The tube hissed and puffed four times; four metal cylinders clattered and bounced in the corridor. The noise was followed by four muffled explosions. Milewski handed the spent tube to Urk, who passed it back.

“Iffy?” Urk asked.

“Neg.”

That was good news. However they had gotten this ship, the skullbones had not obtained the internal security codes. Auto-defenses would not be a problem. The systems would not be up and firing unless they could ping to identify their own crew before firing. “Cassin, your game,” Urk announced.

Sgt. Milewski pushed against the far wall of the airlock. Cassin squeezed past, then pushed up against the weightlessness. Milewski followed. As the sergeant pulled herself through the new hole in the hull, Urk entered the lock and pushed off. A taser crackled somewhere in the ship ahead.

Urk pulled through the laser-polished, smooth hole, wide enough for one marine to pass easily. The striated layers of hull plating and insulating materials caught his eye, but he wasn’t here to look at that. He pushed into the enemy ship’s corridor from its ceiling, light but not entirely weightless. The concussion grenades had disabled the artificial gravity fields. A twist and spin brought him feet-first to the scorched deck.

Milewski had a skull-bones on the floor, already wrapped in tangle. Cassin stood to the left, back to a wall. “Three behind that partition,” he reported, pointing. Urk moved right to give the next marine room to come through.

Urk flipped infrared into the heads-up, superimposed over the normal view, saw the three heat blobs. “Thin wall, not a bulkhead,” he commented. One panel of the foam-packed partition was already buckled where the grenade had exploded.

Two more marines were already on deck. A third was coming through, feet-first now that there were fellow troops to watch

the way. “Gonzales, Wahli, through that wall with me.” Urk backed as far as he could to the other wall and lunged into the partition, rolled left as it lurched but held. Pvt. Gonzales and Pvt. Wahli followed in quick succession. Urk heard bolts shearing.

One of the blobs was aiming a gun as Urk lunged a second time. Three quick pops sounded as Urk hit the partition and snapped the last ceiling bolt. Bullet holes appeared in the thin metal skin overlaying light foam – one bullet thumped into Urk’s chest armor. Pvt. Gonzales and Pvt. Wahli hit the wall panel to either side of their leader, ripping it away from the panels to either side.

Battlesuit-amplified muscles rammed the panel into the room, battering the three skull-bones into bunks folded up against the far wall.

Milewski followed them into the room, her canister of tangler in one hand. Pvt. Gonzales and Pvt. Wahli lifted and tossed the panel out of the way, foam particles scattering from inside the thin metal sandwiching. Each of the two marines pulled out their own tangler canisters and sprayed. The liquid plastic became solid strands of tangling cord as they wrapped the arms and legs of the battered enemy.

Urk looked back at the corridor. His marines were popping down through the ceiling now, all almost through. Milewski finished wrapping her second prisoner and straightened up.

Her faceplate hid her inevitable scowl, but he could see her wagging and index finger in rebuke. “Good thing all he had was that popgun,” she said, pointing at the automatic rifle lying beside the prone skullbones. “Gauss or laser, you might need a band-aid.”

“I’ll keep careful.”

“Don’t go first again, dammit.”

“ROEs. Right.” Urk switched to the inter-unit channel. “Urkers are in and ready to move up. Vele, your Larkers set?”

Lar’s own voice came back, clear and digitally crisp. “You’re having a picnic? Got three piss-ants already.”

“Our count’s four already – dishpan hands for you.”

“Stupid bet, who cares? Ready to move!”

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“Let’s move and clean up before the second wave gets here.”

“Out.” Vele clicked the channel closed.

Urk switched back to his unit’s channel. “Cassin, take it forward. Fan out. Pre-set objectives. *Go!*”

The marines paired off with their usual partners and started forward. Urk managed to be almost to the front, behind Cassin. Milewski was right behind. She wouldn’t let anyone else catch his back.

His main objective was the main computer room. The brass warmers wanted navigational data intact, if they could get it. It would be easier to hack at the main box, rather than a secondary hub. Lar’s squad was to secure the engineering section quickly. Navigational control could be managed from there, so long as there was power. As on any ship of the line, the secondary nav computer was housed in main engineering. The skullbones might not have a crew sophisticated enough to take advantage of that fail-safe, but there was no point in being sloppy.

And, besides, it wouldn’t take much engineering skill to set the main drives up for a blow.

This was an old Fleet design, formerly a Fleet vessel, despite its time in Jin Jun idiot hands. It was a fair bet that some of the skullbones had served in Fleet at one time, or had been trained by dropouts and dishonorables. The brass was sure that the Jin Jun had lost track of a whole ship, let it fall to people who could handle it.

If so, there would be evidence of a hell of a fight somewhere in the corridors.

September 3, 2385 (Ten Years Ago) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV) (Murphy)

Murphy awoke in his bedroll. One of the Horns – a young one, Pelest – was staring down at him. “Hornless, awake. There is service to perform.” He nudged O’Meath with a toe, or toe-equivalent. It was wrapped with soft, rough leather, but a hard

point could be felt behind.

Murphy slid out of his bedroll and stood. He had listened late into the night as the embers had died away. The Horns had sat and sung stories, played simple stringed instruments, laughed, drank something with a solid kick of alcohol. He already felt a deeper understanding of the language that had previously been gleaned from long-range recordings, pieced together by philologists with half-understanding.

He already suspected that Chengen and his hand-picked “experts” had at least one piece of the social structure entirely wrong. The Townfolk were not the leaders, the savants moving forward and occasionally beleaguered by the nomadic Tentlords. The Tentlords were the powers here.

They roved the plains, protecting their territories, protecting the weaker towns within. Their own weaker members were sometimes banished into a town, pitied or derided at the loss of Horn. On occasion, a brash youth from one of the Towns could come to the plains, establish him or herself as a warrior, be permitted to grow and keep the single sharp head-weapon.

Those idiots had trapped themselves into the simplest of assumptions: that the nomads were of course the scavengers, the outlaws. Cities were welcome progress.

The nomads were the law, defining the entire continent, if not the entire world, through their allegiances. Obligations were passed from one to the next in the simplest form: blood debt. On a metal-poor world, a steel sword was great wealth, but true riches were found in relationships and ties.

Murphy brushed himself off and followed Pelest to the cooktent. Various meats, cheeses, and breads were laid out on wooden platters. Pelest pointed one out. “You are to serve Irthasht himself,” he said. “Be quick, and do him all honor.”

Murphy looked at the young Horns assembled. They all looked with what appeared to be curiosity, perhaps edged with impatience. They were waiting for him to take the lead.

He would have no cues about how to serve. He could as easily offend as do well.

A tune snuck into his mind. He whistled a few notes, then

stopped. There was no way of knowing how the Horns would perceive that communication.

Murphy went to the platter, knelt down, and lifted it. It was heavier than he expected. He heard a muffled sound from the assembled youth – the Horn equivalent of laughter? Or awe?

Adjusting the balance as he stood up, he looked to Pelest. “Where must I go?” he asked.

Pelest beckoned. “We go to Irthasht’s Tent,” he replied. Murphy followed him through the small encampment. They went past several of the cloth-covered domed yurt-like structures, coming finally to one that was half-open. It was no larger than any of the others. A flap was open, revealing the presence of several of the Horns – the ones called “Irthasht” and “Fahnisht” in particular. They and the others sat along one curved wall in a semi-circle.

Murphy ducked through the flap, taking care to keep from dropping any of the food from the platter. He straightened up inside, looked at those kneeling around. No one provided any cue.

After a moment, Murphy knelt, balancing the platter, then put it closest to Irthasht.

Looks were exchanged, a decision seemingly made without words. “Pelest, when a foolish hornless youth came from Town Eshassif and demanded the chance to be a hero, did we hand him a sword and bid him challenge me to be Clanlord?”

Pelest hesitated. “No, Milord.”

“Did we ask him to mount and ride against Clan Dofesh-na to collect long-overdue blood debt?”

“No, Milord.”

“Did we allow him to serve at High Feast before he even served the morning feast?”

Pelest’s eyes carried something akin to human embarrassment. “No, Milord.”

“Why would this once-foolish Hornless Townfolk do this to this – this smooth Albino?”

Pelest had nothing to say. He cast his gaze down, as human a movement as Murphy had seen.

The young Jin Jun seized the silence. “Because I was so brash as to ask, Milord. Pelest tried to teach, but I would not listen, thinking I could do no wrong.”

There was murmuring among the seated Horns. Murphy caught little of it, nor could he risk guessing whether the tones were angry, amused, or mixed.

The murmuring died down. The central Horn, Irthasht, gazed into his eyes. “You will listen next time. Pelest is a Horn from the Hornless. You owe blood debt already.” He motioned toward Fahnisht. “This one has asked my patience.” The Horn stood. “I would have killed you for failing to speak the words.” He moved close to O’Meath.

Murphy considered holding his tongue. The uncharacteristic restraint evaporated in a puff. “I would not have died alone.” He put his hand on the hilt of his sword. He moved his own face closer, made sure that his breath could be felt against the Horn’s cheeks.

Irthasht glared. The silence stretched, then broke with a sound that must be amusement.

Fahnisht stood beside his Clanlord, head tilted back, teeth bared in an almost-human laugh. “This albino will increase the blood owed your sword, Irthasht. The Horn is simply stuck upside-down, inside his head, not outside to be seen.”

Irthasht seemed unconvinced. “Your curiosity will be your death, Fahnisht.” He made a dismissive gesture. “Pelest, send a better server. Kill the next untrained beggar who does not listen to you. Fahnisht – take this one and eat away from me.”

Fahnisht made a gesture, assent perhaps. “Follow me,” he said to O’Meath. He led him out of the yurt.

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Vele)

Vele wasted no thought on Urwah. He would likely be dead soon, regardless. Her three easily-captured Skullbones were also thrust to the back of her mind by the sound of rocket-grenades

cutting the air.

"Incoming!" Cpl. Jensen yelled through the comm. marines ducked and scrambled to the side.

"Fuck!" Lar grunted as a grenade passed over her head to strike the bulkhead behind. Shrapnel pinged off walls and bounced against armor. Smoke and dust filled the corridor. Lar got her running balance, both arms forward. She sprayed gauss-launched needles forward in an arc to sweep ahead, at the same time trying to lock onto a target with infra-red.

Another grenade spiraled through the corridor, punching into the partition to Lar's left. She rolled down and up again as shrapnel mixed with charred foam insulation sprayed. The burst of flame from the grenade launch gave her the target. No blob of heat to mark a body. "SOB has battle armor!" she yelled through the comm. "Use deadly fire!"

She followed her own order, blasting gauss-needles at full automatic and firing pulses from her laser until its safeties shut it down against overheating. She had no doubt that she took the attacker down.

She'd had the benefit of briefings not supplied to Grunon. She might be gunning down comrades in the Cause, but the pursuit was heating up too fast. The Jin Jun were looking for this ship, almost certain that it was not *Ibn*. They wanted this ship intact. They wanted to prove what they had correctly surmised.

The Jin Jun could not be allowed to have this ship, intact or otherwise. They would know where it came from. Lar's orders from the higher cells were to get it out of circulation.

She started forward again. Corporal Estrateche was close behind. They passed Jensen – seated, leaning against a partition, a leg mangled – kept going for the moment. "Enoki, move," Lar ordered. "Medic to Jensen."

Two more grenades spiraled through, heat-seekers looking for a target. Lar heard one muffled, strangled scream behind. She swept another blast of needles ahead and leapt forward to where the attacker should be. Her body crashed into something light, knocked over too easily to be a person. She rolled out and looked behind at the mess she had created.

Estrateche was picking up a tube. "An auto-launcher," he said. "Rigged to fire."

Lar nodded. "They were expecting us."

"We came in fast and dark," Estrateche replied. "They're not in the know."

"There are games in games," Lar responded. "They're smart enough to have defenses ready. They should be – they're mostly us." Of course they were ready. Lar tripped in the inter-unit channel. "Urk, keep your eyes peeled – we ran into a grenade launcher set on auto." She regretted the necessity of the warning, but most of his own people were also valuable to the Cause. They should know of changing conditions. Besides, he would have access to her own logs if he survived the battle.

"Got it," Urk replied. "Get to the engine room fast."

"I know my job," Lar retorted. She switched back to intra-unit. "Larkers, get Jensen back. Everyone else, eyes open. Form on me."

Lar heard a noise behind her. She turned, saw a woman dropping down from a ceiling panel, a machine-pistol in her hands. Two sets of orders over-rode instinctive desire to kill. She jumped toward the Skullbones and tapped her with the left-hand taser, watched her spasm and fall. With the right hand she yanked the machine-pistol out of the enemy's grip and tossed it away.

This Skullbones was being followed by a second from the ceiling crawl space. A roar erupted from the cabin beside her, and suddenly three more human men and women were aiming various guns. Estrateche and two more marines crowded past and made short work of knocking two over, then wrapping them in tangles. The third was simply thrown against a partition wall with enough force to sheer the light bolts holding it in place. That skullbones, a woman, was unconscious by the time Estrateche began securing her.

"Let's go," Lar ordered. Her remaining marines moved down the corridor. "We want to get to the main drives before these bastards get any bright ideas."

"Yeah, we're making enough mess of their pretty ship," Es-

trateche commented.

They could not make too much mess of the ship, Lar reminded herself. The message had to be sent. Someone was taking too many liberties, but they did not want to lose the vessel.

They came to a "T" junction in the corridor. Lar consulted her battlecomp to be sure, superimposing a corridor map on her heads-up. "Access ladders down to the next deck. We'll move hard and fast to the main engine deck."

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Urwah)

Urk wasted no time moving forward. He tased yet another skullbones, almost absent-mindedly. A marine behind stopped briefly to bind it with tangler spray. After the grenade launcher, this was becoming almost too easy.

"Stay on your toes," he reminded his squad. He scanned forward, putting infrared and ladar scans on his heads-up, looking for anything that might signal another booby-trap.

Urk consulted his heads-up, pinpointing their position in the ship. The crew's mess and main galley should be through the next set of partitions. Another flip, and he had infrared superimposed: at least thirteen people, all milling around near the far partition. The door was a little further down the corridor. Urk pointed, gave clipped directives to Milewski; Milewski brought two other marines into position near the door. One had a grenade launcher.

After a moment, one kicked the door open. The other swung in, launching two grenades. More smoke spewed out. The figures inside were scattered, falling over. The rest of the squad rushed in, grabbing and tangling. Urk came through last. Tables were toppled and askew, plates spilled on the floor. Some kind of stew, he decided, and plenty of bread. "Better than field rations," he commented to no one in particular.

Sharp popping echoed from the corridor ahead. Milewski stumbled. Urk saw the skull-bones, firing from a gangway re-

cess. Too far to taser, and too dangerous. Urk leveled his laser and pulsed, catching the attacker square in the chest. The skullbones fell backward, clutching her chest and dropping her weapon.

Urk went to Milewski first, helped her up. "I'm fine," she said. She limped slightly. If she refused to complain, she would be fine, Urk decided.

The skullbones was already dead. Urk moved past without much second thought. His people were fine. That was enough.

He and his team moved forward, encountering several more skullbones, one marine here and there stopping only to tangle-spray each skull-bones defeated. It was getting far too easy. Uncomfortably easy.

The battlecomp kept track of their route through the ship. They were one corridor away from the hardened computer core. Urk signaled Cassin to pull out his grenade launcher. If the computer core was well guarded, a few concussion grenades would make capture easier. With any luck, the impact would trigger a computer shut-down or fault as well.

Chapter 8

September 30, 2385 (Ten Years Ago) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV) (Fahnisht)

Fahnisht snarled the Challenge. Irthasht's Tentlords clashed swords with their neighbors, shouted, joined the challenge. The group formed over two-thirds of the circle in the open field.

Irthasht raised his own sword, growling and cough-barking back. His remaining Tentlords closed the circle, their own metal ringing, their own voices raised. It was easy to see, though, that Fahnisht had numbers in his favor. Irthasht had lost support over the last year. He had to prove that he remained the stronger, or give way to the younger Horn.

Voices and weapon sounds drowned out the insect-noises in the fields beyond. Younger Cetians pushed between legs, climbed on hillocks, fought for a vantage point to see the contest. Irthasht had been Clanlord for many years. The children who were not old enough to be warriors or fire-keepers had known only one Clanlord through their entire lifetime.

The sun was more than noonday in the cloudless sky. Riding beasts grazed in the fields beyond the standing stones. No tents had yet been set up. The old customs of the challenge were observed here, as they should be. No places would be claimed until all knew who would lead.

Fahnisht and Irthasht strode out onto the fire-blackened center stones, swords raised. The warm Tau-Ceti sunlight glinted off the steel rank-ring nailed into Fahnisht's horn, the gold of Irthasht's own rank-ring. The two barked their words, almost-human sounds. They came together, and wrapped arms around each other, swords still ready.

"Glory, Fahnisht, glory and life." Joy at battle suffused Irthasht's voice. "If you succeed, let the flames send me to the Spirit."

Fahnisht held back regret. The old Tentlord had taught much, was owed much blood. "Glory, Irthasht, glory and life. If I fail, let the flames proclaim your continued strength." The two touched horns for a moment, Irthasht's gold band gleaming in the sun, then broke off. They backed away a pace each, bowed slightly. The crowd around them roared, began to chant in rhythm.

Irthasht's sword cut through the air. Fahnisht danced aside, raised his own sword to block, sliced back in a graceful pirouette. Irthasht blocked, still swift, still more skilled than most Cetians. Dance forward, back, thrust, test, parry. The two moved quickly around the circle, around each other.

Irthasht moved forward, slashed almost wildly. Too easy, Fahnisht knew as he parried, and he was right. Irthasht continued forward, head down, horn aimed at the neck. Fahnisht stepped to the right, narrowly missing the move that would have torn his jugular. "You taught me that, Lord – no easy tricks."

Irthasht laughed. "This is the only test that shall matter!"

Again the two danced around, looking for weaknesses, looking for openings. He had often sparred the blunted blades with Irthasht, as most of the other Liegemen had. It was well to learn from the leader. He had fought beside Irthasht in older days. He had been a child, like those who pressed through the legs of their elders when Irthasht had won challenge against Uither. Irthasht still danced as a young warrior, unbowed by the years, sinews still tough, muscles still hard.

Irthasht made a swift rush forward: slice, parry, clash of blades, whistling air. The Tentlords cheered, chanted, pounded

their joy. Neither male was touched, neither drew blood. Blades up, down, ringing as they spiraled against each other.

Another thrust-and parry, still another. Irthasht was a master still. Fahnisht noticed, though, that he was guarding his left side. He tested, attacking more against that side. Irthasht parried, steering him away from that side. Fahnisht danced right in feint, then stabbed left.

Irthasht had expected the test. A fast parry and thrust threw Fahnisht's balance. Irthasht swung his blade out, then down to slice at Fahnisht's upper arm.

Fahnisht grunted at the pain, fell, rolled away. As he came up, he flexed, knew that the blow had been almost entirely absorbed by his leathers. Irthasht and he circled each other warily, Irthasht looking to see how much he had weakened the challenger. Fahnisht resolved himself. Irthasht had survived other challenges, wore the healed scars as a message to the young warriors with more muscle than mind.

Fahnisht fell back. Like Irthasht, he now favored his left arm. It was sore, but the wound not as deep as he would have Irthasht believe. He mimed the tiredness, hoped there was enough blood on his leathers to account for such. Perhaps, too, his widened eyes portrayed an illusion of panic for the elder warrior.

The chanting behind grew intense. Irthasht's remaining loyal Tentlords repeated his name, an intense growl that accelerated as it grew more quiet, the urgency of repeated whisper. Fahnisht slowed, let himself hesitate with his back toward Irthasht's most staunch supporters.

Irthasht leapt forward to strike, swinging his sword for a death-blow across the neck. Fahnisht barely raised his own blade in time to deflect the blow, slowed by his feigned injury. A kick sent Irthasht further off-balance, followed by a sweep of the sword. The blade bit deep into Irthasht's leg at the knee-joint. The old warrior fell to that knee, somehow still raising his sword for a last blow. Fahnisht parried.

Irthasht's sword flew out of his hand, clattering against the stones. The chanting ceased from both sides. Fahnisht grabbed

Irthasht's horn, pulled the head to the side. Irthasht struggled as Fahnisht brought the sword toward the Clanlord's neck. Fahnisht efficiently sliced into the skin, sliced open the veins and arteries near the surface.

Irthasht sighed. "Lead them," he said with a last coughing breath. Still holding Irthasht's horn, Fahnisht lowered him to the stone slab. "As best I can," he agreed.

Irthasht's eyes rolled back. Fahnisht let go of the horn, looked to the sky. "The Flame returns!" he shouted to the sky. "The Clanlord comes! Night, be afraid!"

The assembled Tentlords were quiet a moment longer than might have been seemly, if not for the years that Irthasht had survived challenges. Fahnisht's own Tentlords shifted nervously, knowing they should not be the first to echo the defiance of the Dark Spirits. Irthasht's remaining liege-warriors also seemed unready to accept the change. Too many had tried, lost their bids, failed to prove that the time of change had come.

Arisut, senior consort, was the first to recover her wits. Her voice was almost shrill in the quiet of the plains. "A new Flame guides us yet remaining!" she called skyward, in the old ritual of the women. Others from Irthasht's house joined the call, and then Fahnisht's men and women joined.

Fahnisht looked at the sky, saw that much would have to be made ready before the sun set. He did not interrupt, though. The transition must follow the old rules, even with the pale white warrior watching.

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Avinashini)

Avi maneuvered on full manual, happily free to use full boost, with minor nudges to swing around as needed. She gave the computer full control of the lighter rim weapons. She maintained firing control over the more powerful drill lasers now firing pulses as a single weapon. Skimming only meters from the enemy hull, she burned any nub that moved. At the same time,

she scanned what she could, especially concerned that even one particle weapon would be manned and powered.

None of the aiming magnets swiveled as she closed on them.

The FDC shuddered as a missile exploded within a meter. The burst spun the small craft spinning off course, alarms blaring. Avi's heads-up responded with track-back and damage-control displays. She righted the craft and veered, then turned the craft on its axis. The full power of her drill ate at the offending missile launcher.

Two pulses later, she was sure it was dead.

Three minutes and two turrets later, she had accounted for all of the small weapons on her portion of the hull. "Lt. Rassmussen, can I lend a hand?"

"Negative," he replied "I'm down to three. You can start the recon."

"Advise if you need anything."

"I will."

Avi switched channels to longer range and aimed a tight beam toward the other two inbound FDCs. "FDC-3 and FDC-4, all but two turrets are clear. All ventral and port turrets are clear. Skullbones hasn't powered any particle guns yet, and does not appear to have them manned. End." She didn't wait for a response, instead turning her attention to sensor scans.

Most of what she scanned would be analyzed later by the experts. Nonetheless, she chose to answer her own curiosity. A gentle vector change let the FDC skim a meter above the enemy hull, sidling up to the main hatch of one of the missile bays.

She put all of the scans on heads-up, superimposing one over another to get a full picture. There was no energy emission whatsoever – no power, no radiation, no infrared leakage. Deeper pinging with the laser and radar showed nothing. The FDC's gravitic sensor was not refined enough to map the interior mass, but the totality suggested that the bay underneath the emplacement was probably empty.

Likely the skullbones had removed the guts of the missile racks that should have been in that bay. That made some sense. Empty, the inner bays could easily be used for cargo or extra fuel

tanks. The large access hatch could be used to move containers in and out.

Avi closed in on a second bay, found the same lack of readings, and a suggestion of a fuel tank. Her earlier conjecture was being confirmed. Based out here on the Reach, expecting to use hit-and-run tactics on small shipping, the heavier weapons would not be needed.

She decelerated heavily, swung around the ship's tapered bow. The forward missile bay was also empty, perplexingly so. It should have housed the extensive survey-class sensor arrays that the Jin Jun had installed when they took the ship over and renamed her *Ibn*.

That seemed foolish. If the skullbones had left those arrays in place and active, they could track the smallest cargo shuttles with ease. They would have been ready to defend themselves against this underpowered attack. The FDCs might never have gotten close enough to kiss-and-bore.

Hubris, or poor planning? The attack had gone off well. Even one operating missile bay would have leveled the playing field considerably.

Her instincts nudged at the thought. If the Skullbones included any former Fleet officers, why had they left themselves both defenseless *and* blind?

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Urwah)

Milewski managed to maneuver ahead toward the swinging door to the galley proper, bashing through without wasted time. Urk pounded through behind her, taking in the scene in an instant. Two large pots stood on the stove, flat tops allowing a little steam to escape. An oven door was open, revealing something baking. Two startled skullbones in gravy-stained clothes ducked into the corner behind the appliance.

Milewski moved past the stove to taser them both. Urk passed inward, allowing other marines to follow him. He pointed

out the access aft. "Through there, and down the next gangway," he said, motioning. He started to motion his marines through.

His head suddenly swirled with dizziness, and his feet left the floor. "Grav off!" Milewski reported, perhaps unnecessarily. Urk twisted to gain control of his unexpected spin. As he did, the room tilted sideways forty-five degrees.

Urk's hip slammed into the corner of the stove. Both pots spun out into the middle of the room, spewing wobbling spheroids of gravy and bits of meat and vegetables from two or three different worlds. One of the crouching skullbones was flung onto the rotating mess, screeching as the steaming globs splashed into his eyes.

Urk looked at one point in the room, grabbed a handhold, and steadied himself. The room seemed to normalize. "Grab hold! They're trying to slow us down." It felt like training again, going through a standard Fleet maneuver to throw off a boarding party. Shut down gravity and inertial compensators, then blast the available thrusters. Spinning decks became bludgeons in weightlessness.

Urk switched channels. "Lar, you close to objective?"

"Stay out my hair," Lar responded.

Urk noted the agitation and let her be for the moment. There was enough to do without aggravating his other sergeant.

Urk switched back to his own marines' channel. "Null-g fighting, maybe some more maneuvering. We aren't sitting still, keep moving." He suited action to his own orders, pulling on the handhold to propel him through the next access way.

A retreating Skullbones yanked a drawer out and propelled it toward Urk. Eating utensils spread out in the weightlessness, bouncing harmlessly off the armor. Urk brushed the cloud of forks, knives, and spoons away. He caught one – a spoon – in his palm. "Souvenir," he muttered to himself, and thrust it into a leg pouch.

Milewski grabbed the fleeing skullbones' leg, let the taser burst. The cook went into a spasm. Milewski pushed her out of the way to continue down the corridor.

Movement was faster in zero-g. Urk pulled himself rapidly,

his men following. “Stay awake!” he reminded as they passed through one corridor junction, scanning with infrared overlay on his heads-up. He saw infrared images of various skullbones through the partition panels, most huddled down. He let his marines behind deal with them as they passed through. Ineffectives were not the main concern.

His infrared overlay showed narrow bars of heat in ceiling and wall panels: conduits for hot steam, heating the environment even as they helped cool the power plant. Efficient design held sway in these old boats, not wasting electric generation when simple fluid dynamics handled most things.

September 30, 2385 (Ten Years Ago) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV) (Fahnisht)

Fahnisht placed the last spirit wood on the bier. His arm ached where Irthasht had cut deep, but he did not show any pain. The Tentlords – all his, now – again stood in the circle. The winds blew quietly across the plain, making odd eddies around the gathered people. The night sky was clear, the stars bright. The Largest Moon was high, but would soon pass back over the horizon.

Klysira came forward and bowed. She held out the pincers. “Take what is yours.” Fahnisht took them, turned back to the bier and the body laid out on it. Three nails had already been removed in preparation. The fourth was pried partially out to allow an easy grip. Fahnisht gripped Irthasht’s horn, tightened the pincers, and yanked the remaining nail free. The gold band stayed tight to the horn. The old warrior’s horn had grown under the metal for many years, longer than most.

Fahnisht gripped the band with one hand, the base of the horn with the other. With a barking grunt, he twisted the band, hearing it scrape against the bony surface as it slowly loosened. With a final hard twist, he twisted the band free from Irthasht’s horn, held it high. Gracefully turning, he showed it to the encircled

throng.

Klysira came forward, hammer and new nails at the ready. Swords clashed, poles thumped again against the stone. Fahnisht crouched, bent his head forward.

Klysira took Fahnisht's steel-ringed horn in her hand. With long, skilled practice, she pried the four nail-heads away from the steel surface, exposing the nail bodies. In another moment, she yanked the nails out of the living horn. As she twisted the steel band, Fahnisht felt twitches of pain where the base of the horn grew from his skull, but allowed no sign to show, no sound to escape. The steel band came off. Klysira took a step back.

Fahnisht stood. "The Clan passes to the strongest horn." He went to Irthasht's bier, slid the ceremonial knife from its waist-sheath. He had tested it earlier, before the crowd gathered, made certain that Irthasht had not neglected it. He had not; the blade was honed razor-sharp, carefully protected with a light coat of oil. Fahnisht brought the knife up over his head, rested the blade against the horn, then sliced deftly upward. The living nerve in the pith stung, and blood oozed out. He repeated the action four times, carving the bone by millimeters, making it new and clean and sharp.

The chants and sword clashing increased in volume, intensity, finding a faster rhythm. "Clanlord, Clanlord," they repeated. "To you we swear!" They chanted the phrase over and over, granting their allegiance, calling on Fahnisht to do the same.

Fahnisht raised the band up, showed it to the assembled crowd. The crowd grew quiet, expectant. "In the shadow of his Flame, I give Oath."

Arisut, senior of Irthasht's consorts, stepped forward with her rune-covered rod in one hand, tinder in the other. She laid the symbol of her days as Irthasht's first Firekeeper at Fahnisht's feet. "Light the new Fire and back away the night." Both knelt, the rod between them. Fahnisht took the tinder and began flicking sparks at the oiled head of the long-dried rod.

He knew, from the histories recounted many times, that Arisut's aunt had carried the torch and tinder for Irthasht years

before. Arisut had kindled and kept the fires longer than anyone in remembered years, all as Irthasht's closest personal advisor.

A spark struck the torch-head just right. Fahnisht blew gently; Arisut joined after a respectful moment. Klysira came forward and knelt beside her, adding her gentle breath. Fahnisht leaned forward, the gold band held to his chest, also blowing gently at the spark.

A small flame started, then a larger flame. In a moment, the torch blazed. Arisut lifted it gently, then passed it to Klysira. "From my hands to yours. You now serve as the Flame's Keeper."

Klysira bowed. "I shall serve as you have, as long as the Flame allows." She stood straight, turned to lock gaze with Fahnisht. He held the gaze as he raised the band over his horn. He made his voice loud so that all around could hear. "In the Flame, I bind myself to my people."

"Fire-bound! Fahnisht!" The shouts increased, speeding up. The crowd began to sway back and forth; the circle started moving in earnest.

Klysira thrust the flame at the new-sharpened horn, held it there. Fahnisht felt the burning pain, held still. Only a hint of strain came through in his voice. "Like Irthasht before, I make oath to all in Fire. I shall lead well, fight well, and bring glory and honor always to our plains."

Klysira pulled the torch away. Fahnisht pushed the band down on his horn, felt it scrape against brutalized quick. The horn throbbed, pus oozing to cover the wounds and burn. Standing straight, Fahnisht reached. Klysira relinquished the spirit wood torch; Fahnisht raised it high. The assembled Tentlords clashed their blades with their neighbors'.

Fahnisht brought the torch to the bier. He lowered the burning end and held it against the lighter brambles, straw, and other kindling. The flames caught, began licking at the bier. They moved up to the oiled corpse. "Free the soul and rejoin it in the Flame, to the Flame." Fahnisht sat, cross-legged.

Klysira sat beside him, quietly repeating the Flame-freeing Prayer. The encircled crowd did the same, becoming quiet, let-

ting the fire speak for them. Fahnisht breathed deep, taking the smell of wood smoke mixed with the charring flesh as it cleansed away Irthasht's husk and freed his soul.

In minutes, the bier was fully engulfed, outlining Irthasht. Fahnisht felt the heat warm his cheeks, dry them until they almost burned. The pain in his horn became dull throb, adopting the rhythm of the quiet chanting. He watched the flames lift the sprit away, carrying it, returning Irthasht to the air and soil.

They sat and watched, honoring their fallen, forgetting time and space as flesh hissed and smoldered. Some might doubt their new lord, Fahnisht knew, but that would not last long. He would lead them well, bring them through the plains.

He would even learn more of his new Warrior. Fahnisht looked over at the hornless one. This one was still a question. He was not like the ones hiding in the hills beyond. He did not choose to stay in the village they had built so quickly, so easily. He did not pretend to hide. He knew that the village had been watched as thoroughly as it watched. He did not use their small, poorly faked birds, their ridiculous floating rocks to spy on the Houses.

This one, Kameef, had come to them, arms open, a sword at his side, ready. He had ridden with Fahnisht, a sword at his side. Now Kameef sat, listening to the silence of fire, listening to the breeze against the grass. This one might have more to teach than sloppy hiding and furtive glances.

Klysira stepped to him, the one proper step away from her Tentlord – now Clanlord – and Husband. He could see that she had observed his gaze, almost read his thoughts. She was the proper Lady of any man's house, worthy, strong, sinewy. She was a grace to him, could almost read his thoughts as if written on the tip of his horn.

She had done so here. "Leave Kameef for another time. You still have strength to draw from the flames. Its spirit is not yet all released."

Fahnisht agreed with her wisdom. He breathed deep, letting the oily smoke of his predecessor suffuse his lungs, clear his mind.

Finally, the fire was embers, Irthasht's shell almost as fully returned as his essence. Fahnisht heard restless sounds behind, those whose discipline was not yet mature needing to shift or cough. Fahnisht began a gentle but definite crescendo. "The soul is freed and rejoined to the Flame." He repeated the phrase three more times, slowly raising the flat of his sword to his forehead. The cool steel blocked the last heat of the bier. "His Flame burns on in us all," he intoned. Klysira beside, and all those behind echoed him, then fell silent.

The death-chant ended, the plains around the standing stones were almost silent. The embers popped and gently crackled; other than that, no sound but a breeze rustled through the grasses.

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Vele)

The corridor spun, angled itself again as the ship again maneuvered. Lar was pushed against a partition by inertia and centrifugal force. She was held there lightly, perhaps by two g's at the most. This large ship couldn't take the best advantage of heavy maneuvers. It was too slow, too bound by its own inertia. marine injuries amounted to a few bruises. The thrust reduced.

She keyed into her private channel to Urk. "This is getting annoying, you know," she pointed out, not pretending. "Are you there yet?" She had tried to get her own squad on the run at the main computer, knowing far better than Grunon what was really sought.

Her battle computer flashed a signal: "Gangway S-3." She looked right, saw the dogged hatch. Estrateche got to it first, struggling to keep the commander in check. "Slow down, hot-shot," she muttered. She braced herself against a handhold for leverage as a third marine came up, covering the door.

Lar studied the door through the infrared overlay. She saw no sign of anyone waiting behind. "Go," she ordered.

Chapter 9

April 15, 2391 (Four Years Ago) – Vicinity of Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV) (Ramachandra)

Ramachandra nervously rubbed at an old coffee stain on the main board. He had insisted that his boards be cleaned when he first signed on, but the rest of the crew was too busy chip-shooting aging drive controller boards and hand-turning coolant valves.

Ramachandra refused to do a job beneath his abilities. He insisted instead on allowing the dislike of the rest of the crew to simmer just below a boil. *Conestoga* and its beneath-contempt crew deserved no less. His training, experience, and years in the Fleet deserved a better ship, even if no better ship could be spared for this particular effort.

Manifest Destiny would have to be cleansed of the various untouchables at some point. For now, they served a purpose – none of the movement's better ships and crews could be risked on this operation. Ramachandra himself would not be piloting these zealots if his skills and training were not absolutely essential to success.

The Humanitas zealots in the lower echelons would have to be pruned back at some point, too. The religious face of the movement attracted many people. Even Aunt Sunitha had ac-

cepted some questionable ideas. For now, the Humanitas foolishness served a purpose, but realism would eventually take the place of false religion.

Ramachandra scanned his boards. The computer could not be trusted to send the codes at the right time. It was, perhaps, discomfoting to think as much. The computer *had* to be trusted to pull together a gravitic bubble allowing travel through hyperspace, and *that* was complicated. Its architecture was built for that, though, and it had all of the processors in the controller boards to assist. Ramachandra himself could probably sequence the bubble manually, if a malfunction happened at the wrong time. This old boat's entry sequence was simple, compared to a battleship's configuration.

Entry into hyperspace could be aborted at the last minute. An interdiction satellite's nuclear barrage would outflank any evasive maneuvers he could drag out of this ancient hulk. Ramachandra watched the timer he had set on a side display.

At ten seconds, he positioned his fingers on the key locked to the transponder. He counted down with the screen, silently, gently tapped the key as the "zero" appeared on the screen. Symbols flashed across the screen in the dance of query-and-response. He gave the responses as required.

Now he had to await the light-second delays as the transponders determined whether the codes were valid, the ship supposedly permitted. If the Jin Jin had finally changed the codes the latest herd of stinking cattle would never know it, at least not in this life. Ramachandra leaned back, chanting quietly to himself, awaiting the verdict.

No alarms went off, no missiles appeared on a *Conestoga*-bound vector. *Conestoga* was in the blackout groove. Ramachandra relaxed, touched another key and began the approach sequence. He did not bother to give the cattle-cargo any warning. They had been told an hour ago to brace and stay braced. If any of them were hurt – no loss.

As he had twice before, he cut out the main drives, turned the ship. He ran the flicker-brake sequence through the mains. Old stanchions creaked. Inertia pressed and pulled him in his seat.

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The main navigation screen flickered and died. Ramachandra merely frowned. Cursing would waste energy. He calmly switched the display to a secondary, keying the next braking sequence before taking the time to see if it could be re-booted.

The screen refused to re-boot. The only course was to ignore it and continue his final approach. He watched the countdown, keyed the maneuver, tracked the computer's work in case the whole system cut out and required his intervention. It did not; he remained easily in the groove.

There were twenty minutes to pass before the next maneuvering. Perversely, perhaps, he chose the long-dried stain as his focus point. Ramachandra set his internal clock, regulated his breathing, slipping quickly into the calmer state of awareness.

Nothing interrupted his meditation. He returned to the necessary worldly state of awareness just as planned, ready to bring the freighter into atmosphere. He keyed the sequence to increase power to deflection, changing the simple dust-sweep into plasma shunt and heat shield.

Once again, the aging equipment was slow in response. An indicator came up red: the number eight segment was failing to properly increase power. Ramachandra keyed comm. "Potters, attend the deflection shunts. Number eight is offline, five is at ten percent. We have five minutes before entry."

Potters' typical attitude could be heard through the comm. "The ablat'll be enough."

Ramachandra remained calm. This sort demanded the angry reaction for self-justification. "I have discussed this before, Potters. The tiles are old. You will do your job, I will do mine. Check the system, repair five, and power number eight."

"I getting damned tired of you giving me orders on *my* ship."

"What tires you is no concern of mine. If you prefer, you can take over, and I will retire to my lifeboat. I will come to ground alive. We are wasting time in silly arguing on which you insist."

Potters went silent for a moment, then barked an order to the second engineer. "Etienne, I told you to check the re-entry shunt

system an hour ago. Get it fixed.” The comm went silent.

Ramachandra returned his attention to piloting. He could do no more, regardless. If the shields remained down, the ablative tiles would have to be sufficient. Centuries ago, the very first orbiters had relied on far more fragile systems.

Sometimes the reliance had been mistaken. Ramachandra made his contingency plans, setting a key to shunt additional power to units three and four. The plasma skirting those shields would flume away in a somewhat protective arc. The generators would not bear the extra stress well, however. This ship was almost past its useful life.

Ramachandra focused on the trajectory. The dayside landing would limit the visibility of the contrail, though it would also make the contrail visible from the ground. The latest information stated that the Jin Jun had only a limited presence. They maintained the single manned station and several observation satellites. For the most part, they observed using drones.

The Jin Jun had for the most part taken their own smug advice, keeping their own away from “polluting” Shānhé-Wòtu and its sub-humans. Unless an unexpected supply ship or some such was coming, or that one foolish bastard O’Meath was wandering about again, no electronics or human eyes should be lifted skyward to see the ship. This run was no more difficult than the prior two.

The comm crackled on. “All screens up.” Potters sounded no more happy than he had a few minutes earlier, even if his own survival was better assured. Ramachandra confirmed the report with his own checks. The shunt fields were less stable than he would like, but would probably hold.

The freighter dipped into the first layers of wisp. Ramachandra allowed the computer to stabilize the re-entry, occasionally entering a correction, but his main attention stayed on scans of more import. Jin Jun ships might lurk, new satellites might be in orbit. The race-traitor himself supposedly visited the planet from time to time, on his business or the Jin Jun’s. As the upper atmosphere bit, the vibrations and groans became louder, but not distracting.

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Plasma streamed by the front canopy, flashing various colors, pressing inward against the screens. Ionization blocked any scans now. If prying eyes were looking, they would see the streak through the sky.

Alarms. The freighter bucked, banked heavily to port, began a spiral. Ramachandra assessed rapidly, knew that the number eight shunt was failing again. Even this far away, he heard screeching from the hold. "Potters!" An adjustment to number six helped straighten the descent, but did nothing for the hull, nothing to straighten the dive. Hull screamed; dust liberated itself from unknown cracks; lights throughout the cabin flashed different shades of red.

Stub fins provided no lift. A burst of the gravitic drives refused to bring the nose back up. The freighter was no better than a falling stone for the moment. Ramachandra felt his shoulders pressed too far back into the chair. He had no time for gods as he calculated solutions in his head.

The horizon began to creep back up. Ramachandra keyed rapidly at the main panel, sensing the change. The freighter was no longer falling, not quite. It became a vessel again, responded appropriately as thicker atmosphere took hold of its minimal aerodynamic surfaces. Alarms and flashing lights died away.

Where was his heart rate? Was he really drenched with cold sweat? Did it matter? The pilot looked over the plot and began making corrections. He was only a few hundred kilometers off course, despite all.

The rest of the descent was uneventful. The freighter passed over the peaks, descended into the valley. Landing stabilizers descended as he searched out the level plain marked out near the growing settlement. Scans found the weak beacon first. Markers became visible in the distance moments later. The final keening bursts of over-powered gravitics slowed the hull to a near-stop, as the units allowed the structure to ease itself to the ground.

"Grounded," he said tersely. "Secure from flight, Potters."

"Christ, stop pretending you're still Fleet," Potters replied.

"If I were not Fleet, you would be scattered dead on the mountains now." Ramachandra stabbed the comm key off, then

keyed the bridge shut-down sequence. Nominally, he should watch over this, especially on this near-hulk. The sky outside spoke to him, though. It called. The freighter would handle this task one more time, if not more.

Ramachandra moved aft and down a half-deck's height, past the two escape pods to port and starboard, to the rear-facing air-lock. The lock was currently unpowered, manually locked shut, as Potters had not repaired servos. That would require attention. Ramachandra undogged it, cranked wheels and hand-valves, and listened to the hiss-burst of fresh air forcing its way in between separating gaskets.

The air was fresh, alluring, almost wet with vapor after the weeks in space. The door creaked open as he pulled inward. Light flooded the dim space, revealing cramped confines, chipped grey paint, power cables beyond the safe age of their insulation.

He stepped out onto the dorsal surface, careful to step only on the footpads. Two streams of settlers were already flowing out of the hold below, to port and starboard. They pulled carts and wagons behind them. These were the peasants, untouchables and expendables of the Cause, their only value to be placed in harm's way. They of course thought, and were told, a different version. They were given some small reason for hope, a slight belief that they would be supported here. Most had so little on Earth or in the habitats that the found any risk worthwhile.

As he took deep breaths, he wondered that he was not taking the risk himself. He would, perhaps, at some point. Perhaps.

Two wagons trundled in from the distance, carrying the small welcome committee from the settlers already in place. He doubted that they had any idea that they had come close to "welcoming" an oversized falling tea-kettle. The fools probably thought they were the center of the movement.

August 17, 2391 (Four Years Ago) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Fahnisht)

The pre-dawn mist rose from the quiet stream, obscuring the rising mountains to the south. He had never been along these paths, even as Yinthe's guest. He was far outside the Clan's circles. Could but that he could appreciate this better.

Fahnisht distracted himself from such regret by stroking his beast's powerful haunches. It was ready for its long ride, ready to carry him into battle if need be. It was the best mount he had yet been privileged to train and ride.

The mount he had led to this spot was almost as solid. Pelest had selected it for Kameef from the best the Clan had, not begrudging the long-absent Tentlord his due. Pelest had been young when he had resisted Kameef's assimilation, himself still in many ways an outsider. They had become solid advisors and warriors together. Pelest in particular had been against granting Kameef leave to wander up and away from the grasslands to that formless place beyond the sky.

Pelest returned from the stream, a skin of cool water in each hand. He set one down, offered the other to the nearest mount. The beast drank thirstily.

There would be no collecting of blood-debt today. Today would likely leave him owing blood to Clan Yinthe, and perhaps others.

Yinthe and his own senior Tentlord noted the appearance of the first rays of the morning sun. Yinthe came over, rubbing his palms together against the chill. "Your hornless albino does not know his place if he makes you wait."

"He does not ride along local circles, as you should know. He will be here."

"Perhaps he no longer pretends friendship," Yinthe suggested. "Perhaps these new Hornless are his reward to you for befriending him."

"You do not know Kameef as I do," Fahnisht replied. "He is such as we, not lying hornless Townfolk."

"As you say, I do not know this Kameef as you do," Yinthe

agreed. He seemed unconvinced.

The beast beside him made a grumbling noise. It heard something, perhaps, better than the Horns could.

The sound became audible to their own ears. It was a hum, a whine. Pelest and Fahnisht had both heard this sound before, whenever Kameef brought that other Ooh-mahn to the Clan. That one, Kameef had assured, was busy, important, a Clanlord and more among his own kind. She was too busy to ride a proper beast.

The sound became louder. The smooth-framed flying thing came into view in the almost-horizontal shafts of dawn light. It came to rest far enough away that the beasts were not discomfited.

Kameef got off the machine. He reached behind the seat and lifted his sword from behind it, shrugging its sheath-strap over his shoulder. The hornless albino approached, gave honor. Fahnisht responded with the appropriate gestures accepting Kameef's fealty. The various proper honors were given to Yinthe, Yinthe's Tentlord, and finally Pelest. Yinthe accepted him despite apparent disquiet over the number of fingers and lack of a proper head bone.

"Too long gone, Kameef. We must see you more."

"I have indeed been too long away from my plains," Kameef agreed. "Though I am sorry to be called back for this news." He looked to the spare beast. "You readied a fine mount. I ask we await nothing."

Fahnisht would have preferred to spend time with further talk, further re-familiarization. Yinthe's impatience, however, reached through the mist to tug at his sleeve. "I agree." He mounted, knowing that Kameef followed suit.

He gestured for O'Meath and Yinthe to join him at the front of the column. "Kameef, your other clan has ways of watching. They did not see these ooh-mahns come here. This I do not understand."

"We are unsure ourselves, Milord," Murphy responded. "They must have somehow closed our eyes above."

"You simply were not watching, you tell us." Yinthe

snorted. "Your ways are poor, then. What of the floating balls?"

"They can be interfered with."

"I do not believe."

Fahnisht looked sidelong at Kameef. His Tentlord made the human shoulder-twitch that dismissed an undeniable, uncontrollable reality. He followed with a more comprehensible hand-gesture expressing the sentiment more clearly: "I will duel fairly with the warrior who comes with sword ready."

Yinthe chose to misunderstand. "I do not believe that these Hornless will honor your drawn sword. They walk about the hills with weapons that kill at distance. They have sought to injure my warriors, but will not engage in honor."

Kameef shrugged again. "They will be gone soon enough."

Yinthe desisted. The ride became silent. The beasts picked their ways up the slopes of the various ravines.

The sun rose in the sky. It was beginning to cast shorter shadows as they reached the higher plains.

The human settlement stood ahead. Fields were being tilled. Structures could be seen in the distance, some crudely fashioned out of wood, others looking more like the domes erected by Kameef's own Clan in the farther mountains.

Hornless human heads dotted the fields. In the distance, human figures stood, holding things ending in burnished metal tubes. These were their distance weapons. The humans could kill from where they stood. Fahnisht accepted this, but wondered whether the dishonorable death would find its way to the bards.

Kameef took a hand-sized ball from a pouch worn over one shoulder. It was like the devices that Kameef's Clan Jin Jun used to spy on the plains. Kameef tapped at a spot, spoke in his human words. The ball hummed, lifted away, began to float toward the center of the human Town.

A figure formed underneath, another human. It – Fahnisht had difficulty determining human gender – was clothed in bright colors and adornments of the rarest metals adorning. As it floated down, it unrolled skin on two sticks, then began to speak. Fahnisht strained to understand the words, could not.

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Urwah)

Milewski pulled the manual lever and swung the door wide; the marine sprayed ahead with needles. “Clear!” Urk pushed off against the bulkhead and into the steep gangway downward. Swinging feet-first, he aimed through his legs for anyone coming against him.

He bounced into the open corridor below, using his legs to ricochet off the deck and toward the ceiling. Milewski followed suit, as the rest of the squad followed through, each taking a new position to cover the others.

The corridor looked wrong. The schematics had led Urk to expect a modification here – a bulkhead sealed shut. This corridor was open. Urk consulted his battle computer; it agreed with his memory.

It didn’t make sense for Skullbones to remove the bulkhead modifications.

Urk looked more closely. He saw no signs of either weld-scars or cutting. The partitions were smooth, and the structural steel corners were solid. “Something’s wrong here,” he said to Milewski. “Should be a new pressure-tight bulkhead, if this is *Ibn*.”

“Briefings could be wrong,” Milewski pointed out.

Urk tightened his lip. “Damned big mistake.”

“Matter to our job?”

“Might. All of you, keep your eyes open. Keep moving, though.” Urk pushed off, gliding weightlessly down the corridor, again putting the infrared overlay on his heads-up.

The ship spun again, walls again assuming new positions. Urk found himself resting against a curved metal ceiling support, exposed power and steam lines only centimeters away from his helmet. He glanced at the upper left corner of the heads-up to note the time. These maneuvers were a little too regular, he decided. Someone without much imagination was piloting the ship.

A new pull grabbed him. All of the marines rolled and tumbled down toward the floor, artificial gravity again making the deck a floor. Urk cursed. The control room pilots had a little

more imagination than he had credited. He heard groans and swearing through his comm.

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Vele)

“Main power is ten meters up,” Lar reminded them. She waved, and her marines followed her aft to the T-junction.

Lar peered down the port junction. Estrateche peered starboard. An expected hatchway at either end closed off the two entrances to main engineering. “Two teams, per plan,” Lar reminded her marines. One squad formed in the narrow space behind her, the other behind Estrateche. “On three.” Lar counted, and the marines surged.

A hot wall of force slammed against her, pounding her into the forward bulkhead. The suit’s internal temperature spiked. Lar rolled out, feeling her battlesuit stretch oddly. “Steam!” she yelled, perhaps pointlessly, as the invisible edges of the high-pressure steam formed slightly cooler wisps and clouds of vapor. Lar put a gloved hand to his side, felt the melted layers of armor and cloth. “We *should* kill these bastards. Send a *real* message.”

Marines came around, checked quickly. “Seals are tight, Lt.,” one commented.

Lar looked ahead, scanning through IR, pinging with her targeting laser. “There’s at least three,” Lar said. “If one hit dead-center --”

“It didn’t,” Estrateche pointed out. “I don’t need you cut in two, hard enough to keep track of you in one piece.”

“They’re fighting back. Ambushes. Stupid, *stupid*. They should *know* that this is only a warning.”

“Maybe no one told them,” Estrateche suggested.

Lar shifted mental gears, pointed up the corridor. “Rail driver – cut through the pipe there.”

Coggins moved up, pulling the heavy mass-driver from its shoulder sling. Power hummed from the back-pack. The marine braced the weapon, took careful sight through the integrated sys-

tems. Lar took the moment to admire the steady pull in the trigger, the burst of power as the coils pulsed, the puff of coolant evaporating from the power-pack exhaust behind.

The high-pressure line snapped, buckled, snaked. Steam streamed out horizontally, invisible in the center, becoming more visible at the edges. The spike drove itself through, into the ceiling bulkhead. "Good shot." Lar got to her hands and knees, started forward. "Heads down, everyone." Coggins put the mass driver back, taking his place second to last in line as the unit scrambled forward.

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Avinashini)

The collision alert sounded. Avi glanced down at the main screen, assessed the data. "Heads up, Rassmussen," she noted, though she doubt he needed the alert. Avi touched at her controls, choosing thrusters to roll the FDC out of the way, following the Skullbones' spinning rolls. Avi scanned over the nav read-outs, continued to adjust her course.

"Our grunts are probably getting bumped around in there," Rassmussen replied. "We can take out the maneuvering thrust-plates for them."

"Brass wants this ship intact, as few repairs as necessary," Avi replied. "The capture program needs maneuvering power."

"A few thrusters more or less –"

Avi tightened her lips. "The mission briefing was clear. Turrets and weapons only, serious emergency's the only exception."

"And this isn't?"

"Just stay close to your pick-up point." Avi adjusted her own trajectory again to follow the vessel.

"Yes, *ma'am*." Rassmussen's tone was not as deferential as Avi would have liked.

Avi turned back to her navigating and sensor runs. The missile emplacement forward was not empty, but the ping was not

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heavy equipment. It was cargo, by the looks of things. This was clearly a makeshift hold, full of hijacked cargo.

That, at least, made sense. This old frigate was designed for battle, not to carry supplies. The Admiral had known this class well, often discussed it. In its day on the line, its holds would most likely have carried extra supplies, extra ordnance. Occasionally, they might be converted to house extra marines for boarding parties. This ship could not be an economical privateer without extra volume to carry the spoils.

The weapons-bay design encouraged that use. It had large, powered hatches at several points, exposing its racks of missiles for firing. Less accessible designs had failed; the first Zhīzhū War was almost lost when weapons could not be serviced easily.

Avi swung the FDC around and fired into the main hatch, chopping holes into its fastenings, hinges, power systems. Plating drifted away as the ship fired its maneuvering engines again. Avi scanned close, zooming a heads-up, to see cargo containers carefully arrayed, now straining against ties and stays.

Avi fired again, cutting through various stays, boring holes into containers. Containers spilled into space. Avinashini took care to record the scene for later review by analysts; they would probably be able to match the containers to lost ships.

August 17, 2391 (Four Years Ago) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV) (Murphy)

Murphy watched the floater move toward the main human settlement. It transmitted the message from Parliament, approved by the House of Knights, in standard frequencies, and sought any network it could pry open. At the same time, the recorded holo of young Yi spoke in Standard for anyone present to hear.

The boy's voice was thin, but he managed authority well. "On November 24, 2351, with the assent and advice of both Lords and Commons, and with full support of the House of Knights, Empress Zhang decreed that Shānhé-Wòtu be free of

human settlement or interference. She decreed that we are no longer the Euros who killed whole cultures, nor the Khans of long before. By settling on Shānhé-Wòtu, you have violated the November 24, 2351 Decree.

“Shānhé-Wòtu exists for the Cetians, both Horn and Hornless.

“By this edict, you are to account yourselves, your livestock, your equipment, and all of your human possessions. You have thirty days in which you will prepare to be moved. You will be removed, by force if necessary, before the end of the year. The Parliament has assented to this edict, as has the House of Knights.

“The Knights Jin Jun have been tasked with overseeing this effort. Sir Cuchulain Padraic O’Meath stands before you today as the Emperor’s Representative, on the Emperor’s Own Business. The Jin Jun presence has been temporarily increased, and their satellites re-coded for security. Thousands of floaters have already been released to locate each and every human on Shānhé-Wòtu.”

One of the distant guards raised his rifle. Murphy put his hand to the butt of his laser. The heads-up linked automatically, directed images to the back of his eyeballs and into the optic nerves. He keyed for the zoom overlay, saw that the guard was aiming at the floater.

Murphy looked to the other guard, again zoomed. His rifle was also up, leveled at the group on beast-back. Murphy zoomed his heads-up, drew, put the target-beam’s red dot on the guard’s forward hand. One burst of the attack beam seared a deep burn into the back of the hand. The rifle flew free with the pain reflex. Murphy switched targets; before the other guard could draw a bead, his rifle was spinning away as he clutched his upper arm.

Murphy holstered the pistol, keyed his handheld for comm. The emperor’s image faded. “This is O’Meath himself,” he said in Standard. “I’m riding in with Clanlords Fahnisht and Yinthe. We’re all being monitored. A Jin Jun cruiser’s waiting not far from here, ordered to take this garden spot *out* if any one of us dies. One nuke. Stupidity here is deadly.”

With any luck, the idiot settlers would buy the bluff. The settlers were thought to be ready to defend themselves, and to prove a point by sending back bodies. Murphy preferred the blatant lie to being riddled with holes. The Clanlords would place their honors before their hides, but even Fahnisht understood little enough Standard to know what he had said.

Murphy turned to Fahnisht. "We must show ourselves, Milord," he stated.

"Of course we must," Fahnisht replied. He spurred the beast, moving toward the common center of the settlement. Yinthe followed next. Murphy spurred his own beast to follow them both, keying the floater to repeat the young Emperor's recorded message.

They rode into the center without incident. The native mounts were skittish as they approached. Murphy and they could smell the unfamiliar Terran livestock. Though the smells were unfamiliar to the mounts and the Clanlords themselves, Murphy could distinguish the familiar smells of sheep, cattle, and pigs. Someone had prepared these settlers to show at least the appearance of seeking success in the long-haul.

They were defining "success" as ecological disaster. The idiots hadn't learned from history.

Murphy filed the observation away for later consideration. It would most likely be necessary to destroy most of the Terran livestock, whether by hunting it down or finding some other means. Collecting it would be beyond the abilities of any squad he could muster. There was no way to calculate the damage that would be done by a few escaped sheep, or a breeding rooster and chicken. The damned Manifesters were unbelievably arrogant.

If nothing else, they certainly could have studied Jin Jun reports and recordings which were publicly available. The Hornless Townfolk had their own livestock, perfectly edible by human standards, and already tamed. They might as well have rustled a few head, rather than bringing invasive competition to the surface. Apparently, though, none of them had paid attention to the mandatory classes in global ecology from grammar school on up. Three hundred and fifty years of recovery from the post-

industrial population explosion, the Two Earth Crisis and the Pandemics had apparently left the Manifesters inbred and stupid.

Fahnisht led the cadre to the largest building, which satellite and floater images suggested was a common hall. As has been discussed in advance, the two Clanlords and their escorting warriors stayed on their mounts. Murphy alone dismounted. He pulled the rolled hard-copy of the official Edict from his saddle bag, as well as the data card containing the text and other details.

Three tall, bearded men came out of the common hall. They approached Murphy. The apparent leader spoke first, choosing official Court Mandarin over Standard. *"We decline to accept the Edict. The young Emperor is surrounded by traitors to humanity and the One-in-Many God, and the Parliament is being manipulated by such traitors. The insult of this delivery is unacceptable. We shall not abandon our rightful place on the world."* All three kept their hands folded before them, obviously refusing to take possession of the documents.

Murphy considered responding in standard English, but decided against it. So long as they claimed the right to bargain in Mandarin, they were claiming to remain under the protection of the Emperor. *"Your Emperor understands that his expanses do not include this world, and he has long abided by the decisions of his forebears regarding this. Your energy and efforts will be welcomed on any other world. The Court's records reveal no application by your group for off-world colonization. Had you applied, you would no doubt have been permitted and supported. While there is still an opportunity, perhaps you would be wise to seek such permission. You can transmit it through the Jin Jun satellites, which will forward it to my ship. I will personally shepherd the application and recommend you for priority consideration."*

One of the other men seemed about to speak, his face already read. The leader stayed him with a look and a gesture. The leader spoke again. *"The One-in-Many God has offered us this blue-green world, close to our home world. We decline to journey further when this bounty has been gifted us, the One True Species."*

Murphy shrugged. There was nothing more to say. He wasn't going to argue made-up theology. Moreover, at least one small suspicion had been abundantly confirmed: this settlement had strong ties to the Humanitas church. There was a fair chance that the spokesman was a Humanitas minister, though probably not from the upper hierarchy. None of the major ministers had disappeared from the nets or their congregations, so far as he had been told. No major political or business supporters were gone, either.

Hell, these people were too low-level to have pulled this off.

Murphy dropped the scroll and data card at the leader's feet. He used his impeccable Court Mandarin. *"By this edict, you will be removed from this world within six months. If you leave unwillingly, you will not be guaranteed a place on a blue-green world. We have satellites focused, floaters assigned, and the Horn Clans will be watching. If you try to disperse, you will be tracked."*

"You are warned in fairness that not all of the Clanlords will treat humans as Fahnisht did. The Horns will protect their circles of influence. Any of you who disperse are likely to be killed." Murphy looked pointedly back at Yinthe, turned, went back to mount his beast.

Once seated, he looked to Fahnisht, switched to the Horn language. "Milord, I have delivered the message of my other Clanlord. It comports with your wishes."

Fahnisht signed assent with a Cetian gesture. He and Yinthe turned to their mounts, followed by their escorting warriors.

As they trotted out of the human settlement, Yinthe and Fahnisht spoke. Murphy overheard enough. Yinthe was beginning to doubt his own original wisdom in bringing this matter to Fahnisht. The other clanlord began suggesting a simple war party, noting that other clans in the area were eager to cleanse the lands. Famished listened, saying little.

Murphy knew that Fahnisht would remain true to his word, already given. He owed Murphy blood, by Horn views. They were tied together. Fahnisht would do as he had promised.

Almost every Clan on the plains owed Clan Fahnisht blood,

and Fahnisht would collect those debts. He in turn believed in his Tentlord Kameef, and those few other humans he had met. He expected them to do as promised.

Fahnisht also knew that the settlers' weapons and tactics would be more dishonorable than those of any Hornless firing arrows from behind a wall. The Clans of the Plains would be decimated if they attempted to clear these usurpers.

Nonetheless, Murphy began to question whether or not he was doing his Horn friend any long-term favor. He mused momentarily about how easily the situation could have been resolved with a small nuke.

Hell, that was probably what the Humanitas nuts wanted. Their own floaters would no doubt record anything so spectacular for propaganda purposes. Unleashing a nuke on settlers would topple Parliament. The Imperial Family itself would be threatened.

That left military removal as the sole option. The Jin Jun had insufficient capacity to handle such an action. They would have to obtain help from Fleet.

What Fleet officer would willingly command such a mission? Fleet had been seeking permission to set up shop in the system and on-world for thirty years. If nothing else, any blue-green world in human hands was a blue-green world denied to the zhīzhū. A good number of the Fleet personnel were members of the damnable Humanitas Church. They were already half of the way to joining the Manifest Destiny movement. Who would command? Zhaohui herself? Was that one of the wheels within wheels she planned to turn? Or would she consider common sense? There were no easy solutions to any of this damned situation.

Murphy urged his mount onward.

Chapter 10

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Urwah)

Urk bounced away from the wall. “Around the next corner. Heads up!” Urk pushed off and twisted to face the skullbones whose IR signature he’d spotted. He got only a glimpse before he tucked and spun to protect his faceplate.

A half-meter string of undulating globules of liquid flame flashed by. One splashed against Urk’s arm. The liquid spread around, flames licking at his battlesuit, spattering onto the partition beside him. The flame spun onward, re-shaping itself, eating into walls and wiring.

A marine let loose a string of curses over the comm. Urk felt his arm heat up, ablative cloth sizzling and melting away. Patting at the flames with his gloved right hand thinned the flames, but set his glove on fire.

Another string of flaming globules swept down the corridor. Milewski pulled Urk out of the way. Another marine emptied an extinguisher over both. Fire crept toward the squad as the corridor shifted again, another maneuver. More swearing burst forth from the marines. Another burst came down, this one closer to the nominal ceiling.

The fire burned against the bulkhead, flaring in all directions in the zero-g. “Napalm!” Urk brushed extinguisher foam off his

faceplate. "These bastards are crazy!"

"We need to get up that corridor." Milewski rapidly inspected Urk's battlesuit, spreading fire-extinguisher foam along the scorched patches to look for bubbles of escaping air. "You're suit's tight," she pronounced quickly.

"What lunatic blows off a flame-thrower in zero-g?"

"Focus!" Another flame globule sputtered down the corridor to the junction, hitting the bulkhead. Flame spattered through the corridor, blocking easy passage. The marines pulled further back, Milewski tugging Urk.

"Old-fashioned napalm." Urk oriented himself, looking at the corridor ceiling. "Fire suppression must be cut off on purpose." He looked at the bulkhead. "We're too deep inside to open the can up."

"We don't have the right bangers, either," Milewski added. "Decompression might hurt the computer, anyway. They're killing their own oxygen supply."

"Carbon dioxide puts out fire. Self-limiting." Urk looked at the scorched wall. The flames were diminishing. "Not fast," he said. "Lots of air in this can. Wonder how much fuel they have?"

"Maybe a lot, maybe not."

Urk looked back at the squad. "Grenades."

Trang separated herself. "Only one tube left."

Urk reached his scorched arm out for the disposable grenade tube. Milewski pushed the scorched arm down. "Her privilege, Lieutenant."

Urk cursed. "Some squads follow orders, you know."

"So make it an order. I'll sleep late in the brig."

Urk gave way. "Go." Urk looked around, took another extinguisher from a recess in the partition to his left.

Trang crouched low and pulled herself to the edge of the corner. Milewski tucked against another wall, pointed out her planned course; Trang pulled herself slightly higher along the wall; a third marine moved up to brace her feet. Trang gave a thumbs-up.

Milewski pushed off at an angle, immediately flipping to end

feet-first against a wall. She landed in a crouch near the ceiling. As she presented a target, Trang waited for the first fireballs rushing by. They came, spattering higher along the wall, new blue flames erupting out of cable insulation.

Trang extended her body, brought the grenade launcher to bear, and thumbed the firing button. She tightened her body as the

burst streaked away from the oversized muzzle. Rocket exhaust smoked and obscured vision as she pulled back.

Milewski came bounding back through the haze with smears of napalm burning on her helmet, torso, and legs. Explosions followed in rapid succession, blowing more smoke ahead of a blue and red fireball.

Urk and another marine intercepted Milewski in mid-trajectory, dousing her battlesuit with foam. “Back!” marines pulled further away, watching the flames smother themselves in black, oily smoke, swirling in the weightlessness. “Radar’s up – go active, at least until the smoke clears.” Urk motioned them forward.

Urk pushed off into the oily murk. He had expected resistance, not virtual suicide attacks.

Simple skullbones shouldn’t be have this much discipline, or so he thought. Perhaps, though, he was just seeing phantoms – or underestimating the will of people who would put a drifting ship this big back to use. A strong leader might account for loyalty.

Urk came to the other end of the corridor, scanning ahead. At least two charred bodies drifted near the wall. Urk pushed by them, turning the corner.

A subtle shift went through the murk. Milewski understood before Urk. “Grav’s coming back!”

There was no time to adjust. They tumbled downward, bumping and bruising against plates as the fields snagged them. One more indignity, small but annoying. Urk rolled to his knees, pushed himself up. His lip bled inside where a tooth had poked through. “Move on.” Damn, why couldn’t they have built the data-sucker to plug into the main computers at some junction box?

Urk and his squad pushed forward. Before his heads-up flashed, he recognized the door from briefings and old holograms. Trang moved forward, knelt, and took aim. The hatch blew away easily.

“Come on,” Urk ordered. “Get into that computer.”

He and Milewski went in to the room. A computer tech tried to block them. Urk wasted no effort on this one, red-dotting the forehead and firing his gauss rifle. The tech dropped, his skull torn and oozing grey matter.

Trang pulled a handheld from a pouch and brought it in to the main computer console. It slid into the standard cradle, just as it should. The screen lit up. Trang started tapping codes into the main console.

Forty seconds crept by. “Damned thing should be done,” Urk complained.

“They have an extra firewall layer,” Trang replied. “Better than we expected.”

Trang sounded odd, hollow. Urk shook his head to clear it.

“Done,” Trang reported. She was about to pull the handheld, then cursed in unquestionable surprise. “The hyperdrive is powering up and ready to go.”

“Can’t be,” Miliewski responded. She pushed forward to look.

“Is.” Trang keyed on the ship’s own console. “They have a full load of fuel, too. Four minutes.”

“I thought we’re too close for a safe entry,” Urk said. “That gas-midget --”

“All I know is what I see,” Trang responded

“Stop it.”

“The helm’s too damned firewalled.” Trang pulled the handheld out of the slot. “They’re going over the lip. It’s suicide.” Her eyes were wide with genuine fear. “We’ll get torn apart.”

“Let’s not.” Urk keyed comm. “Urkers, Larkers – this thing is on a suicide run. Everyone back to your can.” He ushered his marines out of the room.

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Vele)

Flanders gave the sign. Lar, Estrateche, and the others pulled back, setting their guns. “Go,” Lar ordered.

The charges flashed, and the door blew inward. Defenders behind the bulkhead screamed and scattered as the door and shrapnel battered and punctured them.

Lar moved forward, firing her arm-laser. “Move!” She started down the gangway. A crewman half-screamed and clawed at his neck, falling backward from the steep gangway.

The environment alarm beeped. Her display flashed red. Lar stopped. The air temperature was plummeting. The external oxygen percentage was dropping, crowded out by hydrogen and non-reactive coolants.

Pure, cold hydrogen. The vapor clouds were pushing upward.

Flanders collapsed beside them, quietly whispering in surprised pain, his battlesuit neatly holed in multiple places.

Years of drills moved Lar to the left, into a crouch that made her a smaller target. She cursed. “They got *all* the codes somehow. Sons-of-bitches! Back! Evasive! Max jamming!”

Estrateche responded. “Auto defense? They didn’t get those codes!”

“They did.” Lar’s mind raced as they began to back away. What idiot had handed up those codes? Most of the auto defenses were semi-passive. Small laser emplacements were concealed in the ceilings, but her marines had followed the drill and destroyed them as they swept through.

Estrateche cut in. “Lar, we can go down, try for one shot – “

Lar’s eyes danced over the screens. “Iffy’s up! We’re ID’d Foe!” Idiots. If they would just have kept their heads down, they could be safely out of system soon enough without killing many marines. The Cause should have known that Fleet would protect its people, even in this.

Were they looking to kill anyone in particular? Urk? Were the cells outside Fleet rebelling against their benefactors?

Comm lit up – a general order, from Urk. “Urkers, Larkers –

this thing is set for a suicide jump over the lip. Everyone back to the boarding cans.”

The battlecomp screeched an alert: motion from behind. At least a squad. Staccato footsteps were audible at almost the same moment. The rear-guard ducked down and opened fire without awaiting orders – good marines.

The fire was returned, heavily, a deadly spray. Two marines went down, their suits ripped by AP rounds. All of the marines returned fire, including one of the fallen. Estrateche also went down, her leg cut away by a stream of gauss needles. blood squirted out of the ragged stump. The battle ended a moment later, all of the attackers down.

Whiunui was using his arm-mount laser to try cauterize Estrateche’s stump. It seemed to be working. Lar left him and the others to the casualties, pushing over to the attackers.

These were not the unarmed crew they had faced earlier. They were older, seasoned combat veterans. Lar pulled ripped cloth away from an arm, saw the tattoo that made perfect sense: a Fleet seal with crossed cutlasses underneath.

Retired marines.

What in *hell* was the Cause doing putting its best fighters on a privateer?

Whiunui was silent. The blood had slowed down to a trickle, but Estrateche’s face was white through the faceplate, eyes rolled up so that only the lowest arc of the blue irises were visible. “Goldbricking, Lar,” she whispered, her lips barely moving.

All fucked up.

Lar knelt and touched her shoulder. “Nothing new.” She glanced at Whiunui, received the clear fatalism in the eyes. “See who you can help,” Lar ordered quietly.

She did not need to reference her “worst-case” files on any of her marines. She had memorized each in the most appropriate languages and variations. Lar made the Sign of the Cross in Estrateche’s line of vision, if she was still seeing, murmured the specially abbreviated Last Rites quickly.

Estrateche said no more. Lar checked her bio-signs. The heart was still flickering. She keyed her own battlecomp, sent the

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signal. Estrateche's battlesuit injected the euthanizing drugs. "Return to the One Human Spirit," she invoked.

Estrateche's heart gently slowed to its final beat.

Lar paused, perhaps a whole second. The two wounded were up, one supported by Whiunui. "Pull yourselves into the next compartment and brace on the bulkhead." Lar took Estrateche's grenade launcher as the others pushed out, aided in quick movement by weightlessness.

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Avinashini)

Gravitic readings from the Skullbones fluctuated. Avi scanned them closely. "Rasmussen, prepare to dock with your module. The hyperdrive is being sequenced."

"Yeah, I see. We're too close to the gas midget. They'll get ripped up."

"That is their concern. Retrieve your marines." Avi keyed in the recall signal to her own Urkers. "Lt. Grunon, you will be needing to prepare for retrieval. Skullbones is attempting premature jump."

"Things aren't nice here anyway." His voice was strained. "We'll be waiting."

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Urwah)

Multiple laser pulses scored Hansen's helmet. His scream was choked off. Iffy signals came up on Urk's heads-up – and Urkers were not getting back the "friend" response. All of the iffy levels were changed. Hey weren't on fleet protocols.

How the hell had the skullbones figured that out?

How wasn't important for the moment. "Urkers, fast march back. Main firepower to front – no quarter. Expect serious resistance. Tasers off – don't waste the juice!" Urk wasted no time

taking his own position. He started around the corner, lasers pulsing. He went as far as the next junction, ready for opposition or bedlam. The rest of the squad spread behind him, ready to move forward on order.

Urk keyed the rest of the squad. “Even numbers, leapfrog up – secure as much corridor as you can.”

The even-numbered squad members trotted by, guns up, alert. Urk saluted them with a slight inclination of his laser mount. They swept past, the last stopping at the end of the next corridor. There was back-channel chatter, ignored by his own battlecomp for some reason. There was no time to think about that.

Popping and hissing noises echoed through the stanchions. Yelling and screams echoed through the air and over the comm channel. Urk’s fingers tensed. The firefight was brief, seconds only. “Point clear!” someone called back on the general channel.

Urk keyed in. “Odds, forward.” In a few moments, the group trotted past.

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Lar)

Lar stopped at the junction. Most of the squad had taken minor hits. The crew and marines had seen moves coming, prepared for tactics. If the point of this mission was to send a warning to the Cause, it wasn’t being achieved.

The Manifest Destiny Cause was sending its own warning.

Light-headedness signaled that gravity was cut off again. “Head’s up,” Lar called to her troopers. Lar peered around the hatch-opening.

Four of the Cause’s troops were clustered around the borelock. Lar red-dotted them and opened fire, full-auto. Gauss-propelled needles sliced into through the battlesuits. The rest of his marines came around, kneeling or crouching to fire. The skullbones staggered backward.

All four went down, crumpling. “Hold fire,” Lar clipped out.

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“Back aboard.”

Lar keyed the hatch. “Down and in!” She remembered the iffy she had taken, hoping it might be useful. She tossed it to the deck. “Leave anything you picked up behind!” She guided her squad aboard, helping maneuver Estrateche’s limp body before she went in herself.

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Urwah)

Four skullbones in shipsuits were pulling themselves weightlessly through the corridor from the other direction. They reached the entry point as Urk looked down the corridor. Two were carrying heavy demolition packets. One carried a heavy laser to drill through the hatch. They moved together in sequence, a practiced unit of four. Urk needed nothing else to prove that he was seeing trained marines.

Milewski joined him. An exchanged glance was enough. Two arm-lasers dispatched the attackers silently. The demolition packets slipped out of dead hands; the unit drifted out of its prior cohesive lock-step.

“By the numbers, now.” He keyed the unlock signal. The module’s hatch opened. Urk pulled through to the far end of the corridor. Milewski held her place.

The squad moved past. Urk keyed the FDC. “Urkers are aboard, Avi. How much time?”

“We have four minutes, no more. Are you aboard?”

“Getting there now.” He went to rope, clambered up. Milewski followed behind. The hatch slid shut below them.

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Avinashini)

Avi keyed the locking-check routine. Green lights showed in her heads-up, followed by the undock sequence displays. “Lock

down, marines.” She tapped in the sequence. Not one to talk to the air, she let a prayer flit through her head for the marines who remained on board. Their husks would at least be dissolved in fire.

“Four – three – “ She finished the count silently, fingers playing over her main panel.

Thrust kicked her back. The craft shuddered, then vibrated as almost all of the power was diverted to the drive, pounding against artificial gravity, straining against the excess mass in the passenger module.

The artificial gravity flux from the enemy vessel increased, buffeted the small craft like hurricane winds. The FDC spun and yawed, shook, felt like it might split at the seams. An artificial event horizon appeared ahead: a hyperspatial bubble dimming the pinpoint light of stars ahead. Avi jammed the throttle, watched the power outputs shoot into the red.

The craft punched through the bubble, vibrating and complaining. Aft sensors showed the hyperspace bubble rippling and collapsing, no different than an oversized soap bubble she had once seen in a high wind. If Shiva was in a good mood, the old ship’s drives were overloaded, blasting plasma into the engineering section.

Avi quieted the thought. There would be better ways to mourn the dead, and the soon-to-be-dead. “Ahmadinejad, Ahmadinejad, close please.” Avi found moisture in her cheeks to wet dry lips. “It appears that you have your chance.”

Sensors picked Ahmadinejad’s missile streaking toward the old missile corvette. Another was directly behind, fired by Ahmadinejad’s winger. Avi pushed the engines to the limit. She was beyond the zone of destruction, but did not want to take excess radiation. She angled the limited particle-shunt shields for best effect and continued to seek every micro joule available from the drive.

No missiles followed, no beams tried to slice her hull. Skull-bones was already effectively dead in space. Avi kept her eye on her secondary display, watching two missiles close on the target. She thought of telling Urwah, decided there would be time

enough later.

Ten seconds to impact. She was now well away from the most deadly effects of the expected bursts. Avi watched the scans, kept her attention on the intellectual activity of imagining the related activities on the enemy ship. With no turrets available to fire on the missile, the crew was panicking. The hyperdrive was powering early, without quite enough power in the system, probably before the best calculated moment. Still too deep in the gas giant's gravity well, the lip of the hyperspace entry point would form badly at best, possibly not at all. It would most likely tear the ship apart, even if they were able to form the warp before the two nukes flared.

She blinked at the display. The gravitic bubble was suddenly there – a good one, she thought, a surprisingly good one. It disappeared under the burst of two nukes going off.

Avi blinked again. No, she was just imagining. There was not enough gravitic distortion in the explosion-spheres. Only an inspired star-pilot, perhaps only a zhīzhū, could make such a ripple-free entry in a gravity well. She had imagined it. Ramachandra, perhaps, could have made such a jump, but he was at a Fleet research facility. The nuclear explosion had simply done its work.

“All fighters, form on me. Set a course for return.”

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System – (Vele)

Lar sat in the cylinder, fuming. Foolishness and more foolishness. She'd lost a good cell-member and marine. They'd been given reason to question whether some members of the Cause were less than fully loyal to the greater good. She had no one to discuss this with for the moment. Her squad was almost entirely loyal, but *some* security had to be maintained.

Would Dumas have an answer? Or would she simply shrug it off as the “fog of war? Shrugging it off was a habit, too much of a habit.

Things would change. Soon enough, things would change. For now, she would sit and securely dictate her Cause debriefing to Dumas.

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System – (Urwah)

The Commander's docking was smooth and clean. "Debark," he ordered the squad. "Wounded first." He watched as they began to move out of the cylinder. He was isolated again, an outsider giving orders.

He already knew that Vele's squad had taken more than hits. Corporal Estrateche was dead. The skullbones had taken a good marine.

Milewski looked back as she went out the round hatch. "Got us back alive, Lieutenant. You can't be all bad." She moved out quickly, saying nothing more.

Urwah went to the hatch himself, pulled himself out to the deck. Lar's squad was moving more wounded. There were looks across the deck, more than one of them hostile. The squad merged around a body: Estrateche. They carried her body out on a stretcher toward the medical section for the essential autopsy scans.

The pilots exited separately, through the main cabin locks. Commander Avinashini pulled herself out, straightened. Her light vacc suit could not hide strength and grace. She unlatched her helmet and tucked it under her arm before walking toward him. "Captain Dumas has ordered a debriefing in an hour, Lieutenant. Wardroom. Clean up. Have Vele there, too."

Urwah saluted. "Aye." He saluted and turned, keyed comm. "Sergeant Vele, Officer's Wardroom, one hour. Debriefing. Proper dress."

Clipped, curt: "Aye."

Urwah went to the gangway.

July 13, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Vele)

Vele shut the wardroom hatch behind her. She saluted Captain Dumas properly. Neither Grunon nor Avinashini were yet there. “I lost Estrateche,” she said, not waiting for the return salute. “This is not what was expected.”

“I don’t get to know who’s double-crossing who, Sergeant. I don’t like it, but I’m not that high in the loop. Now, open the damned hatch before Grunon gets here.”

Vele complied. She rubbed her hand against the wet hair. She had rushed through her duties with the body and her squad, then her shower. She wanted to curse out the Captain for putting them in that spot – firing on useful former marines.

There should have been none such on Skullbones. Good retired marines weren’t needed to liberate supplies, nor to keep the Reach stirred. That was for retired Army at best, such civilians who could carry and point a gun.

She heard padding steps in the corridor beyond. Grunon appeared around the corner, followed by Avinashini. Vele forced herself to attention and a proper salute.

Urwah ducked through the hatch, then stood to one side as Avinashini stepped through. Rasmussen, a minute later, was last to arrive.

Dumas had them take their seats. “I’ve skimmed through the computer uploads already. The records downloaded by Grunon’s squad were particularly useful. There’s no doubt of two things.” Dumas cleared her throat. “First, it’s the ship the Jin Jun lost for us. *Ibn Battutta*. There’s no doubt of that now. We don’t know yet how it got converted to a skullbones, but we may find that in the records you were able to download.

“Second, we took her out. Cold. Good shooting.”

Avinashini leaned forward. “Captain, the skullbones was just about to push over the lip when the warhead went off. I saw some anomalous readings. It might have pushed over the lip just before the detonation.”

Dumas looked cold for a moment, then smiled. Lar could see that it was forced. “Fog of war, Commander. I have data from

three points, including yours. There's no doubt that *Ibn Battutta* was dead center in the blast. Vaporized, just *before* she went over the lip. Your anomalies stem from that. Worth studying for the future – what happens when a ship crossing into hyperspace gets hit.

“And that's it. Write your reports. Grunon, you took casualties. See to the necessities. Dismissed.”

July 15, 2395 (Present Day) – 107 Piscium System (Urwah)

Urwah slid open the door to the marine Mess. He walked in, then slid the door closed behind him.

All but two tables had already been folded and stored in their wall clips. One stood at the head of the room. The other waited beside it, a temporary auxiliary. The chairs had been arranged with their backs to the side walls. Nothing else showed that meals were normally taken here.

He placed the black duffle on the smaller table, arranging it in perfect line with the four edges. He pulled open the zipper to the prescribed ten-count, barely making a sound. When that was done, he stood at attention a moment, then readdressed the bag. He pulled its contents out, one item at a time, setting each precisely on the auxiliary table: the white drape, the black armband, the name badge, the two pieces of the snapped ceremonial sword.

That done, he addressed the main table. Moving slowly, each time making the prescribed count, he draped it with the white cloth. He moved the badge into position, set the armbands where honor guard could take them up. Finally, he set the sword pieces in the middle.

He sealed the bag, folded it, and put it on a chair. Finally, he lifted the auxiliary table, set it on its side, folded it, put it in its wall clip, all as quietly and slowly as prescribed.

Urwah went to the table and took one of the armbands. He pulled it over his right arm, making sure that it was properly set. He angled himself appropriately, facing the table.

And waited.

This was his private duty, and his private time to reflect. Regulations and custom called on him to reflect on what he knew of the woman who had died. He'd barely gotten to know her, apart from her record. She was a good marine, from what he could see.

He could not keep other thoughts from intruding into his reflection, thoughts bringing doubt. He did not like doubt interfering with his belief in the rightness of the mission. He did not like doubt in his superior to creep in, as it had. Dumas had not debriefed them. Dumas had ordered them to accept a pre-ordained verdict.

He doubted the verdict. He doubted very much that he had been on *Ibn Battutta*.

He heard the partition door slide open. He could not see it from this angle, but he knew from the timing that it should be Captain Dumas. Urk was privileged to be the first mourner for those under his direct command. She was privileged by rank and overall command to join him. She came slowly toward the table. When she came into his peripheral vision, he noted that her ceremonial cutlass was poorly hung around her waist.

She bowed well, to the proper angle, but straightened too soon. Her salute was not as crisp as it should have been.

Urk said nothing. The failure to truly respect was subtle – perhaps, she thought, too subtle for his simple grunt eyes to see.

There was nothing to say. The formalities were being followed.

The Captain turned, walked formally to a seat. She turned and sat, a guest in this non-religious wake.

Lt. Commander Avinashini came in next. She moved with the same precision she gave to her other duties. No part of her uniform was misplaced. Her bow and salute could not have been faulted by the Imperial Court itself. Her winger, Rasmussen, followed as soon as Avinashini had moved off to her chair. The two other fighter pilots under Commander Avinashini's command came next, did their respect, took their seats, completing the commissioned officers' official representation.

Urwah turned slowly to face the Fleet officers. He bowed deep to them, giving his thanks for the formal respect to the dead, then straightened. With another quarter turn, he faced the door, waiting for his own marines.

They came, in proper order: Larissa Vele, then the remaining thirty. The mess was now crowded. All were silent.

Urwah turned back to the table, addressed it with his sword, then sheathed the blade. He felt it become secure, knew the other marines were watching and counting with him. At the proper moment, they joined in a low bow.

The bulk of the silent ritual was complete. Urk performed the perfect quarter-pivot required. The marines behind him followed suit in time, facing the assembled Fleet officers. The officers stood in unison, bowed, and took their slow leave, dead-marching out of the room. When they were out the door, Urk again pivoted by one-quarter, facing out.

The assembled marines separated slightly, allowing him passage through. They would stay here, remaining silent, for fifteen minutes. After that, each would stand thirty minutes' watch of honor, from least senior back to himself, most senior.

It would be a long night.

For now, he needed to sweat, to work the stress out of tired, sore muscles. He wanted his head clear. Urk went back to Grunt Country and his personal cabin. A quick change put him out of his dress uniform and into a basic shipsuit.

He keyed the combination of his personal weapon locker and opened it, setting his ceremonial officer's cutlass in its clip.

Beside it was the more ornate, slightly smaller sword given to him by the Horn Tentlord Fahnisht. Its leather belt and scabbard were covered with alien symbols. The scrawny Jin Jun, O'Meath, had impressed its value on him.

As if he had to. The Horn sword was a fine weapon, and one he wished he could carry with him. Fleet prejudice prevented its open display, and he had received scowls from almost anyone with whom he'd checked it. If he could have trusted it in a shipment home, he would have sent it to his mother to hold. Running a finger against the carved hilt, he retired the thought, as he

had retired it on other occasions.

As he sealed the lockbox again, he caught sight of a more troubling souvenir of battle: a spoon. A spoon that should not have been on *Ibn*. Fleet would have stripped that ship of *all* identification before decommissioning her ship and handing her over to the Jin Jun. Nothing with the ships' seal would have been left aboard.

More to the point, the handle of the spoon bore the wrong seal entirely.

Dumas had insisted on the identification, though. Perhaps someone had been sloppy, not cleaned out the drawers. Perhaps flatware from another ship had found its way to *Ibn*, as sometimes happened when crew or marines transferred. It wasn't his job to figure out all of the mistakes that might be made in the process of decommissioning a ship. He'd simply decided against reporting the find after the briefing.

Taking his shower kit from its place, Urwah closed off his cabin and went to the officer's gym. No one else was there. Urk began with a run on the treadmill, stretching his muscles, building a sweat. He tried to imagine himself in one of Jannah's Domes – Berkshire, perhaps, which had been close to the apartments in which he had been raised. That environment had always appealed to him. He had seen deer there from time to time. He and his older brother Jibral had played there often.

He reached his stride, a calm rhythm, before the door opened again. The relaxed protocol of the gym allowed him to nod while running, rather than stop and salute, as Lt Commander Avinashini entered.

She returned the nod. "I did not expect to find anyone else here," she commented. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Just getting a stretch," he replied. "Need it."

"I understand." Avinashini chose the stationary bicycle, began pumping it up to speed. Her legs muscles showed through the form-fitting shipsuit. Urk resisted the urge to look higher up, and especially to gaze improperly.

She seemed more closed than most officers, when on ship. She had only been more open and jovial when piloting him and

his crew. Here, she maintained a distance. Here, they were again proper with one another.

“You hate losing your marine,” Commander Avinashini commented. The words pulled him from his thoughts.

Urk evaded, refusing to show any emotion. “This was supposed to be a milk run.”

“That makes it worse.”

“Marines buy it. Can’t change that.” He hunkered down, put on a little more effort. The sensors in the treadmill kicked up the speed by a bit.

“It wasn’t – the vessel did not seem right,” Avinashini said. Her voice was low, almost a whisper. “I have never been told to distrust my eyes and my own readings.”

“I’m not sure you should,” Urk responded. “You have a good record.”

The pilot did not speak again. After a few more minutes of pedaling, she abruptly stopped and got off the unit. She gave an abrupt half-bow, hands together in front, and left the gym. She seemed to be retreating.

Lt. Commander B.P. Avinashini did *not* have a reputation for retreating.

Urk thought again about a ridiculous detail. A bit of cutlery. What had Avinashini seen? Should he follow and ask? On a ship that, more and more, seemed run by the Humanitas Church?

Urwah continued his exercise routine. He didn’t need to know what his pilot had seen. He knew he hadn’t been on *Ibn Battuta*. He’d been on *Lambert*. *Lambert* was supposed to be hanging preserved in vacuum, waiting for the day the zhīzhū stopped their damned waiting game. It should be hanging in space, with a fleet of other old ships. It shouldn’t be out here, shouldn’t be manned, shouldn’t have trained marines defending her corridors.

The Jin Jun hadn’t lost their sole converted missile corvette. Someone in Fleet had given *another* one away. One that was supposed to be waiting for the inevitable zhīzhū invasion.

Worse, he felt sure that some of his own people knew more than they said. Sergeant Vele – Lar – was locked into her anger,

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her Humanitas crap. He'd tried to talk to her after Shānhé-Wòtu, but she wouldn't listen. She'd talked to others, though. She'd talked to his half-brother before Jib took his discharge and his papers for Delta Trianguli, before distance had made communication between brothers almost impossible.

Distance.

Who could he trust on *Harris*. Anyone?

Chapter 11

July 30, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity of 107 Piscium (Murphy)

The jolt of the re-entry twisted through the ship. Murphy cursed over the momentary nausea. He should probably be glad that the computer handled the jumps at all. He felt the slight band of pressure at his temples that usually resulted from crossing the lip. Jump calculations had never been his strong suit. *Granuaile*'s programs were serviceable, but not too picky. One of these days, he was going to have to locate a good pilot and find a way to convince Zhaohui to assign the team.

Granuaile was already once again querying the Fleet data buoys. Sensors came up on full active, adding to his information. He was seven hours out of the magnificent ring-and-moon system that included Rock Circling Perfect Rose. He keyed and locked in *Granuaile*'s instructions. *Granuaile* would make the necessary braking calculations and maneuvers to slide into the refueling line. He could match and go in for a sit-down, if anything justified his doing so, but he didn't have to decide that for the moment.

A massive pusher was coming in to refuel. Murphy checked the transponder codes against the Imperial Registry. It was nothing surprising. Like any pusher, it was not much more than massive power plants, oversized field generators for the hyperspace

drives, fuel, and a smallish crew cabin. The rest was docking spine, allowing pre-loaded cargo carriers to be locked on and removed easily. Most of these older ships required eight weeks in hyperspace to traverse only ten light-years. The round-trip along the Reach – from Sol to Delta Trianguli and back – took a full year.

A smaller vessel, one of the growing number of independent traders, was further ahead, almost matched to the refueling station. He reviewed this one more closely. The growing fleet of independents was to his liking, dealing in luxuries and moving civilian information more quickly. They would become the real backbone of the Empire. The pushers were a government-subsidized necessity, not a truly viable economic force.

Murphy keyed out hails to all of the ships. He would have to wait for the signal turn-around time to elapse. This would be as good a time as any to go below and fine-tune the drives. He went quickly below, happy to be out of the con. The con simply felt too empty with no one else aboard.

Over an hour elapsed before *Granuaile* signaled a message inbound. Murphy looked at his progress adjusting the fuel flow, decided that he was at a good stopping point. He keyed the bots to come in and button up the access.

The display in the main lounge would do for this data. Murphy went forward and keyed the information, arranging the displays for parallel data and analysis. He knew what he wanted to see: evidence that supposedly retired Fleet ships were out here. He expected that he would find the hints: fuel dives caught on sensors, pings that hinted at military configurations, and so on.

This all assumed that Fleet didn't clean up the logs before transmission. There was no reason to believe that Fleet would be honest with the Jin Jun at this point. There was information to be found even in the gaps, however. *Granuaile's* computers would be able to locate signs of file doctoring.

He already knew from the buoy he'd jimmied that there was too much traffic out here. Unidentified vessels were slipping up and down the Reach. For the most part, they followed the pusher routes. They had to get off the routes somewhere, though. They

had to go somewhere to meet, to get maintenance, to leave off goods and materials, pick up essentials. There would be a locus, a system convenient for their purposes, or at least a defined point in space. Gathering enough data would end up pointing the way.

In the meantime, he was gaining on *Harris*. The enigmatic pairing of Lt. Commander B.P. Avinashini and Lt. Urwah K. Grunon remained of interest. Based on Fleet protocols, *Harris'* ten days patrolling this system should have ended on July 25. She would have moved on, carrying data on ship movements and encounters, Fleet messages and orders, mail, and other such information to the next system.

The first transmission received was buoy data. *Harris* had indeed been here recently. However, she'd left the system three days late. She was still bound for L 1305-10, per its routing codes.

Jesus Buddha on skates. *Harris* had engaged the reputed skullbones. It was, indeed, an *Eighmy*-class missile corvette.

Murphy's fingers flew over the keys. The data files should carry detailed, heavily-encrypted reports. He keyed in his old codes from the Tau Ceti command. Out here, however, someone had smartened up and invalidated those codes.

Murphy set *Granuaile* to working on the encryption. He had Zhaohui's codes, but would reserve them for absolute necessity. He'd abused them enough in the last several weeks, put them at risk of discovery. He'd also risked her anger, real or feigned. When he reported back, she could always change her codes if she was unhappy with the use of them

If that happened, he'd have to set about stealing them again. Most likely, it would mean renewing the more personal relationship they'd enjoyed from time to time, something he'd decided not to do. It never worked out well. Apart from a growing sense that Zhaohui was always comparing Murphy to his long-dead father, she demanded too much in return for a loyalty she would not herself give.

He wasn't interested in marrying Zhaohui. He wasn't that interested in marriage.

Even if Zhaohui was, someday, allowed to divorce Chengen,

any marriage vows she might insist *he* take would not be returned in kind. She would be very pragmatic if she thought a sexual encounter with someone else would help her achieve a goal. Wheels within wheels.

Possibly, Murphy considered for a moment, he simply lacked a willingness to commit. He hadn't met a woman yet who somehow moved him deeply enough to make a show of a lifetime commitment. He considered the Horn females who had been suggested to him at times, all skilled with a blade and ready to engage in close combat. He needed a human woman like that, just savage and dangerous enough to hold his attention.

He turned his attention back to the files he could get into. The engagement with the pirated ship had included a boarding action. The compressed roster suggested that Urwah Grunon had been in charge of that foray. Two of the versatile fighter/delivery craft had carried the boarding party; a third and fourth had carried heavy missiles only.

Grunon's marines had been piloted by Admiral Sunitha's daughter, B.P. Avinashini. Damn. One of Fleet's best zhīzhū killers was in the Reach? What the hell was that about?

Was that mere coincidence? She and he were the ranking officers, but that didn't mandate putting them together. The questions kept adding up.

Why board at all? The simplest solution to piracy was destruction of the pirates. The pushers out here carried enough valuable cargo to be worth a nuke or two. Interrogation of crews and computers required capture, but the simple destruction of a vessel that large would send a message to the hidden support facility or facilities somewhere along the Reach. There was no point in risking men and ships.

Was there? Did Fleet need to find the base of operations? Was it trying to send some other message?

The records went on to show that a nuke was launched. The skullbones was reported vaporized. Murphy's heart sank. Without the ship in hand, it would still be difficult to refute Fleet's claim that it was *Ibn Batutta*. It wouldn't matter that similar ships were missing from the cache. Neither he nor anyone else

would be able to go through structures, installed weapons and sensors, cabins and computers to determine what ship had really been engaged. There would be no certain evidence of how the ship got where it was. Any evidence would be in Fleet's hands, subject to doctoring.

Murphy fumed. That would be worth a nuke to the those Fleet officers behind the hijacking of an entire task force. *Harris* had covered that much up for them with a single missile.

Fortunately, Grunon hadn't still been aboard. The marine squads had been pulled off before a third FDC fired off its nuke. He was still alive to be questioned. He might even remain honest enough to tell Murphy the truth.

He keyed the navigation program. "*Granuaile*, compute the fastest trip to L 1159-16 you can. We can cut some time if we make a fuel dive instead of stopping."

August 13, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Chengen)

Alan called him from the next room. "Chengen, get out here! You need to see this."

He rolled out of bed. He found himself unsteady, as groggy as he still was. Lights came on, but the natural light of the local star had not yet filled the ceiling panels.

Schwartz was a light sleeper. He always had been. Chengen envied that, on rare occasions. He didn't envy it at this Buddha-forsaken pre-dawn hour, though. Bad enough that Schwartz had never fully adjusted to the Cetian days and nights. Worse that he dragged his superior out of sleep for something that would likely wait until morning.

Chengen stumbled out to the other room. Schwartz was sitting in front of the main holodisplay. Superimposed displays symbolically displayed Shānhé-Wòtu, the star itself, and a series of small pips. The pips followed a curving line ending at the planet.

“What is it?” Chengen asked.

“Meteors,” Schwartz replied. “A bunch of them, all together, tight. Probably what’s left of a comet.”

Chengen scratched his head. “No comets due that I remember. Survey of the Oorts and junk rock out here has been pretty thorough. Almost as good as Sol herself.”

“There’s still room for error,” Schwartz replied. He tapped at the keyboard, flicked an eye. “They’re reading with a fair amount of iron. They’ll make a clan or two rich.”

Chengen grunted. “Tons of iron on an iron-poor world. The Bards have songs about things like this.” Interest began to overcome grogginess. “Any track on where they’ll hit?”

Schwartz called up the figures and rendered the GIS views. “At least one of them will hit almost dead center in Clan Fahnisht’s circles,” Schwartz said. “He’s going to be more powerful than ever.”

“And that scrawny little Murphy won’t be here to see it,” Chengen muttered. “I’d better make sure it gets recorded. And we should get some more floaters out to listen to the Bards. This might just get interesting.”

August 14, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Fahnisht)

Pelest supervised the bundling and tying of the yurts. The cook-fires were out, the food and stores loaded on the beasts. Fahnisht was free to look west, away from the predawn sky.

It was typical. Every few moments, a light streaked across. Kameef had explained to him that those were sand, perhaps stones, falling fast from his place. He still sometimes disliked believing Kameef, as he unfortunately did. It was almost painful to believe that Kameef and a few like him – the warrior Ooh-rye-ahh, the not-woman Zhaoh-hoo – were not simply deformed, lacking horns because they came from far islands.

Klysira came beside him. “The fires approve you. They al-

ways do.”

“They do.”

“We are only a day from Niblock. You will rebuke the Townfolk for their arrogance.”

“Yes. Foolish hornless cowards. They should know not to provide for Lanna. They owe the blood to me. I do not collect all that is due, even today. Lanna will measure drop to dram and leave them all weak.”

“He is not you, husband.”

“No, he is not.”

A larger, thicker line of light streaked across the sky. Fahnisht admired. “That was a half-year fire,” he said. “It favors our day.” He touched the hilt of his sword, then the tip of his horn. He pushed hard enough to prick the finger, bringing blood welling to the tip.

“It does.”

Another streak, still larger, closer, swept overhead. This one roared, boomed, crackled. Pieces seemed to break away. It passed just over the horizon and ended with a flash of lightning-like light. Moments later, the ground trembled. A sound different than thunder, not different, rolled over them.

Fahnisht stood still. All sense of ease left him. “What is this?”

“The old lays,” Klysira said, quietly. ““Rocks from above, bringing steel to blade.””

A glow appeared on the western horizon – reddish, not sun. “Fire.”

Another long star streaked across the sky. It, too, passed just over the horizon.

Small, jagged rocks rained down from the sky. Fahnisht covered his head with one arm, took Klysira under the other. “Come!” He pulled her into the nearest tent, made her crouch, and arched himself over her. The rain of stones and pebbles continued, some slicing through the taut skins to batter at his back. One, particularly large, buried itself deep into the packed brown turf a few feet away.

The shower ended. Fahnisht helped his principal woman up.

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Her eyes were wide, glowing with excitement. “We are blessed! New stones from the skies. It is in our circles. We must find it.”

Fahnisht caught her excitement. He went to the large stone that had come close. Kneeling, he pulled it free. Klysira bent, peered closely at the stone. “Iron,” she whispered, pointing at the reddish hues.

Fahnisht left the yurt. “Pelest! Call the warriors together!”

August 14, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity of L 1305-10 (Murphy)

“I’ll interview them on my ship.”

“My wardroom is yours. There’s no need to inconvenience you or my people.”

Murphy’s detected a hint of evasion. “I’m on Yi’s business, Captain Dumas. I transmitted the Writ as soon as I came in. You let me match.”

She stuck her chin out. “The damned spoiled nobility.”

“The damned spoilt nobility is the *Emperor himself*, and he’s given me a job. That’s his code there along with Zhaohui’s.” Murphy keyed his handheld via the neural link. “Have them start in twenty minutes.” He looked at the schedule scrolling though his peripheral vision. On a hunch, he made a change, uploaded it.

Captain Dumas frowned. “I’ll have to file an official protest, you know.”

“Of course. I expect that.”

“I’ll want you to tie on to a boarding tube.”

She wanted to tie *Harris* more tightly to *Granuaile*, possibly try to hack into the main computer. She probably couldn’t manage to get through his security. “No. The zip lines are already attached. Your people can log an extra hour in pressure suits this way.”

The Captain’s face grew red. “I’ll have to be present at all of the interviews, as their ranking officer.”

“No,” Murphy said. “Fleet regs don’t allow that, and you

know it. Unless they've changed since last time I was a Commodore. But grunt regs allow the highest ranking marine to be present at every non-officer's interview. And he gets to escort your officers."

The Captain glared. "I need him working his troops."

"Fleet regs. Follow them, or I'll have to wonder why not."

Dumas looked cornered. "Lt. Grunon will be assigned."

Murphy shrugged. "Whatever you want." He stood, making clear the discussion was over. He glanced at the marine who had escorted him from the airlock to the Captain's quarters. "Show me the way back, Sgt. Vele."

February 8, 2392 (Three Years Ago) – Shānhé-Wòtu Low Orbit (Tau Ceti IV) (Urwah)

"Attention on deck." Captain LaFrenier stood to the side of the briefing podium.

The marines stood, perhaps a bit hesitantly, perhaps refusing to snap the appropriate "snap." The short, wiry male coming down the aisle to the briefing stand was not one of their own.

To the Jin Jun's credit, First Sgt. Urwah Grunon decided, O'Meath did not try to look like he was Fleet. He bore no rank insignia, despite his temporary commission as a Commodore. His shipsuit was a simple coverall, faded blue, not even the official working uniform of a Jin Jun. He looked more like a mechanic than a field officer, much less a spoiled child of the nobility.

The Admiralty would have something to say about an officer with such disdain. Grunon scowled at the thought. Spit and polish – that was for the parade ground, not out here. In that, he could almost like what he saw of this pygmy. Certain minimums of decorum were needed for a unit to operate, however.

Captain LeFrenier saluted as he got to the front, then took her place in line. The small, wiry man leaned up against the wall, pointedly ignoring the podium. As he turned, Grunon noticed for

the first time a back-slung scabbard, hung for the lefty-handed. An ornately carved hilt – some ivory-like substance – protruded from the worn leather sheath.

“I’m O’Meath,” the Jin Jun announced bluntly. “Jin Jun terms, I’m Lead. On your op chart, some Fleet numb-nuts has me the Commodore, Fleet rank, for what it’s worth. For the duration, today at least, I outrank the other Knights Jin Jun here, and anyone in Fleet or marine ops. If you hear reference to the ‘Lead Jin Jun,’ that’s me. ‘Commodore,’ that’s me, too.”

He looked them over, perhaps gauging the scowls, then quickly shrugged. “I don’t really care much about that, except for one thing: on the ground, there’s only going to be one person who really knows the Horns well enough to call shots. Not you, not your marine officers, not even the First Jin Jun herself. Me.” He paused, looking over the troops again.

“So bloody fucking well pay attention.”

Grunon shifted slightly, keeping his eyes locked ahead, but listening to the briefing room. The silence deepened. Marines could curse well enough on their own. They needed no Jin Jun to act like he belonged. Resentment might build attention – or might block it.

O’Meath was gauging the room, too. “Oh, right. Spit and polish rules. At ease.” Grunon waited for the Captain to sit, then the junior officers. He sat with the rest of the sergeants. Finally, the marines behind him clumped into their seats.

O’Meath keyed his handheld. The wall display activated, showing the planned landing zone from well above, then shifting to a satellite view of one of the main Humanitas settlements. “You’ve already been given materials to read and study, maps, that sort of thing. You know about the settlers and their towns. Your Captain will tell you how to handle human beings. They’re not my problem, and neither are you. Mostly.

“I’ve spent some time on Shānhé-Wòtu, with the Horns. First human to do it, and one of three or four total. I got my in when I was young, and stupid, and maybe a bit rash. I got lucky – they didn’t slice my guts out when they could have.

“So far as a friend named Fahnisht is concerned, I’m just an-

other one of his Tentlords – warrior, guard, advisor, family, serving boy, all rolled into one. They’re sort of human – sort of. It would take too many hours to describe it all.

“Politics on Shānhé-Wòtu – some of you boys would like playing politics down there. Politics with cold steel.” O’Meath’s hand went to the ornately carved hilt of the long sword behind his neck. “Your own blood is your ‘money.’”

“Fahnisht and his Tentlords have territory, lots of it. It’s one of the opposites of social evolution on Earth. Cities are the losers, nomads the winners. Towns exist for the weak, and to serve the Clans. If you live in a town, you cut off your horn. If your horn gets cut off, you live in a town. Pretty simple way to figure out who’s weak and who’s not.

“Each warrior clan – that’s the best translation – controls the space between towns, the towns themselves, trade routes. They’re mobile, they’re organized, and the lines of allegiance and hatred are pretty clearly drawn. They control their territory and the towns inside their territory. Town ‘Hornless’ – they’re the ultimate weaklings, even if they do have some interesting tricks, like metalworking and such. Towns work hard to deal with the clan that will give it the best protection, for the best price – but it’s not a cash deal. The trade is in honor, family, more honor, tradition, obligation, fealty, the strength to lead and make right decisions, more honor, and so on – scrambled like an egg.

“These damned idiot Humanitas settlers came down, and helped Fahnisht out – helped him a hell of a lot. He was just a guy with a weird albino no-horn pal, me, that stopped by a few months every year or so. Fahnisht had respect and a lot of blood-debt collected, but he was still only one chieftain amongst thirty or so in the general area. His Clan had a little more clout. Enough to hold their own, some respect, some trade – one of his towns makes damned good swords. And he has more than a few blood debts to his name.

“These Humanitas idiots started to take territory. They parked themselves on Clan Yinthe’s routes, and grazing lands, farming. Good, proper settler behavior. Take the land from those savages, don’t buy, don’t even ask. It’s theirs, because

they're human and know better how to rip it up and make a mess of it.

"Yinthe didn't go to war. He should have, he had every right.

"Instead, he put sensible warriors on the border, kept watch, and rode his own ass over to Fahnisht. Didn't send a Tentlord with the message, this was too big. And Yinthe's people understood his wisdom. They honored Yinthe – in their own blood. Yinthe's people stopped a Tentlord named Lanna from taking a bite out of one of the human towns. They lost a lot of swords that day, exchanged some new blood-debt, and heated up a lot of rivalries. It's gotten damned ugly down there.

"And Fahnisht owes Yinthe blood debt because of this – more blood debt than I can figure out entirely, because Yinthe was pretty well thinking of slaughtering the settlers. He didn't go to Fahnisht out of any silly good deed that needed doing – he went because he planned to pay off his own blood-debts to Fahnisht on *my* back. Yinthe and Fahnisht see me as a thane, a Tentlord, someone tied into the web.

"So this isn't your average briefing. You don't want me here to tell you your damned ROEs. You get those from the ship's web. I'm just one of those no-good almost-noble Jin Jun scum you love to blame messes on.

"This is about understanding why we're doing things *my* way, apart from my having half an idea of how Fahnisht and the Horns think. That alone is half an idea more than most of you, and as marines you're probably closer to an idea than anyone hanging out at in Sol system."

O'Meath paused, looked over the assembled marines. Grunon felt an inkling of the message now, an inkling of the belief behind the goal. For O'Meath, this Clan Fahnisht was family. He was close to the problem, perhaps too close.

O'Meath continued, more animated, more heated. "My way is about how Fahnisht *thinks*, and how much he's paying, and going to pay, to keep this from being a justified slaughter of a bunch of goddam invaders. And *you will get that*. Humans there are *invaders*. They're land-grabbers. This isn't about who set-

tled first, or who wanted to settle first, like the zhīzhū conflicts, this is about whose land it's been *from the first*. Fahnisht is paying out blood-debt – hundreds, maybe thousands of bodies worth. I don't intend to owe any extra debt when we're done.

"If you don't get the point from this, folks, no amount of reading your briefing books is going to get you there. So just remember how this works, and what the rules of combat are, and don't screw with them.

"You're not to point a gun at a Horn, even to save a damned human settler. Aim at a Horn, you face a court martial.

"Shoot all the settlers you want. No harm, no foul in that.

"Don't shoot a Horn. You're here to escort the settlers away – as the criminals they are, for breaking Parliament's law, not vetoed by the House of Knights, and enforced by the Emperor."

Marines murmured in the background. Several openly jeered. One in his platoon – Vele, began cursing in Russian. Urwah turned to the source. "Clamp it, marine." She scowled at him, but lips tightened to hide the bared-teeth look.

The dissent died down.

O'Meath swept his eyes over the assembled marines, locked eyes a moment on Urwah, went on. "Fahnisht will be there. He's calling in all his blood debts on this one – *all* of them. He's going to owe a lot more blood when he's done, we expect, starting with Yinthe. But he made the choice on his own. He's been holding the lines on his own for months, while I got pulled in and we got this task force together. The no-shooting rule keeps his honor and yours. Get that.

"If Fahnisht has to go at it with Lanna and his blood-debtors, leave them at it. Fahnisht plans on holding the line. I'll be there helping him. I have to be, or Fahnisht has no support. They see me there, with them. Action as communication.

"You can fight sword-to-sword, hand-to-hand, if you get in the middle. Cutlass action is fine, if you have the balls. Don't think that it's just a fencing match.

"Again, point a gun at a Horn, you come here for court-martial. *Fire* a gun at a Horn, though, and you'll get handed to Fahnisht for justice, his way – because I'm his Tentlord, and

you're *my* vassal-warriors. That's the way they're thinking. You'll be lucky if he lets me have you back to clean up after the animals, or if he decides you'd make a good farmer in one of his cities. Most likely, he'll slice your throat – and he'll make me hold you when he does it.

"Believe it or not, I really don't want that. Don't put me there. Follow your ROEs so I don't have to choose between one of you and Fahnisht. Because I won't choose one of you.

"Questions?"

The shout came from another unit. "Yeah, what next – burp the zhīzhū after every meal?"

O'Meath met the challenge with a shrug. "No zhīzhū in this one, but I'll be happy to send you to a Nest as an appetizer if you break the ROEs – if Fahnisht gives you back to me alive." He grinned, but the humor seemed forced.

Another marine piped up. "So why the fuck give us guns at all?"

"You don't *want* to get it, do you?" Murphy shook his head. "You're *not* there to protect settlers. The settlers are *in your custody*. They're under arrest. They're on their way to a less attractive planet. The guns are to *convince* settlers to march for the transports. Leave their crap behind. Keep them scared enough to toe the line. Fahnisht doesn't care how I deal with thieving human 'Townfolk.' Cetian Townfolk are cowardly, classless vermin who cut off and file down their horns and don't rate death in a fair fight.

"Lanna and his folk are different – even *stupid* Tentlords rate higher than Townfolk.

"Get this through your grunt skulls. Fahnisht is so far out on a limb – he either climbs higher, or falls entirely. I want him to climb higher, and so does anyone who knows anything.

"But I actually want most of the settlers to survive, too, even if they're criminal land-thieves who'll be lucky to finish out their lives on the Hesperides mining colony."

The same voice shot back, angry. "This is bullshit. They're *humans*. A lot of them are kids. The Horns – fuck them. A blue-green this close to Sol is from the Unity to *us*." A few murmurs

of assent joined together, became a rumble of protest.

“Skip the Humanitas religious crap,” O’Meath said.

The protests grew louder. Several marines started to stand.

Captain LeFrenier stood and faced the troops. “Attention! Eyes front!”

The disturbance ceased immediately. The entire troop stood.

“Like the orders or not, we have our job. The laws are bad, but that’s the politicians’ problem. The *politicians* gave this Jin Jun a Commodore’s commission and this task force. Like it or not, that makes him a Commodore.

“Our orders and ROEs are clear, and in writing. None of my marines will give *any* Jin Jun a reason to shame us, or the One True God. *None*. Is that clear?”

Silence, glances. Then, a desultory “Sir, yes Sir.”

“Louder.”

“Sir, yes Sir!”

“I can’t hear you, grunts!”

“*Sir*, yes *Sir*!”

Captain LeFrenier turned to O’Meath and saluted. “The Imperial marines have honor, *Commodore*, and our own ‘blood-debts.’ Remember that. You’ll owe one to us. You think you owe this ‘Famish’ a debt now – be ready to pay the blood-debt to the Corps.”

For the first time, the wiry little man smiled. His return salute was not at all sloppy, and his stance was the purest respect. “My debts *always* get paid, Captain.”

August 15 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Fahnisht)

Fahnisht reigned in the beast as he looked ahead. He could see the new rise of land in the distance. Flumes of smoke swirled lazily upward from various points in the nearby grasslands. Further away, an entire forest seemed to be burning.

Pelest came up beside him. The young Tentlord was dark

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with the grime that had been drifting down from above.

His sword was out. He pointed southwest. "Riders."

August 15, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity of L 1305-10 (Murphy)

Murphy finished the tenth interview. So far, it seemed that there was little new to learn. It was no news to him that most marines had adopted Fleet's surly attitude toward anything remotely Jin Jun.

Urwah Grunon had stood through each interview, saying nothing, showing no emotion. He showed little sign of recognition, even, much less willingness to remember a moment or two of comradeship.

It rankled.

"Dismissed, Corporal," O'Meath said. The marine came to attention, saluted her Lieutenant. "Permission to debark, Sir," she said.

"Permission granted." Murphy gave a perfunctory nod. "Escort her to the lock, Lieutenant, and bring in the next."

Grunon stood and edged out of the cramped galley. Murphy looked over the notes he had keyed into his handheld. He listened to the sounds of the two going down the ladder to the lock.

As usual, nothing seemed out of place. So far as this marine could tell, the vessel was nothing more, nothing less than she had been led to expect. It was an old missile corvette, apparently converted for longer journeys, fewer crewmembers, more survey. And then re-converted to piracy.

Either marines were blind, or these had been well indoctrinated. They weren't willing to find anything out of place with the set story.

Lt. Grunon came back down the corridor. Behind him came a tall blonde marine, also familiar to O'Meath. Vele.

She stood at attention, saluted properly. Like the others, like her superior, she remained in her battlesuit, only the helmet left below. "Sergeant Larissa Vele, reporting as ordered." Her eyes

gazed forward at the end wall.

"At ease," Murphy said, for the eleventh time that day. The Sergeant went to parade rest.

"You can sit, marine," Murphy invited.

"No sir, I cannot," she replied, her gaze staying level.

"Suit yourself." Murphy tapped at the table to pull up the next data file. "I've read your official report. It sounds like you found some damned skullbones and took care of them."

"Aye, sir."

"OK. So how did a bunch of vermin get into the main computer files of a Jin Jun ship?"

"I don't know that, sir."

"How did they manage to mount a serious attack on your people?"

"I don't know, sir."

"How did they get three levels of Jin Jun security codes?"

"I don't know, sir."

"What did you see that was out of place?"

"Nothing, sir."

Teeth-pulling. Damned teeth-pulling, and he wasn't actually getting any tooth for all his efforts. Murphy softened his tone. "You lost a good marine, Sergeant. That's a debt those skullbones owe you now."

"Aye, sir." The voice remained even.

"Any idea of who I chase to help you collect it?"

"No, sir."

"No idea of who they might be? A photo on a wall? Papers floating?"

"No, sir."

"OK, let's go through it all, from the beginning. From launch forward."

Vele began her narrative, repeating the words of her report almost verbatim. Murphy waited patiently occasionally inserting a question to clarify.

Nothing was unexpected, nothing was out of place. He had expected nothing different. Neither of them acknowledged any past meeting.

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Ten minutes later, Murphy leaned back. “Dismissed, Sergeant. Lieutenant, escort him out. You go over, too. We’re done for the day. We’ll pick up again at 08:00, Beijing time.”

“Aye, sir.” Grunon slid out of the galley bench and followed his sergeant. Murphy listened for the sounds of the lock. When he heard the quiet chuffs and pops that accompanied its cycling, he keyed his handheld to lock *Granuaile* tight. He didn’t feel like trusting anyone from Fleet tonight. Not even Urwah Grunon.

Damn, that was a loss.

Chapter 12

February 5, 2392 (Three Years Ago) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV) (Urwah)

Urk exited the landing craft onto the flattened meadow, assault rifle and other equipment slung over his shoulder. It was odd to be without a combat suit, in the cool air of a planet enough like Earth to remind the senses. Less habitable planets were the norm, and “terraforming” efforts far less effective than the politicians would have one believe.

The rolling plains smelled like the Siringitu Dome during the rain cycles. The scent was more powerful, though, more urgent. It pushed straight through his nasal passages into the back of his brain. Morning sun, not a dome’s massive sunlamps, warmed the nape of his neck as he cleared the landing pod’s shadow. The feelings pulsed down into his abdomen, warming it, making it feel solid and steady. As he cleared the FDC, he turned and saw the deep purple of the rising hills behind it.

He understood why the colonists would defy laws and decrees putting this world off-limits. The human race needed places to take new roots. The natives – well, that was admittedly a tough knot to untie. O’Meath and his speech had expressed one extreme view, the Humanitas Church the other. Some compromise should be sought.

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Instead, he was here with a gun, with rules of engagement targeting human colonists. His emotions dropped again. This world should not be untouchable by decree.

Hell of a first foray into the field as top sergeant. Some damned Jin Jun was set up as Commodore Admiral and field command, because the Fleet's own officers weren't trusted to carry out the orders. Fleet Noncoms would bear the brunt of this action, keeping their troops in line. For the first time in his career, Urwah wondered whether he could justify the ROEs to himself, much less his men and women.

A small vessel flew over, gravitics glowing bright, banking into a turn – a reminder. The *Xiaoqin*. *Xiaoqin* was one of those newer Jin Jun ships – light, fast, long-range, armed fairly well, and with plenty of electronics. Scuttlebutt overheard while on an errand to the Officer's Wardroom was that it had computer power enough to be run by a single person, despite being designed to carry at least eight. The Jin Jun were getting the newest technology, as usual. Never mind that the Fleet and its marines were holding the zhīzhū back at Ross 128. Never mind the rest of space, and the growing human scavenger threat growing along Yi's Reach.

Never mind policing a few strays who wanted a fresh start on a world with a breeze.

A few ships like that wouldn't hurt the effort at Ross and elsewhere along the zhīzhū borders. Instead, they went to a few spoiled third and fourth children of noble families. The Fleet and marines did the real defense. Ground army did some of the work. The Jin Jun played at Pompous Ceremonial Guard Duty, and Messenger Duty, and Making Fancy Star Charts.

High-born brats. He wasn't sure whether he would put O'Meath in that class, though. He wasn't sure what class O'Meath fell into.

He *was* sure that the Jin Jun was too close to the locals. That Jin Jun was discounting the zhīzhū experience far too easily. There was no understanding aliens on human terms, no matter how hard one might try to find similarities.

"Form up," Captain LeFrenier ordered, transmitted through

the earpiece. “Set your guidance for Target A. Start moving as soon as you’re put on the ground.” An armored troop gravver hummed by, banked and lit gently to the ground twenty meters away.

Urk turned to his own squads and waved them on to the carrier. “You heard the Captain. We’re about eight kilometers from where we walk.” He opened the protective cover on his sleeve panel, keyed the target in, and keyed the helmet heads-up to display map and coordinates. “Confirm and lock on me. Then get on to gravver.”

Once all were aboard, the troop carrier lifted and skimmed along the meadow, saving them a few kilometers of walking. The troop gravver set down with a bump at the edge of the hills. Urk got his people out, formed up his squad.

Urwah barked orders, took up the lead and began to clap the pace. “My First Sergeant, he’s got cla-ass!”

The troops picked up the clapping and responded. “My First Sergeant, he’s got cla-ass!”

“He’s got a face like a lion’s a-ass!”

“He’s got a face like a lion’s a-ass!”

“*Sound off!*”

The pace automated itself to the cadence-calling. They would get to the edge of the settlements by the time the grav-tanks were off-loaded and running.

He didn’t wonder why they weren’t already on the ground.

Urwah’s spirits rose as he moved his marines up between the hills. The settlers had chosen the foothills wisely. From the briefings he’d read the Horn nomads preferred the often grassy plains prevailing on Shānhé-Wòtu’s temperate main continent. Some were mountaineers, but not that many – the briefing books had gone into biological theory. He had skipped that in favor of biological facts – internal organs, bone structure, and other factors indicating good kill points. If he was going to be limited to blades, he was going to know where to stick them.

Urk’s squad was on point, going uphill along a rock-strewn ravine. The outskirts of the main human settlement could be seen ahead, a kilometer or so away. Grav-tanks were finally down

from orbit and circling slowly. They were sending the simplest message they could: the marines were here in force, guns ready, following orders. Like it or not, the settlement would be dismantled. Its people would be moved to a less habitable world.

Like it or not.

Urk motioned a halt, stopped, keyed his heads-up for a zoomed view. The settlers were in motion, some setting up barricades, some arguing and shouting, some just sitting, heads in hands. Most of the children played, somehow making a game of the adult chaos.

Private Vele moved up beside him. "Sergeant, you know this is wrong. These are real people we are pushing out of their homes. *Human* people."

Urk glanced left at the blonde. "You planning on following the ROEs, Lar? Not gonna make me cuff you up, are you?"

"No, no, of course not. But *still* it is *wrong*."

"I don't make policy, Lar. Neither do you. Grunts follow orders."

"We follow orders when we can trust those giving the orders. Here – can we trust?"

Urk gave the private an appraising look. "Just keep to the ROEs, Lar. Defend yourself if you have to. Stunners and guns here, cold steel on the march."

"Sergeant. Yes, sergeant." She did not try to hide the sarcasm in her response.

Loudspeakers echoed over the hills: orders for the settlers to prepare for the march. "By the Emperor's decree, the laws of both Houses of Parliament, with the assent of the House of Knights, you are ordered to leave this world. You will be resettled elsewhere, or you may return to Earth to face trial for settling here. You settled here illegally. You have refused to agree to remove yourselves. Take your barricades down, and prepare the basic goods you can. We will begin leveling your settlement in three hours. Our orders are not appealable.

"You will be marched to your embarkation site. Families who comply will be kept together. Stragglers and those who resist will be arrested and segregated."

There was a pause before the recording began again.

Urk keyed comm to his squad. "Come on, we need to get up there. We have work to do." Urk tapped the button on his left wrist stunner, listened for the hum of power-up. His heads-up flashed the "ready." "Non-lethal if possible." A check of his main gun – a low-recoil short-barrel rifle – also proved all ready. He waved the squad to follow him.

They moved up toward the settlement, exposed, but not too badly so. The gravvers transmitted data from above. No settlers were truly hidden; infrared showed the heat signatures in a gully to the left, behind bushes to the right. Short-range radar imaged the guns and other weapons they planned to use in ambush. Vegetation hid them from visible-light scans only.

"Lar, take them." He pointed toward the bushes. "I've got the gully." He took his four marines at a trot toward the gully, taking a gasser from his belt. He stopped, knelt, loaded the gasser on to the muzzle. The heads-up set a suggested trajectory; Urk corrected slightly for instinct, pulled the trigger. The grenade spurted away on its rocket, arced gracefully into the camouflage, slid through almost silently. A white plume escaped through the brush.

Five bearded men erupted out from under, coughing. Urk's marines rushed them, stunners up. Probes fired out, made contact. Several men quivered and fell. Urk was up, following his marines only meters behind. One of the men, older than the others, managed to raise a simple hunting rifle despite wracking spasmodic coughs, pointing it Urk's way. A low-aimed quick-burst sweep of full-auto, brought blood from the settler's thighs. He fell to the ground.

Urk keyed comm to send for a medevac.

Multiple rifle-pops sounded from across the ravine. Assured that his five were down, Urk zoomed with the heads-up. Lar was bending over a settler, cursing in Russian. Another marine sat, holding his hand over his belly. "Report!" he barked over comm.

"Idiot!" Larissa replied. "Came out shooting. Got Stein. We – " She spouted another stream of Russian. "Fucking *idiot*."

"ROEs, Lar. Medic's coming. Get the rest of them bound

up.” Urk glanced at his own marines, saw that all of the settlers were already restrained with traditional plastic clip-straps behind backs. He trotted over to Stein, knelt beside him along with Fahd. Fahd pulled out his med-pack and opened it. “You good, Stein?” Urk asked as Fahd pushed a compress on the belly.

Stein nodded, his face whiter than usual. “I’m good, Sarge. Shoulda worn full armor.”

“All of us should’ve,” Urk agreed. “Kept it too light.” Urk keyed comm. “Urkers to Cap, man down, lucky shot. Settler, too – settler’s bad. Settlers got more spunk than we thought.”

LaFrenier responded. “Roger that. You need relief?”

The medevac gravver skimmed up from the rear, wooshed down, landing. “Medevac’s here. I’ll send my man back.” Two medics came up. Urk and Fahd let them in. “We’re still on point.”

“Roger. We’ll go to Two. LaFrenier out.”

Lar was standing, fists clenched. “I should have seen it. Stein shouldn’t have that hole. And the boy – “

“Lucky shots happen, Lar. You took the shooter down.” Urk glanced at the prone figure, two medics working over him. “Come on.”

“We should be protecting that boy! Not shooting back!” Larissa fired a burst off into the brush.

Urk grabbed her shoulders from behind. “Lar! Knock it off!” The other squad members went to crouch, wary.

Lar shuddered, pulled herself together. “Let’s go, Sergeant. We have more humans to *shoot*.”

The loudspeakers echoed in the distance. This time, the voice was live. “Clear those barricades, settlers. Clear them, before the rockets fire. *Clear them.*”

A twenty-count came onto Urk’s heads-up, began descending. An automated count echoed from the gravver hovering over the settlement. Another gravver moved into position, turret turning. The count ran down. Four rockets streaked into the barrier, blew pieces of furniture, brush, and rock into the air.

“Let’s go,” Urk said. He stopped beside Stein, knelt. “We’ll catch you later, Stein.”

“I’m good, Sarge,” Stein replied.

The rest of the squad filed by Stein, squeezing his arm as they moved. Larissa stopped, lingered, squeezed his hand – but looked longer at the young settler.

The line of settlers was a single, reluctant creature. Women ushered children, but without enthusiasm. Some of the men scuffed their feet through the tamped-down grass, bowed in self-loathing. Others marched, swaggered, looking for an opportunity to fight. The children mirrored their parents’ moods, some harassing the soldiers who walked beside them.

A hundred meters to the left, the Jin Jun – *Commodore* O’Meath, author of this debacle – rode one of the local horse-like beasts. His coverall was not even Jin Jun standard, and the only emblems he wore matched some of the Cetian runes and symbols. Further off, some of the Horns themselves rode, armed primarily with swords. What would they do if a marine opened fire? It would take little to mow them down.

A Horn beckoned in the distance, and O’Meath guided the animal to him. Urwah keyed his heads-up, zooming in the cam. This Cetian’s central horn was ringed with a polished gold band. It reminded Urwah of old legends, bad cartoons. This was probably the leader, Fahnisht, as O’Meath had named him.

O’Meath and the Cetian spoke for several minutes. The Horn gestured slightly. Urwah could not interpret the movements; they were disturbingly not quite human. Perhaps they were sharing a joke, or telling tales. More likely, they were planning.

O’Meath tapped heels into the flanks of the animal, turned its head toward the line of settlers. Urwah watched as he came closer, then realized that he was galloping toward his position. He found himself checking his firearm for readiness, his line of sight. His subconscious had made the decision for him. The Commodore was in no way trustworthy.

The Jin Jun reined the beast in as he came up beside Urwah. Up close, he was not at all imposing. His coverall was wrinkled, mussed. The scabbard too long for his height now hung from a harness on what served as a saddle.

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“Sergeant,” O’Meath called down as the “horse” slowed to a walk. “Trouble. I want you on your toes. Blades ready. Safeties *on*.”

“That doesn’t explain much.”

“No, it doesn’t. You have an hour for local politics? I don’t. You were at the briefing. You stand out.”

Urwah drew himself up. “I need more than that to go on. Sir.”

“Here’s the bullet. The clan shadowing us, that’s Fahnisht and his folk, some of Yinthe’s. Look for blue dyes on the leathers. Fahnisht trusts me – remember, so far as he’s concerned, I’m one of his Tentlords.”

Urwah scowled. O’Meath seemed unaware, went on. “Lanna’s a few kilometers out – they’re in blue-green. Not much difference to our eyes. It’s more in how they move, walk. Lanna’s sworn blood feud. Jihad. Jihad on Fahnisht and most of the other Houses. For not wiping the settlers out the way they should have been, the way they see things.

“Odds are, Lanna’ll attack. A foolish waste. Probably a hundred horse-born, another hundred or two on foot. They’ll try to cut through Fahnisht’s line to come along here. Follow me so far?”

“That seems obvious. If they break through the line, we’ll defend. That’s what my rules of engagement say.”

“Blades only. By the ROEs.”

Urwah stopped, glared upward. “I won’t let humans be slaughtered.”

“It’s a risk they took when they trespassed. You’re here to escort them to your ships, not protect them from the Horns.”

“Jin Jun *bullshit*.”

O’Meath shrugged, then smiled. “That’s Commodore Bullshit to you.” He gave a sloppy salute, pulled the rein looped over his mount’s horn and coaxed the beast to swing round. The Jin Jun urged the beast to a trot, returning to the cluster that marked his allies.

Fuming, Urk turned his attention to the march, began formulating contingencies, and setting his marines as best he could. He

looked at the line of settlers – no serious weapons, little ability to defend. Notwithstanding O’Meath’s orders, he would not allow a slaughter. When he had moments, he glanced into the distance, zooming with the heads-up.

O’Meath was distinct among the Cetians, equipped with bits of technology and comm gear. He could easily have given his orders over the comm. Even in the distance, he seemed impatient. Those around him were simply vigilant, waiting for the inevitable.

A half-hour later, inevitable erupted. Mounted Cetians swarmed over a rise, streaming toward O’Meath’s knot of Horns. Beasts reared, wheeled and screeched as swords flashed and pikes shoved out. O’Meath charged into the attackers, swinging the long sword right and left to clash with another, seeking to parry through to meat. The screams and rumblings of distant voices were pitched differently from a human battle, but not too differently.

The settlers slowed, huddled, justifiably afraid. “Heads up!” Urk called to his marines. “Ten meters out, now. Move!” He was moving out as he spoke, pulling his cutlass out.

Ten meters away, Lar hesitantly gripped the hilt of her own cutlass. “Urk, a little full auto would solve this quick,” she growled over comm.

“Want a court-martial run by a fucking Jin Jun? ROEs. No *useless* chatter.” Urk scanned the melee again.

O’Meath’s Horns were holding the line, swords bloodied. O’Meath was somewhere in the mob, perhaps down, perhaps simply obscured by the waves of non-human bodies.

Without warning, a surge pushed through the line. Ten, twelve, perhaps fifteen beasts were suddenly jumping and galloping through and around, pushing straight for the line of settlers. Urwah scanned, calculated, and started running further out. He keyed comm. “Urkers! Form on me!”

An assault rifle cocked somewhere close behind him, followed by popping. Urk stopped swiveled, saw Lar raising to sweep ahead with fire. A simple leg extension caught her in the knee, sent her sprawling. “*No guns!*”

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He turned again. The Horns had seen all, turned, and were angling to go close around the marines. They would tear Lar apart, the others if they could.

Urk tucked low, running straight at the lead animal, slammed shoulder hard into its front haunches. The animal screeched as it fell, bones popping, not much less frail than a Terran horse. Urk rolled out, realized he had dropped his cutlass – found at hand a longer Cetian blade. He managed the grip, made for different hands, swung at the unhorsed warrior as he – her? – charged. Blood spurted from the stump of the forearm, forearm spun through arc into high grass.

The rest of the squad closed in, joined in melee. The non-ceremonial cutlasses swished, clanged against Horn steel, thunked through Horn bones. Horn mounts squealed and reared. A Horn thrust a dagger through a marine's open mouth – they knew armor and weakness. Differing shades of red stained the veldt. Two marines down, all but one Horn dead or dying.

One Horn mount managed to rear, hop-jump over two marines who tried to bring it down. A cutlass cut into the belly. As entrails spilled, the Horn spurred the mount. It galloped in agony toward a cluster of settlers.

Urk gave chase, several other marines behind, needing no orders. The Horn got to the cluster, swung his long sword, connected, The human head flew away, stopped short, held by a tendon and strip of skin. A second sweep as the mount fell, tangled in its own entrails. The Horn managed to jump off, cocked his sword for a devastating swing at a horrified woman.

Urk discovered that his captured long sword was raised overhead, his two-handed grip solid, and the Horn in range. No deflecting blow – sweep down, cleave the Horn skull, brain tissue popping out like loose seeds from a gourd. The Horn's hands held the sword tight as knees unlocked, torso sank and collapsed to the side.

Urk pulled the sword out, looked at the blood.

The human settlers were due that much, at least.

August 15, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity of L 1305-10 (Urwah)

Urwah clamped the hand-tractor to the zip line, secured the safety line to a suit loop. Thirty meters wasn't that dangerous. He'd jumped further without safety line. There was no point in taking additional risk, though.

Lar was already across the void, waiting at the lock. Urk thumbed the button and felt the grip-wheels clamp over the thin line. He pulled away from the Jin Jun vessel, toward *Harris*.

His comm flashed in the helmet heads-up. Lar's icon appeared, showing a secure channel. "He's out to bury the facts," Lar said. "Jin Jun bullshit, as usual."

"Maybe," Urk replied. He wasn't sure he wanted to discuss this with anyone.

"Maybe?" Lar chuckled. "It's a cover-up," he said. "Why send anyone out at all? They lost a ship, and that's that. Or went pirate themselves."

"Jin Jun ? We'd have lost more marines if they went pirate. They train in personal combat – every one of them serves in the Imperial Guard before they can do anything else." The tractor reached the half-way point. Urk cut power, prepared to set the brakes.

"Well, they sure as hell lost a ship. Wasted it, really – it'll be needed one of these days.

A few years ago, he might have agreed with Lar. He had certainly seen enough results of stupidity. The Jin Jun weren't stupid, though.

The damned Jin Jun were mostly smug. They connived to hold their position. They had gone well beyond their function of protecting the Imperial Family. They wanted to be the sole and only authority on opening up space, and dealing with sentients.

They thought that the *zhīzhū* could be talked to. The *zhīzhū*. Spoiled children, unaware of the bloodthirsty way the spiders fought. There was no conversation with a thing sucking out guts and brains.

For all of that, distrusting O'Meath felt – wrong. Urk distrusted learned Fleet distrust. The damned red-headed pygmy

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had an agenda, but he was honest, dammit. The rest of the Jin Jun could be discounted.

O'Meath he would not discount.

February 7, 2392 (Three Years Ago) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV) (Urwah)

The last settlers limped up the ramps. “Ready to seal,” Urk reported over the comm, his voice hoarse. Two handcarts had carried bodies on top of hastily-packed goods and possessions. Other transports had similar loads, mourning families. Lanna’s Horns had concentrated on Fahnisht’s position, but other attacks had been made.

Only one other marine in a different squad had disobeyed the ROEs, opened fire. The Horns had overwhelmed him, cutting him into several large chunks before desecrating his face. O'Meath would not be handing *that* marine over to Fahnisht today.

Urwah walked toward the tents being set up by his squad. Larissa saw him coming, turned her back to him. “Private!”

She turned, stood at attention, saluted. “Sergeant.”

Other marines stopped what they were doing. Urwah held Lar’s gaze, then looked away. Just what the hell was there to say?

Fucking Jin Jun ROEs.

Gravver-hum emerged from the background noise, grew louder. Urk recognized it as a light gravver. He keyed the heads-up, scanned quickly, confirmed that it was a Jin Jun design. The open-frame four-seater appeared in the dusk, angled into a landing, bumped down on shock-absorber pads.

The voice from the gravver was female, unfamiliar. “Sergeant Grunon, Private Vele, mount up. Leave weapons behind. Orders from Commodore O'Meath.”

Urk keyed the comm display into his heads-up, scrolled. The order was there, properly logged. He shrugged, though he felt his

stomach burning. Damned Jin Jun must have been using their own sensor drones to watch the field.

Urk shrugged himself quickly out of his weapons. “Mickey, take this,” he said, reaching to unbuckle the captured Horn scabbard from his belt.

“Leave that on,” the Jin Jun voice ordered. “Leave *marine* weapons behind.”

Urk complied, handing off his rifle, pistol, and other equipment to Corporal O'Reilly. Lar did the same, stopping at her cutlass. She shot an enquiring look into the glaring running lights.

The voice understood the unspoken question. “Leave the cutlass, Vele.” A set of handcuffs landed at Urk's feet, skidding along the trampled grasses. “Sergeant, put those on the private.”

This was getting no better. He sensed his people behind, waiting for his decision. Urk stood a moment, knowing the squad would back him if he disobeyed. Knowing they would join him in whatever prison this cost.

And knowing that he had enforced the ROEs efficiently, accepting them for what they were – orders from field commanders who had a sense of the situation. This was overkill, plasma cannons to kill flies. “She doesn't go to the Horns,” Urk said quietly. “Not unless all of the squad goes with her.” Urk looked into the lights, trying to find eyes to meet, as the squad rustled to “attention” behind him.

The Jin Jun on the frame sat quiet a moment, perhaps appraising, perhaps communicating through a computer implant. Some of the Jin Jun were reputed to be equipped with those, despite the malfunction rate.

“Private Vele is under arrest, Sergeant. O'Meath will deal with her himself – not the Horns. Now, get her locked, and get on – you're on a tight schedule.”

Urk bent down and picked up the manacles. Lar stood where she was, halfway between fire-rage and ice-fear. He walked to her. “Hands out, Private,” he said quietly. She looked at him, then put the arms out, fists clenched. Urk snapped the manacles tight. “The squad heard,” he said to her, but loudly

enough for his voice to carry. “That’s at least *some* promise.” After his brief discussion with O’Meath on the field, he thought that the man’s word was good.

Urwah keyed comm, set it for the Cap’s frequency. “Sergeant Grunon, Private Vele, reporting to Commodore O’Meath with Private Vele as ordered,” he reported, knowing that the record would be made. “I have been assured that she will not be dealt with by the Cetians.” What else could he do at this point?

Urk strode up to the frame. Vele followed close behind. He gestured to one of the two rear seats on the frame. “Private.” He took the starboard fore for himself, arranged the scabbard, tightened the seatbelt. Lar clambered aboard, stiffly erect, refusing any implied offer of assistance. In the dim light, he saw her eyes – angry, betrayed, defiant, all at once. She climbed in behind, sat, and buckled herself in with an efficient click.

The gravver lifted away from the camp, turning and banking sharply. The pilot was wholly focused on her goal. Asian, older than most of the Jin Jun who he had seen over the last few weeks, she wore no insignia, no hint of where she stood in the temporary Fleet chain of command. There was no way of telling where she stood in the Jin Jun hierarchy. O’Meath was “Lead,” but she certainly had been in the Emperor’s service a decade or more longer.

Urk leaned over, shouted above the rushing wind. “Where are we going?”

“To the Commodore,” the woman replied, simply. Her forward focus permitted no further interruptions. The acid feeling in Urk’s stomach grew more intense.

The trip took only a few minutes. The gravver set down on the open veldt. Urk keyed night filter and zoom, saw the Horn tents a half-kilometer away. Horns clustered around a fire flaring in the center – a funeral pyre, by the size of it.

A large pyre. He could smell the searing flesh from here. The cooling evening breeze could not mask the bone-fire smell.

O’Meath rode out of the darkness on one of the Cetian mounts, reining the beast in a meter from Urk’s seat. A Horn rode behind. Urk stood, saluted. Lar was also up; she held her

hands in front of her, making no sign of deference or respect.

O'Meath swung down from his mount. He looked up, appraising. "Button the top." Urk reached up, fumbled with the button; O'Meath fiddled with the scabbard-belt, adjusting it. "They'll be impressed," he said, perhaps to the gravver pilot, perhaps to no one. "You ever ride animals?" The question was clearly for Urk.

Urk shook his head. "Jump belt is the closest I come."

"Well, try not to embarrass yourself." O'Meath turned to his Horn companion, snarled and hissed out a string of words. The Horn dismounted, held the reins out – up – to Urk.

Urk took them, momentarily uncertain, and suddenly aware that O'Meath's short stature still made him taller than the Horn's skull by enough to be noticed. The Horns and O'Meath had the small, wiry, tough build in common.

"Watch how I get on," O'Meath said, wasting no time putting a foot in a stirrup-loop and pulling himself up. From the mount, he looked down. "Don't jump too hard – you're a damn sight heavier than the beast is used to."

Urk pushed a toe into the loop – it was barely large enough to get a proper toehold – and pulled himself up. The beast swayed, sidestepped, as he tried to feel for the correct adjustment. The animal moving underneath felt plainly odd. The beast settled down, waited.

O'Meath expertly turned his own mount, came almost face-to-face with Urk. "Your helmet has to go. No Horn goes to a Pyre with his head covered – it says you're Hornless. Not a warrior." He held out a Jin Jun earpiece. "This will help a little with translation, but the linguists are still struggling with the speech. It's easier by far than dealing with the zhīzhū, though."

"What are we doing?"

"We're running behind, and we travel silent, so listen once and get it straight, Grunon. Fahnisht is running his 'Honor Court.' He has to keep face – and his goddam crazy human Tent-lord isn't handing up a dishonored warrior. Face-losing. You follow so far?"

Urk shrugged. "Silly shit that you nobles always go

through.”

Unexpectedly, O’Meath chuckled. “Right. But Yi won’t chop me up if I give him the finger. Yi’s too young yet to have that sort of common sense. Blackstone might, but he has a thing about appearances.”

O’Meath pointed at the sword Urwah wore. “I’m bringing him his Face – you have Jifka’s sword. Jifka was one of Lanna’s top Tentlords.

“When I say ‘knees,’ you get down on them. Period. Fast. Head bowed. Abject submission. I’ll be there, too.”

Urk was optimistic. “Some kind of knighting?”

O’Meath looked at him grimly. “Let’s hope so. Whatever happens, you and I are in this together. All the way.”

Urk felt his mouth go dry. Battle was preferable to this kind of politicking. “Doesn’t sound good.”

“I can make it easy,” O’Meath replied. He gestured toward the gravver. “She comes along right now, two of us come back for sure. You don’t want that. This way, Fahnisht doesn’t slice *her* throat.”

Urk understood, shook his head with no further thought. Lar was wrong, but she was his marine. “Let’s get this over with.” He cleared his throat, sat a little straighter in the small saddle, and saluted. “Commodore.”

O’Meath grinned, turned to address the other Jin Jun. “You know the drill, Zhaohui. If you lose me, Plan B.”

“Understood.”

Zhaohui. Recognition set in. The Emperor’s aunt, First Jin Jun, was here, flying a gravver. She was taking orders from the upstart pygmy.

O’Meath tugged the reins, tapped the beasts sides with heels, and moved out. “Let’s go, Sergeant.”

Urk’s mount followed O’Meath’s. It neither required nor accepted Urk’s untrained attempts at guidance. That was fortunate, really; Urwah was turning over the brief exchange between O’Meath and Zhaohui. There had been no briefing over ‘Plan B.’

It probably was not an option the marines would like.

Zhang Zhaohui was more than an Imperial relative. She was

the Lady Commander of the Jin Jun. The Emperor's youngest aunt, far enough out of the succession to have been allowed to enter the Jin Jun. She had learned the role from her own uncle, who had died defending the prior Emperor. Zhaohui, taking orders from O'Meath.

Jin Jun insanity.

The two beasts came to the edge of the Horn encampment. O'Meath halted his beast, and Urwah's followed suit. O'Meath got down easily. Urk watched, tried to follow the movements. He managed to get to the ground without falling.

O'Meath wasted no time walking toward the fire, and the crowd that surrounded it. The stench and sizzle of burning flesh pushed at Urk, tried to force him back. He leaned into it without knowing, as if he leaned into a high headwind. Ahead of him, O'Meath moved without any sign of hesitation. He came to the edge of the circle, stopped. Urk easily saw over the heads of the crowd.

The gold-banded Horn – Fahnisht, Urk assumed – stood before the sizzling bier, his side to the crowd. Another Horn stood, wrists bound, and beside it a Horn held a sword. The snouts, faces, whatever they were, pulled back in snarls. Urk quickly gave up trying to determine what was meant by gestures and sounds that carried through the muffling silence of the crowd. Instead, he focused on the translations that would come through the earpiece.

Fahnisht pulled out a dagger, less ornate than O'Meath's, no less deadly. The captive locked eyes with the leader, snarled, seeming defiant. Fahnisht gestured, spoke to the other Horn, the one holding the rope. There was little response, no more than a twitch. Was that a shrug, or defiance?

Fahnisht swept the long knife down, slicing the ropes and freeing the captive – for a moment only. A swift jab upward sliced into the captive's belly once, twice, three times. Fahnisht's thrusts were deliberate, ceremonial. The captive never allowed its gaze to shift away from Fahnisht's, as its legs slowly folded underneath.

Fahnisht gestured. Two very junior Horns lifted the body

and tossed it on the bier, blood still spilling. Fahnisht cleaned his blade carefully as the Horn's body began to add to the stench. When he was done, he tucked the blade back in its scabbard, looking toward the humans. "Kameef!"

The crowd of Horns turned to look, then stand aside to make a path to the bier in the center. O'Meath started in. Urk hesitated a moment, saw the Horn eyes staring, and made heavy feet lift and push. He wanted no part of this, wondered how many Horns he could take with him if need be.

O'Meath strode to the fire, stood beside it. Locking gaze with Famish, he imitated the Horn growl. They snarled back and forth for a minute, then two, then three. Urk's palms itched; he looked for swords he could grab.

O'Meath gripped the dagger with thumb and forefinger only, slid it from its sheath at his waist. He offered it to Fahnisht. Fahnisht took it, held it ready.

The Horn's eyes shifted momentarily to Urwah, back to the Jin Jun. "This is not the cur, Kameef, and you give me a blade I do not want. I do not want clean blood."

O'Meath leaned forward. "Take what I offer. You need blood. Here, two warriors' blood."

Fahnisht spat toward the fire. "You know us, Kameef! Your others hid in the hills and rocks. They spied like Hornless fear-shivered Townfolk. They listened with your machines. I do not want *them* – I want my Tentlord!"

"You cannot have me now." Now O'Meath spat, but to the ground before his own feet. "Those in the Pyre honored their Tentlords. They died with swords, by swords, even the one you just killed. No arrows, no weak Townfolk took them – and they took blood only by blade. You cannot honor them *and* honor me. I am not the Tentlord you imagined. I gave in to a Town weakness, and let an unworthy live."

"Send for it. Have it brought to this Pyre. Redeem yourself."

O'Meath shook his head. "No. I refuse, Fahnisht. I am torn in my loyalties. Finish it." O'Meath dropped to his knees. Urwah followed suit before the hissed command left the Jin Jun's

mouth.

Fahnisht paused, hesitated. “There is a ‘why,’ Kameef, and I will have it before I take blood.” The Horn put the tip of his dagger to O’Meath’s neck, just under his left ear. O’Meath reached up, took the tip, gingerly set it in the depression next to the larynx, directly against his left carotid. He returned his hand to his side.

Fahnisht gestured. “Yinthe, assist.” Another Horn dagger was unsheathed. The observant Cetian – the one to whom Fahnisht owed a ‘blood-debt’ – pushed the tip against Urk’s own left carotid. Urwah’s skin prickled. O’Meath’s twisted diplomacy was either entirely logical to this race, or unlikely to do any good at all.

Fahnisht spoke again. “Give me the ‘why,’ Kameef. Let me know that you are still my Tentlord.”

“You already know the ‘why.’ I have no horn, no real sense. I am worse than the Townfolk. I never had a Horn to cut off. I am too weak to demand blood due.”

The assembled Horns picked up on that, raised their voices in protest. Fahnisht gestured. “Listen, O’Meath! They watched you today. You have fought with us. They know who you are – why you deserve the Horn the ancestors refused your kind! You are not a skulking coward from the towns. You fight! You have never shown fear like those miserable animals you marched away into your metal flyers.

“And this one!” Fahnisht gestured at Urk. “Magnificent! This one!”

Yinthe’s knife at his throat pressed slightly more. Was it excitement? A threat? Urk began to look for his move. The damned Jin Jun could be a fool if he wanted to. ROEs or not, he would not die miserably. At the very least, he would kill Yinthe before any of the Horns could kill him.

O’Meath was quiet. “Yes, Fahnisht. For this magnificent one, *my* blood is due. Not his.”

Fahnisht gazed at Urwah, deeply appraising. The Horn’s voice softened, perhaps slightly. “Not his size, Kameef. His courage. Skill. He brought down a mount, took blood by blade

as even Lanna's warriors were due. When you take me, he should be at your side."

"When you become so weak, Fahnisht, I may be here to take you. But him – he will not be with me. His clan owes other human clans a great debt in blood, or he would not be here at all. His clan does not want to be here. His clan is large, and disagrees with my human clan. His clan would rather *protect* the Townfolk humans who took your land."

"So you have said before. Though I do not understand why circle-poaching Townfolk would be tolerated by the Tentfolk of your place."

O'Meath locked gaze with the Horn. "No. But you accepted. From knowing me, you accepted that humans might view this differently. You called me back to help and advise."

"Perhaps I merely feared a clan such as his. Quivering Townfolk, at sundown, killing from a distance."

O'Meath's voice lowered. "You know better, my Tentlord. You know much better. You would ride against him and all his guns before you would let poaching continue. 'Death before dishonor.'"

A sound like a sigh escaped the Horn's sharp face. "Your horn is merely unseen, Kameef." Urk thought he sensed humor somewhere in the tone, despite the flattening of electronic translation. "So. You fear his clan? Is that why the dishonored warrior is not here?"

Murphy shook his head. "Of course not. Her body deserves to rot until eaten by crows. She deserves no Pyre. She dishonored her Clan. She dishonored her magnificent Tentlord. If she were a Horn warrior, she would be here, begging for her right to cut her own throat and be left where she fell to be spit upon by all."

O'Meath paused, cleared his throat. "Human honor and loyalties aren't as sharp-edged as yours, Fahnisht. Our ties – harder to cut away with a single stroke. They become tangled, because we are many, and we do not live on your simpler plains. You may not understand, but you already knew when you called me back. Even though his warrior dishonored him, and me, *he* can-

not dishonor her by simply cutting her throat and leaving her body on the ground. She pays for dishonor differently – less cleanly. So much less cleanly.

“But *he* is here – with me – volunteering to pay *her* blood-debt. To cleanse for *her*.”

Volunteering. Urk could not hold back a sidewise glare at the Jin Jun. With Yinthe’s dagger prickling at his throat, he did not move more than his eyes. He would *volunteer* to snap the runt Jin Jun’s neck as soon as he got a chance.

“You are right. I do not understand.” Fahnisht stood, silent, an alien thumb slowly feeling the carving on the dagger’s hilt.

Fahnisht pulled the blade away from O’Meath’s neck. Yinthe followed suit, perhaps more reluctantly than Urk would have liked. Fahnisht turned toward his people, drew a breath. “These are strange people, and they pay their blood debts strangely,” he shouted out. “But we have seen – *strange*, not *weak*.

“Kameef’s knife is sharp! I will use it against all who give challenge! Now! While the Pyre is still hot!”

None of the other Horns spoke at first. From somewhere close by, a voice finally arose, rhythmic, almost singing. “Fahnisht and Kameef.” A Horn in the colors of Clan Fahnisht, moving somehow differently, took a half-step forward. “We who came from outside the plains know that courage can grow in Towns. Fahnisht. One Horn.” He began a chant of the words.

Another joined, and another. The chant continued, passed from one to the next, until all of the Horns were together, more together than a human chorus could have managed. The chant continued for minutes. No one at the center of the tableau moved.

Finally, Fahnisht handed the dagger back to O’Meath. “The Fire may yet refuse to consume my soul, Kameef. I did not know you well enough when I opened my Tent to you.”

O’Meath stood, dusted off his knees. “No one ever does, Fahnisht.” He slipped the dagger into its sheath, looked at Urwah. “Up, Sergeant.” He tapped at his earpiece, spoke to the air in Mandarin. “We’ll be fine, Zhaohui. Get that idiot to *Utah*’s brig. Come back for us at dawn.”

Urwah stood, dusting his own knees off. He rubbed his neck, discovered a tiny rivulet of sweat mixed with blood.

The assembled Horns were still chanting, quietly. Fahnisht turned to O'Meath. "Ale, Kameef. You and this magnificent one – you must both serve in shame tonight, like two who were unready. It is the only way."

O'Meath shrugged and grinned. "Better than a sharp stick in the neck." He beckoned Urk. "Let's get to it, Sergeant – these guys work up a thirst after battle." He led through the crowd toward cloths spread on the ground. Meats and fruits were spread out on the coarse-woven blankets. Wooden barrels stood beside the battle-feast, set up on frames, tapped and ready to go.

Urk touched his neck again. "I'm not sure I get it."

"We're being slapped in the face – great warriors, serving just like the weakest. Face – we run and fetch to help Fahnisht save face for letting bygones be bygones."

"Still sounds a lot like the Imperial Court."

O'Meath laughed. "The Imperial Court could learn a few things from these guys. I have a half-sister they'd get rid of quickly." They came to the food. O'Meath spoke to one of the Horns. "A heavy tray, and milord Fahnisht's cup."

Perhaps O'Meath wasn't a normal Jin Jun. He seemed too entirely at ease at this moment, more like a marine would be. Urk's mind suddenly focused. "What was Plan B?"

"Plan B was for Zhaohui to deliver that idiot private of yours after he sliced our throats. Three bodies rotting on the ground, maybe even four. But more likely, Zhaohui would take my place as a Tentlord. And Fahnisht understands who Lady Zhaohui is in our 'tent,' so he would find a way to accept her."

"And we get cremated."

"Probably not. The Fire is open only to Horns with honor."

Urk shook his head. "Glad it wasn't your Plan A."

"I didn't expect Plan A to work at all, Grunon. We're damned lucky Fahnisht likes me."

The marine cursed.

O'Meath shrugged, pointed at the massive wooden platters the women were preparing. "Help me carry this stuff back."

Gregory P. Lee

Urwah glared, dumfounded. He finally shook his head as he lifted a platter. O'Meath was already moving back toward the bone fire. "Jin Jun. bullshit."

Chapter 13

August 16, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity of L 1305-10 (Urwah)

Urwah sat at his fold-down desk in his cramped cabin. The spoon rested on the surface, its ship's insignia glaring at him.

O'Meath would want this, he knew. He would want to exonerate the Jin Jun of losing a ship to pirates, at the very least. Anyone loyal to his own service would want that.

The memory of a cold steel against his throat and the smell of charnel fire slid through his mind. O'Meath dared the damned Cetian to cut both their throats. O'Meath won the dare, saved a marine he had every right to see cashiered for her violation of orders.

O'Meath wasn't the type to leave well enough alone.

If O'Meath got a look at this spoon, he would grasp its meaning. He would follow it where it took him, right back to someone – many some ones – in Fleet.

It would lead back to *Harris*, most likely. It would probably lead back to Jib, at least indirectly. It would lead back to the admiralty. It would lead back to Prophet alone knew who.

He should have tossed it out into space when he had a chance. He should do so now.

The handheld beeped. In a half-hour, he was to escort Avinashini to be questioned by O'Meath. He stood, leaving the

spoon behind. He turned slightly and keyed the combination of his personal weapons locker. The panel slid open, showing his two blades. The beautiful Cetian weapon hung, as usual, in its scabbard. His proper ceremonial cutlass hung in its polycarbon fiber scabbard. He took the proper cutlass, as he should. O'Meath might take the wrong message if he came on board with the Cetian sword.

Urwah left his cabin. Sliding the door shut, he made sure to key the lock, listened to the snick as it secured the door.

Urwah trotted down-deck to the marine combat lockers. His battlesuit hung on its clips, ready for use. Setting the cutlass onto the bench, he wasted no time getting it on, checking seals, preparing all but his helmet. That done, he took up the cutlass. He stood, looking at it for a long moment.

His handheld beeped for comm. "Lieutenant, I'm at the lock. I want to get this over with."

He keyed the response. "Aye, ma'am, right away." He snapped the scabbard onto its securing clip. The weight and balance was what it always was.

And it was wrong.

Urwah keyed comm. "Commander, I'll be three more minutes." He would still be early for the scheduled transfer. Urwah went back to his cabin, keyed the lock. He slid the door open and stepped through. The spoon sat on the desk, where he had left it.

Urwah went to his personal arms locker and keyed the combination. The locker again slid open. Slowly, feeling the weight of the cutlass seem to increase, he put it back in his place. He took the Cetian weapon and managed to hang the scabbard from a spare equipment clip. He sealed the locker again.

Urwah took a breath. The sword was a statement, not evidence. He could dump the spoon into space from the zipline. Even if it was noticed by automated sensors, it would probably be ignored. That was his best plan. He put the spoon into a suit pocket and sealed the pocket.

Urwah left the cabin and trotted back down-deck. Commander Avinashini stood. She was, as usual, almost unreadable to him.

All Shall Go to Wrack

Lar was also there, manning the inner lock watch. Urwah went back over the watch list in his mind; it should have been Milewski. He should have been notified of a switch.

Her eyes flicked to the sword at his waist. She frowned.

“Helmets,” Urwah said. There was no time to follow up on the roster. He put his own on, listened for the sounds of sealing. His heads-up came on, confirmed beyond the evidence of his ears popping that the nanotech seals were tight and ready. Lar’s and Commander Avinashini’s helmets were also sealed and ready. Urwah stepped into the lock ahead of her; she pushed into the cramped space behind. Jib sealed the hatch behind them.

Urwah pumped the air into the scavengers, then opened the outer hatch. The zipline waited. He inspected it carefully, assuring himself that he was always this careful. With everything looking good, he snapped his pull-along to the line. “Secure yourself, please Commander,” he asked, following protocol. Fighter pilots were worth any ten mere grunts.

Avinashini did so. “Secured, Lieutenant.” He looked at her unit to be sure. “Moving.” He pressed the handle and allowed the pull-along to take him across to *Granuaile*.

Getting there, he stepped into the open lock, turned to face *Harris*.

The line vibrated as Avinashini crossed and came to the lock.

August 16, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity of L 1305-10 (Murphy)

The lock opened with a hiss. Two figures stood inside the small space. Grunon was easy to recognize in his combat suit. Height alone gave him away. The smaller figure, female in some subtlety of stance despite the lighter-duty piloting suit, would be Commander B. P. Avinashini.

Admiral Sunitha’s daughter.

Murphy had not actually expected Captain Dumas to make her available. He had expected a last-minute maneuver, a ruse, or even outright, Buddha-damned defiance. He was more and more

certain that Admiral Sunitha knew something of what was going on out here. Ships could not disappear without her office being involved. She wasn't known to be stupid. Her daughter could be a part of it, especially with a recent transfer away from the Wolf side of space.

Grunon was the first to unlock his helmet and take it off. He stretched his neck, then touched the pilot's arm. "Air's good, Commander," he reported, tilting his head slightly toward the collar-mount microphone.

"Hull's tight, CO2 is normal, and there's no invisible gnats flying around your mouth," Murphy added. He'd forgotten that little piece of Fleet protocol. Marines always protected Fleet Brass of any description.

Especially from Jin Jun.

Avinashini touched the lock points. She took the helmet in both hands as the collar opened, twisted, pulled it off.

Murphy looked up at her face. She was not all that dark, but by no means as light as some Indians would prefer. To his eyes, it was closer to a smooth, cinnamon brown. She wore no make-up, and her dark black hair was pulled back into a severe bun. She was stoic, controlled, but her eyes hinted at a deep-hidden savagery. This was a woman who could face down a zhīzhū ship with a handgun. That alone made her attractive.

Murphy reminded himself whose daughter she was. Letting *that* brain's logic rule was going to cause him deeper trouble than it usually did. "You can take off your gloves," he said. "We'll be a while. Grunon, you know the way to the galley."

O'Meath turned and went inbound himself. The corridor back to the ladder was chilly, crammed tight between fuel tanks. *Granuaile* was a guzzler, almost half of her volume given over to hydrogen in its most easily stored form – water and the odd hydrocarbon. Halfway to the small hold, he came to the rungs going up either side. He clambered swiftly up and into the main deck, then forward to the lounge.

He had kept the lounge largely bare, save for the essential weights and exercise gear. The galley area, farthest forward, was comfortable, not spacious. It doubled for meetings and briefings,

or at least that was the design. Murphy took his usual seat and called up the various displays he wanted visible from the tabletop, keeping his private notes visible only through his neural up-link.

A questioning cursor blinked on the tabletop display. Murphy considered it, muted it – but did not shut it down.

The two came up the ladder and into the main living space momentarily. Neither had removed their EVA suits; only the life support packs had been left below. Grunon's was the standard combat battlesuit issued to all marines, specially made for his height and bulk. Commander Avinashini's was lighter, less bulky, made for easy of wearing in a fighter cockpit.

Murphy invited the two to sit with a wave. "Get comfortable." Grunon, predictably, refused. Avinashini looked at the marine for a moment, considering. In the end, she, too, remained standing.

"Fair enough. Let's get right to it, shall we? Commander Avinashini, I've gone over the sensor logs from your FDC. Have you?"

"I have," she replied. "I referred to them in writing my debriefing report."

"Looked at them again before coming here today?"

"Yes."

"What would you say if I told you the ship you bagged wasn't *Ibn II*, hijacked or otherwise."

"I would tell you that the sensor logs are not conclusive evidence of that."

"Good answer. Not 'conclusive.' But you think there are questions?"

Avinashini looked at the marine. His eyes were straight forward, focused on the wall beyond. She looked back to O'Meath. "I noted some information that was perhaps difficult to fit with that identification."

"Oh, come on, Commander. You're already a damned legend. You took out big chunks of a zhīzhū task force. Damned gutsy, damned good, and damned smart, so don't dodge the questions. What didn't fit?"

Avinashini hesitated, then spoke. “Power and radiation output signatures suggested a recently maintained vessel. The forward missile bay was not fitted with the extensive sensor systems I understood *Ibn* to have. The additional external arrays that were in fact present did not match records that were available in my ship’s database. There were inconsistencies in hull configuration. There were no ship markings on the hull.”

“That sounds conclusive.”

“No. These are all anomalous, but could have occurred during maintenance at some base. Fleet has evidence of at least one skullbones base somewhere along the Reach, probably orbiting a brown or red dwarf. Refitting could have occurred there, if the ship was captured or located after it was lost.”

“A hell of a lot of refitting,” Murphy commented. “Especially for a bunch of mythical skullbones hiding out in the deep dark. That’s the kind of crap that the High Brassholes put out there, isn’t it?”

She looked down at him, her eyes boring in. “You’re referring to my *superior*, Admiral Sunitha. She would point out that Jin Jun secrecy could also explain misinformation.”

“Your mother keeps a lot of her own secrets.”

Grunon’s lips pulled back, almost revealing his teeth. “Is the Commander under suspicion? Charges? Or is this just more of your Jin Jun bullshit?”

Murphy ignored him for the moment, tapped at an icon on the tabletop. Two almost identical ship schematics came up in the display, with power and configuration specifications beside each. Murphy pointed to the one on the right. “That’s the *Ibn*, after it was refitted for the Magellan II expedition.” He gestured to the other. “And that’s what I’ve put together from your sensor logs.” He tapped at the bow of the *Ibn*. “That’s the missile bay you were questioning. It was entirely rebuilt, inside and out, for extensive sensor and labs. No way it was emptied out and left useless – why the hell would a *smart* pirate get rid of sensors that could detect a dead fly half a light-year away?”

“I have questioned that myself,” Avinashini said. “In fact, that is the most significant anomaly, more significant than the

lack of missiles in the bays.”

“Why?”

“Because,” she said slowly and carefully, “had we been detected earlier, it is likely that the boarding would have been repelled or evaded in its entirety. At the very least, my FDC would have been fired upon.”

Murphy tapped at a key next to the second ship. Additional data came up, merged with the data already on screen. “Apart from some extra sensor dishes, the ship you blew up matches the *Lambert* to ninety-nine decimal points. A ship that was put into reserve cache, and should still be there. Any thoughts?”

Avinashini maintained her composure. “I have no additional information to give you.”

Murphy looked, wondered if she was just maintaining a façade to the last. Somehow, he did not believe that she was dishonest. His gonads had interfered with information about women occasionally, but this didn’t feel like that. “Sure?”

Grunon spoke up in a strained voice. “The fake refit was a good job, O’Meath, and the Commander wasn’t inside her. But it was a fake. And you’re right about the ship.” He unzipped a leg pouch, reached in, fumbled a bit.

And pulled out a spoon.

Grunon laid the stainless steel on the table. Murphy looked up into the marine’s eyes. “What’s this, a foxhole shovel?”

“Look at the handle, *Commodore*.”

Murphy nodded at the reminder, then picked up the spoon. He looked, saw the Fleet seal at the end of the handle, and a ship’s insignia further down. He didn’t recognize the particular seal. He turned it over. “IFS *Lambert*” was written along the length of the handle. “Son of a bitch,” Murphy said. “*Granuaile* pegged her right on.” He looked back at Grunon. “Is there any way this could have been on the *Ibn*?”

Grunon shook his head. “Every ship has its own flatware. A tradition. Probably looks stupid to you.” He glared. “And no way the Jin Jun got *Ibn*’s silver from her days as *Vandal*.”

Murphy handed the spoon to Avinashini. “Here I thought *you* were the one holding back.” He picked up his handheld,

pushed back in his chair. A mental tap via the neural uplink set *Granuaile*'s main computer to its next task.

The pilot took up the spoon and inspected it. "*Lambert*. It fully explains the anomalies I observed."

"Any idea how that ship got made to look a whole lot like *Ibn*?"

"I certainly do not." Her Indian lilt suggested that the question was ridiculous.

Murphy sat quietly for a moment. There was more than enough evidence at this point, most of it in the hands of these two officers. He would need them as witnesses before the House of Knights.

"Grunon, I'm going to do what I have to do. You know that."

"You've already done it." The marine's eyes flicked to the handheld, back to O'Meath's face. "I knew you were going to be a Jin Jun bastard about this."

"Did you tell the Commander?"

Grunon shook his head, put his hand to the hilt of the sword on his belt. It was not his ceremonial cutlass, as it should have been. "No point. Either way, her career's entirely dead now, just like mine."

"I hope not," Murphy replied. "And you would have kept her off *Granuaile*, if you thought there was a chance I was wrong." He stood.

"You're both damned good officers, and damned good fighters." He turned his attention back to Avinashini. "Commander, you're going to be held as a material witness to treason, theft of Imperial military equipment, and I don't know what else.

"Piracy for sure – that ship out there actually raided civilian transports. It's not just a mock-up for show. I'll order transfer of your gear and such, but it may take a while catching up with us, I'm not waiting."

She stared at him. He found that he could not read her face, guess at her emotions. She was harder to suss out than Zhaohui, whose poker face was renowned. "I protest. The Captain will insist that I return to my ship."

All Shall Go to Wrack

“She can insist all she wants. I already transmitted a Plenipotentiary Warrant.”

Avinashini started to turn back to the hatch for the lower deck. Urwah took her arm gently, shook his head slightly.

“We’re already moving, Commander. I know this bastard and his Jin Jun Bullshit.”

“And you’re helping him?” For a moment, her eyes widened with anger, then went back to inscrutable calm.

“I’m not interfering,” the marine corrected. “I’m waiting for the next step.”

“That’s helping.”

“If we refused, he’d do it anyway. Hell, he either conned someone out of a Warrant or he made one up and somehow got the codes right. Probably made it up. Doesn’t think much of rules or protocol when they get in his way. Pretends to follow them when it suits him. Thinks he knows what’s best for everyone.”

“I used to think it unfair that you were treated as an untouchable on board.” Avi’s voice cut. “To whom are you *really* loyal?”

“The marine I lost on that ship. A good marine, even if she was mixed up in something wrong. If some treasonous bastard in Fleet put that skullbones out there...” The marine paused, unbalanced the fist that had formed as he spoke. “Fuck. Like him or not, O’Meath is the son of a bitch who will make it right.” He held her eyes for a moment, looked back to O’Meath. His hand went to the hilt of the Horn sword. “And I’ll slit your throat with this blade if I’m wrong. Don’t think different, pygmy.”

O’Meath laughed. “You brought the right sword for it.”

Avinashini looked firmly down toward the shorter Jin Jun. “I insist that you return me.”

Murphy shook his head. “We’re heading straight for Earth. You can complain when we get there.” He stood. “I’m going to the con to make sure it’s all set. Make yourselves comfortable. Pick cabins for yourselves. There are spare shipsuits that should more-or-less fit. Lying Jin Jun styles, sorry.” He stood and went aft to the center of the main deck, then up to the con. He closed

the deck hatch and locked it tight before going to the center station.

Grunon wasn't dumb, Murphy reflected as he keyed in his codes. Sooner or later, someone on *Harris* would dig deep enough into that Plenipotentiary to figure out it was a fraud. Hell, even if they didn't, they might decide to sacrifice a Jin Jun and a grunt to keep their secrets.

Would they sacrifice Admiral Sunitha's daughter, too? Had they already? She was not yet a known quantity in all of this.

Granuaile was already vectoring away from *Harris*, but *Harris* could keep up. Her FDC's could do better than keep up. He keyed the sensors. Passive receptors almost as good as those that had been installed on *Ibn* showed what he had assumed would happen. *Harris*' well screened power plant was running at full blast. Particle weapons were charging. No doubt, three out of four FDC's were being readied for launch.

Murphy called up the navigation programs and keyed in the parameters. *Granuaile* didn't like his suggestions. "Unsafe entry into hyperspace. Not advised."

"Override," Murphy responded. He gave his code. "I'd rather rip apart on the lip than get fried by a nuke." He left *Granuaile* to make the calculations on her own, keyed comm. "We're going to have to bounce in early, folks. Might be an ugly transition. I suggest you folks choose your cabins quick." He cut off comm. He didn't feel like conversation at the moment.

The display alerted him to incoming comm from *Harris*. He skimmed it to get the gist: charges of forgery of a Plenipotentiary and kidnapping Fleet officers. Match trajectories or risk fire, that sort of thing.

Their comm and coding folks were either bluffing, or they were better than he thought. He'd estimated that he would have at least two hours before they found the electronic smudges on the forged electronic signatures.

Murphy pushed the power plant output to the highest level, hoped that the engineering bots could handle any problems. He'd rather have been on the engineering deck for this, but the panels here were more versatile. He needed to be ready to do anything –

right down to firing off one of the nukes that Zhaohui hadn't really signed for him to have.

He heard muffled thumping from the rear of the con. The marine was shouting; distance, steel, and insulation left it muffled.

August 16, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity of L 1305-10 (Urwah)

Urwah looked below at Avinashini. "He's not answering."

"I can feel the safety fields," Avi said. "And I can hear the power plants through the bulkhead. We're pushing hard. That means we're being pursued. *Harris* will get us back."

"I doubt it." Urk pounded the hatch again, finally quit. All that he was achieving was a sore hand. O'Meath didn't care. He was the same damned, smug, self-righteous Jin Jun he'd been before. "We'd better do as he says."

"We should try to call *Harris*."

"How? And have them do what? Put the marines in boats to match, lock and bore? Take O'Meath into the brig?"

"Why not?"

"For starters, he'll shoot back. The Jin Jun have nukes, you know. I'd be shocked if he didn't have some on board." Urwah came down the gangway, put his hands on her shoulders. "Commander, there's something wrong on *Harris*. You know it. Dumas and some others knew that we weren't chasing down *Ibn*. No way they didn't."

"We don't have proof of that. Apart from a *spoon*."

He let the sarcasm bounce off. He knew from her look that she knew better.

She broke free of his grip on her shoulders. "Lieutenant, we're not cooperating with O'Meath. For all you know, he's trying to hide whatever's going on here. How do you know that the Jin Jun didn't get their hands on another ship?"

"Fleet bean counters wouldn't have let that happen. Commander, that ship I was on was *Vandal*. We both know it. It was

in mothballs somewhere. Someone *knew* where it was, and someone *let* it get taken. Someone had to be in Fleet to do that.” He cleared his throat, hoarse from yelling at O’Meath. “Someone in your mother’s command, most likely.”

Avi went rigid. For a moment, he thought she would hit him. He probably deserved it. He held himself still.

Avinashini seemed to relax with intentional effort. “Yes,” she said. “Most likely someone sympathetic to the Humanitas ‘faith.’ I dislike facing that.”

“With due respect, Commander,” Urwah said gently, “You’re going to have to decide what you stand for. Who you stand for.”

“O’Meath is not my first choice.”

“No, he’s not. Not for me, either. But I’m sure of one thing about him. He’s loyal.”

“To whom?”

Urwah was prepared to answer, “The Emperor,” but did not. The memory of an alien knife and a grassy plain kept him honest. “To some code of honor, at least. Yi Tan’s mixed up in there somewhere.”

He did not like the doubts that nibbled at the edge.

August 20, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Fahnisht)

Fahnisht lay on his pallet. At some point in his delirium, he had stripped off his clothes. Sweat still beaded around the base of his mainhorn, slid in rivulets along his skull. He had already moved as far away from the cooking fire as he could.

His young ones had been moaning when he was last awake. He did not hear them now. He tried to push himself up on an elbow to look, could not. He fell back. “Klysira.” His voice was weak, almost nonexistent.

This was no way for the Clanlord to die. He needed to stand. He needed to take his sword, take blood, give blood back. If he must die, another warrior should take Fahnisht’s blood, take the

Clan. Where was Kameef? Where even was Pelest?

The Clanlord managed to roll himself up to a sitting position. He saw both Klysira and his youngest consort huddled with the young, across the tent. The fire was almost out, he saw now, untended.

Untended.

The Clan could not go on if this was the path. Others would come in, raid the towns, steal away all that Fahnisht and his predecessors had built. The circles would break open, then dissolve away.

Fahnisht dragged himself over to the women and young. His young consort was closest. He would have given her to Kameef, fathered Kameef's young himself as a great honor, had only Kameef agreed. Instead, she was cold. She was no longer of the world.

If Kameef had taken her, would he have taken her with him when he last left to follow his human Clanlord's orders? Would she be alive?

The young, three, were also cold, stiff. He felt the pain he'd known when he sent Wesht to Lyrt. He found no shame in the weakness, this first time. His young were no longer of the plains.

Finally, he reached Klysira, beyond the children. Her body was warmer than the others, but there was no breath, no beating of the hearts. She had left more recently, but she had left.

No one remained to keep his fires burning.

The sound that forced its way out should have been rage. It should have been a call to battle, a challenge of whatever opposing Clan had taken all from him. It would have been, if there had been swords and blood.

This was only pain. He could issue only the whimper of a child.

Fahnisht allowed his eyes to close. There would be no proper Fire to mark his passing.

September 10, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity of L 1159-16 (Murphy)

The protein dispenser pushed out the usual vitamin-fortified, high-fiber recycled glop. Murphy scowled, but took the bowl to the table.

Avinashini was already seated on the other side. She was taking her own meal, a similar glop. By the smell wafting over the table, she had discovered the curries and spices in the flavoring racks. She glared at him over the table, seemed ready to take her bowl and leave.

“I won’t tell anyone you sat within two meters of me,” Murphy promised. “You can’t stay in your cabin all the time.”

“I choose my companions more carefully than you, I am quite sure. She pushed her chair back to stand.

“Buddha’s balls, you’re a pain in the ass,” he muttered.

Murphy’s handheld chirped. He keyed it, watched the data stream over his neural uplink, the back of his eye itching. “There’s a messenger incoming.” Murphy checked his scans. “Jin Jun signals. Open Imperial datastream.” He furrowed his brow. Tapping the screen, he transferred the data to the table display.

“It’s a disaster code,” Avinashini commented. She was suddenly all business, setting down her bowl. “Civilian.”

Murphy pushed his plate into the table’s center and keyed at the inset display-board. “O’Meath, Cuchulain,” he spoke to the computer.

“Lead Jin Jun recognized,” the system responded. “Playing message, decrypting files.”

Chengen’s face appeared in the table display. He looked old, wrinkled, worn away. “This is a general distress call to all Jin Jun and Imperial Fleet units. Also all civilian vessels. Relay is mandatory by Imperial statute. Data files are attached, and must be transferred. Imperial Codes 28, section 2034.

“Shānhé-Wòtu is experiencing a Horn-specific pandemic. Loss of life is widespread. Death has been rapid. Humans are not affected. For Town folk, we are approaching a ninety percent

death rate or more. Nomadic Horns are faring slightly better so far, but the pandemic isn't over. Cetian extinction is possible.

"Get help here. We need the people who have been studying Horn biology. We need medical staff – even Fleet medical staff, ready to do what they can. We need this *now*."

"And that bastard O'Meath. If he's not too busy screwing his way out of trouble"

The transmission froze, pixilated. The display went dark. "Unexpected termination of transmission," the computer noted quietly.

A new signal flashed in the display. "EM radiation burst in multiple frequency ranges detected on survey package two. Standard analysis suggests fusion explosion."

Murphy sat back. "Christ."

Commander Avinashini looked at him, a question on her face. Was she clueless, or simply hiding realization? "What has happened?"

"Just who the hell out here has nukes to lob at a messenger?" Murphy took his handheld, and started for the con. He stopped, turned. "Come on, hot pilot, I could use you in the con."

Avinashini started to stand, then sat again. "I can monitor from here," she replied.

"Get your ass on my bridge. Now. You've hid in your cabin a month, no matter what I've said or done. Except when I was elsewhere, and you used the exercise gear. You're on my ship, you work when I tell you to." He caught himself, lowered his tone, keyed his handheld. "*Granuaile*, upgrade passenger Avinashini to accessory crew. Hell, upgrade Grunon, too. Page him to con."

Murphy turned and went to the central gangway, ignoring *Granuaile*'s insistent queries to give minimal access levels to his two passengers via proper protocols.

Chapter 14

September 10, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity of L 1159-16 (Avinashini)

Avi wanted to shake her head free of the cotton-wool daze that muffled her thoughts. She refused to make the gesture, as she had learned.

The Jin Jun's rhetorical question – just who might be here to 'lob nukes' – had only one good answer. Some well-equipped Fleet unit had committed main ordnance to a target. She used the sterilized terminology to insulate her from the likely pain of a second possible Fleet betrayal. There was no other possible supposition. By the timing, and location, it was most likely *Cartwright*. *Cartwright* had fired off restricted ordnance – a nuclear weapon, she faced – to squelch news of a pandemic affecting a possibly intelligent species that was protected by Imperial decree.

O'Meath's idea that renegades had taken hold of active Fleet elements was no longer possible to disbelieve. She would prefer that it was someone else, perhaps the skullbones themselves. That still led back to Fleet. She was forced to accept that Fleet was supporting whoever was out here, attacking Imperial shipping.

A few Fleet elements clearly had taken distrust and human-

centered ethics too far. Fortunately, they were the exceptions, not the rule. Fleet remained loyal to its Emperor and Parliament. No other conclusion was reasonable

She was the third generation of her family in Fleet. Her mother was an admiral, had commanded on the zhīzhū border. Her grandfather had commanded one of the first warships berthed at Kentaurus Station. Fleet remained loyal. No other conclusion was acceptable.

She came to the narrow gangway to the con, gripped the rail. She looked up at the now-open hatch. O'Meath was waiting for her up there, ordering her to turn on Fleet. He was ordering her to put more than a decade of training and loyalty behind her.

She tightened her grip on the rail. The Jin Jun was ordering her to serve Emperor Yi Tan. Those in Fleet who would do anything else were not entitled to her loyalty.

She started up the steps just as she heard Urwah come out of his cabin. As she went up, she saw the tall, handsome officer, pulling on a shipsuit and forcing himself to alertness. He rushed her up the gangway, through the hatch, and into the rear of the con.

O'Meath was at the front of the domed cabin, sitting at a console. He turned to speak. "A Fleet unit just jumped out. Not running its transponder, but it's probably *Kristen*."

"*Cartwright*," Avi corrected. "*Kristen*'s at the Trianguli end of the reach." She reached the forward consoles. "What station?"

"Take port," Murphy said, pointing. "I'm diverting to Tau Ceti as soon as I launch a messenger of my own."

"Will we be allowed to send mail?" Avi asked. She went to the seat, buckled herself in out of habit.

O'Meath hesitated only a moment. "Record what you'd like to send. It'll probably get held and analyzed to death when Zhao-hui gets her hands on it, though."

"Do you suspect me, O'Meath?"

The pause ran too long. "Should I?" he asked.

She refrained from showing him any hint of the anger his question raised in her. "I am loyal to the Emperor first, O'Meath.

I am part of no sedition.” She tilted her head away. “But you’ll let the First Jin Jun do your dirty work, anyway.”

“Do you think Fleet brass would do any different if it were Jin Jun taking out Fleet messengers?”

Urwah came up behind them both, braced and leaned over O’Meath’s seat. “Damned pygmy,” he growled down at O’Meath. “You act like Jin Jun are the only ones who understand an oath. I should slit your throat now. Ask *me* that question and I *will*.” Avi noticed his fingers digging into the chair back, his white knuckles.

O’Meath shrugged. “No time to wrestle. Both of you, record your messages. Avinashini, you have helm training – you run the jump calculations when you’re done.”

“Aye,” she said, only half-grudgingly. *Granuaile*’s high-end systems would be interesting to work with, if nothing else. This, though, was what it took to get such systems into a Fleet officer’s reach.

She turned her attention to her message. Rather than incur any deeper suspicion, she addressed it to the command structure. “Admiral Tsu: I have been quite illegally detained by an arrogant Jin Jun, who has acted on a falsified ‘Writ of Plenipotentiary.’ As you might expect, it is the Jin Jun O’Meath. I am currently aboard Jin Jun Courier *Granuaile*. I request that you formally protest this to the highest levels.”

She paused, carefully considering her next words. “At the same time, it appears that the Jin Jun O’Meath has uncovered involvement of some Fleet officers and crew in illegal acts, most recently the apparent destruction of a Jin Jun messenger torpedo. This presents a substantial concern, and must be investigated. I remain loyal to the Emperor and Parliament foremost, as is my sworn duty.” She keyed in her electronic signature and finalized the message.

She looked back to O’Meath, who was busy keying in information and murmuring voice commands to *Granuaile*’s computers. Urwah had stepped back to dictate quietly into his own handheld.

She began calculating the jump to Tau Ceti. Her entry and

exit would likely be more comfortable than O'Meath's had been. There was that consolation, if nothing else. It was as if he left piloting entirely to the computer.

September 21, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Avinashini)

Granuaile lurched and bounced. Avi cinched her bunkstraps tighter. "O'Meath, stop fighting the computer."

Urwah was less forgiving. "I could fly this rock better than you! Hand it to Avi! Why the hell did they let you have a ship at all?"

"I flunked out of Fleet, remember?"

O'Meath had a flippant answer to every comment. His tone lacked the insouciance to which she had become accustomed.

He should learn to hold his tongue and pay closer attention to his duties.

The ship banked and corkscrewed. Avi did her best to simply enjoy the rough piloting.

The flight eventually smoothed out. Avi felt the ship angling in for its landing zone, wondering where it would be. She had looked at the map of Shānhé-Wòtu. Smallish continents dotted the seas. The mountains on the most populated continent were not like those of Asia. They were more like the Appalachians of North America – older, worn down, more green.

That was where the Jin Jun had settled their sole manned base. They thought it would limit contact. Had they considered the possibility that they were trampling on a holy High Place? Had they asked the Cetians before they chose their spy base?

Granuaile finally slowed, hovered, settled.

"We're down," O'Meath reported, unnecessarily. "We're at the observation camp. You two are welcome to get some air while we're down. I don't know how long we're going to stay."

"You're not afraid we might hijack her?"

"You're only auxiliary crew," O'Meath replied. "You're not

going anywhere without a Jin Jun code and permission.” He tapped at the console ahead of him. She heard the hum of the main power plant diminish.

September 21, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Murphy)

Chengen looked old. He was no longer big, bluff, self-important. He sat alone in the dome, head bowed, over a cup of tea brewed from a local leaf. “I’ve got Schwartz out there doing what he can, O’Meath. We’ve used up the med kits. Schwartz is trying to find something to help, but he can’t.

“Some of the Horns recover, but not many. Some lucky immunity, or a hardier system. I don’t know what.” He glanced at O’Meath eyes, looked away. “You think they’re more to you because you’ve lived with them, but you’re wrong.”

“I know that this is your life, Chengen.” Murphy leaned forward. “Chengen, someone in Fleet blew out your torpedo with a nuke before we got most of the data files.”

Chengen looked up again, his eyes hollow. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

Murphy shook his head. “It’s done. What I got, I sent on in another torpedo. It might make it through. Pre-programmed by your wife. Maybe she has a safe destination for it. We might start getting some help here, but I don’t know how quick it will be.”

“Bastards. You have to get out there and find out who did this.”

Murphy lost his breath. “What?”

“Find who did this. Someone *did* this, O’Meath. We’re sure of that. It was in the files we sent.”

“I told you, I didn’t get them.”

Chengen cursed in Chinese. “O’Meath, long-range caught an old Fleet corvette skulking around here. It came and went at least twice. The one Fleet claims was *Ibn*. Skullbones, they kept say-

ing.”

“Or another one like it,” Murphy noted. “That’s not good.”

“No. We didn’t get much on it, not enough. Our damned sensors are pointed *down* most of the time. And Zhaohui called back most of the station in March. Schwartz and I have been on our own since then.” He stood, walked to the window, speaking without turning his head. “The disease – you know which clan it started in?”

A cold tingle nicked the bottom of O’Meath’s spine. “No.”

Chengen nodded, his back still fully turned away. “Fahnisht. A big chunk of rock broke up and hit on his plains. He and his people went to look at it. The disease came out of his clan, for one. They –”

“Son of a *bitch*.”

“It moved fast. Other meteors, too, other clans. Lots of Horns are dead. Hornless, too – the towns didn’t fare any better.

“Fahnisht used the comm you left with him. First time since those Humanitas settlers were located. Schwartz pushed the epidemiology, best he could. The computers agree with him. It was those rocks.”

Murphy’s throat was dry. “And it tracked back to the corvette sightings.”

“They’re evil, O’Meath.”

“You’re sure of this?”

“Schwartz is. I’m a language expert, remember? But the computers ran it all. It fits.”

Murphy stood, walked over to the window. He stood next to Chengen. “Biological warfare. Has to be. And they’re trying to hide it. ‘Asteroid strike.’ Christ. Upload all of it to *Granuaile*. I’m going to need it for the House of Knights.”

“There’s no damned reason for it, O’Meath! There are other systems out there, good worlds.”

“Not as many as we’d like. It takes a lot to make a marginal into good world, and Shānhé-Wòtu – well, it beats almost anything else we’ve found. Delta Trianguli’s a long way out. Quayle and Humanitas and all the others – they don’t see why we should leave this world to the Horns.”

“Genocide?”

“Genocide. Pure and simple.”

“Maybe we should let the zhīzhū have us for lunch and call it quits.”

“Maybe.” Murphy paused. “Fahnisht – you said he contacted you?”

“Yes. He’s alive. He’s one of the tough ones. Something about the immune system.”

Murphy felt a previously un-noted knot in his stomach release.

“I’ll have to go see him.” Murphy stood silent for a long time. Did Chengen need to know? Did anyone?

The core of the Imperial family knew. A very few of the Jin Jun knew, sworn to utter secrecy. Zhaohui accepted it as mere history. Young Yi Tan considered it ancestral shame, as if there was anything he could do to erase the stupidity that had saved Earth from other kinds of stupidity. Yi Tan had come to Murphy after he learned, ready to atone in the most foolish way. Murphy had spent a long night watching over the boy, protecting the boy from himself.

Murphy and some of the other Jin Jun knew. They had to know, as part of their training. Only Zhaohui herself had a list of those who knew. It was one of the only computer files Murphy had never been able to hack. She’d secured it beyond his best abilities. Anything else he had, she’d let him find.

Someone in the Manifest Destiny movement might well know that a few centuries’ worth of wild-eyed, discredited conspiracy theorists had actually been closer to truth than had ever been admitted. If they could get their hands on the hard data, long since scrubbed out of the computer networks and preserved only in a deep-buried vault, they could use it as propaganda to justify what they had tried to do here.

If it was good enough for the First Empress, why not for all humanity?

Fools like that would never understand the answer. What the first Empress had done saved humanity from extinction. That, at least, was the view expressed when it was discussed at all. What

these new lunatics had tried to do was murder another whole species, one that was nowhere near its own “two-earth crisis.”

Genocide without the slightest excuse.

Murphy let himself breathe. Webs within webs were the politicians’ specialty. Zhaohui could trace them and help Yi Tan with that. They would figure out how to angle the fan-blades so the shit would spin back at Quayle.

Right now, he had to see what he could do for his own. “I’m going to see Fahnisht. You should come.”

“I’ve been staying here to coordinate what I can, and to put data together. Your ship’s computers would help.”

“I’ll set up the links. I’ve disabled flight control, though – Admiral Sunitha’s daughter’s a crack pilot.”

“You don’t trust her. Good.”

Murphy shrugged. “She’s Commander Avinashini’s daughter. She’s unhappy that I kidnapped her at all. And now there’s no one to trust.”

“You don’t actually sound convinced that she’s dangerous.”

“She – hell, no, I’m not convinced she’s part of this.”

“My wife will have your head if you’re not cautious.”

“Right. Which is stupid – Zhaohui *knows* I’m not cautious.”

Chengen forced a grim smile. “Zhaohui’s not wrong to distrust the woman on the mother’s account.” He managed an amused smile. “And she doesn’t trust *you* around other women.”

“*Granuaile*’s locked to me,” Murphy replied. “Main power won’t start unless *I* tell it to. Hard to get to orbit without main power. As for Zhaohui’s jealous little heart – well, you know how little right she has.”

“No one better. But she’d be right to distrust this one. Take her with you.”

“What, save you the trouble?”

“Yes.” Chengen looked down into O’Meath’s face. “You didn’t doubt your gut ten years ago, when you should have. Foolish boy with hormones in place of brains. If the daughter’s some kind of trouble, maybe a taste of the Horns that are left would do her good. And you’re better equipped to handle a spy than me.” his eyes flicked to the ornate hilt.

“Fair enough. I’ll have to leave Grunon behind, then.”

“I can handle a grunt. I did my years in the Family Guard. So long as he doesn’t have heavy weapons.”

“I’ll make sure they’re all locked up.”

Chengen nodded. “I’ll ask him about Jifka. It’ll be a distraction from – from all this. I’ll compare his version to the Lay that’s been going around the fires.”

“How does he do with the bards?” Murphy asked.

Chengen breathed deep, adjusted his jaw. He sang in the heroic mode of the Horn dialect. “The massive dark warrior / Horn ingrown and hidden / Wrested down the beast / And came a-square / With Lanna’s best. / Swords matched / They began the blood-dance.” He stopped, cleared his throat. “It goes on like that for about ten minutes.”

“Not bad. How did I do with the bards?”

“In general, or that battle?”

“That battle.”

Chengen’s delivery was deadpan. “Two minutes, thirty-eight seconds.”

“That much?”

Chengen smiled with the delight of driving a knife home. “The bard was a stutterer.”

Murphy laughed. The laughter died down, though, as he considered his clan dying away.

September 22, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV) (Murphy)

Murphy guided the gravver down the cargo ramp, set it down on a flat patch of wind-bare stone. The Commander stood a hundred meters away, her back to O’Meath, looking down into the valley. She had managed to find clothing that fit in Chengen’s stores. Less form-fitting than a standard shipsuit, it suited her as well.

Whatever else Avinashini might be, she was an fine example

of the artistry of DNA.

He keyed comm. “Avinashini, let’s go.”

Avinashini turned, saw him in the grav frame. She took a last look over the valley, then started back toward *Granuaile*. Coming to the side, she checked that her own gear was stowed. She took her seat.

Murphy brought the gravver to a hover, then pushed the joystick forward. The gravver tilted slightly and moved ahead, gaining altitude as it went.

He would have preferred to walk, or even use the wheeled rover some planner had thought would make sense to carry along in a multi-purpose ship. Urgency propelled him, though. He needed to get to Clan Fahnisht.

They were gathered at the Standing Stones, Chengen had said. The annual trek had had been halted by the pandemic. The pyres had burned daily, until the stocks of wood gathered from the nearby forest had been depleted. The spirits of both adults and children had been released into the smoke, returned to the envelope of the known world.

Chengen knew that Fahnisht had survived, but little of any other individual Horns, much less any of the Hornless. Chengen had rarely chosen to leave the dome for fieldwork. Once, he had hoped, planned to do so. His plans had been to do so when the House of Knights would permit, though – permission which would have been denied for another ten or twenty years, had Murphy not taken it on himself.

Chengen would not have survived contact with the Horns, especially not a first contact. Despite his bravado, he would not have been ready to kill a Horn to establish ‘face.’

Had Murphy done him a favor or a disservice by usurping the role?

That didn’t matter now, if it ever had. What mattered now was Fahnisht, Klysira, Pelest, the other Tentlords and warriors with whom he had ridden over the years.

Murphy pushed up the gravver’s speed.

September 22, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Avinashini)

Avi looked ahead through the windscreen of the small grav-ver. O'Meath was a few meters up, flying what he seemed to believe was a ground-hugging path. She said nothing about it, instead looking at this world.

It was everything ever said about it: younger, cleaner than Earth. Primitive industry had not yet dumped appreciable poisonous waste into the soil, water, and air, especially of poorer, older homes of man. They had nothing more advanced than individual smiths producing tools and weapons. No China had joined the race to Two-Earth affluence, spilling its industrial messes into its neighbor's territory. India's masses had not come to expect the unrealistic affluence of the West. There was no need, as yet, to invent technologies to mine the landfills and re-bind the waste into something useful.

There was no *need* here for a planet-saving stroke of Devi, such as the one that had almost doomed humanity. There was no need for Kali to be sent to devour a mass of Cetians, force it to reform its ways, cut away the wasters, teach the nations and peoples to live again. This world did not need rebirth, so it had not needed death. The pandemic facing the Cetians would not help them, as the Pandemics had once by some fortune saved humanity from itself.

Shānhé-Wòtu was, simple, fresh and invigorating, with a taste in the air that spoke to her of the long-ago that must have been Earth.

Why, then, had there been a devastating illness such as this Chengen described?

Could men like Quayle somehow have some piece of truth? Did the gods *want* humans to take the best worlds, regardless of who might first have had them? That seemed extreme, even to Avi. The Admiral, though, seemed willing to embrace such extremist views.

Avi could not do so.

She refocused on a plume of smoke that became visible in

the distance. It was a few degrees to the starboard of their course. O'Meath adjusted the controls, pointed the gravver for the smoke. As they grew closer, it became an upward stream, a column set against the deep blue. The scent of the air changed. Hints of charnel smoke wafted up through the drafts.

"They burn their dead here," O'Meath commented, breaking the barrier of silence. "Like Hindus."

"I know," Avi replied, thinking over the material she had studied during the days in hyperspace. "Your cultural notes are extensive."

"Good reading."

"Necessary reading," Avi corrected him. "Your prose is quite dull."

O'Meath smiled. "First Chengen, now you. Everyone's a comic."

Avi ignored his attempt to lighten her truthful comment. "Will we be going directly to Clan Fahnisht?"

"Schwartz, the exobiologist, is at the nearest impact crater. I want to talk with him first."

"You could use the comm."

"Face to face. We have time."

Avi looked ahead for the tell-tale ring of displaced earth. She saw it in the distance. O'Meath slowed the gravver and began to descend.

September 22, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Murphy)

Murphy set the gravver down on the blackened soil. Puffs of fine black soot erupted from the edges of the pads, drifting up in the breeze before dissipating. The scent was pungent, welcoming, reminiscent of spring fires in the fields of Ireland.

Despite the scent of burnt grass, shoots of green were already poking upward. The plains were resilient, perhaps more so than those on Earth. The tall grasses would be full-height before the

end of the warm season.

Schwartz could be seen in the distance, near the center of the meters-deep bowl. He had either not heard the low hum of the gravver, or been too occupied as he dug for something with his hands. Murphy shrugged out of the harness. "Come on, Avinashini," he said. "We're walking from here."

She looked reluctant, perhaps scowled in her unreadable way. Murphy stepped down from the platform and walked over the crater's ridge. He glanced back to be sure that the Fleet officer was following him.

They walked toward Schwartz. He was crouched over a hole pounded through the glassy surface, alternately digging and making recordings with the wand of the sensor pack hitched to his belt. He was taking the great care of an archeologist preserving a dig, or a peace officer documenting a crime scene.

They came to him. Schwartz looked over his shoulder as he heard them. "I'll be with you in a minute," he said. He finished a recording, then picked up his digging tool – a soup spoon, no doubt pulled from the observation-base kitchen. Schwartz scooped around something, finally fully exposing it.

It glinted in the sun: glass. Formed glass, by the look of it. It was hollow, a tube. It looked like it had been about five centimeters in diameter. Its uneven edges might have been jagged, broken at some point, but had been melted smooth by intense heat. A good part of it remained buried in the soil.

Murphy crouched down beside Schwartz as the latter aimed the wand again. "There are a lot of glass remnants," Schwartz said as he recorded all angles. "This isn't the usual stuff we'd expect from the rock itself, or sand in the soil. This stuff was formed."

"I can see that," Murphy said. "What else can you tell?"

"I could use a full lab, but I don't think it was formed here." Schwartz waved the sensor wand. "I've been running it at all bands. The bounce is giving me impurities that aren't common here. Various metals and such. There's a carbon lattice-structure for strength, nano-technology."

Murphy glanced at the wand. "X-Ray mode? Do I need to

cover my crotch?"

"It's low-level." Schwartz was clearly irritated. "I thought you'd be taking this seriously."

"You think I'm not?" Murphy reached out toward the tube. "Can I get this now?"

Schwartz put his spoon into the soil. "Let me make sure I've freed it." He scooped around the tube with the spoon.

Murphy stood, addressed Avinashini. "The Horns around here don't use nano-technology in the glass they make. They sure as hell aren't making oversized test-tubes."

"No one from Fleet did this."

"You don't like the idea much, but someone sure as hell did this. Balls, we already knew that. This is just icing on the cake."

Avinashini crossed her arms. "Fleet serves. That's all."

"Damned poor service."

"Individuals may break their oath, but *Fleet* serves." The stress in her voice was obvious. She was still holding tightly, even desperately to her belief in Fleet.

"A whole lot of individuals," O'Meath commented.

Schwartz finished clearing the tube. He took careful hold and gently rocked it from side to side, freeing the rounded end from the soil. "Here it is." He held it up to O'Meath. "There's residue baked on. I need to get this back to the base to see what it works out to be."

Murphy took it, held it so Avinashini could see. "It'll work out to be the virus that killed most of the Horns." He addressed Schwartz. "I can get you back to the dome in no time. Take the jump-seat."

"I'd like to finish off out here first," Schwartz responded. He gestured toward the far rim of the crater. "I've got some other readings that are probably glass, even some metal. There may be more evidence that this was ..." He stopped, looked at Avinashini.

"Fleet," Murphy finished for him. "She doesn't like believing it, but Fleet's Buddha-damned well in this somewhere. This took some work and coordination. Technology that doesn't exist down here."

Schwartz nodded. "It could be another sentient species," Schwartz replied. "You're quick letting the zhīzhū off the hook."

Murphy shook his head. "You're kidding, right? Even the hero of the Groombridge rout won't tell you that the zhīzhū did this. Right?" He pointed the question at her.

"*That* Avinashini," Schwartz noted to himself.

Avinashini's dark eyes burned at Murphy with anger. "Do not place this on me."

"You know the answer. I'd like to hear it."

Schwartz looked perplexed. "Yes, so would I, if you know, because I think O'Meath makes damned big leaps of faith. He doesn't stop to analyze everything."

Commander Avinashini's voice was edge with anger. "I must concur. I am *that* Avinashini, and I know them.. The zhīzhū would not have attacked in this way. The zhīzhū *taste* what they kill, whenever they can. They sift through wreckage in space to find a meal." She had watched for them. "They don't use energy weapons, so far as I have seen, even in ship-to-ship battle. They don't like their meat cooked." She repressed a shudder. "And they have never used any kind of gas or biological against any of our marines on the ground."

Schwartz looked thoughtful. "That puts them at more risk. Propelled mass – that has range limitations, at least on the ground."

"You mean 'bullets,' right?" Murphy shook his head at the evasion. "Killing is pretty personal for the zhīzhū. Their motto is 'Know your enemy's tasty innards.'"

Commander Avinashini's expression grew even less pleasant. "You're not amusing, O'Meath."

Murphy shrugged. "Neither are you." He turned his attention back to Schwartz. "I'm going on to Clan Fahnisht. I'll be back in three to six hours, depending on how much fat's on the calf. Be ready. And be looking for human origins. You'll find them."

Human origins. A vault deep in the Emperor's residence came to mind. The earliest records of the Zhang Dynasty rise in the face of the Pandemics were not open to the public.

Murphy motioned toward the gravver. "Come on, Commander. Let's go. Unless you'd rather dig in the dirt with Schwartz." He trudged back to the rim of the crater, Avinashini trailing behind.

Murphy was about to take the pilot seat, stopped. He turned back to Avinashini. "Fleet teach you how to fly anything other than fighters?"

Her annoyance was palpable. "Of course. Unless, of course," she added with a gleam of sarcasm, "Jin Jun control systems are too automated for real pilots."

A tone of sarcasm in her voice. Murphy liked that. "Take the first seat. The map's the most recent from the satellites. The Fire Stone is marked."

Avinashini took the first seat, brought power up. Murphy took his own seat. As he clicked in the harness, he was pushed down by the jack-rabbit lift. She stayed close to the ground, landing pads skimming centimeters above the grasses. She followed the rolling contours effortlessly, hopping up for every hill-ock, then skimming back down.

More than once, Murphy feared a snag or collision. Several curses freed themselves from his lips. Soon, he saw the camp in the distance. Just beyond, the Clan's Fire Stone could be seen. It was recently blackened with the residue of many souls released by the pyre. Could he smell it at this distance, or was it just morbid imagination?

Did it matter? "Bastards," he muttered.

Avinashini landed the gravver just outside Clan Fahnisht's camp. The sun should have gleamed off the yurts. Warriors should have been sharpening swords, sparring, preparing for hunts. Women should have been smoking meats for the next trek. Children should have been playing.

The yurts looked dirty, ragged. The few male Horns he could see were thin, despondent. The female Horns were no less so. Only one child could be seen, and he was randomly digging for roots near the edge of the grasslands. He saw few he recognized.

This was no longer the Clan that had dared him to prove his

hidden Horn.

A few of the women must have seen the gravver land. They disappeared among the yurts, going toward the central tent. They would be seeking Fahnisht.

If he were still alive. With a cold chill, Murphy reminded himself that Chengen's news could be old.

Avinashini shut down the gravver, stepped off the platform to the ground. Murphy hopped down, pulled out his He keyed into *Granuaile's* computer. "The translation matrix is on line. You'll be given a pretty good translation of anything said by a Horn. It won't be two-way."

Avinashini nodded, apparently focused on studying the surroundings.

Murphy fingered the hilt of his sword to remind him of place, of his role. Here, he was loyal vassal in a world simple enough to allow him to be only that. He walked toward the camp. As he approached, Fahnisht appeared from the jumble of yurts.

Like the others, the Clanlord was gaunt. He didn't look bent or beaten, but was not the warrior-king he had been only a year before. Murphy went forward, made the gesture of his submission to authority. "*My Clanlord*," he said, simply.

"*Well returned*," Fahnisht replied. "*Clan Fahnisht is gathered*."

"Yes," Murphy replied. What else was there to say? There should have been far more yurts, far more beasts.

"*All of the Clans are diminished*," Fahnisht said. "*Not all rocks from the sky carry wealth*." He looked behind Murphy at Avinashini. "*This one – it is female, like Zay-o Hhouui?*"

"*She is*," Murphy replied. He motioned for the pilot to come forward. "*This is Avinashini. She is – she is from a different clan of humans*."

Fahnisht signed agreement. "*Her color is more pleasing. More like the magnificent Oorh-whaah. Is she of his Clan?*"

"*She is of a clan with blood-debt ties*," Murphy responded. "*She is here at my request*."

"*Does she owe you blood-debt?*"

"No," Murphy replied honestly. "*If anything, she will seek*

my blood."

"*I see.*" Fahnisht remained grave. "*You brought her, Kameef. You I will trust. Let us go to my tent and speak.*" He looked around. "*Pelest! We will need food and drink.*" He turned and started walking back.

Murphy looked, saw Pelest. Standing beside a yurt, he, too, was thin. Whatever disease had killed had left its mark on those who survived. Murphy signed his honor to the Tentlord, still perhaps his junior in the ranking of Clan Fahnisht.

Pelest replied with the Horn version of an angry scowl, but then provided the correct gesture of respect. He turned, going toward the cooking area of the camp.

"Come on, Avinashini," Murphy said. "Hope you don't mind cooked meat."

"I am Hindu, O'Meath. I do not eat flesh of mammals."

"Well, technically, these aren't mammals," Murphy replied. "And you'll offend them if you don't eat something. They're sharing the hunt with you. Probably not much of a hunt."

He led her to the main yurt, held open the flap for her to enter. She bent over to remove her shoes, then ducked in.

Murphy followed, keeping his footgear on. The interior was dim and warm. Blankets and pillows had been set up, less artfully than Klysira had done in the past. Fahnisht's youngest daughter seemed to be trying to assist as her mother had, without her mother's experience. None of Fahnisht's consorts were present.

Fahnisht motioned for them to sit. He waited for Pelest and other young warriors to come in to serve. Pelest and three others – two of them too young to have normally allowed to try themselves to first blood – carried in the platters. The choices were more meager than past meetings.

Murphy took out a knife, cut only a small piece of meat. The Clan did not appear wealthy. He could fill up on rations later.

He periodically glanced over at Avinashini. She seemed serene, taking breads and fruits, taking a small portion of meat. She wasted no time gulping the meat down, then turning to the fruit and bread.

Fahnisht indicated Commander Avinashini's feet. "*Why did Nah-shin-hee remove her shoes?*"

"*She does you honor, in the ways of her clan,*" Murphy explained. "*In her clan, one does not bring the soil of one's shoes into the home.*"

"*Soil is everywhere. Sweeping removes it.*"

"*Many clans, many customs,*" Murphy responded.

Fahnisht signaled resigned acquiescence with a Horn gesture.

Chapter 15

July 19, 2377 (18 Years Ago) – Earth (Sol III) (Avinashini)

The line stretched meters and meters out the door of the tent. The people were thin, clearly poor, clearly underprivileged. It was difficult here, despite Imperial policy. Distribution of food and other necessities was still unfair, still regional.

Twice a year, the Parent left the comfort of Bangalore to visit still-impoorished zones. Like many other administrators, he came to support the doctors, nurses and educators who came to makeshift hospitals and schools. He left his regular work administering Imperial programs and regulations, to humbly erect tents, run errands, dish out meals.

Despite handhelds and comm, northern India was little different than it had been before British colonialism, before computers, before space travel. With squalor came ignorance, despite the world-wide networks. Caste was more firmly observed. Women and children remained chattels. Men struggled to feed their families themselves, farming, working, fighting.

This year, he had decided that Avinashini should join him and see these other realities. The Admiral had disagreed with taking her from school. In one of his rare moments of intransigence, he made the arrangements against her wishes. He had one of his rarer moments of winning an argument with the Admiral, if

only by default. The Admiral had been sent back to Wolf 359 on short notice to rectify serious supply issues. Her father had decided.

Ramachandra had balked at the journey. The Parent had not insisted. Instead, her distant cousin was boarded with another family for the month. Avi had her father as much to herself as she could. She had quickly become his assistant, running errands, carrying messages, handling tasks suited to her age and maturity.

She kept her eyes down as much as she could. Thin children and adults and huge staring eyes left her uncomfortable, almost ashamed. She did not know how to discuss this with her father. She left the feelings hidden below the always-calm exterior her mother demanded.

On this trip, Avi carried the box of ampoules to the doctor vaccinating the queued people against the next expected influenza epidemic. He was not Hindu – not even Indian. He was tall, thin, pasty-white, his hair reddish-blond. The Euro smiled. “Put them there,” he said, indicating with the injector he held. “You’re Sri Prem’s daughter. He’s a big help, cutting through the red tape year-around. And then he comes wherever we are.” The Euro smiled again. “You’re lucky to have him.”

Avi found herself almost mute. This man paid her father open respect and admiration. She had somehow not expected that. The Admiral overshadowed the Parent on most occasions. “Thank you,” she said, cautiously. “I have to go and help him.” She left quickly.

For the first time, she raised her eyes. She was not ashamed of the Parent.

September 22, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Avinashini)

Her stomach threatened to expel the meat, along with the in-offensive foods. She schooled herself against the physical rebel-

lion.

Fleet had exposed her to different people of different cultures. Before that, her mother's constant prodding had pushed her into contact with others. No matter how she had hated the experience, she had maintained the proper politeness. Her father, had also brought her to other places.

Like most humans, though, she had never shared a meal with a sentient non-human. She had spent her lifetime fearing the zhīzhū, fearing her own potential of being a meal. The Horns had been at best an afterthought of the gods, if that.

O'Meath, she suddenly realized, had arrogantly made himself the most privileged human of a generation. At best, a very few others had followed O'Meath. A very few others had seen what she was now seeing.

The chieftain, Fahnisht, growled something. O'Meath tilted his head back, laughed, added a hand gesture. She ignored the translation from her earpiece.

What was there to laugh about? She might as well be back in the northern India or Appalachia, helping her father in his annual struggles to overcome poverty. How much was different in this tent?

Those people had laughed, too, when they could. These beings were not ignorant by neglect and choice. These creatures were simply five or six thousand years behind humanity.

The comparison made her uncomfortable. Her ancestors had devised proper human civilization. They had not always lived it.

O'Meath's handheld beeped. "O'Meath." He listened through the neural link for a moment. His face turned red. "Son of a bitch." He stood, spoke in Horn; the translation reached her earpiece. "Lanna's men threaten one of my warriors. I will go."

Fahnisht's eyes seemed to brighten. "Blood. *We* will go."

"Time," Murphy responded. "A beast cannot get me there fast enough."

"Take your flying thing, Kameef. We will follow."

O'Meath nodded, spoke to her in English. "You can stay here. Schwartz needs help. Blades only." He started toward the tent flap, sliding through the crowd of warriors who were sud-

denly showing signs of real energy.

“I’m coming,” Avi replied. She was not sure why. She owed nothing to O’Meath, to these people, to Schwartz, but her oath to the Emperor allowed nothing else. She followed O’Meath out of the yurt and on a dead run toward the gravver.

September 22, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Urwah)

Urk stood at the window, looking out at the stunning blue of the sky. In the closing days of a pandemic that devastated his life’s mission, a senior Jin Jun wanted to compare badly translated alien poetry with human memory. He wanted to *talk*.

Jin Jun bullshit, as usual.

O’Meath was flying around, showing Avinashini the world, introducing her to the remaining Horns. Urk would have trouble telling one from the other, but had been here before, been honored by Fahnisht with a feast. For better or worse – worse – a few days here had pushed his career forward.

Chengen came in, setting a handheld down on the conference table. “I’m sorry to make you wait. “Let’s begin.”

“Horns are dying, and you want to talk poetry.”

Chengen leaned back in his chair. “Some have survived and recovered, from what we’ve seen. Enough that we’re not worried about racial extinction anymore.”

“There’s any other kind?”

“Yes. *Cultural* extinction. The whole Horn culture is on the edge. Clans lost half or more of their people. Towns, two-thirds. And that’s not as bad as we thought it would be. Luck. Or better immunity than we expected. But these are people who transfer most of their knowledge and culture orally. Some of it will be lost.”

“So you’re going to preserve it.”

Chengen sat quietly, then gave a half-smile. “I don’t look much like a Bard, and that bastard O’Meath has a better working

command of the language.” He mused quietly for a moment. “But it’s a thought.”

“Beginner’s luck. Start asking.” Urk shifted his balance. “If we’re going to waste time, let’s do it.”

For the next hour, Chengen recited and confirmed the various facts in the lays. Urk found the account more detailed than he could have expected, down to his apparently honorable conduct in serving the victory feast.

Chengen finally relented. He stood, stretched. “Apart from you, only Jin Jun have been this close to the Horns, you know. And you’re one of three humans who hold a genuine Horn sword. Murphy’s the only one with a Tentlord’s knife. I’d like to see Jifka’s sword before you leave.”

“Horn cutlery – another privilege for the nobility?” Urk hoped his sarcasm could be heard.

“A privilege with a price. We have to protect them.” Chengen cleared his throat. “Every major Euro expansion killed natives. Africa, both Americas. They enslaved and destroyed cultures. Not that all of the cultures were any nicer than the Euros – the Spanish Conquistadors and the Incas were evenly matched in moral depravity. We can’t have that again.”

“Did the Chinese dynasties do any better?” Urk crossed his arms.

Chengen shook his head. “Not at all.. Especially if you count the Communists and post-Communists with them. And some of my distant ancestors sacked a bit of Europe. *All* of humanity likes to kill off competition for territory. When we can’t kill off for farmland and hunting grounds, we’re happy to make do with religious and cultural territory.

Chengen added, his face getting red, “Don’t forget militant religions, pushing themselves out, like Christianity and Islam, with all of their ‘holy wars,’ jihads, and the like. Now ‘Humanitas’. Pantheistic, murderous *scum*.”

“A lot of good people follow that religion.” Urk felt uncomfortable defending his brother for wavering in his commitment to Modern Islam. Could he also defend Vele?

“No reasonable god creates a universe of differences just to

name one species the best.”

“You sound like O’Meath.”

“I’ll try to avoid that.” Chengen’s handheld beeped. He looked, keyed. “Come with me to the comm center.”

Urk followed. Chengen led him to a room smaller than *Granuaile*’s con, but crammed tight with displays and consoles. Chengen sat, keyed up views. “*Granuaile*’s computer is quadrupling my monitoring right now. I’m sampling from all the satellites, and at least a thousand floaters.”

An aerial display came onto a main screen. Chengen looked, keyed to lock down the location. “Clan Lanna’s on the move in Fahnisht circles. They’re fairly deep in already. This will be trouble.”

“War? With all that’s happened?”

“Why should the Horns be rational after a pandemic? We weren’t. Two major wars by 2035. We’ll never know how many minor tribal wars. War follows disaster.”

“We should warn O’Meath.”

“Good point.” Chengen tapped at the keys. “He’s getting the data now.”

“Let me talk with him.”

“He’s in the middle of discussions with Fahnisht,” Chengen responded. “And –” Chengen cursed.

Urk leaned over the console. “What?”

“Some of Lanna’s Horns are heading straight for Schwartz. The rest are going straight for Fahnisht’s Fire Stone.” Chengen looked up. “Lanna hates humans.”

“Tell O’Meath.” Urk straightened, turned, and started out the door.

“Where are *you* going?”

“There’s another gravver on *Granuaile*. I’m going to get to Schwartz.”

Chengen hesitated only a moment, then nodded. “I’ll unlock the controls for you.” He faced the board, started fumbling with the keys.

Urk went out to the ship. The cargo hatch was still closed. He keyed the panel to open the hatch.

The panel was dead, probably still locked under O'Meath's codes. Why in *hell* was the pygmy so paranoid about anyone wandering this planet?

He turned to go to the forward airlock. That one wouldn't deny access to the ship. Chengen might have the hold and gravver unlocked by then. Clambering up the short ladder, he considered the weapon locker to port.

That would certainly be locked. The pygmy would also object to the use of any weapons in there.

Did he have a say? Did it matter?

Chengen's passion for cultural protection came back to him. He resisted the temptation to try the locker, instead clambered up the central ladder. Chengen went to his cabin and retrieved Jifka's sword. He strapped the scabbard-belt around his waist as he went back to the access for the lower deck.

Chengen was already in the hold, fumbling with the gravver controls. "O'Meath didn't give me enough access," he said, frustrated. "I can't start it up."

Urk stopped. "Paranoid Jin Jun *bullshit*. What else is there?"

Chengen shook his head. "There's a ground rover, but that's locked, too."

"What about you – do you have anything? A bicycle?"

"Foot. Cultural protection." Chengen slapped the controls with realization. "There's a grav-pack. We've never used it because of the rules."

"Where? Is it charged?"

"Equipment dome," Chengen said, getting out of the gravver. "Of course it's charged. Have you ever –"

"Trained and checked every six months." Urk considered getting his battlesuit, knew that getting it on and integrating the systems would be too time-consuming. He followed the older Jin Jun out of the hold.

Chengen ran to the equipment dome, unlocking the door. Urk was right behind him. Chengen brought him to the equipment rack. The grav-pack hung neatly as it should.

Urk took the pack from its charger, slid his arms through the

straps. After he had the gear adjusted, Chengen handed him a light helmet. Urk pulled it on, tightened the chin-straps, and powered up the unit. The heads-up display came on, showing him the mapping and eye-flick controls. The unit was standard marine equipment. "Can you feed me coordinates?"

"I'll do it while you fly. Start out now, you're tight on time. No guns, right?"

"Not unless you have one to give me."

"Go. They'll see the sword you have. Some of them will remember you."

Urk nodded. He walked out of the dome, feeling the lightness of his step as the unit compensated for its own weight. Outside, he took a breath. Most of his training was fly-with-firearm; he felt uncomfortable with his hands empty.

There was no time to rethink the matter. He bent his knees, flicked his eyes to key thrust, and pushed off.

The comm light blinked. Chengen's voice came over the helmet phones. "I'm uplinking now. You should have a full course. You'll be there in about twenty-five minutes."

"Will it be fast enough?"

"I hope so."

With eye-flicks, Urk kicked up the speed to the most the gravver would supply. He tucked his arms tight against his side for the best possible aerodynamics. The wind blasted around his body, too lightly dressed. Though the shipsuit was somewhat adaptable, he would be chilled when he arrived.

Urk kept as low as he could, seeking the extra degree or two of warmth he would get from reduced altitude. The map uploaded, superimposed itself over the helmet visor. He was on a straight shot, needing only to vary his altitude as he went.

From the hilly territory, he came down to the plains. He flashed over stream-beds and well-trod paths. A herd of the horse-like beasts grazed in the distance, perhaps freed by the deaths of so many riders.

He kept on, planning. "Chengen, can you upload a visual from any of your floaters?"

"No. They saw it, shot it down. They're good with slings

and arrows.”

“But I can’t take them out with a rifle. Good rule.” He adjusted course slightly. “Can you give me the last known position?”

A map appeared in the left corner. Dots showed the relative positions of himself, Schwartz, and the Horn party.

They were coming from the west. Urk adjusted his course to pass them, perhaps a half-kilometer to the south. Tau Ceti was dropping down toward the horizon, shadows lengthening. He could use that.

He thought the chances reasonably good that these warriors had never heard of the successful tactic of attacking from the sun. Long before the gravver, in the earliest days of air warfare, some German had perfected the tactic.

Keeping one eye toward the dots, Urk eye-flicked his maneuvers to make the best possible attack. He swept by the position, tried to look. He was too far away, at too oblique an angle, to see anything. Sweeping south to begin, he flew a tight, fast circle. Urk got his feet to the sun as he pulled Jifka’s sword from its sheath. He came on the Horn party – five of them – from the rear.

They were already in the middle of the crater, hacking at what must be Schwartz.

Urk ploughed through, slashing as he went. Three of the Horns fell, blood spurting. The other two screamed, shouted, perhaps cursed in their own language. Urk keyed the gravver into another turn. He aimed straight at the Horn closest to Schwartz’s bleeding body, impaled it on the sword. Eye-flicking to key the unit into a climb, he carried the writhing Horn up a hundred-fifty meters before letting the sword tilt downward.

The Horn slid off, fell limp to the ground below.

The fifth Horn was running. With nothing simpler than berserker rage, Urk dove down, pursued, and raised the sword for a swing. As the Horn reached the rim of the crater, Urk swung. The Horn’s head flew off the neck, skittered across the ground, as the body lurched and crumpled.

Urk keyed for a landing, put the unit on standby. With the

slight hopping sensation that came with the state, he ran back to Schwartz.

The blood and gore gave the grim news. Schwartz's face was frozen in the grimace of his last pain.

Urk had never met the man. He never would.

Damned, damned killing.

Why should this race get priority over humanity? How were they *different* enough to get a better chance? Was Jibral right?

Urk fell to his knees, shaking. Why had he trusted O'Meath with that spoon in the first place?

Chengen's voice came through the helmet. "Grunon, what's going on?"

Urk stared at the dead body. Schwartz had wanted the damned Horns saved. He had been looking for ways to help their illness-battered systems.

"Grunon?"

Where the hell was O'Meath?

September 22, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV) (Avinashini)

Avi raced toward the gravver. With longer legs, she had pulled ahead of O'Meath at first. O'Meath, his shorter legs pumping faster, had worked to keep up, then drew a slight lead. She heard other feet pounding behind her, Horn warriors, running in the same general direction for their beasts.

Cetian hooves pounded toward them, over the rise. Ten, twelve of the horse like beasts swept into the encampment, cutting the two humans off. Murphy slid to a stop, drawing his sword in a fluid movement. He shouted with guttural fluidity at the warriors.

One jumped down, drew his sword, shouting back. The words had a rhythm hinting at ritual.

The Cetian Fahnisht came from behind, slower, almost laboring for breath. He, too, shouted out in the Cetian language, draw-

ing his sword. The rest of the beast-riders dismounted, their swords flashing out. Pelest and others of Fahnisht's people rushed in. Blades swished and clanged. The skirmish seemed to be tentative, testing – perhaps a show of strength before parlay? Avi did not know anything about the Horn customs of such things.

One of Fahnisht's men went down, blood streaming from deep wounds. His attackers looked, saw Avi. She was pulled from her daze, realized that she was seen as part of the clan. She reached for the sword O'Meath had insisted she wear, pulled it out. She had taken her basic training, like any in Fleet; blade weapons had not been forgotten. The touch and balance were not entirely unfamiliar. She took a stance, long forgotten, ready to defend.

The Horn lunged toward her. She parried his thrust, turned to the side. The Cetian was strong, competent with the weapon. She was long out of practice, wished she had her sidearm. She braced herself for another attack.

Through the corner of her eye, she saw O'Meath suddenly lunge at his own opponent, end his battle with a decisive thrust. The blood was as red as human blood. He wasted no time pulling his sword out, turning to engage her own attacker. He shouted and growled in the Horn language, drawing the Horn's attention. The clash was short: O'Meath attacked, berserker, forcing the Horn warrior back with swift, sure blows. The Horn fell onto its back. O'Meath refused to waste the opportunity, impaled it without hesitation for treaty. He looked up, face almost alien with rage, and found another Horn to attack. That one also fell to his powerful swing, its head sailing away from the neck. He turned again to go after still another of the warriors, robbing Fahnisht of the chance to win his own battle.

Gods. O'Meath killed with more ease than most marines.

Two last riders came over the hill, their beasts at full tilt. Fahnisht saw them, pointed them out to O'Meath. The Jin Jun rushed at them. Fahnisht rushed behind, shouting, "Lanna!" The rest was garbled, her translator off-line.

Fahnisht caught up to O'Meath as the latter's sword was up,

poised to strike at a rushing beast. The Horn chief swept his own sword high at O'Meath's. The Jin Jun lost his own grip; the sword tumbled away from his hands. The younger Horn, Pelest, dropped his own sword and confronted O'Meath, alien hands on the human shoulders. The alien growled and shouted into O'Meath's face.

September 22, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV) (Murphy)

Just as he was to strike at Lanna's mount, the sword flew out of his hands. Murphy turned in rage, saw Fahnisht. The Clanlord's words were almost lost in the rush of blood and rage. "*Lanna! We speak now!*"

Pelest rushed up, dropping his own sword. Murphy could easily best him. He always had before. The younger Horn warrior was screaming, though. "*The Clanlord's speak! Kameef!*" Pelest grabbed him by the shoulders and shook hard.

The haze of fury began to clear. Murphy caught himself up, forced understanding, his temples still pounding with the blood lust. A small finger of shame slid in to the left of his consciousness, telling him that he had lost control.

Lost control when Avinashini had been threatened. Not when the battle started.

When had he last felt such rage? When they'd defended Wesht, most likely. Before then, in years of training, he'd learned to keep it controlled.

More shouting, and the remaining swordsmen separated by two swords' lengths at most. Each of them was taut, wary, ready to slice at an enemy with any slight excuse. Murphy worked on relaxing, nodded to Palest. Palest understood the human gesture. "*The Clanlords speak.*"

September 22, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Avinashini)

With the noise and shouting diminished, the translation program came back on-line, her handheld again transmitting to her earpiece. The one she thought O'Meath called "Lanna" was swinging off his saddle, speaking. "More of the pale-worm Hornless!" he said, almost spitting. "They owe us all blood, Fahnisht. I will take it if you do not." The warrior pushed toward O'Meath, trying to get eye-to-eye.

Fahnisht raised his own blade. "His blood is mine to take, Lanna. Not yours. If it is a debt due, *I* will collect."

Lanna gestured back. The last rider, still seated on his beast, pulled a bundle from a saddlebag, handed it down. Lanna took it, unwrapped the bundle. He held the contents out to Fahnisht. Avi inhaled, exhaled.

This clearly human glassware, still imbedded in a chunk of rock, was intact. It matched the glassware they had seen at the crater. It had not broken, not opened at all. A yellowish fluid could be seen through the clear glass.

Lanna pointed at the lettering etched into the glass. "I have seen this before, Fahnisht. You have seen it, too. These are the runes of – those." He pointed at Avi, then O'Meath. "This came from one of the great rocks. Iron, from the sky, we thought. We went to it. And then – then most of us became sick. Died." His voice began to rise, though the translator did not catch the emotion. "My consorts, my bards, my priestesses – all dead. Children. Sons and daughters. Almost all of my Tentlords – dead. No blades, no honor. Just *dead*."

He snarled, seemed ready to pounce on O'Meath. "Tell your hornless Kameef to deny that *he* killed my people. *Your* people."

Fahnisht looked to O'Meath. O'Meath seemed, for once, speechless. Finally, he made a gesture. He spoke in the Cetian language, but the translator brought his words back to Avi. "Humans did this, but they were not my people. They were not my clan."

"Not your clan. And what will you do?"

Murphy looked to Fahnisht, then back to Lanna. "I will seek the debt of blood."

"Liar."

O'Meath stood straight, put his hand on the hilt of his sword. "I will seek the blood, Lanna. Or give my own. This I swear to my Clanlord, Fahnisht, on blood and sacred fire."

Lanna look appraisingly. Fahnisht stepped closer. His knife was out, glistening in the sun. He raised it to O'Meath's jaw line.

O'Meath locked eyes with Lanna. He did not flinch as the blade slid. Blood welled out of the crease, rolled down toward his chin.

Avi felt herself shaking. Her stomach growled, rebelled. She found herself dropping to her knees, her arms outstretched to support her. With powerful heaves, her stomach emptied itself onto the Cetian grasses. She stayed on all fours as her head swam with the nausea. No one came to comfort or assist.

"On blood and sacred fire, Kameef," Lanna repeated. "You believe as we do?"

"My soul can only be freed on the pyre, Lanna. No different from yours."

"There is no pyre for you if you do not seek this blood, Kameef."

"Kameef has ridden with me," Fahnisht interjected. "Do you doubt that he knows the ways? If you challenge him in this, you challenge *my* honor. Both our clans are diminished – mine would do well if I could add your Horn-ring to mine."

Avi finally managed to breath. She went more upright, resting back in a kneeling position. She looked over her shoulder. Fahnisht, sickly and weak as he appeared, seemed larger than Lanna.

Lanna's eyes were almost human in their appraisal. "Do not rest easy that you would be wearing my ring," he replied. "But I choose not to challenge. Your honor and blood-debts are known all the way to the East. If you accept your Tentlord's vow, I must accept it."

O'Meath looked squarely at Lanna. "The way of my people – my other people – in battle is not always the same as yours,

Lanna. Here, I honor your ways. I have taken enough of yours with the blade today.” He gestured toward the bodies. “What I do off of the plains will follow the ways of my own people – but blood *will* be repaid with blood.”

“Make it so, Kameef,” Lanna replied. “Make it so. Your other clan did this, and so this is Clan Fahnisht’s debt. If it is not repaid as you say, I will bring all of the clans together. This sickness has attacked wide, Kameef – wide, perhaps all the way to the East. If I cannot be told that blood has bought blood, the blood of all of Clan Fahnisht must pay this cost.”

“Clan Fahnisht will repay the blood,” Fahnisht responded. “One way or the other. On that, you have my blood-oath, given on sacred fire.” Fahnisht swiftly, deftly creased his own jaw line with his blade. He turned to his warriors. “You have heard this! You understand! If you wish to be free of the blood-debts sworn to me, I free you – give your blood to Lanna, or any other Clanlord. Let that be known to all warriors, and all Towns in my protection.”

He turned back to Lanna. “To you, I offer myself as witness to all that Kameef does. If he does not do as he vows, I will take the blood he has first pledged to me.”

“And if you do not return?”

Fahnisht looked to O’Meath. “How long, Kameef?”

O’Meath seemed to calculate quickly. “Not more than one warm and one cool,” he replied. “A year.”

Lanna seemed to signal assent. “If you have not returned before a warm, a cool, and a day, Fahnisht, your Clan ceases. The blood of all of your Tentlords, warriors, bards, miserable Townfolk – down to the least concubine, the last child – all will be taken as due. Be sure that I will do this.”

“I doubt nothing,” Fahnisht replied. “You, Lanna, be as sure that I will return, and you will pledge all your blood to my clan. Clan Lanna will become the vassal.”

Lanna stood quiet, considering. “I hope for us all that you will return the blood due.”

September 22, 2395 (Present Day) – (Far Orbit, Wolf 359)
(Hogajue)

Hogajue matched trajectory to that of the refueling sphere. Through the neural nets, it directed individuals in the placement of locking lines and extension of umbilicals. When all was secure, the transfer began.

Others of the subNest operated the sensory extensions. While passive electromagnetic sensors would not obtain visualizations at this range, transmissions could be intercepted. The Nest had emphasized its imprinting of directives: the Observer was to be given all data available. Despite the Nest's clear distaste for the minority view, it was willing to put up with the encroachment of insanity if it increased information flow.

The refueling process occupied most of the subNest for several hours. Once complete, the two spheres disengaged from one another. The larger sphere retained enough fuel to return to the stepping stone. The scouting vessel had sufficient fuel for its rapid transit of the system and its leap to the vermin toehold.

If the vermin were indeed planning an attack with the loathsome flesh-burning weapons, the Nests would be properly warned. Properly warned, the People would devour the vermin.

Finally.

All Shall Go to Wrack

Humanity barely holds back the spidery zhīzhū, voracious competitors for rare Earth-like worlds. Imperial Fleet ships have disappeared from the Reserve Anchorage near Proxima Centauri. Piracy is increasing along Yi Tan's Reach. Human "Manifest Destiny" fanatics are preparing biological genocide of Tau Ceti IV's non-human bipeds while sympathizers in Fleet itself prepare for open rebellion.

With these crises converging, Cuchulain "Murphy" O'Meath of the Emperor's Jin Jun has been set loose to disobey orders, forge Imperial Writs, and just possibly find a way to get matters under better control. Along the way, he illegally detains Lt. Urwah Grunon, Fleet Marine, and Lt. Commander B. P. Avinashini, Fleet's most skilled Gandiva pilot. O'Meath takes them to Tau Ceti IV to find Fahnisht, O'Meath's non-human friend and Clanlord. The puzzle begins to come together as the zhīzhū lurk and genocide begins...

Gregory P. Lee is a lawyer, writer, father, husband, small press publisher, and very slow cyclist residing in Attleboro, Massachusetts. He was raised in Berkshire County, not far from Mt. Greylock.



Greylock Publishing Lines™
279 South Main Street
Attleboro, MA 02704