

Long-Remembering Harpers

Her grandparents were heroes to three intelligent species.

Her parents are celebrated scholars.

Kirthi O'Meath is teetering at the edge.

Seventy-three years ago Cuchulain "Murphy" O'Meath of the Emperor's Jin Jun and Fleet fighter pilot B. P. Avinashini helped prevent the genocide of the zhīzhū, and began the long process of rebuilding the genocide-decimated Horns of Tau Ceti. Fifty-three years ago, they located the last vestiges of the human Manifest Destiny movement and ended its two decades of multi-species terrorism.

B. A. Kirthi, their granddaughter, tries to eke out a living in the obsolete, salvaged *Rani Lakshmi Bai*. The death she caused haunts her. Her dishonorable discharge from Fleet follows her. Fleet Admiral Idanha keeps her from finding a future. Her grandmother, rigid and distant, is no help, and a friend of the zhīzhū to boot.

The unraveling threads lead Kirthi to the unstable flare star Zhu Rong, where she must reconcile past, present and future before the star incinerates her ship and everyone aboard.

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Long-Remembering Harpers ○ Gregory P. Lee



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Book N+1 of The Laughing Lip

By

Gregory P. Lee

Long-Remembering Harpers

Book N+1 of The Laughing Lip

Revised Edition

Gregory P. Lee



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This is a work of fiction.
The events described are imaginary,
and the characters are fictitious.

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DEDICATION

This one has turned out to be for
Rebecca Anne.

THOUGHTS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book can be read without the first two novels of *The Laughing Lip*. It is not a direct continuation of the story that was left off in 2395. This novel starts 73 years after the end of Book 2, and this is *not* Book 3, not Book 4, and possibly not Book 5. It's a bridge to a new set of stories and characters.

This is, however, "Book N+1 of *The Laughing Lip*." This is for a reason. I'll leave you in as much suspense as I can about that. No spoilers will be found in the introductory notes.

This is one of those books that started in one place and ended up in another, moving on its own momentum and in its own time. It was originally commenced during a break from writing the one massive novel that became the first two installments (with some left over for a third) of *The Laughing Lip*. I had ideas to work out on the longer timeline of that story, and I was musing on a story behind crossing a harsh environment in a tracked or wheeled vehicle.

When this novel was ready in its turn to be put aside for simmering, I got reasonably brutal about what would make the first two novels of *The Laughing Lip* work, created a publishing company out of thin air and print-on-demand, and got those first two novels out.

While I was working on that, my siblings and I faced a new step toward of mortality with the death of our oldest sibling, Harry, to whom *All Shall Go to Wrack* is dedicated. He is the first of ten grandchildren of Lennox Nelson Lee and Ethel Melville Lee to pass away. He passed too young. It rippled through many pieces of life.

This summer, I started working on Book 3 of *The Laughing Lip* (tentatively *Some Man Kneel Down*), and came to a point where I again needed a break. I have to

write the story that's talking to me for Book 3, not the story I thought I would write. While that was on hold, I looked back to this novel. My brother's death changed little of the base story, but it definitely honed the edge. It educated my revisions.

This is and always was a story about generations. Generations deal with the effects of events from before, whether a year, or decades, or sometimes centuries. We are our genes, our personal histories, our family histories, our national histories, and even (especially!) our inaccurate legends. Kirthi O'Meath feels herself a screw-up because she compares herself to all of the prior heroes in her line. It is up to her to reconcile herself to all of the effects of her actions, and to live with her imperfections.

Enough thematic hints. You have to do some of the work yourself.

Thank you Fran, for encouraging me to run my imagination; to first readers, in particular Reverend Richard Trudeau and Rob Eaglestone, who have enjoyed my other work; and to more or less everyone else who has helped me along.

As before, thank you, Marc Miller and those who have put work into the Traveller game system, which helped me organize some of the underlying rules for ships and equipment. Thank you for the writers and mythologers who have given me rich tapestries as examples. Thank you other SF creators, including one series that reminded us that projectiles (bullets!) are highly efficient weapons even in space.

Thank you, NASA, for having such wonderful and non-copyrighted photos. The cover image is of a massive red dwarf flare, and is a public domain document. The original can be found at:

http://www.nasa.gov/images/content/228177main_Red-Dwarf-Flare-Full_full.jpg .

OTHER BOOKS BY GREGORY P. LEE

All Shall Go to Wrack (Book 1 of The Laughing Lip)

Demand the Debt that's Owing (Book 2 of The Laughing Lip)

Le Tour de Pudge (Lance Need Not Apply)

Woods of Memory

One

Fare thee well to you my own true love,
I am going far, far away,
I am bound for California,
A place that I don't know right well.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Vicinity Zhu Rong
(Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Rani Lakshmi Bai lurched over the lip and out of hyperspace. Dust puffed out of old console seams and other hiding places. Unstable gravitic ripples fluttered paper and sloshed cold, stale coffee in the safety cup. *Rani's* hull groaned long and loud: the vengeful old bitch's usual threat to dump all aboard into vacuum for the sin of refusing her old bones rest.

Bangaluru Agnivesh Kirthi skimmed fingers and eyes over the controls, finalizing the shut-down. "God knows what Ajji loves about these old monkey-shit ships," she muttered to herself. "This is a rancid old bucket."

"Not spoiled meat her time," Yazjwu responded laconically. "Fresh meat always tastiest." It made the

chalkboard-scratching sound it used to mimic human laughter.

Kirthi repressed the sound-induced shudder. “I suppose.”

Did it mimic human amusement as well as the sound? Just what was “funny” to a zhīzhū? What real sense of humor did the spidery things really have? Her parents, the foremost scholars, were guarded in their conclusions. Ajji had once strongly affirmed that the zhīzhū had a comic sense, though a crass and low one.

Her parents had been comfortable around the spiders. *They* might have a guess. Kirthi had never been able to fully repress, or even ignore, the deep-seated human reaction to the half-spider, half-something forms. Four unlidded, bulbous eyes always stared out from the four points of their external compass. Eight limbs, the eggplant-purple skin-shell, and the need for raw meat taken through a lower mastication-suction tube rendered dispassion impossible. Kirthi had learned to tolerate the zhīzhū from childhood, given her parents’ close study of their communication. She had never developed her parents’ affection.

Why couldn’t her parents have studied the Horns of Tau Ceti? She might have grown up riding their horse-ish mounts, hunting the open trails, learning the proper use of a sword. Instead, she spent two years too many poking around the slimy Nests of Alula Australis. With a proper upbringing, she might not have found herself looking for a wreck on a rock, under a hard bargain just so she could hold on to the wreck’s near-wrecked sister.

Like it or not, Yazjwu was part of the deal. *Rani* was the best thing she had. She would hold onto her, despite all of the sharp practice that brought her out here.

This particular zhīzhū’s seeming familiarity with *Rani*’s design and systems was discomfiting. The zhīzhū were not close allies, despite the Ross Accords pushed through by the Emperor Yi, her grandparents, and Hogajue-Two.

Twenty or thirty zhīzhū trade spheres stopped at Jannah regularly each year. Fewer went beyond to Sol and Centaurus. Most were diplomatic vessels; human ships carried trade goods on from Jannah. A very few could be met at the edges of systems, smuggling for each side's black market. *That* business was one she had engaged in herself.

Fleet maintained its unflinching vigilance. Any zhīzhū sphere in Imperial space dared twitchy fingers on firing buttons. Fusion weapons still frothed the zhīzhū into enraged fear, but also still kept them at bay.

Humans were no more likely to go to Alula Australis, for all that the Nests spoke of interspecies cooperation. The Reality Nests had long accepted that humanity were more than breakfast sausage. Humanity could thank or damn her grandparents, even her own parents, for that. Baby-eating zhīzhū would be easier to properly annihilate than those that accepted humanity as almost-equals.

Kirthi was not sure that she fully believed that the zhīzhū had truly given up the appetite to eat their way through Imperial space. The "Reality" Nests had simply curbed their desires, the way old-fashioned Hindus like Ajji curbed their desire for a proper beef stew. Members of the remaining Must Nests had certainly tasted long pork in the last sixty years. Kirthi did not at all doubt that proposition, though she granted the long pork in question had probably done *something* stupid to put itself on the serving platter.

The history and reasonable dislike stood against true cooperation. Zhīzhū were rarely carried on human ships, even as guests. They weren't given panel schematics, key codes, or an introduction to human-based computing. Moreover, none of the other old *Ladies* remained in active service. *Rani Lakshmi Bai* should be a museum piece. She was still in active use only because she had been lost and adrift for half a century – and because Kirthi had no other choice if she wanted to eke out a living.

How, then, could Jwu have been comfortable with *Rani's* human controls the moment she came aboard?

The zhīzhū maintained a reservoir of memory from one generation to the next. A Nest could transfer stored memory to a new zhīzhū, or retransfer memory to a regrown individual. An adult zhīzhū could take some of a dying zhīzhū's memories back, somehow incorporating undigested neurons into its own four lobes. They had, over the decades, learned how to analyze human memories in the same way.

Some zhīzhū in Jwu's line must have known the *Lady* class and transferred its memories back to the Nests. The alternative – that some long-ago Jin Jun had been ingested – was unpleasant to consider. If such had occurred, the Jin Jun remained silent.

Had another lost or damaged *Lady* been studied over the years? Or was Jwu close to the Hogajue line? Hogajue – both Jue-One and Jue-Two – had been on board *Lady*-class cruisers. Jue-Two had taken journeys with her grandparents, especially during the Manifest Destiny Rebellion.

Idanha's representatives had claimed no knowledge when Kirthi asked these questions. They had refused to respond to any queries. No public record helped, and she had been unable to hack into any Jin Jun databases.

Kirthi had asked Jwu the same question when it came on board. Jwu had claimed to have solely its own memories.

She had never known a zhīzhū to lie. Her parents opined that fiction was not available to a zhīzhū's brain-wiring. So why would it lie?

Why wouldn't it?

How much different was zhīzhū wiring from a human where self-interest was concerned?

Admiral Idanha had provided damned little, really, apart from the agreement's central promise. Idanha had promised real finality to Imperial Smithsonian's harassment

over title to *Rani*. He had been vague about the methods he would employ. Blackmail, no doubt, or perhaps veiled threats against some Smithsonian trustee or another. He would enjoy that sort of thing. He certainly would not be so crass as to simply offer some of Fleet's black budget as a payment.

Not that Imperial Smithsonian had much claim at this point. Despite Ajji's refusal to help, the voting Knights had endorsed Kirthi's claim. The appeal to the Emperor's Council was being dragged out, but they would likely choose not to ignore the Knights. There was some advantage, after all, to a renowned lineage, even if Kirthi was a mutinous screw-up.

Kirthi finally pulled her attention back to the ratchedy con she commanded, called up the passive sweeps. *Rani* herself was old and creaky, but the sensor suite was in prime condition. Kirthi'd hoisted it out from under the noses of the Jin Jun themselves, who didn't seem much to care that it was even more a museum piece than *Rani* herself. Hell, the sensor suite should have been in the Imperial Smithsonian Air and Space Museum next to that wood-and-cloth airplane, instead of lost among the crates in an orbit-cached assortment of outmoded spares. The *Ladies* had been designed for deep survey. Their sensor suites were without peer for small ships, excepting (perhaps) the Lady II class that had replaced them.

Ajji had used a sensor suite just like this to pursue *Mundi Astrum* through multiple jumps, something damned near impossible for a human. She had used gravitic-bubble hints to calculate exit expectations to tolerances still wondered at by seasoned zhīzhū navigators, much less Fleet combat tacticians. Ajji had saved the zhīzhū from extinction, whether that had really been Grandfather O'Meath's best idea. Even now, at a hundred-plus years old, Ajji could probably find a pin within a light-year with this sensor suite.

Kirthi gave herself the time to look at the survey results. Passive had pulled up what was expected: the super-flare star Zhu Rong, its single main companion, the hot-jupiter Panlong, and Panlong's complicated skein of moons and moonlets. Zhīzhū signals pushed through the heavy electromagnetic interference, just as expected. Their spherical pickets held to close orbits of Panlong L-II as they had for some fifty or sixty years. Apart from that, there was energized dust, plenty of it, slowly flowing outward from Zhu Rong.

The schematic simplification did the system no justice. Rock collisions made new dust; solar flare winds pushed the new dust outward. Oort crap dove in, dropping new dust and rocks along the way. A few rocks tried to sweep the dust away. The magnetic field interactions between Panlong, its moons, and the central star made the dust flow, swirl, eddy through the system. Something like lightning occasionally flashed out along the magnetic bridges that formed and then collapsed.

She closed the display. "You hold the con," she told Jwu. "Stay passive." She went out the rear hatch to the exit down to the central deck. As she scrambled down the gangway, she keyed her handheld with an eye-flick, locking Jwu out of non-emergency functions. She would allow the zhīzhū to babysit *Rani*, but had no intention of really trusting himher.

Year: 2467 (Two Years Ago). Location: Bangaluru, Earth (Sol III) (Idanha).

The old Indian woman sat regally erect. She was almost motionless in the simple wooden chair. Her long, white hair was tied back tightly, her bearing still military despite the traditional sari. She was slim, but not obviously frail.

By rumor, she still cycled thirty kilometers daily, outside, except for the monsoon season. She peddled inside during the monsoons.

Her Standard English was clipped as if conducting a briefing. “The latest data from the zhīzhū show that Zhu Rong is quiet. The Kill-12 zone will recede to just inside Panlong's orbit for at least six months. The ship will get in, make a fast approach, and make a few orbits to confirm location. A small crew will make the retrieval. There will be no risk.”

He coughed in impolite incredulity, shook his head. “No risk? If the shunts fail, my people will take full doses. More like ‘when’ they fail. It’s still the Kill-24 zone. People will be ill, at best. Cancers become certain. Med-Pods are expensive. Death sooner for most of them, even with zhīzhū meds. *Certainty*, not risk.”

“The zhīzhū have agreed to share their shunt technology, at least for the ground phase.”

“You don’t trust the spiders any more than I do.”

“The information should be obtained.” She remained skilled at attack hidden in evasion. The old woman always went to that last argument. Yes, there *was* information to be found in the wreck. There was information leading to *the* information. She *knew* the admiralty wanted to obtain *the* information. *The* information that could not be named out loud.

Even if she could be trusted, it was not enough. In this respect, her renowned perspective was nearsighted. He couldn’t afford to have Fleet caught looking for *the* information.

Information was not what *she* wanted. The information was her excuse for feeding her own mad hunger. He could never discuss that, though. No one could. It was the one matter on which she was irrational, no matter how outwardly calm. “I’m not interested in killing good people

for this – information.” He avoided looking in her eyes, just as he evaded in words.

Then he did look up. “And since I’ve mentioned zhīzhū – they’ve made damned clear about that system. Not even *you* have enough influence with them to get permission. The ‘Must’ nests keep their data-streams and neural connections quiet, but they’re still there. They’d love an excuse to heat things up. The ‘Reality’ nests have kept them in check this long – they can keep at it, for my money.”

“The zhīzhū will forgive me.”

“The zhīzhū aren’t wired for human forgiveness. You of all people know that – you helped *him* write the first book on them.”

“Himher.”

“Himher, herhim, it, who cares? I’m sorry, but no. You’re entitled to most anything the Empire can grant for all you’ve done. Statues, awards, that huge pension you don’t spend.” He glanced around at the simple old home. She had inherited it from her father, kept it much as it had been the day the Rebellion broke out. “Your technically active rank, even though you haven’t shipped in years. A title or two I gather you’ve refused. You have free passage on any Fleet vessel going anywhere you want to go in Empire space, free run on Shānhé-Wòtu, and an invitation to spend the rest of your life at Alula. A carrier keel’ll have your name ten minutes after you die. Hell, I hear the Jin Jun are holding back on the Lady III class so they can name the first in your honor, just to confuse our call signs.

“And I booted your granddaughter’s ass out of Fleet. For *you*. When she should have spent twenty years at hard labor. She’s out, free.” Idanha shook his head. “*This* isn’t on that damned long list.”

“I did not ask you to protect my granddaughter.”

“Not directly, no.”

“Not at all.” The Lady Admiral looked him in the face with the brown eyes that refused to reveal emotion. White hair and the ten thousand wrinkles of age – more than 100 years, he knew – did nothing to give him a real clue as to her thoughts. She’d *always* been unreadable and stoic. MacPherson’s memoir made that clear, as did the video records. She’d said damned little over the years about any of the great battles, from the Groombridge Rout forward. Just log entries.

The facts, Ma’am. Not like O’Meath, whose mouth would run as long as the beer was poured into it. But his self-serving recorded versions of history glorified himself. They often varied from computer logs.

Admiral Idanha wished he’d had a chance to serve under B. C. Avinashini in her prime. Or, better yet, to have met her when she was still Bengaluru *Premanand* Avinashini, *before* O’Meath had somehow taken her sanity and given her a different middle initial. Bengaluru *Cuchulain* Avinashini. No such luck. The Admiral hadn’t taken command in decades.

She stood, politely, clasped her hands together. “Namaste, Admiral. Please do not forget your shoes.” She gave the slight bow of politeness.

Idanha stood, found himself at attention. He saluted, as he should – retired or not, she was still the Admiral. He turned and left her living room, as clear that he was dismissed as he had been that she had summoned him. He found himself at the ornate door, slid his shoes on, and let himself into the humid Bangaluru night.

His marine driver came to attention. Idanha absently returned the salute. He stepped into the grav-car. “Back to Utah,” he said. “Comm ahead. Tell them to get my ship ready for the trip back to Wolf Base.” The marine took his place and brought the power up. The gravver lifted quietly into the night.

His handheld required only a few moments on the secure nets to confirm what he already suspected. She had been in recent contact with Hogajue-Five. That damnable zhīzhū had just been here on Earth. Most likely, it had rebuffed her once again, so she was playing Fleet against it and the rest of the Reality Nests.

Hogajue-Five had observers here, human allies. It would know he had visited before the gravver reached Utah. The Admiral was sending the zhīzhū a message: she was getting impatient. She had always been a tactician, and always would be.

And, damn the old bitch to hell, Idanha *did* want *the* information she was pretending to offer up as a bribe.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Vicinity Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

The cell was incorrect. The bars were black, smelling of rust-covered enamel. The cot to the side was too large, much too plush. No toilet protruded from the wall opposite the bars. Her conscious mind tried to correct these details, but dream state refused. Instead, it added a shower cabinet and a ridiculous European bidet in a separate room of concrete block.

What were steel bars, concrete block walls and an overly ornate toilet doing on *Hibernia II*, anyway? As much power as a ship like her could generate, she did not carry excess weight. Her architect certainly had not installed concrete brig cells at the cost of fewer missiles or sluggish changes of vector.

It mattered little. The dream would not correct the unimportant details. What it had right was the despair which left her lungs a vacuum, her digestive tract in knotted

pain. Stuck in orbit, given no windows or displays, her earpiece shut down, she had nothing to divert herself.

The vision twisted, and she floated above the crematorium. Both grandmothers entered, all of the children and relatives with them. Fleet marines and high-ranking officers stood at attention, honoring two living admirals present. One of them was Idanha, she noted with revulsion. Only family would be present in the crematorium itself.

Forcing her perspective into the ceremony, she watched as the flames engulfed the body. Only Hindu prayers were said over the body. Nothing of Grandfather Donal's Christian origin intruded.

Before the face melted in the heat, it changed. She was looking at Gakido, instead.

Behind the flames, Grandmother Avinashini glared.

Kirthi rolled over in her bunk, felt the cold sweat on her sheets and pillow. Dragging herself away from the night mare, she took control of her uneven gasps. She sat up in her bunk, rubbing the ache in her forehead. She'd hoped that dream had finally left her.

With Ajji in a med-pod just across the common area, the dream had apparently returned.

She got up, pulled on her shipsuit. Kirthi unlocked her cabin, went across to the lavatory. She locked the door, stripped, and went into the shower. The computer recognized her, set the water flow as she liked it best. She scrubbed hard, twice shampooed her auburn hair to rid herself of imaginary jail-lice. Feeling slightly better, she dressed quickly. A quick breakfast was in order.

Commander Milton Obote leaned over the galley table, handhelds and paper books strewn over the top. Some of the titles caught her eye: Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Churchill's *While England Slept*, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, the First Zhang Empress' *Notes and Diaries*. Obote flipped

from one treatise to another, keying, checking, keying more.

He looked up as Kirthi approached, snapped his fingers and gestured toward the table top. “You know, you really need to fix this table. Or let me work in the con. I need to get all of this pulled together properly.”

“You’re not getting open access to main systems. You’re Fleet’s damned observer, nothing more.”

“You haven’t changed, have you? Mutineer.”

Kirthi felt her face tighten and flush with anger. The taunts should have no force after all of the time stuck with him. “My contract says I carry two observers. Nothing about giving you control access.”

“The damned zhīzhū ‘observer’ has the con.”

“Tells you how I feel about *Fleet*, doesn’t it?” She turned away, dismissive, and went to the synthesizer. The machine reconstituted basics into the meal she chose, added flavors and spices. She hadn’t had the funds to properly stock the freezers on this run, and Idanha had been uncooperative when she’d suggested raiding a Fleet icebox.

Rather than endure any more of Obote’s company, she took her reconstituted protein meal away through the common area and into the medical bay.

She had taken many of her meals here over the past several weeks. This one cabin had been completely refurbished before the old bitch had pushed off from Wolf base. Med bay now had its own power supply. Supplies had been laid in for every contingency, from ingrown hairs to deep radiation exposure. The long-archaic automed had been removed and replaced with two extended med pods. Idanha had insisted on this one expensive upgrade, out of claimed deference for Ajji.

Fleet’s one extravagance. Kirthi distrusted Fleet generosity, especially when Idanha’s hands did the giving. It wasn’t enough that he insisted on keeping the Admiral alive and well. The old gear could have handled that.

Kirthi planned to hold on to the medical gear when this charter was done. That wasn't in the contract, but she would find an edge to play.

One of the two pods sat silently on stand-by, waiting for a medical emergency. The other was warm, as it had been since it was brought aboard. A pump hummed quietly, circulating ocean-blue support gel evenly around the pod's occupant. The Admiral had been inside from Earth herself, transferred to *Rani* at Jannah.

Kirthi keyed the display. Ajji's face appeared, eyes closed. The umbilical snaked into her mouth, providing nutrients and oxygen, removing carbon dioxide and waste. Her heartbeat registered, just barely, slowed to the minimum. Her eyeballs twitched in REM underneath the age-thinned eyelids. She dreamed often, as people apparently did in these pods.

The readouts showed what they should show: an aged body, slowly losing ground to the decades. Kidneys, liver, all of the filters were less efficient. The heart muscle, though still lean, was no longer supple. Various cells seemed perched on the edge of cancer. The goo could take care of all of those things, even lubricate and revive the aged skin, if Ajji would allow it.

She had refused consent to any such treatment. She had locked the pod's controls herself on Earth, encrypted with a password only she knew. "I will live what I have left," she had said in a recording made at the Bangaluru Medical Center. "I will see the next life when the gods call."

Kirthi ate, then set the pod to begin the process of reviving the old woman. It would take time. There was no point in sitting to wait for the hours to pass, and there were other preparations to make. Kirthi left the med bay, passing Obote and his thesis research. She clambered into the con

Jwu greeted her with an almost human wave of her his rearmost arm. "Passive models building." Kirthi rounded the zhīzhū, came up to the other side of the circular console.

She keyed the computer to display the visual model of the system.

The enhanced display made ribbons of charged dust and meandering rocks pretty. Dust and far smaller charged particles bounced up against *Rani*'s crap-deflection shunts, flaring into splashes and sprays of light. For a moment she felt herself on the soaring and crashing bow of an old sailing ship, pushing through waves, cutting through spray. The momentary vision was worth the trip. She ran her hand through her dark auburn hair, gift of two Euro grandparents; the shower-dampness added to the illusion.

After a few moments, Kirthi shook off the silly romanticism. She had a last inbound course to plot. *Rani* needed to get from the safe periphery of the system into the worst of the heavy radiation. This wasn't a system for a strolling tour. She would be pushing the engines.

Panlong and Zhu Rong had killed thousands of zhīzhū in several foolish Nests before it was finally left empty. It had also killed more than a few of the Manifester rebels who had later based themselves here for their desperate final offensive. A superflare star with a hot-jupiter giant in close orbit was no home for complex carbon-based life.

She knew this personally, or at least intellectually. Zhu Rong had killed one of her two red-headed Euro grandfathers, the one she had never known. The one her father had never known, for that matter, save through Ajji's stories.

Kirthi had no intention of joining Cuchulain Padraic O'Meath on the road to the next life, not at this system's request. She might have followed her other grandfather on that road, but that wasn't the point. Kirthi began calculations in earnest, looking for the best way to get in close without undue exposure to radiation.

"Zhīzhū balls detected predicted," Jwu noted. "Orbits what believed."

“That’s wonderful,” she replied. Balls – it meant spheres, of course, in its broken Standard. Why couldn’t it remember to call the zhīzhū vessels ‘spheres,’ or at least ‘ships?’ Kirthi was not comforted by confirming that eight zhīzhū battleships maintained their apparently eternal watch.

Why in hell bother interdicting an ugly rock circling a hot-j and its vicious attack star, anyway? Was there something about the long-ago battle near Zhu Rong that evoked shame?

Zhīzhū shame? Did they *have* that emotion, any more than humor? If she could bring herself to dig through her mother’s treatises, perhaps she’d know the answer to that.

More likely, the zhīzhū were afraid of something. What memories and ideas had been curried and culled through the lines? Why were the most liberal of zhīzhū afraid that no human could be trusted near the site of the Manifesters’ last desperate attempt to create a human-only sphere of influence? Was this some five-lobed compromise between the Must and Rational Nests?

Why hadn’t the zhīzhū long since landed and destroyed whatever was on left on the surface? Why not use nukes against inanimate objects? There would be no meat to waste below, not this many decades later.

She’d asked Jwu during the trip through hyperspace. Jwu had admitted that it had no intention of explaining.

The Imperial interdiction of the system was more understandable. Defying seventeen years of a losing civil war and Imperial mop-up, the Manifest Destiny movement had made a final attempt to wipe out the zhīzhū. Seventeen years of growing detente between the spiders and humanity had almost been undone. Emperor Yi had been ashamed, without doubt, as had most of the government – Lords, Commons, and Knights. The shame had been deepened by the use of variations on methods long before dreamed up by Fleet researchers.

More than “face” had been at risk, of course. Incomplete genocide would have strengthened the surviving zhīzhū. A zhīzhū aroused was an implacable zhīzhū. Kirthi shuddered at the image of the slaughter that would have followed. The zhīzhū might well have lost and died off, but the human costs would also have been high.

No human could be trusted here in Zhu Rong. Even Ajji was suspect.

Kirthi again drew herself back to the tasks at hand. She finished her course calculations. “I’m going below to check on things. Work the sweep for me.”

“Wish command me. Fresh meat with return, please.”

“No. You leave the place a mess when you eat up here.” Kirthi got out of her chair and went past the zhīzhū’s four-petal stand around the circular “meeting” console. It had brought it along, somehow certain that it would be allowed the privileges it had quickly obtained. “You go below to eat, hear? My ship, my rules.”

“Fair square hijacked, your ship,” Jwu responded, and again grated out hiser laughter.

Kirthi went out the hatch and down the steep gangway, scowling. This time, though, she did not go forward. Instead, she went around to the back of the gangway, opened the personnel hatch to the ship’s lowest deck.

The access deck was serviced by a simple vertical pullway. The grav field could be neutralized to move large items – smaller equipment, injured bodies – as necessary. Kirthi enjoyed the quick zip down. At the deck level, she walked aft to the main cargo bay.

Kirthi tugged three times on the starboard hatch before the seal finally popped. The thick metal creaked open with difficulty under more sustained pulling. She would have to program the bots to run extra maintenance routines while *Rani* was downworld. They could install the new gaskets she had scavenged, even grease the hinges.

Kirthi ducked through the oval into the hold itself. Standing, she admired the crawler that had been rolled aboard at Wolf Base. It was, according to the specs, a “rátha.” It rested on its metal wheels, in place of the grav-flyers once stored in its place. The heavy magnetic flux, flares and resulting charged dust would render grav lift dangerously unpredictable at best. The open frames of the antique gravvers would have blocked none of Zhu Rong’s radiation.

The rátha’s clear upper body had been custom-woven out of fullerenes infused with zhīzhū-designed maintenance nanos. A large enough projectile would hole the “glass,” but mere dust scratches would polish themselves away. It would certainly hold full pressure against the dust torrents expected on the surface.

The “glass” would darken in bright light and shield against most UV. A small grav generator powered a shunt-screen for the worst of the other charged particles and radiations that showered down from both Panlong and Zhu Rong.

The ten seemingly metallic roller-wheels were non-magnetic, independently motored, and unlikely to break against any rock. The rátha’s sensor suite was combat-ready, though the upper gun-rack mounting had been left vacant. The vehicle was only rudimentarily streamlined. It was not built for speed, but for rugged, airless, high-radiation terrain.

She wondered what Fleet had in mind when it originally commissioned the rátha. It was *designed* for travel under a small handful of overactive stars. Kirthi knew of no call for ground combat ops on radiation-flooded dustbowls. Airless hot-j moons weren’t prime real estate for either humans or zhīzhū. Anything worth finding on such a moon could also be found in more hospitable locales.

Pure exploration? Fleet wasn’t an exploratory force. The Jin Jun might build such a crawler, but probably would

not share it with Fleet. Did Ajji simply have enough pull to get Fleet to design and build a one-off “rátha” on short notice, using the most advanced and expensive technology two species could offer?

None of these hypotheses fit. The fact was, this rátha had been designed solely for this expedition. Long before Idanha’s approach of Kirthi, Fleet put significant resources into the vehicle. They’d even pirated zhīzhū tech for the purpose, or somehow commissioned that tech.

The admirals had hoped to put humans on Panlong L-II’s surface. Idanha had been prepared for any opportunity.

Fleet had never properly rid itself of its aggressive xenophobic tendencies, even after the quelling of the Manifesters. The House of Knights had kept Fleet in better check over the last fifty or sixty years. A return to xenophobic illogic was wasteful.

Why would Ajji have bothered pushing Idanha to hire Kirthi for a mission if she could pull the favor of the rátha from Fleet? Why not just send *Bangaluru* or one of the other carriers? For that matter, why name the vehicle a war-chariot in an obscure old Indian dialect?

None of these questions were going to answer the main question: was it ready for the mission? Could it really be trusted to keep them alive?

Kirthi keyed the rátha’s port hatch. It slid backward, allowing her to pull herself up the exterior rungs and into the vehicle. She moved forward in a slight crouch to the front console, to the left-hand control seat. Folding herself into the cramped seat, she said, “Power.”

The vehicle recognized her voice and powered up to a gentle hum. Diagnostics ran, clearing all systems. The rátha would be ready to go as soon as *Rani Lakshmi Bai* set down. She checked the key-codes she had set on the voyage out, made sure it was locked to her alone. She did not trust either Obote or Jwu. “Observers,” they had been called. Fleet and the zhīzhū were watching each other, and

each hoped to outwit the other before *Rani* got back to Imperial space.

The vehicle itself ready, she checked its inventory. The spare EVA packs were properly stowed aft and port. Demolition and cutting gear was aft and starboard. The heavily shielded safe was ready to power up its independent shunt-shields. The artifacts they retrieved would be better protected than the living passengers.

Kirthi clambered out of the *rátha*. She tapped at her handheld screen, hanging at her waist. The med-pod was almost done reviving Ajji. She was expected to be present when the old lady awoke. She went out of the hold, heaved the hatch closed again and dogged it tight. She went to the ladder and up to the main deck.

Obote was apparently in his cabin, perhaps sleeping. The lounge was dark. She walked through to the medical cabin.

The pod was softly finishing a quiet Indian lullaby, pre-programmed to meet Ajji's tastes. As Kirthi checked the final readings, it began another tune. She recognized it as one of the only Euro tunes she had heard Ajji regularly hum. Kirthi had looked it up after one of Ajji's non-responses to a childhood question.

It was something about Liverpool and sailing ships. Ajji must have picked it up from the other grandfather, the one Kirthi had never met. It didn't make full sense to Kirthi, an Irish song about Scottish sailors on American ships. She'd thought that the lines were better drawn, way back then, nations never mixing.

Not that the mixing was all that good now.

"The Admiral is ready," the quiet computer voice advised. The display showed her grandmother's face unobstructed, the umbilical now removed. The blue nutrient solution had been drained for recycling. A few drips of blue remained, sliding at odd intervals down the side of Ajji's sepia face. "Open the pod," Kirthi replied.

The top half of the rounded unit lifted away on its hinges. Ajji's eyelids flicked up, down again, then opened with more alertness. She turned her head right. "Panlong L-II, Granddaughter?"

All business, Ajji was. Weeks of sleep had not softened her. "We're still in the outer system. I've plotted our approach. The damned zhīzhū is probably triple-checking my ballistics." A moment of deference to the aged came over her. "If you would like to take the helm, Ajji..."

"This hijacked scow is your command. I won't steal your helm."

Ajji was still the critical, rigid Admiral. "I took it by salvage right," Kirthi reminded. "Smithsonian's claim wasn't properly registered, and I took the risks. Upheld all the way to the Great Judicial Court. The only people who won't let go are some museum trustees who want a working ship sitting next to that prehistoric space shuttle."

"*Hijacked*. So I've heard. To the Imperial Smithsonian's great loss. They want her quite badly." She seemed almost amused under the scorn, though Kirthi was no doubt misreading the aged woman. "And they may yet prevail in the Council."

"They can have *Rani*. For the price they keep refusing to pay."

"Stop demanding your 'honorable' papers. Perhaps they'll consider the cash alone."

Kirthi refused further comment. It was like Ajji to once again remind her. No reminder was needed.

Ajji reached out a veined hand. "Help me out of this coffin, granddaughter."

Kirthi helped her sit up, swing her legs over the side. "Let me get a robe."

"Yes." The old woman's eyes flicked down to her nakedness, back up to meet Kirthi's. "I can't be indecent with young men and zhīzhū aboard." Again, her eyes flashed something like amusement.

Two jokes in a single day? Kirthi doubted it. Her occasional desire for the old lady's approval was once again causing her to fantasize.

Ajji let the younger woman get the covering around her shoulders, help her off of the pod. Kirthi steadied her as she pulled the robe closed and tight. "You have a proper shipsuit for me?"

"I'll go get it."

"No. Bring me to my cabin. I've slept long enough. I can take care of myself for a few minutes. You take care of your ship." Ajji rejected the hand of support she offered and walked around her to the door. Remarkably spry, she made her way across the open living area to the nearest cabin. Intellectually, Kirthi understood that Ajji's mercurial moods and obsession over small things were symptoms of the greatly aged brain.

Intellectually. Kirthi's gut, though, suggested that she shove the old lady back in the pod, not again let her out. She could sleep her way through the surface time and not get in the way.

Rather than attempt it, Kirthi went out of the med-bay and back toward engineering. The bots were far better at handling the power systems than she was, but that was one place she could hope to be left alone for an hour. She needed to calm the burning in her stomach.

Year: 2466 (Five Years Ago). Location: Vicinity Wolf Base, Wolf 359 System (Kirthi).

Tanks full, the hydrogen barge required extra care. The computer had calculated a slower approach, but *Hibernia II*'s new captain was in a rush to get the vessel away from the tenders. *Hibernia II* had to make a show-the-flag tour

to Ross 128 and back, and the supercilious bastard at the helm wanted to prove his ultra-efficiency.

It would serve him right if she disconnected the computer altogether and let the tanker slam a pylon or six. Even a gentle bump would set *Hibernia* back by a week or two. Bastard had been the Executive Officer not so long ago, and had insisted on preferring g charges for something the zhīzhū did.

She looked ahead for vessels she could avoid, blame for a course change. The small craft had been swarming in and out of the barely habitable zone lately. Anyone with keys to a life-pod was heading out along *Rani Lakshme Bai*'s projected sweep back into the system. Imperial Smithsonian was willing to pay a small fortune for the salvage rights if it had no other choice. Its own ship and small craft were holding back, betting that they had the best data.

Kirthi put aside the idea of a vengeful slam into *Hibernia II*. Fleet would never accept that a new bump was an accident, no matter how cluttered local space seemed. There was still quite a bit more space than craft out here.

Even an excusable collision would do her little good. Kirthi was barely tolerated now, her clearance reluctantly approved in some claim of slow "rehabilitation." "Rehabilitation" from having disobeyed bad orders, as everyone knew, "rehabilitation" from having been right.

Right in a way that cost a life, and maybe bought nothing. One Must Nest more or less was not apparently reducing the renewal of tensions between human and zhīzhū. Gakido was dead because she'd miscalculated. She'd been right, but not right enough.

It still annoyed her to see pilots and techs she had known, have them treat her like the pariah she had become. She had to earn her way, though. The message had come down through channels, quite clearly. The admiralty would not refuse her civilian work, but would offer no other olive

branch. Even her own grandmother, technically still on active duty, had maintained her distance.

Damn Ajji for the difficult old woman she'd become. How could she have put up with her Grandfather Cuchulain if she had such a rigid stick up her hole? Grandfather Donal would not have abandoned her, not this way. He would have reached out, found a way to forgive her.

Her own father, though, had made it clear that she'd killed Donal MacPherson. He'd died on learning of her impending court-martial. A quick stroke had taken him. She couldn't see that her father had been wrong. Gods, she missed Grandfather Donal.

The board beeped. She was closing in on the fueling dock. She kept the course tight, applied the final thrust carefully.

The barge matched perfectly to the fuel processing plant. Her console directed the data stream into her earpiece, updating the heads-up displays by nerve induction. With a final nudge of gravitic thrust, she shut down the main drives. Bot-herded lines snaked out and sealed onto the valves.

Draining the frigid tanks required far less time and effort than the incessant skimming of the system's hydrogen masses. The barge was bone-dry within an hour. Kirthi keyed to secure the pumps and valves, then thrust away from the dock. Another barge would be taking her place soon enough.

Automatics could bring the barge to dock. She'd been out for two weeks, running back and forth to get raw hydrogen for Fleet. She needed some proper down-time, and the barge needed routine service. The food and waste processors were sputtering again. The stench of waste had wafted into the control cabin more than once while she'd been out. She keyed the details to the service dock.

She'd also had a chance to take readings and make calculations. Two weeks alone in a can gave time to waste,

or time to keep busy. She was willing to bet on herself over Imperial Smithsonian.

While she waited for the final approach, she checked her suit. She'd been denied her pilot suit when she left Fleet. Bastards left her with nothing, really. She'd bought the current suit second-hand. It required constant supervision and repairs.

Gentle braking – the inertial compensators were also flakey – announced her arrival at the dock. The barge put itself into the proper orbit and orientation. Kirthi went to the airlock, sealed it behind her, and started the chugging scavenger pumps. Her suit expanded slightly with the reduced pressure, became easier to move. She watched the gauge lights until they stopped at ten percent pressure. She had complained about that before; the old scavengers were wasting too much air.

No one out here cared much for Fleet standards on something so simple as air. They could always manufacture more from the raw materials. Sometimes the damn fools acted like they were on pre-Pandemic Earth, able to waste any consumable around. Ten percent meant a lot if you might find yourself stuck out in deep space.

Nonetheless, she opened the hatch, watching vapory wisps of moisture sweep out. The dock's airlock, a sphere on top of the long mast to the station proper, lay about a hundred meters away, and eighty-seven or so degrees off her own deck's angle.

The dock's automated line-caster operated in the black silence, flashing the tug-line over. Kirthi snagged it and clipped it to the old-style ring hitch to the side. No one was interested in spending on a nano-tipped line here. Kirthi examined the line carefully, assuring herself that it was not too frayed for safety purposes, then clipped her own loop around it. Hand-over-hand, she arrived at the other end in good time.

Once inside the nearest lock, she felt the air pressure increase on her suit. Out of long-trained habit, she assured herself that her suit's own gauges matched the tell-tales built into the airlock wall. She waited for both to read "full pressure" before she opened the inner hatch and pushed through. She pulled her way down to circular hatch to the mast, and from there through the mast itself. Finally, she pulled herself into the gravity-equipped waiting area.

The bleached blond at the main desk glared up from her handheld, clearly annoyed by the interruption. "No capsules in." One more Fleet spouse, looking down on Kirthi because that was the Fleet way, sticking together against the rejects.

"Call one," Kirthi responded. She would not give this bit of trash satisfaction. "Within the hour." She keyed her own handheld through the earpiece induction. Within moments, the routine had located her personals; bots would trundle the box to a tiny private cabin at the hostel she always used.

Kirthi sat. Her handheld plugged into the news system. Much of the news was the usual local material. Misconduct, weddings, local politics, silly conflicts between various Hindu and Islamic sects – nothing of real interest to her. Jannah was no different than any human conclave. Its people were just as petty as any found on Earth. She needed to find her way out of the system.

One item caught her interest: the representatives of the Imperial Smithsonian were now interviewing all of the locals, especially those who worked the asteroid miners and fuel shuttles. *Rani Lakshme Bai*, the old Jin Jun cruiser, had been abandoned forty years before when it bounced over the lip short of the system. Its tanks had spewed themselves dry in hyperspace. Only the lifeboats retained fuel and power.

The all-human crew and a passenger had taken to the boats, tried to get into the system. None of the crew had

made it alive. One of the two lifeboats lost power two days before creeping into the system. The other just barely reached Jannah.

The sole passenger had survived. Of course it had survived; the zhīzhū “diplomat” had no compunction against eating humans and other sundry lower life forms. It had defended itself, so the records said: it had pointed out that both of its companions in the lifeboat had been near asphyxiation already.

Occasional attempts had been made to locate *Rani* over the years, but the data were sparse. The best estimates were that she would be pulled gently in on an elliptical course. All of the math said that she would be detectable sometime in the next thirty days. If Smithsonian was asking questions, it wasn’t as sure of its data as it claimed.

Kirthi was already tired of pariah rehabilitation. She would find *Rani* herself and refuse any finder’s fee. Screw Imperial Smithsonian. She wanted to get away from this hole.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Vicinity Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Kirthi passed through *Rani*’s central computer core, ignoring it. The computers of the original *Lady* class were no longer state-of-the-art, but they remained powerful AIs. They were also durable and backed up in multiple ways and degrees. In 2428, all of *Helen*’s crew were killed by a mutated virus. The computer had brought *Helen* back with no human crew. Without doubt, *Granuaile*’s propulsion, AI, or both were destroyed at Zhu Rong, or she would have come back as easily as had *Helen*.

Nonetheless, there was little chance that *Granuaile's* multiple-tiered computer memory was smashed beyond any attempt at data retrieval.

The “observers” wanted data, not souvenir scraps. That much she had deduced from the equipment she had poked through. Idanha thought Fleet cargo seals made a difference? She’d hacked much tougher security when she’d salvaged *Rani*. And on other occasions.

The port hatch into engineering led directly to the main watch station. Kirthi stopped, pulled on her ear protection, then pulled open the hatch. As she stepped through, the thrum of the power plant could be felt in her spine, despite layers of insulation and gravitic muting fields.

She closed the hatch behind her, went up to the main console. Without real concern, she noted that all lights were green. The old bitch’s plant was as sturdy as its computer. From there, she stepped down into the “pit,” strolling by the massive spheres, cylinders, and blocky turbines that managed to keep electricity moving and quantum fields pushing against space-time. Small bots moved in and out, most floating on anti-grav, adjusting mechanical systems, checking boards, generally massaging the system as it ran.

Kirthi finished the inspection walk at the starboard workspace platform. As usual, nothing was out of place. She could have used the starboard hatch to exit, but there was no rush to get anywhere else on the small ship. No reverse walk-through had ever caught a problem in the old bitch’s gizzard, but she wasn’t about to give up the good habit anywhere near Zhu Rong. She started back, looking at the same points from the reverse angle, came to the port-side platform.

Ajji stood behind the console, looking down at it. Her entry must have been covered by the general background noise and Kirthi’s own ear protection. The long white hair had already been tied tight, and was tucked behind her ear

protection. Her shipsuit betrayed only the slightest hint of what might be the emaciation of the truly aged. She had never been given to extra fat, though.

The old woman noticed her presence, looked up. "You keep your drive deck properly." There was some hint of grudging approval in her tone. "Better than he kept *Granuaile*'s. He was prone to leaving tools out, a half-empty cup of coffee at the console. Crumbs behind every maintenance panel. The engineering bots found him most irritating. As did I." She sniffed at the air. "It smells the same, though. Grease with a hint of ozone."

Ajji looked down at the console again, turned. Her gaze rested on the hammock tie-points to the side. "Solo watch in 2395. He pushed the engines hard, kept them running despite the abuse. Barely slept. Worked in all the noise."

Ajji sighed. "And lived through my first squeeze-out. I think I loved him then, for his damned refusal to die. Dying would be giving up." She seemed lost in the years for a moment, almost softening. "I had no idea that I loved him then." She looked at the main station, or looked beyond it.

"Come." Her voice resumed its habit of command, even on a ship she admitted was not her own. "I want to see Zhu Rong from the con." She strode to the hatch, ducked through.

Kirthi stood at the steps for a moment, taking in the audacity. Shaking her head, she went up the steps to the platform, then followed Ajji out and up to the con.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Vicinity Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Ajji stood outside the con, beside the open hatch, in an attitude of timeless patience. Kirthi pulled herself up the

gangway. “What are you waiting for?” the younger woman asked.

“Permission to enter.” Whatever softness she had shown in the engineering deck was gone. “Did you learn no proper courtesy before you were drummed out of Fleet?”

The tone was becoming irksome. “No, and the Jin Jun wouldn’t take me,” she shot back. “I’m not very teachable.”

“Probably not.” Ajji looked pointedly at the opening. “Well?”

Kirthi reached into the memory of Fleet pompousness, gave a mocking salute. “Permission to enter, Admiral. You have the freedom of the con.”

Ajji raised her eyebrows. “You’re not in my chain of command,” she pointed out, and then pointedly refused to return the salute. She ducked in through the hatch without further ceremony. She stepped to the side to allow Kirthi to enter.

Kirthi ducked through. “Course, Jwu?”

“Most efficient calculated course,” the zhīzhū answered through one of its speaking orifices. It focused a single eye on her. “Four hours orbit. Polar low maximize scans.”

“That makes sense,” Kirthi allowed. “The old-fashioned orange-peel scan.” She went forward, around the rear console toward the center console at the forward-most compass-point of the conning dome. “I’ll lay in the course. Ajji, you’re welcome to take the helm.”

“So you’ve told me, and so I’ve refused,” the old woman bit back. “I will sit starboard to rest my feet.” She walked to the console, showing no evidence of pain or difficulty walking in her slippers. Why would her feet hurt after weeks in the pod?

Kirthi activated the main forward display, opening a virtual window ahead. They were already deep in the system. Panlong, the largest planetary body, could be seen in one corner, reflecting Zhu Rong’s harsh light.

She keyed for the stellar weather satellite data stream, found that it was already queued. She was no expert on such things. The sunspot activity was higher than the average that had been recorded over the past forty years, though. Flares bounded up from the surface, often curved and splashed back to the surface. A solid solar wind pushed particles and gases away.

An electromagnetic bridge was definitely forming between Zhu Rong and hot-j Panlong herself. The next superflare was on its way. This would have to be a short visit. She had no desire to anywhere near Panlong L-II when the plasma started crawling along the flux lines.

For now, though, the system was beautiful. The forward gravitic field pushed into a cloud of old nebula-like material, gently glowing with Zhu Rong's light. Forward lights played and reflected in the dust. Kirthi subtly enhanced the hues on the display.

"Stop that," Ajji scolded. "It is beautiful enough to be in deep space again." She settled back in her chair as Kirthi returned the display to normal. The aged woman held her palms together, on her lap. "Zhīzhū, give me your name and nest."

"Yazjwu, Nest HkUffstoma." It emitted a scent that somehow added information for those sensitive enough to understand.

"I thought so," Ajji commented dryly.

Kirthi could not tell whether the information pleased or displeased. Kirthi herself had glanced over the allegiances of the Nest when Jwu had come aboard, decided that it had come from a rare "Neutral" Nest, though bordering closely on the "Must" classification. Jwu was presumably at least mildly in favor of the more traditional zhīzhū expansionism, the desire to colonize all blue-green worlds for zhīzhū only. It was, however, polite enough to keep such views to itself.

“I have never heard the ‘jwu’ suffix,” Ajji said, again speaking back toward the zhīzhū. “Is it new?”

“Incomprehending,” Jwu responded. “Simply is. Seventy-twelfth mode sub-one.”

“Oh, of course.” Ajji looked forward at the display. Her voice dropped. “I know enough zhīzhū linguistic math to recognize intentional vagueness,” she said, perhaps to herself. “Murphy and I worked it out.” She looked over to Kirthi, shifted language to the old Kannada. “*Keep a watchful eye open to that one, granddaughter. It may be capable of lying.*”

Kirthi nodded. What did the old woman think she had been doing? A zhīzhū in the con was easier to monitor than a zhīzhū hacking the main computer from its cabin. Anything Kirthi could manage, a zhīzhū could manage twice as well.

But no zhīzhū could lie. Ajji should know that. The species’ hard-wiring precluded concepts such as storytelling. She’d asked the zhīzhū specifically whether it intended to hack any system, interfere with any orders, or harm anyone on board. Yazjwu had expressly answered “No.”

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Yazjwu’s calculations had been perfect. She’d really had no reason to change the course a bit. Orbital insertion had been smooth and sweet. Kirthi wouldn’t mind that kind of skill on navigation all the time, at least if it didn’t come with a zhīzhū on her con.

Rani’s automatics could help Kirthi do the job when this was done. They were accurate, though not overly gentle.

Idanha had provided data. Fleet had kept the records it had been able to make those years ago. There were large gaps, though. How many were caused by simple exigencies of a long-ago battle, how many by Idanha's editing scissors? The information showed that Granny should be somewhere in the south polar quadrant. No human ship had been close enough to get more.

But then, she reminded herself, Idanha wanted this relic found.

Seven polar orbits later, they were almost done mapping the south pole area.

She had finally allowed Obote up to the con. He had shared the duties of analyzing sensor results, sorting reading after reading. He was closing in on the likely landing spots, but not yet certain.

The Earth-sized moon below had an active, fast-spinning molten metal core. Its resulting magnetic field interacted with Panlong's high energy emissions, as well as Zhu Rong's emissions. Increasing flares from Zhu Rong made the lines of surface flux unpredictable at best.

Though the rock below had no atmosphere to speak of, and no liquid water, a thin of ocean highly-charged dust flowed over the surface. It confused the sensor package. Even Ajji had taken a hand at adjusting and interpreting. She had admitted that it was by no means as simple as pinpointing a live energy source in open space.

Jwu had remained in the background, quietly skimming the data. "Located husk *Granuaile*," shehe finally advised. "Probability ninety-eight percent."

Kirthi stood, offered a hand to Ajji. Ajji spurned it, pushing herself up out of the chair. Both walked aft. They stood together beside the display. In a moment of apparent excitement, Obote had pushed close to the zhīzhū, forgetting to cringe away from the touch of herhis skin.

The large display showed a small portion of the polar surface. A blinking red circle brought their eyes to a

location on the current sun-side of the planet, beyond the twilight divider. Even at this magnification, the area appeared rough.

The zhīzhū zoomed the scan to the red circle. It might once have been mountainous territory. The flows of flux-propelled dust and metallic particles had eroded the bases of the hills over the years, much as wind and water would erode similar structures on earth. The result was apparently rolling in general, with tall spires of rock jutting to unexpected heights. Dust continued to flow around the bases of these pinnacles. Many of the bases were narrower than higher portions of rock, before the structures narrowed again to pointed crags.

Though partially blurred and obscured by the flows of dust that lapped against it, the typical shape of a Lady-class vessel could be discerned in the midst of the needles. She lay in a depression between pinnacles, the flow blurring and obscuring her details. There was no doubt, though, that this was the remains of a Lady-class cruiser.

Only one such vessel was known to have come to this system. “*Granuaile*.” Ajji reached out as if to touch the ship itself, her fingers simply flowing through the projected image.

“Bitch,” Kirthi commented. “That’s a rough spot.”

“Did you expect anything different?” Obote asked.

“We can’t land there.” Kirthi keyed, superimposing the EM survey over the holo. Flux lines showed the magnitude of the local activity. “It’ll kill our gravs.”

Jwu interrupted. “Never doubted memories absorbed. Human O’Meath ship.” It highlighted a different area on the map, over to the dark side. “Land there. Rátha . Some protected chasm. Use.”

“Land right next to her,” Obote suggested. He pointed out a rolling plain a few kilometers from the crash site. “It should be easy.”

Kirthi keyed, highlighting the terrain. “All those jagged spires – all around for kilometers. There must be core material close to the surface – a spinner of some kind. Making extra flux. The EM down there is going to screw with the grav at a fair altitude – as much as kilometers, some directions. *Rani* could lose lift entirely – go down like a damned stone. I don’t want to have one of those pinnacles sticking up through *our* belly.”

“Human Kirthi sensible,” Jwu noted. “Also not more flare dark side. *Rani* systems eased.”

“Pinnacles,” Ajji mused. “Pins. *Rani* could be mounted like an insect in a collection.”

“Yes, old woman.” Kirthi found no humor in the thought. “I intend to avoid that. Grandfather O’Meath was lucky he just landed hard.” She keyed her own console, zooming in on the zhīzhū’s find. “It looks like this would be a good place.” A closer visual replaced the prior screen. “It’s about fifteen kilometers away, straight-line.” She highlighted features. “Just over the day-night divider. Reflection from Panlong provides more than enough light to drive.”

Obote keyed up a different location. “We can land closer. Not even six kilometers away. The flux is no stronger there.”

She glanced at Obote. “I wasn’t able to get *Rani*’s shunts upgraded as part of the deal. I asked. It’s not just the flux. If I can keep *Rani*’s electronics from getting hammered, we have a better chance of getting off that rock when we get back.”

“More than forty kilometers over the bright.”

Jwu keyed up a route schematic. It ran along a chasm to the edge of the higher ground. “Reach return estimate eight hours.”

“Four hours in the bright – each way!” Obote stood rigid, arms by his side, but hands balled into fists. “That’s insane. Eight hours in a glass truck.”

Kirthi shrugged, smiled. “It could be worse,” she opined.

“How?” Obote asked.

“It could be nine hours.” She pulled up the stellar readings on a side-display. “That next damned sunspot is going to blast out in less than a day. Damned starter flares are enough to kill us. Jwu, pick the best spot and let’s bring her down. Find your place in the shade.

“And pray,” Kirthi added.

Obote scowled. “For what?”

“For no big flares.”

“We’ll get fried in the rátha.”

Kirthi shook her head. “Zhīzhū designs in her, mixed with ours. She’ll hold.”

Obote shook his head. “The mix hasn’t been tested. A big flare could knock it right out.”

Jwu twittered. “Big flare, no problem. Massive flare due, math. Problem.”

Ajji nodded quietly. “Yes. The super-flare is due soon. I’ve been calculating it for years.”

Kirthi scowled at her grandmother, then looked Jwu in its closest eye. “This isn’t news I should be getting just now,” she accused. “Maybe we need to get out of this system now after all.” There was no point in ending the bullshit over *Rani’s* title if she and all aboard were evaporated in a plasma flume.

“Due. Week least. Month most. Not today.”

Kirthi relaxed slightly. “Oh.” Hiser math was good.

“Probably not today,” Ajji corrected.

Kirthi glared, but decided to say nothing more on the subject. She’d made her bargain. “Let’s get ready. Ajji, last chance to have the center chair. Heard you were a damned hot pilot once – Granda used to call you Queen of Helper.”

Ajji looked, perhaps hesitated. Was there a twinge of longing? “*Rani Lakshmi Bai* is not my ship.” Her voice was resolute.

“Fair enough. It’ll be a bumpy landing.” She took the center chair and keyed up the protocols. “I’m going to have to do some fancy flying. The belly gravs may fail entirely when we get down to a meter or so. The damned flux’ll play tricks I’ve never seen before.”

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Kirthi slid down the ladder, finally done with the shut-down routines. The landing had been far better than she had predicted. Magnetic flux had not disabled the gravitic drives until the pads were twelve centimeters from the surface. The landing had not been rough. “Obote, get suited up.”

Obote was already at the EVA locker, struggling into his suit. He stopped, looked at her. “Are you sure these old battlesuits are going to stay tight? These damn things were made – what, twenty-five, thirty years ago?”

Kirthi chose her own suit from the rack. “More like forty-five,” she said. “But they’re a newer design than the original suits that came with this hulk. Full Marine set-up.”

“Not helping me,” Obote replied. “I should have insisted on proper, modern Fleet EVA gear.”

“This isn’t a Fleet mission, Commander, remember? You’re just a ‘scholar’ from University, like Jwu is just a ‘historian’ from a ‘neutral’ Nest. You use what I have. Anyway, Jwu’s refreshed them with zhīzhū nanotech. Stuff they use on all of their EV-eggs. Zhīzhū like their air as much as we do. I’ll take it.”

“Great. I’m depending on a damn brain-sucker for my life. More and more comfort.”

“Keep your shit to yourself. You sound like a damned Manifester throwback. ‘Humans will inherit the stars.’ Pure bullshit. The gods never insisted that all souls were human. I don’t love them, but they’re not the worst thing in space.”

“The Cetians are acceptable,” Obote stated. “But the zhīzhū are dangerous. They have not evolved as much as they say they have.”

“If a zhīzhū says he evolved on purpose, you can bet on it,” Kirthi replied. “They can change their genes. Humans – we can’t do it, and we won’t let the zhīzhū fiddle with our ova. Who’s more xenophobic?”

“Fine, fine, you’re right. Let’s get ready. I don’t know why he’s so helpful, anyway. The zhīzhū don’t really want us here.”

“Ajji has an in with the Nests. As you know.”

“Another thing we don’t need. Old friends of Nests.”

The internal patience snapped. Kirthi whirled and grabbed a fold of Obote’s shipsuit, slammed him back against the bulkhead. Hard, so that the back of his head thumped. “Put it away. Shut it *up*. I need you just barely more than I need to waste you out the airlock. There are a hell of a lot of people I’d rather have along on the surface, including Jwu. You’re a damned Fleet researcher, almost useless.” And Idanha’s goddamn minion, to boot, but some remnant of discretion kept *that* from leaving her tongue.

Obote coughed, looked stunned. “I have – codes,” he pushed out.

Kirthi released him, let him slump down. “That’s why you’re here. On *my* ship, *my* orders. Your orders include keeping your bile down your gullet.” She tugged his shipsuit fabric for emphasis. “Are we clear?”

“We’re clear,” Obote said, nodding. His eyes narrowed. “For now, anyway.”

She released him, let him sag. She turned to her own suit rack, checked the lights. Why the hell had she just defended a zhīzhū?

No matter. Obote would bear watching, but there was nothing more to say. Ajji herself apparently retained similar qualms about zhīzhū, though she must have educated herself out of most of her dislike some seventy years ago. Hell, how many humans on Earth had social visits from zhīzhū? Her own egghead parents, her grandmother, who else? The Empress herself?

Kirthi turned her back to her own suit rack and backed in, one leg at a time. She struggled her arms in, then stood straight, shifting, tugging and turning to get everything in the rights place. That done, she keyed the front seal. The zip crawled itself closed from its starting point near the crotch up to the neck-ring. Nerve induction jangled through her body momentarily, then settled.

She stepped out of the suit-rack. The ease of suit-amped movement felt right. The suit computer was functioning properly. She left Obote behind, walked lightly to the central ladder and pulled herself up to the main deck, just forward of the gangway to the con. She looked at *Rani's* deceptively large main computer housings. In a few hours, Obote would be trying to bore into a similar computer on a long-dead sister ship.

Year: 2469 (Two Months Ago). Location: Wolf Base, Jannah Colony (Wolf 359) (Kirthi)..

In crisp Fleet dress uniforms, the swarm of nurses, doctors and orderlies medics trundled the med-pod through *Rani's* narrow corridors. The pod could have monitored itself and made this small invasion unnecessary. Idanha had been stuffed-shirt insistent. Admiral B.C. Avinashini

was allowed to go nowhere out of Fleet territory without damned pompous circumstance.

Finally squeezing into the med-bay, they lifted the pod from its portable power rack and placed it onto the newly installed main cradle. Connections to the cradle were made, tested, tested again, adjusted, and fiddled with by the one necessary technician. The rest superfluously checked monitors from remotes and on built-in displays.

It was almost laughable. If Kirthi had a grand-matricidal ideation, she could simply disconnect the power and shut the systems down once *Rani* was away from dock.

In any event, once the work was done, Kirthi ushered the Fleet crew with their imagined dirty feet off her ship. She left herself, sealing the hatch behind her. Kirthi keyed in her personal locking code, assuring herself that no one could board before she returned.

She had one errand before she could push away from Wolf Base and start the trip to Zhu Rong. She'd been summoned – not asked, summoned – to Bangalore Dome. She would have refused, based on the tone, but the signature had forced her to tamp down her anger. Per the instructions, she gave no one in Fleet even a hint of her intended destination or real purpose.

Her destination would not utterly shock anyone monitoring her. She had occasionally gone to the replica of the Dodda Ganapathi Temple near the dome's center over the years. She didn't much believe in the gods and goddesses, but the childhood familiarity was helpful. And, as Idanha certainly knew well, Ajji remained a devotee. If asked, Kirthi could point out that any dutiful grandchild would offer prayers before undertaking this sort of journey. Ajji was a stubborn, rigid, unforgiving old bitch, but that did not alter Kirthi's duty.

The travel pod Fleet had lent her carried clearance direct to the Dome's lock. Kirthi settled into the seat, set the destination, and dozed through the hour's transit. Gentle

beeping and computer voices awakened her as the pod approached.

The tropical, humid green could be seen through the massive panels. The contrast between the vegetation inside and the dead grayscale surface outside struck her as it always did. Humans held the livable territory inside the domes against Wolf 359's flares, airlessness, and pinging space junk. In the early years, the zhīzhū had attacked more than one dome, piercing the nanotech-manufactured plastics. The streaking zhīzhū projectiles had been little more than intelligent cannonballs, heavy EVA spheres with engines and specially-bred zhīzhū inside, guiding. The zhīzhū had once succeeded in depressurizing Amazon Dome entirely. Thankfully, there was something like peace between human and zhīzhū now.

The pod decelerated and maneuvered up to the docking ring. Turning, it locked its own hatch against the dock. As Kirthi got up and gathered her travel pouch, the controls ran the diagnostics on their own, determined that a proper lock had been achieved, slightly adjusted pressure to equalize the two environments. The pod's hatch slid open, let her pass through, closed behind her. The dome's hatch repeated the process.

She was dumped from the dry, near silent chill of the pod into the humid noise of the Indian replica. It was by no means an exact duplicate of Bangaluru. No one would want the mix of crumbling history and modern bustle in this controlled environment. Still, she felt herself a little homesick as she hailed a bot-cab and instructed it. The vehicle carried her swiftly away from the nearly vertical wall, zigging and zagging through the kilometers to the center.

She glanced to her left as the bot-cab passed the entry to the replica of the Bull Temple. The two curved horns carved from local basalt, taller than a person, were a tourist magnet, and today was no different. A pair of blond Euros

leaned disrespectfully against one of the horns while the guide in her sari recorded their photos.

The cab brought her to the entry of the Ganapathi temple. She authorized the credit deduction and alit, walking up toward the temple. The building carried the shape of the original, and the carvings in the receding roof layers were laser-accurate duplications, but it was not the original. Despite the dome's environment, the smells and noises were not quite right. Real age could not be conveyed.

Kirthi entered the anteroom, removed her shoes, and proceeded into the main temple chamber. She felt uncomfortable as she visited with the gods, kneeling and bowing her forehead until it touched the cold stone. If Ganesh was real, would he accept her gesture? Or would the elephant-headed god flip its trunk with a sniff of derision and walk away? She finished, got back up, went to the antechamber. A door led to the stairs for the level below the temple. She had been invited, so it recognized her, slid aside. She went down to the cleric's levels.

She was met at the lower level by an old priest in his robes. "Come," he said in Standard. For a moment, Kirthi felt insulted. Did he think she didn't know the far older language of their people?

He brought her to a door, stood aside. "Please enter."

"*Thank you, Uncle,*" she said. She edged her voice to make the point. The priest did not react. The door slid aside for her, and she entered.

The figure inside, its back to her, was robed entirely in white. No taller than Kirthi to the tent-like peak of the robe, it seemed to be studying the carvings and decorations. When it heard the door slide shut, the biped turned, lifted the hood away from the boney, brown alien face. The single horn protruding from its skull curved slightly backward. A gold band circled near the base, with layers

over-growing like bark trying to escape a metal ring around a tree-branch.

A thrill went up Kirthi's spine. Horns were rarely found off their own world, save for the few that found their way to space. They adapted poorly to the enclosed spaces of ships and colonies drilled into rock.

By the robes alone, this was a Bard, one of the independent females who lived free of clan restrictions and violence. The Horn word meant "Fire-Keeper." The fires they kept were the accurate histories of the various clans. Like humans, a Tau Cetian's hair grayed and whitened with age, though the warriors of the plains often died young. This female's hair was white; by that measure, she was at least sixty standard years old.

Kirthi tried to remember how one honored a Bard. She'd had so little practice and experience that the hand-gesture was beyond her. She hoped that a deep bow would suffice. She bent at the waist as rigidly as properly as she knew.

It sufficed. The Bard responded with a hand-sign of thanks for the respect. "I speak not Standard," the Bard half-growled. She pointed to a slip of paper on which "219" was written.

Kirthi understood. She keyed her handheld to the translation channel. "I have come as you asked."

"You do me honor. Much blood has been owed to your father's father, the first of the Hidden Horns, and his warrior-firekeeper, the second such. It is said that neither Horn nor zhīzhū will ever fully restore the blood they are owed."

The reference was irritating, despite the apparent intent. Kirthi's father had certainly not followed his father's example. Agnivesh had utterly rejected that way of life, refused to live up to the reputation of the father who'd died before Agnivesh was even conceived. Agnivesh had not been close to Ajji, either. She had spent much of his youth

following the will of her Emperor instead of being a mother. Kirthi's own attempts to live up to the legends had failed miserably.

The Bard waited patiently. How was Kirthi supposed to reply? Finally, the Bard continued. "I would sing to you their deeds."

"I know their deeds." Kirthi crossed her arms. The original gloss of the meeting was rapidly dulling down. "And I have to be off, soon."

"I am old, Kirthi whose father's father was Kameef. I know many songs. I learned the histories from the Bard Threshkelst, who learned from the Hidden Horn Bard Chengen."

"I will listen when I come back," Kirthi responded. "I really have to go."

"I shall sing it short." The Bard began her song. The tones and non-human words carried music, but it was not a music suited to the uneducated ear. The translation matrix failed to convey much of the meaning. It began with the falling of rocks, and death by disease, and a quest inside an iron beast to collect the blood debt.

Kirthi listened as politely as she could for five minutes, then held up a hand. The Bard paused. "I know the history," she pointed out. "Hard not to. I really don't know why you're here to repeat it."

"I ask that you heed the history," the Bard responded. "Do not take this journey."

"The journey has almost nothing to do with that." Kirthi uncrossed her arms. "I'm just helping Ajji collect a body for cremation."

The Bard made a sound that might be a sigh. "She has lost her way. She refused to meet with me before she left Earth. You, at least, have done me that courtesy."

"Yes, I suppose. But I have to get moving here. I have things to get done before I head out." She bowed again, though less deeply this time. "Excuse me."

“Be a daughter of Kameef,” the Bard said as she turned. Kirthi shook her head, went through the door. The damned Tau Ceti race didn’t get simple facts, apparently. She already tried that. It hadn’t worked out well.

She had a ship to hold on to, and bucking goddam Idanha and her grandmother wasn’t going to help her hold it.

Two

I have signed to sail a Yankee clipper ship
Davy Crockett is her name
And old Burgess is the Captain of her
And they that say she's a floating shame.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Zhu Rong
(Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Jwu was already in the special rose-petal rack that had been installed in the center-rear of the rátha. Its EV-egg was sealed. Manipulators and legs were tucked away; a simple power line kept it running off of the rátha's plant. There was no point in wasting its internal power.

Kirthi helped Ajji climb into the rátha. The old woman was flexible and spry for her age – but she was aged more than a hundred years. She had certainly benefitted from the long months in medical hibernation, even without a formal rejuvenation protocol.

Ajji had refused the battlesuit from *Rani*'s locker. The gear that had been loaded aboard at Sol included a pilot's vacc suit, Fleet issue, circa 2394. Kirthi had insisted upon an inspection; Ajji had at first refused and pretended insult.

She had backed down, though, after Kirthi threatened to manacle her to a stanchion and leave her behind. The suit had passed, better than new. Ajji's antique gear had been treated with zhīzhū nanotech within the last year, and not for the first time.

Obote waited for Ajji to clear the hatch and go to the right front seat. He clambered up quickly, took the seat behind the operator's. Kirthi pulled herself up last and hunch-walked to the operator's position. She powered the vehicle up again, linked into *Rani's* computer.

"Open the cargo hatch door, *Rani*. Close it as soon as we're out. Don't let too much dust in."

"Complying," the computer voice responded. "Excursion clock started."

"No wasted time," Kirthi agreed. She pushed the duel throttles forward as the rear hatch opened. The rátha moved forward and out onto the surface. *Rani's* grav thrust had cleared the dust around the ship for several meters, but new deposits were already drifting in along flux lines.

She glanced at the sensor readings. The magnetic flux reading was slightly higher than predicted. It brought with it more stellar wind, more free radiation. They would be cutting things close if they faced any delays.

She veered left, following the guidance system's directions. The chasm was only a few hundred meters away. The metallic wheels began rapidly grinding along.

Obote spoke from behind. "God," he commented quietly. "I've never seen anything like this. Nothing but rock and dust."

"We're not here for sightseeing," Kirthi looked ahead. She considered adding something to lighten her own tone, but decided to remain silent and grim.

"You must always exist in the moment," Ajji pointed out. "It is all you have. Murphy spent many years teaching me this."

“You were trained to calculate well ahead of your trajectory,” Obote responded. “Any good pilot learns that.”

Kirthi locked the course into the rátha’s computer. She maintained moment-to-moment control. The dual levers felt good in her hand, transmitting the rumble of the vehicle over the bumps. The vehicle moved well. “We’re at least four hours from the wreck,” she said. She saw Ajji’s eyes, softened her tone. “From *Granuaile*.”

Ajji whispered something to herself. Kirthi did not catch the words.

The entry to the chasm rose ahead. Kirthi slowed, looking ahead. The land rose gently; the split was the result of some long-ago cataclysm. A few meters in, part of the wall had collapsed, leaving a pile of rubble in the way. The rátha could handle the extra climb, but she had to be gentle. Kirthi keyed at the settings, brought the vehicle to just a few kilometers per hour.

She leaned forward to watch as the rátha came toward the edge. Particles swept through the ravine like water through a river. Driven by one of the planet’s streams of magnetic flux, they shimmered in the reflected light. The floor of the chasm was obscured; Kirthi made sure that sensors could read through the surface before proceeding.

The rátha climbed, bounced and tilted over the rockslide and into the chasm. Kirthi swerved around a boulder too large to drive over, then straightened the course. The walls rose to either side. The nose of the vehicle tilted downward, and the rátha dove into the streaming particle flow. The flow “splashed” and beat against the clear material.

The rátha leveled as it rode along the floor of the chasm. The headlights shone through the surface layers of particles. The stream swept to either side and up as the rátha pushed forward. It was another illusion of sailing along rolling seas, the prow of a boat or ship creating spray as it plunged through the waves.

“I hope the zhīzhū's survey was good,” Obote commented. “I wouldn't want to have to back out and try again.”

The zhīzhū grated some sound out. “It's a zhīzhū,” Kirthi shot back, talking over the non-human. “It can manage simple math.” She pushed the power back up, let the vehicle pick up speed. “But I'll back up and take the open surface if you'd like. It'll be quicker. More radiation out there in the direct sun. Ionizing radiation. Better tan for you. I'm fine with the shunts taking it. The rātha can handle it.” She cleared her throat. “Maybe.”

“You're *really* a bitch,” Obote snarled.

“And you're *really* about to walk back to *Rani*.”

Obote seemed to realize that it was wise to say nothing. The zhīzhū again gave its equivalent of laughter, this time a quiet chuckle of glass scraping against steel that died slowly away.

It was relaxing to hold the levers and control the power to each row of wheels. The computer still micro-managed the separate wheels, applying force where needed to clear a rock or maintain a straight course, but Kirthi was effectively in control of the craft. They travelled in silence for over five minutes.

Finally, Ajji broke the silence. She again spoke in Kannada. Kirthi felt something settle in her chest. Ajji had rarely used Kannada, even with family. “*He was not beautiful, like his mythical namesake, you know. Not nearly as beautiful as your Grandfather Donal. He was not at all a proper man for me – Euro, Christian born, bastard-born of a noble father and one of his assistants. Short, with an oversized nose. He was either self-assured or arrogant. And he preferred an asinine nick-name, ‘Murphy,’ to the name his parents gave him.*”

“*I didn't know he was the man for me when we met. Or perhaps I denied it. I did not even believe that he was*

reasonable – a tool of his lover, the Lady Zhaohui, and the nobility. I had listened to so much foolishness.

“I learned different.

“He was an infection. Slow to allow his deeper self to be seen. An addiction. I did not make my choices because I loved him. I simply loved him. It was never a choice. I tried to choose to resist. Resistance was pointless. He helped me make the right choices.

“He fought with mixed fury and joy, killed when he saw no other choice, but regretted it at his depths. He found ways around killing. He preferred to talk. Lived to talk. He loved to sit and listen to a story, and then tell one. And then another, and another. As the drinks flowed, and the feast was served, and another feast prepared. He would rather make a friend than kill an enemy. That was Cuchulain O’Meath, your other grandfather.”

Ajji paused for breath. Kirthi could not recall the last time she had heard such a long speech from her grandmother. She was not sure what to say, beyond the trite. She found herself slipping easily into Kannada, though it had been years since she had been in Bangaluru. “You will see him again soon,” she said. “We will bring him home and cremate him.”

“His soul shall be freed to rejoin the Oversoul,” Ajji agreed.

There was quiet for a time. Ajji gazed out the windshield as the rátha moved forward along the floor of the ravine.

Jwu spoke up. “Observations higher stellar wind unexpected,” the zhīzhū commented. “Recalculating expectations.”

“You do that,” Obote muttered. He fidgeted nervously.

Kirthi looked ahead. The track kept moving through the dust flow, pushing billows as it did. “You have rarely spoken of those early times to me, Ajji. And you have never spoken in detail.”

"You were enamored of the grandfather you knew. That was to be expected. And your own parents – they sometimes thought me out-of-step. I would still kill a zhīzhū. Your father understood Donal better, because Donal was purely of Fleet. Disciplined, though your father chose not to take on that service. Your mother was Donal's daughter, and could not understand why I never married him when I had the chance. Why I loved him enough, though, to arrange her marriage to your father. And, granddaughter, the records of those things exist."

"Records aren't memories, Ajji. How did you first meet Murphy?"

"I knew of him long before we met. All of Fleet knew of him. We were at odds with the Jin Jun, or so we wanted to believe. Fleet draws the simple, honest citizens. Few of us are of the Imperial nobility. We could advance and learn if we joined Fleet."

"The Jin Jun are still so often the extra sons and daughters of the highest nobility – those who had begun as Agents and administrators after the Mother's Pandemic."

"Yes, Ajji, that's all in the history books."

"I am 105 years old, child, but it is rude to call my life 'history.'"

Kirthi looked for some hint of a smile, or humor in the old woman's voice. No such hint revealed itself.

Her grandmother continued. *"The Emperor and his brother, then the First Jin Jun, died, both too young. The circumstances were never proven to be assassination. Parliament had no choice but to put the young Emperor to the throne, with a regency."*

"His youngest aunt, Zhaohui, was old enough for the task that fell to her. She became the head of the Imperial bodyguard. She had already learned her politics, and she used her position well. She was married – a man named Chengen, a marriage of pure convenience. Loveless in all

ways – the uglier whispers pointed out that he and Zhaohui often found the same men attractive.

“She took her lovers as she desired, mostly with discretion. One, though, was noted – a young, arrogant Jin Jun whose Irish mother had shamelessly bedded Lord Ren-Ma, Centaurus’ senior member of Parliament. Some say he also bedded Zhaohui before he died. Murphy’s half-sister hated her for that, as she hated Dechtire, Murphy’s mother. Regardless, Zhaohui took the boy into the Jin Jun against the wishes of the half-sister and the father’s widow.”

“Gods, Ajji, such ridiculous drama over normal human breeding.”

This time, Ajji’s face revealed her emotional response: a quick scowl. *“There are reasons for traditional morality, if it needs any reasons.”*

“You broke with tradition. And much of your culture.”

She sighed. *“The gods exact a cost for every such decision, child. Trust in this. The costs can be paid over generations. Your costs have not yet been tallied in full.”*

Ajji paused, then spoke again. *“Zhaohui’s lover was, of course, Murphy. His hair was much more red than yours, of course. He was about twenty-five, she was almost forty. He had just returned to Earth after years as the first human to live among the Horns. He had broken the rules to do this, of course, defied the Jin Jun and Imperial Law. Defied Parliament, and the House of Knights. Interfered with the Horn clans, lived with them, rode their beasts with them. He became a leader, an advisor to the warrior-chief who befriended him. Fahnisht, he was called. The Horns could not pronounce Murphy’s surname properly, called him ‘Kameef.’ He loved them.*

“He saved them by breaking the rules. He made humanity see them as people, almost human. The Manifesters might have won the right to colonize, had he not fought them. Murphy and the Horns learned from each other. He worked out some of his wildness. He gave them

a voice, his own, in Parliament, when Manifesters illegally colonized."

"He attracted Manifester attention," Kirthi countered. "He divided the Empire. He goaded the Manifesters into the Cetian Genocide."

Ajji smiled. *"At most, he widened the divide that was already there. Manifesters made him an excuse for what was in their own hearts. And yes, he was loud, obnoxious, and always too independent. Zhaohui used his independence to further her own goals, though she could never truly control him. He went out, put his nose where it was not supposed to be – and found other noses there, doing worse. She found ways to encourage him – often as simply as forbidding what she wanted him to do."*

"He sounds like a child."

Ajji pursed her lips, nodded. Did one eye twitch with amusement, or was it hidden annoyance? *"Not unlike."* She stretched her neck slightly. *"I knew of him, of course. I shared the common views in Fleet and the human population. We yearned for new blue-green worlds. We remember, somewhere deep, what our world was like before industrialization. We do not like the fact that new frontiers are rare."*

"I saw him and the Jin Jun and the House of Knights as unreasonably restricting expansion, and sometimes even restricting defense against the zhīzhū. A good offense was a proven defense at Jannah. Fleet officers whispered that the Jin Jun were stirring up the zhīzhū. They were initially blamed for the attack on the Fleet-sponsored – Manifester sponsored, really – Groombridge settlement. I myself did not at first accept Fleet's sole responsibility in the Groombridge Rout." She cleared her throat. *"All of those needless deaths."*

"He disobeyed another order, more direct. One Zhaohui wanted obeyed, I'm sure. He made sure that a crew of Jin Jun observing the zhīzhū at Alula Australis

could divert a messenger torpedo from its hard-programmed course. Zhaohui, stubborn to stupidity, had the messengers programmed only to jump back to Sol, and to communicate only in Jin Jun codes. Murphy drank with someone, more likely slept with someone, and obtained boards that could be independently programmed. This was before he met me, of course. The Jin Jun observing at Alula Australis used the reprogrammed messengers when they saw zhīzhū ships massing to attack Groombridge.”

“That was the warning you intercepted.”

“Intercepted? The messenger slid over the lip and almost collided with my Gandiva. I was simply in the right place at the right time. I could do only two things: run away, or fight to delay the attack on Hibernia and the Groombridge colony. By the will of one god or another – probably some mischievous Celtic god, or the Fire of the Horns – I destroyed a number of zhīzhū spheres, alerted Hibernia, and survived to get medals.”

“You say this like it was nothing.”

“I was trained to do it. I was afraid that I would be eaten half-alive by a zhīzhū. Desperate fighting was my only option. My Gandiva was destroyed in the battle. I ejected into space, was picked up by a comrade before I died. I was ill for a long time after.

“The first time I saw Murphy, he was the Emperor’s personal guard at the medal ceremony. At the reception after, he managed to offend both my mother and Quayle, the Manifest figurehead.” Ajji paused. “I should have married him then. He wasn’t more than thirty, but he saw the solution to the zhīzhū border conflicts which Fleet did not believe possible: find a way to communicate common interest with them.”

“He and I met again once, near Jannah. He was rushing in from Groombridge. He was training a crew of young Jin Jun in survey and messenger work. He was not authorized to be at Groombridge, so he of course took them

with him into that forbidden territory. He was hoping to walk right in again, as he had with the Cetians – find a way to talk.

“Instead, he found a Manifester ship outbound – the ship that carried Bartlett and his staff. They were making their first attempt to destroy or weaken the zhīzhū with disease. The ship got away. Murphy rushed back to Jannah, knowing something was happening, not knowing quite what. I was part of the Gandiva squadron that dealt with his arrogance, wondered whether – as even the honest members of Fleet thought – the Jin Jun were again stirring the pot.”

Ajji smiled slightly. *“Whenever he infuriated me, I would remind him that I should have shot him out of the void then.*

“Not many months later, I was in Yi Tan’s Reach, reassigned, dealing with a human piracy problem.” She paused a moment. “My mother caused the problem by giving Manifesters the codes of the mothballed ships they stole. She also caused my reassignment, closer to Manifest Destiny. She hoped to win me over, or at least protect me, I believe.

“And there, in the Reach, I met Murphy the third time. He kidnapped me, for all purposes, along with Urwah Grunon. He was going to use us as witnesses against the Manifesters, but the dam was already breaking. We diverted to Shānhé-Wòtu when Manifester bio-weapons were killing most of his beloved Horns. From there, we were caught up in the attacks on both the Emperor and the zhīzhū.

“Murphy never questioned the morality of protecting the zhīzhū. He simply did it, and brought us along – made us essential. He warned the zhīzhū in advance, even though they were never known to use human-style messengers. He simply hoped they would pay attention. To him, of course.

“‘Communication by action,’ he called it. Simplicity. He was more brilliant than even he knew. One zhīzhū listened to our messages, watched us shoot our way past Hibernia at Jannah. Hogajue-One understood our messages then, in both human and zhīzhū terms. In human terms, we were sacrificing for them.

“In zhīzhū terms, though, the sacrifice meant more. Hogajue understood that we would die far from our kind. We would lose against a more powerful ship, never return any core memory to our ‘nest.’ That is what a zhīzhū fears most. For them, rebirth is a certainty, so long as another zhīzhū can sample the dying core.

“I fell in love with Murphy as we pushed Granuaile past all endurance. I nearly killed him twice, learning the squeeze-out maneuver. But I saw him for what he was, and came to love his core.”

The guidance system beeped quietly, interrupting. The chasm was shallow again. A beam of light slanted through the top of the track. The shunts and polarizing systems dimmed the harshness of it. Kirthi took manual control, not because the automatics couldn’t do it better, but because she wanted to handle the vehicle herself. She saw a crumbled part of the wall, almost a ramp, and aimed the rátha for it.

The rátha ground up the rise. Scrambling for traction, it balanced a moment, then teetered. It felt like it would slide back. Kirthi pushed the dual throttle all the way forward, then turned the wheel on the left. The sharp-edge ridges of the metallic wheels bit through and pulled the vehicle down onto the slope below, momentarily bouncing on its suspension.

“Let the automatics run this damned thing,” Obote complained. “You’re not much of a driver.”

Kirthi looked ahead, saw a half-meter tall bump of rock through the swirling dust. She aimed the left side of the rátha for it, accelerated. The avoidance alarm beeped,

trying to draw her attention to the smoother path to the side. Kirthi ignored it. The vehicle lurched and jostled over the bump. Obote swore.

"You were already betrothed when you chose Murphy."

"Yes," Ajji responded. "Tradition. My mother of course arranged the match. I had no real choice. He was a third cousin, a miserable man. He was also involved with the Manifest Destiny Movement. He was the pilot of the ship carrying out the first zhīzhū genocide attempt. He was the first human to apply the squeeze-out. Brilliant, but hard, cold, entirely centered in his own ego."

"I discovered myself very happy to try to kill him. I was almost as happy preparing to die with Murphy. We would have died, perhaps for no good reason – but Hogajue-One arrived. Together, we managed to skip the dead hulk off the atmosphere. The virus would not be delivered to the zhīzhū colony."

"You haven't added much to the history books," Kirthi commented. "It doesn't even sound exciting," she added in Standard.

"Most of the time, it was exhausting. For weeks, Murphy had no relief in engineering, I had no relief in the con. Urwah and Fahnisht carried us food, washed shipsuits, took care of small things. Otherwise, they sparred. Urwah learned what the Horns were, and who he really was."

"Murphy – he was too short, and not beautiful, and impossible to dislike. I kept trying to dislike him, and he kept – he kept obviously wanting me. He was never rude about it, but I felt his desire for me. I wanted him to a shameful degree, too, and he knew. I could not hide that from him. The redheaded insanity. I tried to kill the thought. Duty, family, culture. Avoid being a mere conquest. All of those things, I reminded myself."

"I hid from him almost the entire return trip to Wolf, and then longer still. We still had much to face for the

Empire. I managed to stay free of him until we were both at Shānhé-Wòtu.

"I finally decided, there, that I would have him. On proper terms only." Aiji smiled. "I threatened to kill him if he ever consorted with another woman. I think he appreciated me for that."

Year: 2396 (Seventy-three Years Ago). Location: Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV) (B.P. Avinashini).

The funeral pyres of two days before had quickly given way to wide-ranging discussions. Lanna, suddenly made Urwah's teacher and confidant, found himself listening to Murphy – "Kameef" as the Horns called him. The Horn agreed with some points, disagreed with others. He had quickly adapted to the use of an earpiece for translation, and had taken the opportunity to speak directly to her.

"You at least appear healthier than that albino," he said. "Not like Ooh-rah, but also unlike some sickly thing in a dank, wet place."

The English translation had hardly been complimentary. She wondered how much less so it was in the Horn language. "Thank you," she said, simply. She placed palms together, gave a slight bow, wondered if he would understand the gesture.

Lanna went on. "You stood by Kameef, and by Fahnisht. A Keeper by her First, and her Clanlord. You, too, have the unseen Horn. I begin to see that there may yet worth in your kind." The Horn Tentlord took up his earthen cup and drank down all of the sour-smelling ale that had been poured for him. He wiped his mouth with a leather-clad arm. "Be sure, Affi, we may choose to come away from our plains in some day yet to come."

Avi considered the statement carefully before responding. She mimicked the tone and structure that had come through the translation matrix. “Be sure, Clanlord, that I will *choose* to show you what is above your plains, should you ask to see. I will choose to teach your best riders to guide our ships.”

The Horn Clanlord threw his head back, made the half-baying sound she now recognized as something like laughter. “Kameef has found his match in this one,” the Clanlord said to another Horn. “She seeks to make *Kameef* the Keeper of the Fire.”

Murphy came over, drawn by the boisterous burst and his name. From his keying at the handheld hanging at his waist, Avi suspected that he had heard the conversation. “There has been no joining fire yet between us,” he told Lanna. “Nor will she ever be only a Keeper.”

“The joining fire will burn tonight,” Lanna replied. It was not so much a prediction as an order, superior to inferior. That much of Lanna’s tone and stance she could determine.

Perverse as he was, Murphy might choose to refuse an order from Lanna. Lanna was at best a new ally, not yet trusted as Fahnisht had been. She watched him carefully, dreading the rebellious streak. She noted the beginning of his broad grin with relief. “There shall be.” He turned up his face to address her eyes. “With your consent.”

She reached a hand out to him. “You have that. You also have my sworn blood-oath.” She bent her lips down to him, hesitated a moment, then let him kiss her. She ignored her own conservative upbringing, ignored the Horns murmuring in the background about the strangeness.

She was given little time to prepare, or to worry over matters that usually consumed many months for proper Hindu brides. Chengen, Murphy, Urwah, and she still had to prepare reports, messages and more for the House of Knights. Lanna and the other Cetians pulled at Urwah to

begin creating order in the new Clan he was creating out of the ten to twenty percent of surviving local Horns. The Manifest biological genocide of the zhīzhū had been wholly averted; the Cetians had not been so lucky. Only their own tough immune systems had prevented total extinction.

Avi considered it sufficient to locate red cloth for an entirely makeshift covering and to download the most basic of prayers from *Granuaile's* computers. There was comfort in the haste and lack of pomp. Rushed, she would have no time to over-think, no time to reconsider.

As the upper rim of Tau Ceti slid below the horizon, the Horns gathered for a new Fire. No bodies graced stacked wood. As Urwah's Keepers brought sparks into flame, Avi quietly recited the prayers to Agni as best she could, and then to other deities.

The ceremony progressed, a confusing mix of Horn customs and Hindu. She and Murphy circled the fire as was proper; some kind of grain was tossed to celebrate. Gold was exchanged, far more precious on this metal-poor world than it would have been in Bangaluru. Taking his cues from Lanna and Chengen, Urwah decreed that his Tentlord Kameef's life would be ordered by the Warrior-Keeper "Affi." Finally, Murphy and she drew new creases along their jaw lines with Urwah's ceremonial knife.

She and Murphy finally sat together. She looked around, saw only two human faces apart from her husband's and her own: Urwah, still young, and Chengen, older than he should be. Her father was absent, still on Earth, likely still held on suspicion of treason. The Admiral – her mother – had escaped again to deep space, no doubt commanding the remaining rebellious ships she had stolen. None of those she might trust from her years in Fleet were present.

Avi reached out again, took Murphy's hand. She squeezed hard. Her voice was suddenly hoarse as she held

back tears. “You are my only family now. Perhaps the only human I can trust.”

He let her squeeze as hard as she could, saying nothing, not moving away, not flinching, not making the grip a contest. No joke deflected her raw honesty. He simply let her hold him, as hard as she needed to.

Finally, she relaxed her grip, and released her last doubts. “Bring me to our bed, Heathen.”

Avi let him help her up, knew the urgency of being with a man – and, for the first time, the freedom to take him as he took her.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

“We had peace for almost ten years. Seven years of civil war, but finally ten peaceful years. We had finally begun to trust that the Manifesters were done. The few Manifesters that were left were scattered. They had no resources for any massive attack – almost all their ships were destroyed.” She frowned for a moment; perhaps some conflicted emotions had never found peace. *“My mother died in the Battle of New Peiping, along with most of their other leaders. We thought Bartlett died with them. We were given time to be something new.*

“Your grandfather and I finally took Granuaile exploring. She was designed for exploration. She stood up to the harsh use of war against brother, sister, cousin, but her true joy was in deep space. She was so much like your grandfather – he wanted to meet new people and sit with them, talk, tell his foolish lies and exaggerations.” She fell silent a moment, gazing out at something inside her memory.

"I had not known I would enjoy such freedom before I met him. I had not been raised to the freedom. The traditions were strong in me. Earth spent generations recovering from the Pandemics. Peoples were more isolated than they had been before. New ways wore off, old ways returned. I would never have married a Euro, I thought.

"Murphy showed me the wider universe. Freed me to decide who I would be.

"We made good use of the new freedom – two habitable worlds to our credit, one truly blue-green and without sentients, and enough other useful systems to keep us busy. He never ceased to look at the next system, to tell me to plot the next jump.

"And those jumps were splendid. We were followed outward by humanity. We helped re-establish the Cetians as well, and gave them a place in Empire." She glanced backwards. "No Horn warrior could have been found to come here with us. The Horns understand genocide too well."

Ajji paused, perhaps thoughtful, before continuing. *"Urwah and Soraya spent the time birthing human babies to the Clan – the first humans truly integrated with the Horns. The Hidden Horns are few still, but they are valued.*

"The zhīzhū were handling their own internal dispute their own way – mostly talking, occasionally sucking out each others' brains." She tried to hide the slight shudder of revulsion. "Zhīzhū trade vessels were docking at Jannah, though. Humans found their way to Alula, such a marvelous and complex system. The zhīzhū learned to simplify their speech for our 'primitive' minds.

"Murphy and I both had deposits in the bio banks. We were discussing finally having a child. Your grandfather wanted that. Odd, for such a wandering soul. He needed to live in that eternity. I was never so sure. My own

mother was a – not nurturing. I was concerned that I also lacked the ability. And always, always, there had been something else to be done first. But I was becoming brave enough to consider it. I was not yet fifty, after all.

“And he was settling enough that I thought he might not forget to raise a child when he was noticing the next odd planet. ‘Home and hearth,’ he was beginning to say. ‘A cottage in Dundalk.’ I would have lived there with him, even in the cold and damp. Though I think he would have come to Bangaluru in the monsoon had I asked.”

“You never did.”

“Of course not. Murphy would never rest in one place.

“We discovered that Bartlett had survived. He had fooled us, no surprise. Cloned his own body and left it for dead. He’d still been working, those ten years. The remnants of the Humanitas Church and the Manifest Destiny Party were somewhere on the fringes of zhīzhū space, hiding where they would not be sought. They were still intent on winning all of the habitable worlds for their vision of humanity.” Again, she went silent. This time, it seemed, the memory behind the eyes was unpleasant.

“Bartlett had produced an entirely new range of viruses aimed at the zhīzhū. He knew that the zhīzhū would be immune to any variant of the 2395 virus. We had preserved it by leaving them a rock full of it. The zhīzhū had taken the virus apart, piece by piece, death by death, to understand it better than Bartlett had.” She again shuddered. “They had the benefit of sharing memories through the taste of dying brains. Many zhīzhū died to prevent genocide using that virus.

“The Manifesters still had agents in Fleet, elsewhere in the government. They learned what we learned. The ‘why’ of the ‘what,’ action we thought of as a kind of bestial hunger. We learned it was preservation of knowledge. Like writing, the zhīzhū use ‘tastesmell.’

“What we learned, the Manifesters were passing on to Bartlett. He must have been amused. Or beside himself for missing the obvious. A zhīzhū sucks brain tissue from its dying companion to preserve information. They had done the same to dying humans to learn to understand us, never understanding how this revolted us. This is being normal for the zhīzhū, like all of us: species brilliance mixed with species stupidity. Even when they tasted our revulsion, they failed to understand what they tasted, until Hogajue-One spoke with us in ‘primitive’ human language.

“Bartlett targeted zhīzhū instinct with his new virus. This much we know. He created an encephalitis that would be passing from zhīzhū to zhīzhū in multiple ways – and especially by the last sharing of brain matter. It would attach at the ‘tastesmell’ receptors. It needed only to be delivered to zhīzhū worlds.

“This time, they did not have ships to waste. They could not hide openly in an asteroid belt, nor jump rocks and drop them secretly into long orbits. They could not hope to pretend that a sentient species’ extinction was an accident.

“They did not desire to pretend. They had been genocidal too long. They could not understand their evil, any more than the Admiral...my mother...any more than so many humans understood their own evil.

“Instead, they scavenged for every messenger torpedo they could buy, steal, or salvage. They equipped them to carry thousands of doses of infection, programmed them to home on all of the zhīzhū worlds. It would be both airborne and carried in brain matter. Multiple routes of infection would ensure rapid and deadly results. The disease was designed to mutate rapidly to thwart zhīzhū attempts to bring it under control.

“Intelligence finally gave us the clues we needed. We were able to track the Manifesters’ ships on their supply runs. Murphy and Urwah went ahead – Urwah and his Horn Warriors went with Jue-Two. Murphy got me near to

Hibernia, *then pushed Granuaile to the limit. Alone. Granuaile came in close to the hot-jupiter.*

“I had brought Hibernia, to make sure that we could destroy all of the messengers. We needed to prove human good will again – the ‘Must’ Nests would happily have launched a fleet against Jannah, and straight on to Earth. Murphy knew that we had to have a major role in ending the Manifesters.

“Hibernia had to be seen in this battle. The zhīzhū knew her name. She had the pride of a crew loyal to the Emperor in 2395, when so many others turned. When even her commanders turned, Hibernia’s pilots were loyal. Your grandfather Donal led the pilot revolt. He was second to Murphy in my eyes, but second to so few others. I commanded the mission as a whole, but left your other grandfather in operational command.”

Year: Approximately 2416. Location: Alula Australis (B.C. Avinashini).

The bed groaned as Murphy pushed upward, she down. His climax triggered another in her. She held herself rigid, letting the pleasure take her. Finally, the waves passed. She rolled off and to the side, lying beside him.

“That has to hold you for the next jump,” Murphy teased. “Will you manage?”

She kissed his cheek, wrapped her arms around him. “I have more concern for you.” She rubbed a long, dark leg over his pale legs. “Insatiable man.”

“I’m slowing down.”

“The noises of this bed disprove *that* lie.” She reached out, ran her long fingers along the ornately carved bedpost.

The passion having been slaked, she allowed her mind to return to pressing matters. She reached to the shelf for

her handheld and keyed for verbal access. “*Granuaile*, status.”

“Status unchanged.”

Murphy stretched. His red hair was fading to a strawberry brown with streaks of grey. “*Hibernia's* not due for an hour yet.”

“I must shower,” she said. She sat up. “I will not smell of our bed when I take command of the task force.” She got up and walked to the door, not bothering with clothes. She knew his eyes followed her as she walked away.

The lav was across the shared space. She crossed and entered, went straight to the shower cube. *Granuaile* registered her entry; the water began flowing as soon as the door was closed behind her. She reached for the soap, began lathering.

Murphy came into the room, whistling. It was the tune he often hummed or whistled. A sailor’s song that spoke of leaving and returning and missing was a joyful dance at that tempo. He had sung it for her first when she asked him to, sitting beside her at their wedding fire, the words adding the sadness of separation from her past. She preferred the happy jig to the farewell – though the words promised return, always.

Murphy opened the door and pushed in behind her, cupping her soaped breasts. “Water hog.”

“Arrogant pygmy.” She turned in the small space, began soaping his shoulders, kissed his forehead.

Murphy took up a separate soap bar and slid it between them, began lathering her in more personal locations. “I’m looking for grey. I’ll pluck any I find.”

“I will end your manhood if you do any such thing.” He laughed.

They allowed the shower to be long and intimate. When they finally rinsed the last of the soap, *Hibernia* was overdue.

Both became more businesslike, toweling off and pulling on shipsuits. They went to the con. Murphy sat at the main console and called up the scans. "Son of a bitch was supposed to be here," he cursed and growled. "Dammit, he started ahead of us."

Avi touched her husband on the shoulder. "*Hibernia's* big. Harder to move. He can't be far behind."

"We need that damned ship," Murphy sputtered. "Fleet has to be *visible*. Are you sure we can trust that damned American? They've got the Manifest bug deep, some of them."

"Donal MacPherson is loyal. You know that well. You distrust him because he is tall." She gave a rare, indulgent smile.

"I distrust him for better reasons."

"I have never regretted marrying the red-headed *pygmy*."

"Good." Murphy keyed the console in front of him. "We're tight on time, though. The Musts will be jumping out in under two hours. The Realities can't be ready for three, and they're outnumbered."

"It should not matter who finishes this." Avi stood straight. "We are showing that we are here, united."

"It matters, Wife. Four peripheral lobes and one central make their brains smarter, not more flexible. They're almost as hard-wired as *Granuaile's* main computers."

"You tell me what I know so well, Husband." The mildness of her tone disguised her annoyance.

Murphy impatiently keyed another active scan, as useless as it was to do so. "They'll believe we're really on board with this when they see it. Action as communication."

"I agree. They must see a human carrier. The Gandivas must arrive even if they are late."

“That brings us back to that Buddha-damned red-headed yak you went to flight school with. We need *Hibernia*. They know her well.”

“*Granuaile* is a human ship, beloved. And her Lead Jin Jun is more trusted by the zhǐzhū than any other human.”

“Buddha Christ. Show some proper disrespect.”

She repressed a sigh. “There’s no time for that. *Granuaile* must arrive with the Must ships.” Avi reached over him to the console, keyed a sequence. “I’ll wait here for *Hibernia*. The lifeboat –”

“You will by all the goddam fires of hell do no such damn-fool thing!” His face was suddenly flush, his voice well raised. His passions were always nearer the surface than he preferred to admit.

She kept her tone even. “Jue-Two is nearby, if I need help. And we both know I need to be on *Hibernia* for the squeeze-out at the other end.”

“MacPherson has helm specialists.”

“Remember *Vancouver*. Half *Hibernia*’s size. A tighter structure.”

Murphy set his jaw, said nothing more. *Vancouver* had shattered when Fleet brass-warmers had ordered it to attempt a squeeze-out. Thousands had been dumped into space to die. “Fleet idiocy. Dammit, we need *you* at Zhu Rong. You and I go together.”

“‘Action as communication.’ *Hibernia*’s late arrival communicates as much as your being there in *Granuaile*.”

Murphy’s face grew still more red, but his tone became decisive. “You have no right to be right when it might get you killed.” He reached forward, keyed comm. “Urwah, Jue, new instructions. Avi’s going to wait for *Hibernia* in the lifeboat. Watch my woman here – pick her up if need be. You stay where you are until *Hibernia* arrives – that sphere of yours will outrun the old hulk easily. I’m going now – I intend to get to Panlong before the zhǐzhū fleet

pops in. I'll be looking for any sign of the Manifester base, or their damned ships. O'Meath, Lead Jin Jun, out."

He turned back to Avi. "Can you pre-program a squeeze-out?"

She shook her head. "We have discussed that before. The squeeze-out depends on understanding the exact shape of the quantum foam at the exit point. That cannot be predicted. We make adjustments as we go, just as the zhīzhū."

"Then help me calculate the closest possible safe exit. We know that the base is on Panlong's inner moons. Probably L-II, from the intelligence. I need to come in just outside the well, conserving course and speed."

Avi sat at the left console and called up the navigation protocols. She checked all of the variables, then programmed entry and exit. She touched the final key. "Programmed and locked," she said.

Murphy had been checking the lifeboat systems while she did that. "Ready to go. You have enough air and power to get to Home Nest, if *Hibernia* doesn't show up. No hanging out here waiting until you run out of air, dammit."

"I have no intention of dying for zhīzhū," she replied. "I am more concerned for you. You will not be the *only* human at Zhu Rong. The Manifesters are desperate. Don't rush into foolishness."

He grinned. "Me? I like my ass just the way it is. No burns."

"As do I." She stood. "But you forget and play with fire." Avi repressed the chill that was about to run through her spine. She stood and started toward the rear of the con. "Help me get my kit to the LB."

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

“Waiting for Hibernia gave me time to think of myself, for the first time in three years. And I thought, and finally accepted, that I must bear Murphy’s child. Hibernia’s physicians prepared me, and quickened ova and sperm with data from the gene banks. They asked what I wanted – boy or girl, how should they combine? Should they optimize for math, or for language?”

“I calculated fifty-three possibilities before I realized: Murphy was a man to let the monsoon decide. And so, the mix was made inside me, as naturally as possible. It was what it was. I bore your father, the linguistic scholar. Murphy never had a chance to know of our son.

“Hibernia couldn’t move through hyperspace as quickly as the smaller ships. We pushed her hard, though. The squeeze-out – Hibernia was not configured for that. I helmed the exit myself, as the most qualified pilot on board. I had learned the math well in the years with Murphy. I took the first principal of the Jin Jun to heart. Ability decides role.”

Year: 2416. Location: Hyperspace, Near Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (B.C. Avinashini).

It was not the long pursuit of 2395. *Hibernia’s* long cylinder, four hyperdrive outboards and jutting fighter pylons were not *Granuaile’s* compact disk and more advanced outboards. Even twice refit, *Hibernia* was not a small, fast ship with ten times the computer and automation she needed.

Men and women crowded into *Hibernia’s* navigation bridge, aiding Admiral Avinashini in the ever-changing

calculations, giving her short breaks for naps and meals. She had almost always been alone in *Granuaile's* over-console con. *Hibernia's* power plant and pumps were not close enough to helm that they thrummed and vibrated into the base of her chair. The drives themselves were tended by their hundreds in shifts, not merely Urwah's almost-friend, the Jin Jun "red-headed pygmy" who had somehow unified two Fleet officers and a Horn Clanlord in suicidal insanity.

It was not the long pursuit of 2395. She had long since ceased wrestling with the false dilemma of choosing Murphy's laughing optimism over her own culture, her upbringing, her own traditions. Loving both had always been the unreasonable choice, because there was no choice.

Still, the similarities to the long pursuit could not be overlooked. They were again racing to protect the same competing species. Admiral B. C. Avinashini, Knight of the Jin Jun, was once again chief helm and navigation officer, because Jin Jun logic put qualification over rank each and every time. Fleet protocol would have left the difficult calculations and maneuver to an underling in the proper chain of command. *Hibernia* would fragment, and all aboard would die painfully.

Fleet logic was fortunately unacceptable, fortunately. Avi was again struggling to apply the complicated math of the zhīzhū "squeeze-out" to a human vessel never designed for such stressing.

The navigation computer began the final five-count. The navigation bridge quieted to hushed intensity. Avi began her final review of the calculations. A presence came quietly behind her. She felt a hand on her right shoulder. "Queen of Helper," a voice said quietly. "Get us through this one alive, and I'll finally forgive you."

She reached her left hand to lightly touch the top of the hand on her shoulder. "Let's hope I damage *Hibernia* less than you did at Jannah," she replied. She took her hand

away and brought it back to the console, keying rapidly. “I must focus entirely, Commodore. And you must be in Combat Command when we exit.”

“On my way, Admiral.” She allowed herself to smile as he raised his hand. He had never quite fallen out of youthful love, dear boy that he had been. Tanushri had no worries from Avi, and the benefit of the more predictable life Donal had built through his years in Fleet. Approaching forty, she was pressing him for another child, hoping yet for a girl after two strong sons.

As she had reminded Donal, though, she had to give all of her attention to the boards. She began constricting the bubble, watching the calculations, adjusting as her own calculations changed slightly. She lost herself in the symbols and simulations as the minutes first crawled, then sped by too rapidly to refine every last point of the gravitic burst that would force *Hibernia* back into normal space with eleven or twelve times the vector it should have.

She and the computer agreed to the millisecond on the appointed moment. Space-time inverted. She felt the touch of madness that gave her visions, or illusions, or some mixture poured by the gods. She tried to direct it, look for her beloved, find him, assure herself of his safety. Instead, she saw *Hibernia* from a distance, shuddering, straining; the vision shifted without warning to an airless planet with dust flowing like water over the surface and into chasms. For a moment Avi perhaps saw *Granuaile*, resting on the surface, her cargo ramp lowering. A zhīzhū EV-egg bounded up the ramp, possibly to assist him. Murphy hummed the old tune in the background.

The hallucination dissolved, sound faded away. Above the roaring of blood in her ears, she heard shouting. Red lights flashed all over her boards, went quickly to amber. The two lieutenants at maneuvering helm had *Hibernia* now, adjusting her course as she raced in-system. Others

were busy relaying orders and readings, advising the gunnery crew, doing whatever must be done.

Avi knew already that there had been deaths. She needed no report. Seven engineers, three pilots. No one would believe her if she said as much. She kept her silence.

Avi finished passing over the helm, shutting down her boards. Had she been part of the standard command structure, she would have stayed here to handle any additional navigation issues. However, every one of *Hibernia's* regular navigators was either here or following from back-up stations and handhelds. She needed to be in Combat, getting the feeds and learning what foolishness Murphy had gotten up to.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

"Seven engineers and three pilots died because we thought we would need added vector of squeeze-out. Many more would have died had I not handled the transition." She exhaled. It was not a sigh, simply a regretful sound.

"I need not have ordered such haste. Murphy, he had answered the urgency hours before we arrived."

Ajji was silent for a long time. The *rátha* rumbled along the path, stirring up dust that glittered and jumped through the local magnetic flux. Kirthi began to wonder if the old lady was willing to finish the story.

Finally, she spoke again. *"Impulse. Emotion. My beloved was too brilliant, too impatient. I am a mathematician – the best Fleet ever had, perhaps the best Fleet ever will, though I once doubted myself. Men around me wanted such doubt. My mother did not teach me to ignore men's opinions, as openly as she herself did. Oh, I*

was foolish, but still I have the habit: I calculate and consider before I act.

“Murphy – he always followed his instinct. His instincts were usually good, especially about people, but not calculated. He wasted no time, damned all consequences, trusted his own gut and luck, trusted the people he somehow led into foolishness. As he once led Urwah and I across light-years, holding Granuaile’s engines together with willpower.” Once again, she paused. This time, Kirthi was sure, tears welled in the corners of Ajji’s eyes, but the old woman shut the glands off before enough gathered to form a tear.

“Murphy located the Manifester ship before it could get the messengers beyond the deep gravity well. He wasted no thought on extended calculation. He saw necessity. He fought. We know he succeeded, because no messengers were ever seen exiting the system, nor any arriving in the zhīzhū systems they might have reached. But we have never yet learned the details.”

Year: 2416. Location: Vicinity Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (B.C. Avinashini).

Avinashini stood in *Hibernia*’s Combat Command center. She would rather have been sitting in the much smaller cockpit of a Gandiva, ready to lead the fast, deadly ships into the heart of the system. The added boost gained by the squeeze-out would make each of them more dangerous than a zhīzhū sphere.

Three Gandiva pylons had broken off as the carrier bounced over the lip, left behind in the irregularity of the maneuver. They would, perhaps, fall out of hyperspace at some point, but the pilots would be dead. They lacked the necessary protection.

Seven engineers were already dead, three more in critical condition, all battered by proximity to the drives themselves. She knew that all would be dead by morning, their synapses too disrupted to recover. The quantum fluctuations abused human neurons.

The squeeze-out had confirmed that aging *Hibernia*'s open-framed design had not been made with zhīzhū mathematics in mind. It was not designed to handle the stresses of manipulating the gravitic level of the quanta, and could not protect its even more fragile human cargo.

The remaining Gandivas were already ahead, accelerating for Panlong L-II. The plan called for a fast attack. The Gandivas had to be deep in-system before the Manifesters got out. The new delivery system the Manifesters had developed would almost certainly succeed in spreading a plague. Their deployment had to be stopped, or nearly twenty years of delicate truce would end. Murphy, Urwah and Hogajue-Two were ahead, their faster ships hunting, but not equipped to seek out and destroy the multiple targets.

Comm was busy, receiving and sending messages through the heavy interference. Light-speed delay made the problem all the worse. The situation around the hot-j had to be understood, if possible. Neither the star nor the planet intended to cooperate.

The Must-Nest zhīzhū were particularly objectionable in their jibber-jabber, switching from one cipher key to the next without warning. "Keep out," was the gist of it. They wanted the Manifesters for their own.

If they could be wholly trusted, they would be welcome to the dirty work. They were speeding toward Panlong and its rocky moon L-II, ready to fire on anything that moved. They would use even nuclear weapons if need be, contrary to their dearest instincts. Meat was not normally to be wasted, even less so the brain – but this was not normal. Waste would be acceptable, this once.

No human ship entering the system now was going to be allowed close to that rock, no matter who was in command or at the helm. The zhīzhū were afraid, perhaps rightfully so, that the latest virus design would be retrieved for future use. Even as a mere threat, it was potent. A virus spreading like wildfire, indiscriminately killing both Must and Reality nests, was nothing to be left to human discretion.

Admiral Avinashini was not to be trifled with, however. She would take *Hibernia*, her escorts and her Gandivas in close, finish this on human terms. No zhīzhū would stand in her way. What she had learned long ago she would not forget: even zhīzhū respected human stubbornness.

Urwah, somewhere ahead in Jue-Two's sphere, was not providing that hope. His head and shoulders faced her in the display. "The Must-Nest zhīzhū are in picket orbits of Panlong L-II. The Reality-Nesters are picketing the Musters. We can't get closer. Jue-Two is negotiating a truce, but no luck for now.

"No messenger-sized launches detected outbound. No sign of *Granuaile* in the mess, from this range. No sign of gravitic distortions. Murphy got them. Jue-Two's sure, even through this interference. But again, confirm, certain, certain: no sign of *Granuaile*. Big plasma flare-out near Panlong L-II's surface. Ship-sized. A power plant must have gone off."

The Admiral's lips moved, soundless, repeating an old command from memory: Aodh Agni.

"No sign of a final messenger launch from *Granuaile*. Nothing we could read from *Granuaile* after the flare. We've only got what we got. Best conclusion, *Granuaile* went down to the rock and took him with her.

"Only one transmission made it through the flare interference. Transcribed ..." Urwah hesitated a moment, cleared his throat. "Transcribed as enhanced: 'Avi...best years... next life.'"

Urwah's eyelids drooped in his dark face. He sounded as tired as he looked. "Repeat and re-confirm: *Granuaile* probably destroyed. Sir Cuchulain Padraic O'Meath is believed dead. Certainty approaches one hundred percent."

Avi felt her eyes go painfully dry. She would not show the ache in her chest. Her crew deserved no less than her best comportment. "I accept your analysis," she said firmly. "Admiral Avinashini out."

Avi signaled to MacPherson. "Recall and retrieve Gandivas ." She swallowed, found her throat suddenly dry, but continued. "Order to all incoming task force vessels: 'Respect the no-fly space controlled by the Must-Nest spheres. No deviation tolerated. All ships, close on tankers for refueling in standard order.'" She looked at the relaxing bridge officers. "Secure from battle stations. Remain at alert. Establish Gandiva defensive formations until we can jump out."

MacPherson looked at her. "We can get Gandivas down to L-II and back, Admiral. One fast recon – three wings. We'll locate *Granuaile*."

"How many Gandivas will be destroyed by the zhīzhū? To locate one hulk and one dead Jin Jun?"

Donal looked her in the eye. "Fewer than we might have lost if the Manifesters attacked the nests. And it's not *certain* that he's dead."

"He overloaded his fusion plant, Commodore. He created that command in 2395. And he is on L-II without operating radiation shunts, alive or dead. The radiation alone will kill him before we can mount a rescue landing."

"Avinashini. He –"

"My orders stand, Commodore."

"Aye, Admiral." He turned began overseeing the orders. How did he really feel about his long-ago rival's death? Was there some hint of relief in his posture?

Admiral Avinashini stared vacantly for what seemed like a long time. The command center seemed silent

around her, though there was no less hurrying and scurrying. She ignored the faces that looked up, furtively, to see if she might finally allow emotion to reveal itself on her face, or in the slant of her shoulders.

She would not, of course.

She could offer the heathen no more help. Unless he had performed some miracle, he had finally left her, as she had always known he would. The ache of the deep-hid hurt was not reduced by his manner of departing. She would someday forgive his dying young. Grief would not allow such generosity today.

She focused again. "Commodore MacPherson, I will be in my quarters." She left the con.

She took one deep breath after another as she went below. There was no slowing her racing heart, nor the pounding of blood in neck and ears, despite refusal to give evidence to others. "Next life," she mouthed toward a stanchion. For a moment, she thought she heard him say the same, but determined herself that it was just the twenty-year-old whisper of memory, his promise made long before she had agreed to accept him.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

"To this day, we know little more. We were never allowed close to Panlong again. Both zhīzhū factions have stayed on watch year after year, despite the flares and radiation. They keep their ships in orbit. They have fired on any ship that approached, human or zhīzhū. There were talks, once, of allowing the Horns to finish, truly finish, what Murphy started – to locate any remnants of the Manifester base and information. Urwah, Jue-Two and I knew they could be trusted in that."

“The Must nests were unconvinced, though. The long stalemate has continued.

“At first, they simply accepted the death rate. Eventually, they improved their radiation shunts. And still, no human or zhīzhū has set foot on Panlong L-II since that battle. The ‘Must’ nests fear what the ‘Reality’ nests would do with the virus. Both are afraid of humans using the virus, because we do not have their ability to absorb chemical memory.

“They may be right to fear us. No human but me still alive remembers the Tau Ceti epidemic.

“Jue-Five remembers me, though. SheHe remembers me as Jue-One met me. SheHe remembers my hatred of the zhīzhū. SheHe knows that I killed many zhīzhū, that my mother contributed to killing many more. That part knows me well. SheHe remembers, though, what I did in 2395. SheHe remembers the first ‘tastesmell’ of me when heshe boarded Granuaile and opened the hatch. Shehe remembers that, unlike Murphy, I was forcing myself to calculate the situation, not merely accepting. SheHe believes that I will always place such logic over hate.

“SheHe was Jue-Four only eight years ago, and went to the ‘Must’ nests. SheHe let them taste his memories of me, and they in turn let him grow anew – but not without new alterations.

“HeShe also knows how long I have ached to know that my beloved is properly consigned to fire. The last time Jue-Five visited me in Bangaluru SheHe insisted that I was rank with the smell of human grief, that it overwhelmed all of the wonderful smells of the temples and the vegetation. HeShe left early, the first time ever. That must have impelled her to argue and arrange for this special trip, dispensation – dispensation because I would never allow the secret to leave the surface.

She looked over her shoulder at Commander Bay, and then at Jwu. Her voice lowered to an almost-shamed hush.

“Jue does not understand that humans change so much with age, and so neither does Jwu. I have changed, Kirthi. I have compromised, finally, for what I...what Murphy needs.”

Kirthi began to reach over, pulled back with a moment of uncertainty. Squaring her shoulders, she reached over, touched the nearest veined, brown hand. *“You’re allowed to be human, Ajji.”*

Ajji did not react to Kirthi’s touch. *“I have never been anything else, grand-daughter. But I know why these two are here. Idanha says he respects the ancient Admiral, but he has no shame in using me, nor in using my granddaughter.”* Ajji fell again into silence.

Kirthi used the opportunity to adjust course slightly, avoiding an outcropping of rock. Kirthi brought the conversation back to the past, about which she was finally learning first-hand. *“You never spoke to him after he went ahead.”*

“The flares overwhelmed most long-range signals, both comm and sensor. Lasers were effective, but of course only between ships which could calculate the line-of-sight. Urwah did not have a truly long-range telescope. Jue-Two and Urwah received only small portions of Murphy’s transmissions. They knew that he located Clementia Astrum. They also knew that he went toward the surface. He fired off his nuclear missiles.

“Those did not destroy Clementia. So, they told me, he lured Clementia close to Granuaile herself, and he made of Granuaile’s engines a plasma cannon. This could not be doubted. The burst was bright, if short-lived. And we have seen the results for ourselves.

“Urwah listened, and watched, and hoped, but they recorded nothing but the star’s flare-signal. They listened many hours, sifted the recordings. Jue-Two heard nothing new.

“Hibernia’s comm experts sifted every bit of data, as well, while I tried to obtain permission to locate Granuaile’s remains. I wanted at least a ceremonial pyre for Murphy. He was not born Hindu any more than he was born Horn, but he respected holy fire. Agni touched into Murphy’s heart as much as any of his old Celtic gods, more than any Christian faith. The old Vedic gods are not gone because we find new ways to understand. Agni has always been part of Murphy’s life, before he was Murphy, before he was Kameef, before he and I circled the flames ourselves.

“We had to leave the system, of course. We could not remain close enough as the flares erupted again and again. We feared a superflare. The radiation from that would destroy us, even if we were not near the flare itself.

“The zhīzhū wanted us far away. We proved ourselves again, and yet we were distrusted again. They were learning that humanity remained deeply divided.

“So we left. I left him. I left my heart, or so I thought. I spent the next six months assisting in the search for the last cells of Manifest Destiny. I knew that they could not all be located, but I looked long and hard. I was efficient...viciously efficient. They killed him, and I would never forgive them.

“Then I had to go home. Your father, Agnivesh, was doing well, but I wanted him born on Earth. In Bangaluru, where I had been born. I wanted him near the friends and relatives I had, people who would raise him if I did not come home one year. By then, Tanushri was settled there. Donal and Hibernia were now based out of Earth, so they were logical choices. I bore him, and loved him for a few months while I could. The Jin Jun Admiral, though, was not allowed to have peace.

“There were more Manifesters to dig out. ‘Manifest Destiny.’ Arrogant supremacy based in bigotry. Its roots have always dug deep into the human fear and hatred of the

different, the unknown, the alien. My own mother feared and hated the alien. My father was wiser, at least caring for the non-Hindu wretched of humanity – but he died long before he could truly reconcile himself to my marrying a non-Hindu in a ceremony that was not remotely proper.

“Even I have spent my days wrestling with my love for him. I have gone to the temples many times to ask the gods to see Murphy for what he was, and who he was. To grant him his place in the cycle. Provincial of me, granddaughter, provincial, unworthy, especially as I threw Donal at Tanushri.

“Agni must consume his body so that he may progress. He and I – we deserve another life together. A longer life.”

“A calmer life, perhaps?”

Ajji smiled. *“He is a thousand lives away from the stillness of true enlightenment. I hope that I shall live some of them by his side.”*

“You said that Hibernia’s comm crew tried to sift out signals, Ajji. Did they manage?”

“Perhaps, grand-daughter. Perhaps. One badly degraded transmission. I have listened to it many times.” She keyed her heads-up with an eye-flick. The recording streamed into Kirthi’s earpiece: a man singing, unaccompanied. *“I am sailing on a Yankee clipper ship....”*

“I’ve heard you hum that tune, many times, Ajji.”

“It is a very old song from his youth,” Ajji affirmed. “He hummed it himself, often. It was fast when he was happy – most of the time. Slower when he was thoughtful. Very slow if for some reason he was sad. He would sing it out at a gathering. He sometimes sang it to me. He sang other songs as well, but this was” Ajji’s voice trailed away.

“I read that the last confirmed recording was just words.”

“I saw no reason to give his farewell to historians. It was not meant for them.”

The pinnacles rose ahead. Kirthi guided the rátha up the rise, between two that curved inward toward one another. *"It's a little like the old entrance from the street into the Bull Temple,"* Kirthi commented.

"He chose an impressive place to die." Ajji sat still, her hands in her lap, as the track bounced up the slope. The pinnacles grew taller and wider as they progressed further into the formation.

"This must have been a simple hill once," Obote suggested. "It eroded away, but not around these rocks. Something to do with the flux lines and dust streams."

"Since when are you a geologist?" Kirthi asked over her shoulder. The zhǐzhū made a quiet, rasping sound of amusement.

Lightning flickered from one pinnacle to another. The glass darkened to protect the retinas, then cleared again. Kirthi found herself listening for the thunder that would not sound through the vacuum.

Obote leaned forward. "What the hell was that?"

"Lightning," Ajji replied, deadpan.

"Of course it's lightning." Obote's annoyed scorn was patent. "What caused it?"

"Electric capacitance discharge," Jwu responded. "Same atmosphere lightning. Capacitance difference peaks."

"He's right, you know." Kirthi pointed ahead. "It's the magnetic flux, maybe the particles. It builds static. It has to go somewhere to even off."

"It likely builds in the pinnacles until it is powerful enough to fire a bolt off into the ground," Ajji added.

"We should see if we can monitor the ground ahead," Kirthi noted. "The electricity must discharge at some point."

"Reasonable," Ajji agreed. She reached forward to her own console. She keyed and murmured commands to the sensor subroutines. "I have tuned the forward EM sensors

for differential charge analysis. These sensors are sensitive, for a ground vehicle. We should be somewhat safer.”

“I’d be happier with rubber tires about now,” Kirthi responded. “All the insulation I can get.”

“The designers should have considered it,” Ajji agreed. Was there a hint of irony in her voice? No, that was just Kirthi’s imagination.

“Shunts sufficient,” Jwu opined. “Zhīzhū construct.”

“Shunts or not, we’ll be higher than the ground we travel on.” Obote shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Like a tree alone in a meadow.”

“A tree with metal roots.” Kirthi shrugged. “I’ll let you out here if you want.”

Obote remained silent. The zhīzhū gave a raspy chuckle.

The rátha continued up the slope, then crawled over a lip. The nose pointed downward again as they went into a dimple near the top of the formation. More flickers of lightning passed from pinnacle to pinnacle.

The short-range sensors called for attention. Kirthi brushed her hand through the auburn hair as she looked at the readings. “*Granuaile* is ahead.” She maintained manual control, closing on the wreck.

Year: 2463 (Six Years Ago). Location: Earth (B.C. Agnivesh)

Agnivesh was hunched over his desk, elbows resting. He supported his forehead with his hands, hiding his eyes. “I don’t understand what we have done wrong,” he said in Indian-lilted Standard. “She adores you. She has always wanted to be like you. There was never any doubt. I don’t understand, why is she throwing it all away?”

Sitting on the other side, Donal MacPherson retained his military bearing. “I don’t understand any more than you, son. She’s as smart as anyone I know – smarter than a good number. But she keeps putting smart up against orders.”

Vesh lifted his eyes. “This is worse. The worst she has ever done. They are calling it mutiny.”

There was no response.

“I should not ask, you’ve helped too many times already, but...”

“I’ve already tried, son. I don’t have the pull on this one. No one does, no one who’ll help. She torked her entire chain of command. Disobeyed direct, clear orders.”

“She was *right*, though.”

“Right doesn’t matter, Vesh. She had orders. She disobeyed. Christ, she gave the zhīzhū tracking data. They killed her senior pilot, let *her* live. Pure treason.”

“Less than...you...” Agnivesh trailed off. “I’m sorry.”

Donal’s voice was soft. “Don’t be. I simply wound up on the winning side of that rebellion, son.”

“Gods.” Vesh exhaled. “So, she will be court-martialed.”

“Yes.” Donal’s shoulders slumped. He was suddenly all of his hundred years old. “I love her, but this ends it. She’s out. There will be brig time. Possibly hard time.”

“She *saved* more than she endangered.”

“I know. She probably ought to get a medal. That’s not how Fleet works. Not usually.” His eyes drifted down. Donal himself had disobeyed orders once, fired on his own carrier. He’d killed engineers, disabled his ship. A ship that itself was engaged in disobedience of Imperial law. Vesh knew well what that had meant for humanity, for the zhīzhū, for so many.

It wasn’t enough to assuage the guilt. The old man still had nightmares. Vesh had heard him, more than once.

Vesh wiped his eyes. “So what are we left with?”

Donal shrugged. He clasped his hands together in that American way of his. “What does your mother say?”

Vesh’s lips folded into anger. “She won’t discuss it with me at all.” He felt his voice rising. “She is a stubborn old woman who thinks she has all answers that matter. This, time, she says, the answer is to just let Kirthi take what’s coming. She won’t lift a finger. May her soul be tormented in the Narakas!”

Donal raised an aged hand. “I’m disappointed. But there’s no point in cursing your mother, Vesh. She is who she is. She and Kirthi – both stubborn.”

Vesh looked closely at his father-in-law’s face. “Kirthi is too much like Murphy.”

“Your father.”

“*Murphy*.” The tone carried all the scorn Vesh could muster. “*He* never thought things out. He just – just jumped in. I’ve read Mother’s memoirs. Yours, too. Spoken to Hogajue-Four many, many times. Kirthi thinks she can do as he did. She does not even know that she is acting like *him*. It handicaps her.”

Donal nodded. “That it does. It’s not the same as when your father pulled all his stunts.”

“He provided half of my chromosomes, but he was never my father. I never knew him.”

“Your mother loved him. Damned dumb Jin Jun...” The voice trailed off. Donal’s eyelids drooped heavily, as they did more and more often. The zhīzhū anti-sunset nanotech was marvelous, but the brain could not be kept functioning forever without cost.

Agniveshi looked at his father-in-law, became silent. The old man’s chin fell against his chest he began quiet snoring. After all of these years, his father-in-law still recalled his brief, youthful romance with B.P. Avinashini. Donal didn’t always seem remember that the true love had been with Tanushri. Tanushri had been a good mother, a solid traditionalist. Years younger than Donal, she had

birthed two strong sons, and then Vesh's own long-beloved, Manisi.

Gods. Both of them had red-headed fathers. Together, he and Manisi had given Kirthi the red-headed insanity.

Vesh rested his head back into his hands for a moment. Breathing in, he centered himself. He would not give in to despair, even in this. He stood, walked into the kitchen. Manisi was still at the University, delivering her lecture in the zhīzhū language. It was that time in the semester in which she tried to convince freshmen that the zhīzhū truly required pheromone cues to encrypt and decrypt verbal statements. Their "refusal" to communicate in the half-century before his mother and O'Meath finally got Hogajue-One's attention was simple. They zhīzhū were simply ignoring nonsense chattering.

Vesh puttered, going through the cooler for food. He chose favorites for himself and Donal. Two plates were put together and microwaved in short order. One was heavily spiced, one of course rather mild. The doctor's orders had been specific. Vesh's ulcer required time to heal before he could again eat properly.

He stepped through into the study. "Father Donal, I have lunch for you. Wake up."

Donal was silent. Vesh focused closer, then set the plates on the otherwise empty mahogany desk. With a sigh, he keyed his handheld to the household monitor, keyed to medical. His office display focused above the desk. The readings were clear to anyone with a reasonable education.

The computer voice spoke in Standard. "Donal MacPherson has experienced a severe cerebral vascular accident. No notice alert was sounded pursuant to advance medical directives on record. Bangaluru City medical services have been summoned to prepare palliative care and minimal support. B. D. Tanushri and Professor B. A. Manisi have been advised, and advise that they will go to

the hospital to meet you. All other family members and others on the advisory list are being notified.”

So. Was it just his time, or had the stress of his favorite granddaughter’s disgrace decided the time? Did it matter? Would Kirthi herself take his death to heart? She was too hasty, too self-involved.

Vesh considered trying to make Donal more comfortable, but he doubted that he could really do so. The ambulance would arrive in soon enough. Instead, he picked up the plates and brought them back to the kitchen. He had them back in the cooler as the emergency vehicle set down in the narrow street.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Granuaile lay against a narrow-based pinnacle that stood between the rátha and the wreck. The main disc was tilted to port, pushed up by the remnants of the starboard hyperdrive pod. The port pod was missing, nowhere to be seen. The long lower deck was crushed; the front air lock was blocked by the pinnacle.

Kirthi brought the rátha around the port side, looking for an easy access. There was none there. She continued past, toward the aft.

Ajji looked past Kirthi at the wreckage. “This alone did not kill him. He was not so weak.”

“This alone would have killed a lot of strong men,” Obote answered. “This is a mess. Look at the gun tower.”

Kirthi took the time to glance to her left, trusting the automatics on this level ground. The cylinder behind the conning dome was sheered away just over two meters above the connection to the upper hull. Judging by the lines, it had been sliced fairly cleanly, perhaps by a

sweeping particle beam. It was combat damage, that much was certain. “Murphy didn’t give up the fight easily.”

“Died most surely delicate humanity,” Jwu added to the conversation. Kirthi considered what it must be thinking. It was perhaps focusing its attention through a single eye, as the zhīzhū were understood to do, recording the scene almost as accurately as a cam.

She continued her arc around *Granuaile* and its fluxdust-eroded crater. The aft came into view. The prior views had not prepared her for this.

The power plants and maneuvering drives of the Lady class were set entirely in the rear. The flattened external structure held the grav-pulse emitters as well as the fusion plants and generators. *Granuaile*’s rear had been half-ripped, half-melted away by internal forces. What was left of the engineering deck and controls could be seen through the gaping hole.

“Agni-Aodh,” Ajji murmured. “I was right.” She closed her eyes and bowed her head slightly.

The rear cargo lock, hidden under the remains of the engineering deck, looked as tightly sealed by rock and sand as the forward lock had been. Had it been accessible, the crushing damage to the lower deck would likely have made opening the panel almost impossible.

Kirthi turned the rátha to face *Granuaile*’s reamed aft. “That looks like the way in,” she grumbled. “I’ll go out through the top hatch.” She nudged the rátha as far forward as she could to minimize the climbing, then shut down the multiple engines. “Seal your suits.”

Three

I am bound off for California
By the way of stormy Cape Horn
And I'm sworn to write you a letter, my love
When I find myself to homeward bound.

Year: 2466 (Five Years Ago). Location: Vicinity Wolf
359 System (Kirthi).

Imperial Smithsonian's chartered mining craft would reach *Rani Lakshmi Bai* a good six hours ahead of the fuel barge. There was no more acceleration to force out of the aging gravitic systems. Kirthi could dump a little fuel, but knew that would be a mistake. *Rani Lakshmi Bai*'s tanks were expected to be empty. To come in under her own power, she would require fuel.

Smithsonian had lawyers, a charter, and politicians behind it. Kirthi would have to have the support of pure, simple possession. She had to get her claim in and registered in a convincing way. Even then, she would likely have to fight for the vessel in the courts. She paced impatiently in and out of the small control cabin, waiting

for the computer to signal for the final matching maneuvers. When pacing failed to expend the nervous energy, she tapped her fingers incessantly. When that failed, she returned to pacing.

Finally, the fuel barge was beside the aging vessel. The mining pod hovered above the domed conning deck, attaching claim buoys. The pod probably carried a crew of two; neither was outside performing EVA. Kirthi had studied Imperial salvage law carefully; these idiots had simply accepted their salary and the promise of a much larger reward than they would normally get from a few days mining.

Kirthi tapped at her console. External spotlights glared away from her hull. *Rani Lakshmi Bai*'s main disc was well illuminated. The hyperdrive outboards cast perfectly black shadows against the lower disk. Kirthi located the external fuel ports and maneuvered the barge closer. With a few more taps at the keyboard and eye-flicks, the barge extended its refueling boom toward the starboard tank.

Comm lit up. "You're too late, bitch. The fees are all mine."

Kirthi ignored the communication and continued to monitor the refueling. When the starboard tank was full, Kirthi disconnected the boom. Her fingers skipped happily over the console as she maneuvered the barge to approach the port refueling valve. Periodically, one or the other of the miner's crew again hailed her, warning her off.

Kirthi disconnected from the second valve. She brought the barge level with the forward air lock. She had come equipped with one thing that no mining pod could equal: zhīzhū-based decryption routines. While the two miners squawked and screeched over comm, Kirthi eased her docking ring up to the forward air lock at the lowest deck. The ring's probes extended and found the locking points for the derelict. The barge powered the lock mechanisms.

Kirthi keyed the decryption routines. While they ran, she checked the seals on her old suit. A chime alerted her to success. Kirthi went to the lock and touched the hatch controls. The barge's hatch slid aside, revealing the short tube extension to the long-sealed package of the Jin Jun cruiser.

Kirthi took a deep breath off the stale air in her aging suit. Walking forward, she turned the manual switch to the right of *Rani Lakshmi Bai's* airlock hatch. She heard the chuff of pressure equalization; the Lady-class vessel had somehow held some of its atmosphere despite the years. With a groan, the motors cranked for the first time in over a half a century. The hatch slid aside into its recess.

Kirthi stepped through. She keyed comm. "You can take back all of those buoys, guys. I'm on board, and I'm planning on staying aboard. Salvage crew is in possession." She closed the outer hatch and opened the inner hatch.

Now the real race began. Though all she had to do was stay aboard and stay alive until the vessel could reach port, she would be much happier if she could get through the more complicated encryption for the main computer systems. If she could manage that, and then restore main power, she could bring the vessel in and make her claim virtually unassailable.

If she had to, though, she would shoot anybody who tried to come through the airlock after her. *Rani Lakshmi Bai* was hers, and she was well within her rights to defend her claim.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

The roof hatch slid to the rear, letting out a last puff of air. Kirthi took the handholds and got a toe-hold on the back of her seat. She pulled herself up, waist-high, then pushed upward with hands pressed on either side of the opening. Kirthi crouched, reached down. Obote passed up the line-gun.

She stood, looked up, and chose a good point in the wreckage. She fired the feeder line at an angle. The nano-tip struck a bent end of frame, penetrated and sealed up into the metal. The gun fed the thickening weave up the monofilament, generating a thin cable the climbing reel could grip. Kirthi clipped the line-gun to an eye on the frame, attached the climbing reel, and triggered it. Her waist-belt tightened and she rose the three meters to the deck level. She found her footing and detached.

Kirthi turned to face the interior. The suit sensors adjusted and built a simulated full-light image. The deck was a mess, as expected. More than one of the fusion units had blown outward. A scorched repair bot was mangled and wedged in pretzel-twisted conduit. The consoles were blown; tools, spare parts and scrap were strewn throughout the wreckage. Glittery grey powder had been blown in by the local flux, thinly coating every surface.

Grandfather had run a long-ago program. He'd made the main power plants into a makeshift plasma cannon. He must have just about backed into *Clementia* holding the valves shut. He'd held the pressure too long. Ajji had done much the same in 2395, but had timed the pressure release better. She and *Granuaile* had lived to tell the story.

Kirthi picked her way forward to the port bulkhead. The hatch was still in place, but the hinges were bent. The old manual locking wheel refused to budge. She turned, went around the turret bulge to the starboard hatch. This locking

wheel was no more cooperative. Looking around, she sighted the container of primitive tools. She knelt down, pulled open the drawer that should contain the sledge.

Screwdrivers. How the hell had her grandfather found anything in his own ship?

Two drawers later, she found the five-pound sledge and short wrecking bar she sought. She wedged the prying-end in the wheel's crossbars and began hammering its external end. The wheel began to turn by millimeters, then a centimeter, then spun freely. She tossed the tools to the deck, felt the vibration as they struck. Two tugs at the wheel opened the hatch, the ancient gaskets crumbling away.

Light from outside was insufficient. Kirthi turned on her helmet lamp, let it shine into the central portion of the deck. The main computer housings were intact. None of the fine surface dust had found its way through the heavy engineering bulkheads.

"I'm into the main deck," she reported back. "Get in here."

"I'm going to wait until you're sure," Obote responded.

"I'm sure," she spat back. "Get in here, or I'll throw you the hell out of the rátha when I get back out there."

"That threat is becoming tiresome."

Jwu chuckled again.

Kirthi walked back to the massive hole and looked down at the rátha. The roof-hatch slid back again. Obote rose waist-high out, then pushed out to a seated position. He swung his legs out and over, then finally managed to stand erect on the rátha. Kirthi found herself shaking her head. He was more an old woman than Ajji.

He attached his own hoist motor to the line and started the motor. He came up, then struggled to get his footing on the wrecked deck. Kirthi pulled him in, though it occurred to her that a fall from this height had a chance of causing

death. The battlesuit, unfortunately, was not likely enough to lose pressure to make it worth her while.

The zhīzhū EV-egg clambered out the rear side hatch, four cybernetic arms and legs simulating a zhīzhū's own movement. It had no difficulty using the external rungs to climb atop the rátha. Ajji followed it, not agile or strong enough to use the roof-hatch. The zhīzhū assisted her from above. Somehow, its movements were as solicitous as an Edwardian gentleman assisting a helpless English lady. The zhīzhū secured her climbing reel to the line, watched carefully as she ascended.

The old lady stepped nimbly onto the deck, waving away Kirthi's assistance. "I'll let the zhīzhū act like I'm feeble. Not you." She picked her way around the wreckage, toward the hatch. She looked appraisingly as she went at the melted and shattered power-plant housings, the blackened bulkheads. "Aodh Agní," she commented. "He thought he could time it as I did, no doubt."

Ajji walked to the hatch Kirthi had opened. "*Granuaile* was the only other woman I allowed him to touch," Ajji commented idly, peering in. She stepped over the bulkhead threshold, Kirthi behind. Ajji walked straight to the foot of the gangway leading up to the con itself. She grasped the handrail, then stopped. Kirthi respected the moment.

The zhīzhū and Obote went immediately to the computer housings. The shielded storage was the best hope of retrieving *Granuaile's* databases. Added to what the zhīzhū already knew, the last observations and sensor readings would likely pinpoint the entrance to the caverns once used by the Manifesters.

The two began working at separate shielded cases, seeking the multiple backup units. Obote plugged a self-powered backup unit into one housing, hoping to spin up the old memory and download it. The zhīzhū was more direct, disassembling the housing of a secondary unit to remove the physical unit itself. Kirthi watched for a

moment, decided that they needed no assistance from her. She turned back toward the gangway to the con.

Ajji still stood at the foot of the gangway, looking up. Kirthi put a hand on her shoulder, slipped back into Kannada. *"Are you all right?"*

"I am mourning, grand-daughter." She swept her arm in an all-encompassing gesture. *"The most free years of a long life I spent here."*

Ajji backed away from the gangway. *"First, the cabin we shared."* She squeezed sideways between the working zhīzhū and Fleet officer. Kirthi followed.

Impact had bent and rippled the forward deck. Furniture had sheered lock-downs, bounced to overturned freedom. Faded plates and utensils lay where they had been strewn some fifty years before.

Ajji pointed out a table spoon, lying alone. "Take that up," she ordered in Standard. She continued toward the arc of cabins along the front hull.

Kirthi knelt down, looked at the spoon before she reached for it. It had a Fleet seal stamped on the handle, a ship's name.

She was suddenly conscious of the suit's cam and other sensors recording for the historians everything she saw. This spoon was a genuine piece of history: Urwah Grunon had taken it from a Manifestor-hijacked Fleet ship in 2395. It had made him realize that Fleet personnel were assisting the Manifesters, had stolen "retired" vessels. He had known, from that moment, that he faced a choice between marine loyalty and the greater loyalty to his Emperor.

Kirthi's great-grandmother, Ajji's own mother, had assisted in the theft of many, many such vessels for the Manifesters. They had all carried such ship's silverware. Perhaps that was part of Ajji's apparent resentment of Kirthi's rightful salvage of *Rani*? Kirthi reached with gloved fingers and took up the spoon. She placed it in the small sample bag hanging from a waist clip.

Ajji had continued forward, entered a small sleeping cabin. Kirthi saw through the open door that the space was almost entirely filled with a non-standard, four-posted wooden bed. Ajji seemed to be examining the grain of one post, rather than the broken post on an opposite corner. *"He had this made for us on Shānhé-Wòtu. The Town Hornless were as skilled in these crafts as any human ever was."*

Kirthi looked more closely at the bed. She had never thought of the unknown grandfather as a sentimentalist. He was a historical figure, larger than life. He and Ajji had been – practical. Nothing more.

"He is not here," Ajji said, breaking the silence. *"I cannot avoid it further."* She turned back toward the door panel, came back into the common room. Ajji stepped purposefully by Kirthi, back toward the central core of the deck.

Kirthi followed the old woman to the gangway, and up into the con.

The ceiling hatch refused to yield to the old woman's efforts. Kirthi quietly guided her down the steep stairs, took her place. She tried to turn the locking wheel by hand without success. "The hammer," she said. She went back to engineering, picked up the hammer and wrecking-bar where they had been left. Ajji was waiting at the foot of the gangway. Kirthi went up, braced her back, set the wrecking-bar, and began tapping. After three taps, the wheel budged free.

She started to back down the gangway. "You may go first," Ajji advised. Kirthi started back up, went through the hatch. She stood in the rear corridor, the access between the con and the rear gun tower. The hatch into the con was sealed tight. Kirthi tested the wheel. This one moved easily. She dropped the hammer and wrecking-bar.

The hinges were less cooperative. Kirthi braced a foot against the lip of the deck hatch for leverage. Ajji came up

behind her as she pushed, added her weight. The hatch finally swung inward on resisting hinges. Helmet lights shone through, revealing the con.

It was not much different from *Rani's* con. Built after *Granuaile*, *Rani* had been equipped with minor improvements and subtle differences. *Granuaile* had seen longer service, though, and had been refit and improved at least twice over her twenty-five years of service.

The most apparent difference was damage: walls were scorched, panels shattered. *Granuaile* had given a fierce final battle, only reluctantly died a hard death.

Kirthi looked at the piloting console at the far end of the domed con. Nobody sat in any of the three main couches on the curved front bulkhead. A sword-belt was slung over the headrest of the right-hand station; the visible hilt was carved with Horn runes. She stepped in, looking for her grandfather's body.

A mummy-dry hand protruded from behind the trunk of the main survey console. Kirthi could not suppress the intake of breath. She stepped further into the con, saw the prone body. He had been dressed in a battlesuit, save for helmet and gloves.

Ajji stepped in behind. She looked to the right, possibly touched a stanchion. *"I slept here, at my station, to avoid giving in to my desires. Even after the great pursuit. I still don't know if I was a fool, or if I did just right. I almost gave in here – wanted to, offered, and he suddenly became noble. I doubt he had ever before refused a willing woman, but for me, he became...more. His best."*

Ajji walked around the circular console, knelt beside the dried husk. *"Beloved always."* She knelt a long time, silent. Kirthi thought she heard the heavy breathing of forced-back almost-sobs.

Kirthi found herself uncomfortable in the presence of the open grief. Ajji had always been imperious, distant. She had been even more so in the past few years in her

apparent disappointment at Kirthi's errors. Reconciling that with the tenderness seemed unlikely. Kirthi moved forward to the main console. It was intact, unburned. Though there was little chance that any information remained in the local storage, she took her own self-powered backup from its leg-pouch, plugged it into the socket.

One green light blinked on underneath the surface. The console memory still held data. Kirthi waited to be sure of a full download, then keyed her heads-up with an eye-flick. Navigation data scrolled over her faceplate, gave way to a surface map. *Granuaile's* final location was clearly mapped, along with the pinnacles all around her.

Another site was marked, both with an icon and words. "Manifester Base." Grandfather had located it in the midst of his final battle. He had made sure to leave the data in local storage, available to anyone with the proper codes and a little power. He had wanted anyone looking for him to find the last known repository of Bartlett's work on the zhīzhū genome.

He'd wanted the knowledge wiped out, regardless of the fact that it could be recreated by intensive study. Ajji might have loved him, but he'd been a fool to die for that. Still, the thought of Obote and Idanha having the data without work troubled her.

There was no point in erasing the data. It would be readily located on a scan of the downloaded logs from the main storage. Obote would press for a detour to the site. Her contract required her to agree.

They could expect another surface hour each way. She superimposed Jwu's more detailed map over this one. There would be no chasm to help shield them from the direct sun. They would be depending on the rátha's shunts to protect them from high dose of radiation.

For a moment, she wondered whether she could tell Obote that the shunts were failing. She reminded herself

that they were rock-solid. He would discern the lie. He would insist on his own diagnostic, or even proceeding with allegedly questionable equipment.

There was nothing else to do. She keyed comm. "I have the location of the Manifester base. Finish your work."

Ajji walked slowly, as far around the body as she could manage in the confined space. She murmured the ancient prayers in the ancient languages, invoking the ancient Vedic gods and those more contemporary incarnations to which she had been introduced as a child. Finally, she bowed, pressed her hands together, and addressed the vacuum-ravaged face. "Agni will free you soon for our next life together."

Kirthi accepted the long silence without moving, afraid that even a slight vibration of the floor might disturb Ajji.

Finally, the old lady straightened. She turned, came to Kirthi, and touched helmets. Kirthi was momentarily perplexed, then understood. She keyed the comm 'mute.' "Yes, Ajji?"

"Go aft and access the last messenger torpedo's core. The password will be 'Kameef.' I'll follow."

"They're getting the primaries below."

"You are like him, always arguing. Go."

Kirthi exhaled, nodded. It wasn't a bad idea to have the ship's most critical data in her sole possession. She might yet have to play a hand or two of information poker with Imperial functionaries when they returned to Sol.

She moved quickly back to the con's rear hatch, back to the access. Stepping over the hatch leading down to the next deck, she went to the messenger access. It opened after several tugs. Stooping, she entered.

As she had seen from the rátha, the upper portion of the cylindrical tower had been sheered away, probably in *Granuaile's* last battle. The central dual missile lift from the deck below was twisted and mangled. Zhu Rong's

harsh light angled in, casting razor-sharp lines of light and shadow on the starboard inner hull.

A messenger sat in shadow in its starboard cradle. Kirthi knelt and inched in to the confined space, wishing she needed no vacuum gear. The battlesuit snagged several times. She positioned herself to reach for the plate covering the physical access. She opened the access, touched her gloved left pinky to the data-transfer pad. “Kameef.”

The memory core's separate power system came up, still sufficiently charged despite the years. The Jin Jun had always insisted on having the best equipment. A messenger torpedo was designed to run for home, jump after jump, refueling itself as necessary. If it could not complete its journey, it would still retain power for decades, perhaps a century, ready to transmit as soon as it was triggered.

The suit computer absorbed the data in a few seconds. Her heads-up asked whether she should erase. She almost keyed “No,” caught herself.

Ajji had wanted her to have a condensed version of the data Obote and Jwu were already retrieving. There was no reason to leave it for anyone else. “Yes. Erase.”

The finger pad glowed for another moment, then went dark. Kirthi pushed and pulled herself to a crouching position. She backed out the access panel.

Ajji was waiting. As soon as Kirthi was free, she closed and latched the access. She was suddenly limber and young, at least for the moment.

She touched helmets again. Kirthi again carefully muted comm. “That data is not for Fleet or the zhīzhū,” Ajji said. “You alone.”

“A bargaining chip,” Kirthi affirmed.

“No,” Ajji responded. “It must be kept from them. All of it. All of them. When Agni gives a bow, Arjuna finds a reason to launch arrows. Krishna helps him rationalize it.”

Kirthi set aside in her mind Ajji's reference to old scripture. The old lady's reputation had been made on

breaking tradition. “The zhīzhū don't 'spoil meat,' Ajji. They never have. And Fleet – “

“There is always a first excuse, granddaughter. *Always*. Zhīzhū who cannot *imagine* the meat-spoiling weapon can *use* it. Hogajue once threatened to incinerate a sphere to protect us. We humans have always excelled at self-interested mass murder. We hate and destroy, or even just refuse to love, because of ridiculous differences.”

“You made an agreement, Ajji.”

“I did no such thing. The agreement for landing permission was *yours*.”

Kirthi pulled back, surprised. Ajji was correct, narrowly speaking, but Ajji had brokered the whole collaboration. Was she forgetting that? Was her intellect finally slipping?

Was she maneuvering? If so, what was she expecting of Kirthi? Damn her, what was Ajji really doing? What did she really intend?

Did it even matter? She pushed the helmet back. “It can always be re-created, Ajji. We can’t un-learn the genomes. The ability to tailor viruses. A properly programmed bio-computer could rebuild the design from what we know.”

Ajji shook her head. “Human direction is needed. And the networks look for such operations. The Empire began with genocide – necessary, no doubt, the only way to preserve the one world we had. It was still genocide.

“Idanha wants this because he can have it and leave no traces of what he’s done. He can keep you silent, by blackmail if possible. More if needed.”

Kirthi shrugged. “I made an agreement. And I can be paid extra for silence. It will get me back out into the deep. Or I can just go to the deep when I’m done.”

Obote's voice came through the comm. “We're done down here. I want to get moving. And I did a log skim, confirmed your data. The old bastard found it before he died, and he recorded the location.”

Ajji looked discomfited. Her eyes raised asked the question through the visor: would they go?

“You of all people know what duty is,” Kirthi answered the brown eyes. “I made a deal. Get the observers to the remains of the Manifester base. Find it, and let them get the data they want.”

Ajji’s shoulders visibly drooped, even through the thickness of her suit. “Yes,” she said. “Duty.” She turned, looking one more time through the hatch into the shattered con.

The zhīzhū clambered up the gangway. It stopped, seeing them with two of its four eyes. “Well husk preserved?”

Kirthi suppressed a shudder. She unmuted comm. “Him? Yes. Vacuum-frozen.”

“Returning *Rani*?” There was an eagerness in its voice despite the alienness. “Permission Admiral Avinashini tastesmell?”

Ajji stiffened. She struggled a moment to speak. Finally, she spoke a single word, with all of the wounded scorn of a new widow: “Never.”

The zhīzhū seemed to jerk slightly, almost as a human might in response to a stern rebuke. For some reason, it seemed that explanation should be made. “It is not our custom,” Kirthi said simply.

“Apology incomprehending,” Jwu offered. “Not fresh meat, intellect leaving long done.”

“They wonder why most of us hate them,” Obote commented over the open comm.

Kirthi did not choose to dispute the point. She touched Ajji’s arm gently. “I’m sorry.”

Ajji regained her unreadable aspect. “SheHe cannot be different. We all carry the insistence of our genes. Even you.”

Kirthi did not have a reply. Instead, she addressed the zhīzhū. “Jwu, get the coffin. Take the ‘husk’ to the rátha. Secure it to the rear rack.”

“As you ask.”

Kirthi took a last look at the sword. Ajji must have seen. “It is not for a museum, grandchild. Horns believe that their swords have souls of their own.”

“You should take it, Ajji.”

Ajji shook her head. “No, grandchild. You shall carry it.”

“I’m not very good with a sword.”

“It should not remain here.”

Kirthi exhaled, walked over to the shattered console. She lifted the sword, took it with her as she followed Ajji out of the con.

What in hell was she going to do with a sword? Hang it over a fireplace somewhere? Rani had no fireplace. The sword would be little use without a fireplace.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Kirthi stowed the sword beside the shielded safe, then sealed and re-pressurized the rátha. She keyed her visor, allowing it to slide away. “Let’s get going.

“Miscalculation magnetic fields flare abnormal,” Jwu responded. “Ten hours massive flare.”

A chill ran down Kirthi’s spine. “How massive?”

“Double triple cubed.” Jwu jabbered for a moment, then spoke. “Joules ten power twenty-eight least.”

“It means it’s going to burn right through this orbit.” Obote ran his hand nervously over his balding crown. “It’ll follow the flux lines toward Panlong. We’ll be in the way.”

“We can go back,” Ajji pointed out. “We should turn around.”

Kirthi chewed her lip. The ground ahead was relatively smooth and clear. The rátha would chew through kilometers on the flats, get them to the mouth of the cave. “We’ll make it,” she said. “We can still be in orbit in six or seven hours. Push hard and make an early jump.”

“The shunts will hold?” Obote looked uncertainly around him at the clear walls and ceiling of the rátha.

“Shunts plus satisfactory,” Jwu pointed out.

Kirthi pushed the controls forward and got the rátha up to its top speed. The dry metallic mist swirled around and back, becoming dust devils in the rátha’s wake. She set the cruise algorithms, but maintained active monitoring of the course and operation. “I have a contract,” she said. “And I plan to beat the flare.”

Obote seemed to calm down. “Yes. It’s important. The mission.”

“When you are ready, I would like to review the logs you carry,” Ajji commented. She spoke almost inaudibly, so that only Kirthi could make out that it was language at all.

As she drove, Kirthi located the last files, uploaded into the messenger before *Granuaile* crashed. She linked to Ajji on an encrypted channel. Something called her to maintain as much privacy as possible. *“We can learn about his last hours, if you wish.”*

“Yes. I have been patient enough years.”

Kirthi queued the logs.

Year: Approx. 2416. Location: Vicinity of Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Cuchulain “Murphy” O’Meath).

“Get out of there. Avi’s due over the lip within twelve hours. She’ll be squeezing out, a fast run to the inner

system. She'll pound out every Gandiva, plus run the big guns. You don't know that the Manifesters are ready to lift."

"Twelve hours too long, dammit. Bastards are *ready*. The zhīzhū are already popping in at the other side of the system. Eight hours out, and *they're* too late. Now's the time. *Hibernia* and the zhīzhū won't be able to get a good fix on *Granuaile*, much less *Clementia*. I can get *Clementia* before she reaches orbit."

Murphy used the twelve-second delay to pull up the data they had. The Manifester base was somewhere near the body's mountainous south pole, built into the honeycomb of caverns blasted out by the 1939 superflare. The Manifesters were using the deep rock as protection from the ambient radiation of the hot-j, as well as the often violent stellar flares. They were also conveniently hidden, until it was almost too late. *Clementia*, though, had led them here on the chase.

"You're already too close. If your shunts fail, you'll get fried. Hell, you'll get half-fried no matter what. Pull out."

Jue-Two chimed in with its gravelly voice. "Concur half-horned Grunon. Evaluation mathematically sound. Not close enough to repair Human O'Meath radiation harm."

"It's the risk. I'm ending it. If I don't, we lose it with the zhīzhū. Maybe others. They might have some of those loaded for us, still. Jue, you can't keep the Musts in check if we miss this, or if they lose a lot of ships getting it. I'm ending it. For goddam good."

Jue-Two buzzed in zhīzhū apoplexy, forgetting all of its hard-won Standard. Grunon was more coherent. "Destroying *Clementia* doesn't destroy the knowledge! They can build it again and again. You're being a damned fool. Pull out!" Urwah's voice had depth of experience, the hint of a Horn growl.

“It’s a start. It has to be smashed *every* time they bloody well build it! They build it, we smash it. If we don’t, we’re giving in, and not by any stinking rancid god will I the fuck *give in*.”

“We’ll all add to system defense. We have to. Races and species won’t stop hating because you fly into a suicide, dammit!”

Rage blew out of all containment. He screamed, but there were no real words. His balled fist slammed against the console, again and again. The plastic cracked. “Auxiliary console C dysfunctional,” the computer reported. “Resetting comm to auxiliary console D.”

“Mute it,” he snapped. “Give me nav.”

The nav displays came up. Avi could have read it without hesitation, set a course in her head. He cursed at her absence; Murphy was better with the ship’s engineering functions. He simplified the loops and whorls of the hot-j and its moons to get his bearings. From that, with a few taps and keys, he gave the computer its essential direction. *Granuaile* calculated the best trajectory to the Earth-sized moon in the low, radiation-heavy orbit.

He keyed comm a final time. “You stand out there, Urwah – keep an eye out. Relay if you can. There’s a hell of a lot of interference spewing out of Zhu Rong. If I don’t get them, make sure Avi and the zhīzhū do.”

The response was delayed again. Finally, he heard Urwah’s surrender. “The Fire and Allah go with you. I will sing at your pyre.”

“I’ll still have a better voice. No pyre this week, anyway.” Murphy engaged the drives for the approach.

The hot-j gas giant Panlong loomed in the screens. No other stellar orbit was filled. The magnetic interactions between the aging halo star and this behemoth had long ago burned away the rest of the worlds, or brought them into Panlong’s influence. Hell, the 1939 flare had been visible from Earth, a lucky catch in the early days of photographic

astronomy. That had burned away a Mars-sized planet. A similar large flare was on its way, based on the zhīzhū data. In hundred years or so, the multi-lobed brains said, Zhu Rong would flare again.

The Manifesters had bet that they could hide in plain sight in such a hostile system. They had almost won their bet. They still might, if they got their last major ship out of hot-j's gravity well. If they got even a few of their messenger-based infection labs out, the zhīzhū population would be decimated or worse.

The facility was somewhere near the southern pole of Panlong's earth-sized moon, L-II. The tide-locked inner face was showered by Panlong's constant radiation. Zhu Rong's powerful but intermittent flare activity posed less of a risk, especially with the moon in Panlong's shadow almost fifty percent of the time. The intelligence reports made this more than mere speculation.

Granuaile flipped, skewed, began to brake for the descent. There was no atmosphere worth speaking of on this rock, but the dust and particles that danced and flowed in the magnetic fields and solar winds would do as a substitute. The main EM sensors were already off-line, for all intents and purposes, picking up only sporadic ghosts.

Eyeballs were the only reliable sensors. The visual spectrum was not as badly affected, though the swimming, flowing dust blurred and obscured. The video pickups, hard-wired into the ship, worked most of the time. Bursts of EM radiation distorted even those systems on an erratic schedule.

Why the hell hadn't someone given him an old-fashioned front windshield?

He could see most of the environment. Dust swirled and eddied in the magnetic winds. It was not "atmosphere," not wind, not fog. Some was metal, more of it merely charged silicon motes. It made the search more difficult.

Where exactly was that installation? What crevasse or mountain crater concealed signs of human creation? Damn, the information wasn't good enough. Maybe Urwah was right. Avi could bombard the surface from Gandivas, close the damned Manifesters down by saturation bombing.

So long as *Clementia* hadn't already launched her attack by the time the Gandivas roared in. That was the point, he reminded himself. The intelligence was certain. The Manifesters were ready to deploy. The modified messengers needed only a helpful lift away from the gravity well before they could be sent homing to star after star. They would start with the zhīzhū, of course. They still had the excuse that half the nests wanted all of the blue-green worlds for zhīzhū, as much as these vile bastards wanted all of the blue-green worlds for humans.

Murphy continued to look for any hint on the readings he could get from the sensors, any sign of the facility. He also looked for *Clementia Astrum*, the Manifesters' last fast scout. He knew it had gone down there, but the flare interference had kept him from a good fix. Two low, fast orbits produced nothing more, despite his having a better than rough idea. His lips tightened. He damned well was going to end this himself.

Tight lips gave way to a smile. He keyed comm, set it to zip and broadcast, uncoded. "Sir Cuchulain O'Meath to the Manifester base. We're almost on you. Carrier *Hibernia* and her battle group are fifteen minutes behind me. Saturation bombing will begin in twenty minutes. Surrender is your only option."

The transmission was met with silence. Murphy eventually shrugged. He hadn't really thought they were stupid enough to fall for an easy ploy. Even in this system, *Hibernia* might be scanned incoming. Gravitic ripples, at least, would warn of a large ship incoming. They would not have evidence of *Hibernia* in the system.

He would have to search, grid by grid, for some sign of occupancy – a relay tower, something.

The comm light blinked. “Give up, old man. We know *Hibernia* hasn’t come over the lip yet. We’re already away.”

Murphy’s eyes shot to the port console. “*Granuaile*, triangulate.” He keyed the sensors to follow any hint obtained.

There was no ongoing transmission. *Granuaile* gave her approximation in a cone of probability. She was certain of one thing: the source of transmission was somewhere to the north of his current position, and still on or near the surface.

A full active ping would give them more information than he gained. Murphy focused the passive sensors along the probability cone, as best he could. He looked over the readings, looking for some sign of energy production, or a subtle gravitic perturbation. Damn, with survey-quality sensors, and a bit of luck, he should catch the unique signature of a fusion plant’s gravity bottle.

Should. There were others who were better at sensor ops and interpretation than he. He missed Avi once more for all of her skills. Hell, he missed her savage insistence on killing what should be killed. If he could even hold *Clementia Astrum* here, her fighters would finish the job.

He could not locate the gravity bottle, nor a power signature. He might yet have to risk a ping. A damned powerful one. With no remotes left, he had no way of getting an EM reflection. He’d have been happy to have a flare gun to light up the dark side, but there was no oxygen to burn the old-fashioned phosphorus. A glint of light reflected from hull was all he needed to guide a nuke in.

“We’re outbound now, old man.”

“Triangulate.” He keyed again. This time, the communication came from orbit, well outside the cone. Had the first fix been so wrong? *Clementia* could not have

lifted without putting out some old-fashioned EM – bright light, a by-product of gravitic fields on high push.

Buddha's balls. At least one of the signals was from a decoy. He was being played with.

He decided to risk it. He keyed to record, then burst the signal out: "I'm only fifty-six, you maggot." As soon as the burst transmitted, he rolled *Granuaile* hard to port, began a powered dive, turning erratically.

Sensors could not help but catch the streak of light: a missile, launched from within the original cone of probability. "*Granuaile*, track back!"

The display reduced the cone. At almost the same time, *Granuaile* shuddered. "Buddha Christ almighty!" He'd been caught on the edge of the fireball. Radiation warnings squealed. A panel behind him in the con burst into sparks and flame before the breakers could catch the surge. Energy flowed along the shunt-screens, keeping him and the rest of the systems from being totally fried.

Where the hell was *Clementia*? How the hell to find her without working active EM? It was too dark out there to eyeball alone. He might as well be stuck in old-style trench warfare, lighting the landscape with phosphorus flares.

Flares.

A nuke.

His mind put the concepts together.

His internal Avi screamed against it. He would be wasting a nuke, and he needed both to make a sure kill. He had to hold one in reserve. Avi had convinced him that her way was better some twenty years ago: a little reserve, a little caution. Don't fire wildly.

He didn't have time for caution. He had to get these bastards now, while they were here to get. He keyed for launch.

"No firing solution," *Granuaile*'s main computer warned. "Tracking back yielded insufficient data."

Murphy pulled the targeting routines onto his main console, fingers and eyes rapidly keying in the firing sequence. One nuke, detonation, and second nuke before *Clementia* could react. Hogajue could run the calculations in its damned eggplant head with two lobes tied behind its back.

Buddha Christ Almighty, he mis-keyed, had to redo the last part of the sequence.

Fleeting through his head: *Clementia* had access to ground-based sensors. With the additional data Murphy's own launch and flare would provide, her gunners should have no trouble tracking back the first missile. They would be firing on him even before his second missile went off. They were close enough.

Fleeting through his head, this thought, and put aside.

Grasped the thought again. He added his own track-back sequence. *Clementia*'s counter-attack would help *Granuaile* locate her. Another few keys, and the sequence was right.

"Firing program accepted," *Granuaile* advised. "Non-optimal program. Substantial EM interference."

Murphy took a breath. The old tune snuck through his mind, pushed to a war cadence by the memory of bodhráns. He tapped the final key.

The computer would handle it all from here. His only job was to fly *Granuaile* half as well as Avi ever had. Murphy put every available erg into the drives, slamming forward at high g, hoping the fields would keep him from being mashed into the seat. He felt the g's mount against him, more than the fields could neutralize. Twenty seconds... thirty.

"*Granuaile* ordnance launch." The first missile fired off. Murphy chose a direction – down and to starboard, then to port, back to starboard. *Granuaile* swirled, g's pushing him against the left arm of the couch. *Granuaile* cut through the dust and metal swirling in the conflicting tidal forces of

gravity and magnetic fields. It pattered, almost roared against the hull as plasma shunts strained.

“Enemy ordnance launch. *Granuaile* ordnance detonation. EM reflections scanned. *Clementia* triangulated. *Granuaile* ordnance launch.”

The con vibrated as the second missile flared away. Murphy rolled *Granuaile* to port, to starboard, brought the bow up, pushed into a new climb. Climbing was inefficient, but he was too close to the crags and spires. He rolled *Granuaile* again, this time to starboard, again to port.

Light glared through the hull, followed instantly by concussion. *Granuaile* lurched, spun corkscrewed her way upward. Another panel to the rear burst into smoke and flames. Red lights flashed on the engineering display. Critical information was pushed in front of his eyes. He keyed rapidly to adjust the power, accepted *Granuaile*’s decisions on system backups.

He was on the edge of the explosion, pushed up by expanding gases as the unnatural wind of airless dust. In the pain of it, not knowing what was next, his lungs insisted on forcing out a scream. His skin felt warm as the light diminished, as *Granuaile* brought herself out of the spin. Several panels to the port rear burst into sparks and flame, unable to hold back the pulse.

“Plasma shunts failing,” the computer calmly announced. Murphy smiled grimly. The shunts shouldn’t have held at all. He and the computers should be fried. Instead, the computer’s fiber-based cores had prevented it from giving out so that he could hear the report.

Granuaile had always been a tough old vessel.

He pulled the main sensor display up. Head throbbing with pain, he risked a full-active scan.

Comm lit up: “You didn’t get me, old man.” This time, a visual was included. It was a young man with a lean face. His hair was light, with perhaps a reddish tint. It was no

one O'Meath had dealt with before. He keyed in a search to see if *Granuaile* had any information on the youth.

The face disappeared from the screen. "Just wanted you to see who's going to kill you, O'Meath."

The facial recognition program returned a probable identification: Gundar Thorrsen. Young, only twenty-six. He had disappeared years ago, like his mother, Sigard.

Murphy had once known her, and the child. She had joined the Manifesters at some point, one reason he would have nothing more to do with her. She'd been a good pilot. If the boy had learned from her, his skills would be solid.

An old man was going to have to teach the youth an extra trick or two.

"*Granuaile*, power up the cannon. We're going to need to get in close to finish him."

Comm beeped again. "You know something? We're not doing anything new. You know that, right? You call it genocide. Stupid old man. The Zhangs did it, too. Began with it. They didn't save the world after the Pandemics, they *made* the Pandemics. We're just saving the race again."

Murphy couldn't help smiling. "You think the Jin Jun don't know the history? Buddha Christ almighty – we make sure that every member of the Imperial Family *knows* it in their deepest soul. Dr. Zhang did – well, the road to Hell and good intentions. You think we're just bodyguards, messengers and busybodies? Kid, the Jin Jun are sworn to protect whoever's on the Throne – unless the git turns on the citizens. Then *we* get to take him out.

"*Never* try to justify genocide." Murphy shut down the channel.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

The rátha pushed ahead. The ground ahead was generally smooth, with the occasional eroded boulder in the way. Kirthi guided the rátha around every major projection, giving as wide a berth as was practical. Independent suspension suspension on each wheel handled smaller bumps. Forward radar kept her aware of major obstacles. The driving was becoming monotonous.

Obote seemed to be snoring in his chair behind them. The zhīzhū had said little since leaving *Granuaile*. Aiji had been engrossed in the logs, as had she.

She ran a finger over her nose, around her lips, down to her chin. Both nose and chin were his, she realized. The genes had expressed themselves outwardly, perhaps inwardly as well.

A burst of light cut through the rátha before the glass could go opaque. Kirthi saw the first bolt to the right, out of the corner of her eye. She snapped her neck to look right as rocks and dust sprayed the clear hull. The trac rocked on its suspension. Obote awoke, screaming and coughing. Aiji winced. Kirthi turned the rátha right to evade, though that made little sense.

The burst was followed by another, and then more. Lightning flickered all around the trac. Kirthi gave up any attempt at evasive maneuvers. Silent prayers were all she could do as the sudden storm continued.

The rátha rocked from side to side, wheels sometimes coming off the ground. The motors stopped and consoles grew dim as a deafening crack sounded. A blazing halo of many colors engulfed the trac for a moment, all colors of the spectrum, barely controlled by the suddenly opaque windows. Kirthi found herself holding her breath.

The storm ended as quickly as it had come. It had lasted no more than ten seconds. The consoles returned, and the motors could again be heard humming through the chassis.

“Electric capacitance discharge,” Jwu commented. “Shunts worked fine.”

Kirthi laughed, perhaps a little more hysterically than she would herself prefer. “We had to be here to see it.” She swiveled the rátha on its wheels, revolving a full circle. A boulder three times the rátha’s size showed the blackened, fresh-shattered surface she expected to see. Other areas of blackened ground could be seen through disruptive eddies in the particle flow. While she looked, she let the on-board run a full diagnostic of the systems.

She stopped the rotation when they were back on course. “We were just grazed,” she opined. If we’d been hit by the whole force, we’d be walking home.”

“Don’t just sit here.” Obote’s voice was edged with fight-or-flight hormones. “Let’s get the hell away before another one builds up.”

“Estimate approximately thirty-seven hours,” Jwu commented.

Ajji keyed at the sensor console in front of her. “You may want to check your math,” she commented. “It seems to be wrong on the flare progression as a whole. Zhu Rong’s output is well ahead of the curve you suggested when we left *Rani*. More energy into the flow probably means more lightning out.”

Kirthi looked at the readings herself. “It’s not that bad,” she decided. “We still have plenty of time.” She put the rátha back in gear.

Year: 2463 (Six Years Ago). Location: Vicinity Jannah (Wolf 359) (Kirthi).

Alarms blared through the cabin, and her wrist suddenly tingled with internal warmth. Kirthi awakened instantly, jittery with the stims. Gandiva W43 wanted her attention, wanted it now. She pulled herself to sitting position, calling up her personal display with an eye-flick.

A gravitic ripple had run across the Gandiva's bow. The computer had already made a rough calculation of amplitude and resonance. Whatever had come in-system was big and a perfect sphere. Its pilot had used the squeeze-out, violating the Ross accords.

Damn, damn, damn, damn. Some Must Nest had gone rabid. Kirthi checked the medical readings. She'd gotten the optimum stim dose, and her sugars were where they should be. She discovered her fingers and hands shaking as she disconnected the wrist ports and let the tubes retract into their bulkhead recess.

Only moments were needed to get from her bunk to the pilot's cabin. The boards were already up, lights low. She reached for her helmet and clamped it down.

"Preparing targeting information. Tighten up with me, Radish, looking sloppy as usual."

Damned call sign. When had Fleet become like the Jin Jun, nicknaming its pilots? It wasn't even the intended word, "Reddish," for her dark auburn hair. And her trajectory was fine, only a point out of optimum. Gakido was riding her again.

Orders were orders. "Aye, Gakido." She set the navigation computer to calculating the trajectory. She would need to add a small bit to her boost, adjust her angle only slightly.

Gakido's and her targeting data began streaming along a peripheral display. The inbound sphere was zhīzhū, of course. Despite the unusual efficiency of the shape in

hyperspace, it had not been adopted by the Empire. Fleet was no longer deeply infiltrated by the old Manifesters, and the Humanitas Church had dwindled in numbers, but some prejudices would take more than half of a century to die.

The ship was a subNest of TGdfgrambtes – Nest 1916, in simpler terms. She made no attempt to pronounce the name, despite the education she'd had from her parents. It sufficed that it was no Nest to ignore. It carried a -4 rating on the Jue-Three Scale, marking it a Nest that refused to accept other species' rights to exist as more than food. Only a -5 rating would be worse; only seven nests currently held such an honor.

Nest 1916 might well be due the upgrade. The sphere had exited hard and fast, its velocity well above anything appropriate for Wolf. Its vector would take it to Jannah in less than thirty minutes, before *Hibernia II* or *Siam* could position their Gandivas. Other defenses might well be ineffective. Kirthi keyed comm. "Assault vector," she advised.

"I already knew that," Gakido retorted. "Joint venture the guns and get it all ready. Guns free. I've requested permission to arm the nukes."

By whatever gods were worth believing in, the long-feared attack was coming. In their dwindling numbers, the Must Nests were making a last thrust against humanity. Something in Kirthi was relieved, something else troubled. Her parents' life work had been wasted. Better communication was not bringing peace and cooperation beyond a few individuals. Species still needed to compete, kill each other.

"Wolf Base to Gandivas W42 and W43. Confirm, confirm. Incoming zhīzhū sphere declared hostile based on Ross Accords violation. Weapons free. You may arm and fire n-tipped missiles. Repeat, weapons free, including nukes. Encrypted unlock codes appended to voice. This message will repeat once only."

Kirthi wasted no time listening to the repetition of the message. Instead, she ran the encrypted message. Her gunnery display went green, with the flashing blue bar declaring the right to end the sphere efficiently.

“Range in three minutes,” Gakido noted. “Prepare your firing solutions.”

Kirthi felt blocked, stupid. She did not like or appreciate the zhīzhū as her parents did. Nonetheless, she was stunned that any Nest would attack Jannah so directly, and with so little force. The single battlesphere could damage Jannah, kill thousands, but it would never survive the retaliatory pursuit.

Were these zhīzhū simply trying to force the war on the remaining Nests?

A light flashed on her right peripheral display, and the computer added verbal. “Directed communications incoming. Source: zhīzhū sphere.”

Directed comm? A tight beam, aimed straight at the nearest human craft? A small fighter carefully designed to minimize sensory return? Kirthi shook her head. Jannah was further back in the same line. The zhīzhū were sending – what? A warning to their intended meals?

Kirthi keyed comm to the center display. A text message scrolled up in Standard. Kirthi read, jaw dropping with disbelief.

“Human Jannah people warning coming attack Human Jannah people Nests TGdfgrambtes and YntfFwudssw attack four spheres. This sphere not attack human Jannah change intent join attack abort attack obey Ross Accords not attack human Jannah attack human Jannah change intent join attack abort attack obey Ross Accords. Advance warning seventeen your minutes advance warning seventeen your minutes. No kill subNest subNest attacks other subNests.”

Gakido’s voice came over comm. “Ignore all zhīzhū comm.”

“Standard policy,” Kirthi replied. Did she need to be reminded? At most, this zhīzhū was telling them when more spheres would be popping out.

The targeting computer was providing firing solutions for missiles and chaff canisters. It assumed that the zhīzhū sphere would launch its semi-sentient missiles as soon as it could. Though the zhīzhū had not changed in their refusal to use nuclear weapons, accuracy and maneuverability remained their primary threat. They had found non-explosive ways to make the high-velocity attacks more effective as well.

“I have a firing solution,” Kirthi reported. “Repeat, I have a firing solution.”

“Hold and update. Let’s get in nice and close. They won’t fire for another minute or so.”

The zhīzhū signaled again, with the same text-only message. This time, it had added a word at the beginning and end of the message: “Urgent.”

“Ignore the spiders, Radish.”

“What, you think I trust them?”

“Just ignore them.” His tone was as always more superior than it needed to be. He wasn’t that much better a pilot than her. They had both scraped through Utah at the lower end of the ridiculous bicycle-based initial training. Did he think she would side with them just because her parents had chosen to study their psycholinguistics?

Trust. Something about the word bothered her, with the zhīzhū. If they could be trusted, a battlesphere wouldn’t be here, breaking the Ross Accords. Two Nests wouldn’t be giving into the basest of territorial instincts, and a subNest wouldn’t be here warning of the betrayal. Trust.

Betrayal – a zhīzhū could negate an agreement. It could ignore the Ross Accords, determine that the Accords did not serve zhīzhū interests, no matter what the Reality Nests had to say.

“New solution,” Kirthi reported.

“I’m taking this one,” Gakido said. Damn fool’s going to sweep right into my first nuke. No sign they’ve launched their own attack yet.”

Betrayal. Breaking an agreement. They could not be trusted.

But they also could not lie about it. That had been drummed into her, time and again. A zhīzhū would not lie, either in communication volunteered or in answer to a direct question. Any verbalized statement they made to a human was at the moment of the statement accurate, as far as the zhīzhū could make it.

The zhīzhū running that ship wasn’t betraying the Ross Accords. It was betraying the other subNests about to bounce over the lip. It meant what it said – it would be turning its attack on them.

“Gakido, hold, hold!” Kirthi keyed rapidly, read the message again. “It’s not lying to us.”

“Told you, don’t pay attention. Damned lying zhīzhū.”

“Zhīzhū can’t lie. It’s part of their nature – the way they communicate directly. They don’t understand the concept. Won’t tell an untruth.”

“Damn! I told command to pull you. You think you know too much. Follow orders. We take that sphere out.”

“We’re all alone out here, and two or three other spheres will be jumping in. We don’t have the firepower to handle them all.”

“Base will be launching fighters. *Follow orders. Out.*”

He was right. Kirthi knew he was right. Even if the zhīzhū on this sphere had somehow chosen to break with its fellow subNests, it should be halted. There was no reason that the zhīzhū could not finally have learned to lie themselves, if only to human “cattle.”

She likely would have heard as much from her parents if they had.

Her mind raced back and forth. She owed nothing to the spiders, didn’t even like them. Childhood visits to the

Nests had given some familiarity, no trust. She had seen enough of the zhīzhū habits.

What would Grandfather Donal have done?

She knew what he had done. He'd fired on his own carrier, his own people. He'd killed several of the mutinous Manifest Destiny pilots under his own command. He'd trusted Ajji. Their actions had launched the long voyage to the Ross Accords, impressed the zhīzhū.

She wasn't about to fire on her superior, but she had to convince him that she was correct. "Gakido, we have to believe the message. Go to weapons hold."

"Let it go, Radish. Or stand down. Just shut up."

There was nothing left to do. At best, she could hope that he wouldn't cause new problems with the zhīzhū. They would have to get used to the idea that humans could make mistakes. Human brains weren't so well ordered as zhīzhū brains.

"Take my firing solution, work yours from it," Gakido ordered. "Two nukes will take her out."

Kirthi's fingers suddenly felt numb inside the gloves. She tapped at the console, made the correct eye-flicks to follow the order. Her mind was going fast, though, faster than she could ever recall. The targeting mechanics became easy. A few minor corrections were all that she needed. "Ready."

"Ten count." Her board accepted the order, showed the count-down. It crawled down, though it should have gone too quickly. Kirthi kept her hands away from the console, her eyes steady, asserting no control over the process.

At "three," she keyed comm, setting all channels for maximum through-put. "Zhīzhū sphere, firing nuke. Defensive fire, aim *here*." She keyed out the coordinates in both Standard and in zhīzhū mathematical symbols.

"Bitch!" Gakido said more, but it was too late. Both missiles were away, both streaking through the black toward the zhīzhū sphere. The zhīzhū vessel responded

moments later, its semi-living projectiles screaming toward an intercept.

A distant fireball erupted, too early. Kirthi aimed a rapid pulse of active EM, watched the returning bounce. Her warhead had taken out Gakido's missile as they had closed on the sphere.

The spider-ball barely evaded the expanding gases. "Recall your missiles, zhīzhū, save them for your own spheres," Kirthi suggested over comm.

Print scrolled up on her comm display. "Gandiva W-43 not now target." The zhīzhū missiles continued.

"Oh, shit." The realization was late. Gakido had already started pumping out EM countermeasures and firing off his chaff canisters. W-42's particle cannons were charging. Kirthi's fingers were light again, her eye-flicks rapid as she put out her own defensive measures. Sensors showed the returns: there should be enough out there to kill off the zhīzhū missiles. Just in case, Kirthi called up a second nuclear launch. It would detonate close, give both of them a sunburn.

She was too late. Two of the zhīzhū missiles somehow skirted the worst of the defenses. They plowed through Gakido's Gandiva in rapid succession, tearing it into pieces. Debris spilled out and spread along its last vector.

Gakido's emergency beacon signaled faintly. She keyed, locked into the telemetry. There was no sound of breathing, no heartbeat detected by the EKG. The suit itself was almost fully depressurized. She could go after him, possibly get him within an hour, but it would be a recovery mission. There would be no rescue.

Kirthi hung her head. Her entire body went cold, trembling. Damn, damn, damn.

She paid little attention to the rest of the battle. She was too numb, too disinterested. She could not help but discover that she had been correct. The zhīzhū in the advance sphere took on the spheres that bounced over the

lip a short time later. Rapidly, efficiently, it deployed its missiles as each of the other four was getting bearings. It used its missiles sparingly to spill zhīzhū bodies into the blackness of space.

Kirthi did nothing to assist it. No other human vessels were close enough to join the fray before it was over.

The zhīzhū sphere transmitted again, but its message was clearly for Wolf base. “Leaving leaving no pursuit will defend will defend no pursuit.” It must have carried a large fuel reserve to be ready to jump back out without skimming. Or, perhaps, it knew of a convenient ball of ice somewhere far outside Wolf 359’s inhabited zones.

Kirthi watched the ripples bounce over, then shut down her systems. She wanted to die, but could not take her own life. At the very least, though, she would not simply return to base to be arrested for mutiny, murder, perhaps even treason.

The charge did not matter. She, at least, would not be carrying out the deserved death sentence on herself.

Year: Approx. 2416. Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Cuchulain “Murphy” O’Meath).

“*Granuaile*,” he croaked. “Comm on.” He was surprised at the effort it took to speak. Smoke, screaming, radiation had all taken their toll. Nonetheless, the computer heard, complied. “Record for messenger while sending.” He shifted in his seat, looked at the cracked and burned consoles in front of him.

The effort of clearing his throat was wasted. He found the water tube hanging from the arm of his seat. With an aching, half-locked left arm – was his elbow shattered? – he brought the tip to his lips, bit down. Several long drinks

later, his throat felt somewhat better. His throat cleared this time.

He turned to the pick-up. "I doubt you guys can get any of this," he said. "I'll record it and send it out in my last torpedo. Maybe it'll get back. All these flares are screwing up the systems pretty badly, though. Other beatings, too.

"*Clementia* is dead. Confirmed kill. Repeat, *Clementia Astrum* is dead. No sign she launched the virus. The virus messengers. No sign. Keep your eyes open, though.

"*Granuaile* is done. Life support – maybe three hours. Main power's blown. Engineering – pieces. Not as good as I thought I was. I've taken some radiation.

"The sensor suite is hashed. The computer is babbling. Playing with its lips like a two-year-old. I've taken some eyeball readings. I'm not sure, but I think I'm on ground. Auto brought me down.

"The worst landing I've ever made, Avi. Soft, but still the worst. Missed putting her down on a damn big spike by a few meters.

"God, I'm sorry. Gods. The one you always talk about when we visit the Horns – Agni. The one you say visited both planets. Tricky bastard, gave you folks bows, told the Horns not to use 'em. I can't always tell if you're serious about that. There won't be a Fire for me, the way I always thought there'd be, Avi. You won't be there to bash my bones and make sure I escape."

He felt himself fade, drowse. Perhaps it was radiation, or perhaps internal bleeding. He could drag himself below and get some help from the autodoc. Live perhaps a few hours longer. Long enough for someone to find him. Avi would look. She would look, for years if she had to. She was his wife, the only woman he'd ever found savage enough to keep him loyal. She would look.

He roused, licked dry, cracked lips. With painful effort, he reached for the water tube built into his chair. He found

it, brought it to his lips, managed a sip before his fingers gave way to the pain.

"I was trying to say . . . explain. I finished this one. I finished the bastard. Bastard.

"Urwah, you asshole...yelling at me to come back. I know *you* get it. You've been Clanlord for what, twenty years? They follow you...you brought them *out* here for this fight. It's the *fight*, Urwah. Not winning. Fighting. Until we're dead, and smashed, like *Granuaile* and that crazy old bastard Kameef. Like Fahnisht. Fahnisht, no fire for me here, unless you can come back and arrange it. Don't know how you guys feel about that. Avi expects me back, but I'll be born a rock or something."

He coughed, dry and hoarse. The spasms hurt his chest. He felt weaker.

He forced his arms to move. With effort, he pulled the manual release, opened his safety harness. The short man pushed himself up against the arms of the chair, wincing as he did so. He found the strength to lock his knees and stand, then hobble. He supported himself against scorched panels and with hand-holds secured into the dome. Some of his right palm stayed behind on a handhold – radiation.

With effort, he came to the rear display.

He keyed replay. The glint of light against black formed in the display. Sensor extrapolations produced the visual representation: *Clementia Astrum*, closing on *Granuaile* from the rear. They were ready to finish Lord Cuchulain Padraic O'Meath, Jin Jun, lover of zhīzhū and Horns over his own kind, the bastard who'd somehow turned the human Empire against humanity itself. *Granuaile* was defenseless. She had no missiles left. The particle cannon was gone.

Comm had come on then, he remembered. This close, the star's massive flared activity could be punched through with a tight beam, laser-to-laser. The golden-haired youth had again come on-screen. "You'll be dead soon,

O'Meath," the younger man said. "The zhīzhū-loving runt. Where's your traitor bitch? We want her, too."

The words hit harder the second time. Traitor? Avi was the most loyal person he'd ever met. Dumbass didn't get that he was the traitor to all human decency.

Murphy slumped over the display, faded again into unconsciousness.

Year: 2465 (Three and One-Half years Ago). Location: Bangaluru, Earth (Hogajue-Five).

She – the humans were of one gender only, unable to cross-fertilize – gestured up the stone stairs. "I am going into the temple," she said. "Enter if you wish. I don't think you will offend the gods."

"Non-carnate beings interested in humanity are quite improbable," shehe replied. It gestured with its forward-most limb. "In addition, humans are often uncomfortable with the presence of zhīzhū."

"As you choose. I suspect that you could use a chat with Ganesh, though. You need some wisdom."

"I have been made very wise over the last decades," Hogajue-Five replied. "Wisdom is necessary to guide our dealings with humanity."

"Being stuffed with information collected from many other individuals is not necessarily wisdom." B.C. Avinashini adjusted her garment, a human covering called a sari. "I will not be more than fifteen minutes." She turned and climbed the five or six stairs, the container of white liquid in her right hand.

She was slower, less agile, than she had been when they first met. Heshe smelled the signs of human aging. She had few years left, even with the advanced medicine available, even with the zhīzhū nano-treatments that

infested her meals during these visits. A zhīzhū of her age would have accepted the need for final sampling; if the individual had been useful, shehe would have been offered regrowth.

The human biological clock was making time short. In their ability to divide groups, rethink, and revert, they remained aloof. Many could be called allies and trading partners; far fewer could be considered friends of the zhīzhū. Many would still consider wiping the zhīzhū out, if they could, though the Manifest Destiny organization had long since shucked its name and visibility.

As a rational zhīzhū, Hogajue-Five did not necessarily consider that logic incorrect. Like the Must Nests, such people understood that the limited blue-green, habitable worlds were not easily divided among competitors. That logic was less expensive than the logic of cooperation and commerce between such different sentiments.

Indeed, that logic was attracting Nests again. No human was yet aware that three Nests had left the Reality viewpoint, rejoined the Must viewpoint. These Nests might well lead others back to that fold. When that became known to the humans, they would regress to their basest instincts in self-defense.

In logic, Hogajue-Five would not blame such regression. In hisher first iteration, heshe had been most impressed by B.C. Avinashini and Cuchulain O'Meath. B.C. Avinashini had made her declaration clear: she would defend her race without quarter, as she had before. She had also, however, left room for cooperation.

And so herhis first iteration had cooperated with the humans, leading to hisher premature ingestion and budding into the second iteration. Cooperation with humanity might not have been necessary. The zhīzhū might well have contained the first outbreak with logic, rapid calculation and direct action.

There had been no guarantee that any other zhīzhū would comprehend the nature of the threat in time.

Hogajue-Five integrated visual information from all four eyes. The humans in the vicinity stayed a careful distance away, even when passing to enter the building Avinashini called a temple. The old woman creating ropes of flowers at the top of the stairs worked deftly, keeping her attention on the alien intruder. A human child in female-identifying clothing stood with her, alternating with speaking and gesticulating toward the zhīzhū. Most of the humans walking to and fro were thin, used to living without excess.

One woman walked up to a man who was cooking some aromatic concoction of vegetation. The male was, at least, not searing meat. The two jabbered in the rapid encryption format Hogajue-Five recognized as Kannada, though shehe had never sought to decrypt it. It had never been necessary; B.C. Avinashini and most other humans had been polite enough to communicate in the dry “Standard English” used by most humans in space travel.

After the jabbering, small discs – coins, the humans called them – were exchanged, along with the flat confections prepared in the pan. The woman left, happy.

The small human seemed to be disagreeing with the women assembling the garlands. Finally, she put her hands on her hips. Her face rolled up into an expression reminiscent of O’Meath’s. B.C. Avinashini had once named it for Hogajue-Two – “petulance.”

The child bent down, snatched up a group of flowers, and came down the stairs. She approached the zhīzhū without hesitation, raising the flowers up in front of the forward-most eye. Hogajue-Five did not understand the words she spoke, but correlated the gesture with other information. The child, shehe determined, was offering the zhīzhū a gift.

Aware of humanity’s ability to be offended, Hogajue-Five extended its forward-most limb and took hold of the

flowers, careful to hold them around the stem. The colorful petals were reminiscent of the growth pods in which zhīzhū grew, the seating petals on zhīzhū vessels.

Hogajue had no face to express a visual cue for the child, and most scent cues would be alien to the human. Calculating, it brought two hands together. Inclining herhis body slightly toward the child, heshe spoke as clearly as it could. “Namaste.”

The child responded with a facial cue, the baring of teeth they called a smile. She, too, brought hands together, bowed slightly, and smiled. “Namaste.” The child turned and ran back up the stairs.

Human offspring were more open to the new and different than most zhīzhū. Youth was a time for them to be foolish. How many other zhīzhū would be able to resist the scent of succulent youth? Hogajue-Five isolated hisher third lobe to consider the potential permutations of this observation.

A moment later, B.C. Avinashini’s unmistakable form emerged from the interior of the temple. Hogajue welcomed her as she reached the ground level. “I was offered these, and accepted. I presumed, correctly I hope, that they were not meant as a meal?”

“You presumed correctly,” the oldest living human acquaintance agreed. “The old woman herself, or the child?”

On observation, the “old” woman on the steps was not more than two-thirds of Avinashini’s years. It was interesting that the flower-weaver was seen as “old.” Heshe stored that observation for later consideration on the human mindset. “The child.”

“Yes. Children can sometimes see possibilities we cannot.” Avinashini pointed over to the man selling his grain-based confections. “You won’t like those, there’s no meat in them. I will happily buy you one if you choose to adventure.”

“I appreciate the offer, but decline.”

“I thought you would.” Avinashini started walking along the path. “We will pass the Bull Temple as we go.”

“Bulls are male cattle. I find it ironic that you worship an animal that other humans consider food.”

“As you once considered humanity a potential food source,” B.C. Avinashini responded. “The irony is not lost on me – especially as a good Hindu would never raise cattle to eat.”

“Hindu ethics entirely escape a species which requires animal matter for survival.” They walked away from the Dodda Ganapathi Temple with its oddly tiered pyramidal roof of ornate representational statuary, toward the adjacent Bull Temple. After five incarnations and much contact with humans, Hogajue-Five still did not understand the need to build monuments and commune with non-existent beings. No logic could be found in worshipping beings who could not be proven to exist.

“That is the Bull Temple,” she said, pointing out the structure. “Nandi, the bull, is the mount and gatekeeper Shiva, the god of transformation.”

“You choose to spend your time with Ganesh, not this one. You humans have many non-existent incorporeal beings from whom to choose.”

“By my puja, I thank Ganesh for having given me wisdom over the years.”

“I do not thank non-existent beings for the benefit of sensible factual analysis.”

“No, you don’t. Yet you come to Bangaluru this morning and decide to just take a walk with a superstitious old lady. Why?”

“I came as ambassador. The Nests still value my abilities to find comprehension between our species.”

“Bangaluru is not the Forbidden City. I am not the Empress.”

"You are valued by the Nests, you know well," Hogajue-Five responded. She calculated the tone and pace of the words, concluded that Avinashini would not be patient with her questioning. Eventually, she would ask a question to which an incomplete response would be impossible. She could not lie in such a case. Thus, she volunteered, to avoid the questions. "I come with a gift."

"In return for the flowers?"

The human humor did not escape her notice. It was the species' most comprehensible emotion. "In return for many flower petals you have spread."

"You've mastered Standard, and probably Court Mandarin," B.C. Avinashini complimented. "But I don't have time for your flattery. I am an old lady."

Hogajue-Five put aside the courtly poetry with some regret. Human language cipher cues were delightful, once understood. "Encrypted data has been transferred to your personal handheld."

They came to a path of concrete, descending stepwise at intervals toward street level. The aged woman started down the path. "What kind of information?"

"We have been studying the patterns of Zhu Rong. You may find them of interest."

They came to the two horn-shaped pillars marking the entry to the Bull Temple grounds. They went on to the paved street. B.C. Avinashini waved at a rickshaw; the "driver" approached and waited for her to board.

When the young man began pedaling, Hogajue kept pace beside while her elderly passenger sat, silent. They moved through the streets quickly, back toward the small home the old lady maintained.

When they arrived, the driver stated something in the unknown language. The old woman barked something back. They went on, back and forth, for several minutes. Finally, they seemed to have resolution. B.C. Avinashini handed the driver coins. As he took the them, Avinashini

clasped his hand between both of hers, held his hand a moment longer than needed, bowed. He smiled, shyly.

She joined the zhīzhū, and they went through the garden to the old cottage. She removed her shoes before entering into the main sitting room. B.C. Avinashini took her usual seat on the old, high-backed mahogany chair. "I observed the interchange without understanding," Hogajue-Five confessed, settling down on the floor in front of her.

"He haggled properly," the woman said, making the subtle facial gestures of satisfaction that she tried to hide. "It's a small courtesy he does me – he knows I enjoy it."

"I still do not comprehend."

"I spent many years giving orders and doing duties, old friend who is somewhere in there." She leaned forward to tap at the carapace above her his forward-most eye. "Now I enjoy being a mere citizen. Now, tell me more about this gift. Why in all the gods' names do you think I need data on Zhu Rong?"

"You would like to go there." Hogajue-Five extended the bribe without being precise. She had learned that she need not provide all details of an offer in dealing with humans. They filled in the blanks. Hogajue-Five could not offer a permitted trip to the star the old woman knew as Zhu Rong, but she could offer incentive. Though the remains were unimportant to a zhīzhū after all these years, she understood the fact of importance to B.C. Avinashini.

"Would I go with the blessings of the Nests?" Her tone carried the cipher-tone Hogajue-Five knew as suspicion. It was a tone made necessary by the unique human capability of imagining non-existent conditions and facts, such as non-carnate beings interested in guiding human activity.

"No."

"I thought not. I would be given a ship if the Nests officially wanted this. You can't lie, but you can omit."

"You refuse the gift?"

“Your gift carries a price. You’ve simply failed to name it. I will not pay the price. It is too high – it would reduce me in the next life, perhaps doom me to never progress. I would not be allowed my next life with him.”

“Human statements that their lives are followed by non-corporeal existence are not factual.”

“I shall not argue karma and reincarnation with the fifth version of Hogajue.” She gave the facial cipher code of a slight smile, evidence of amusement.

Hogajue-Five considered the situation. HisHer oldest surviving human friend had become cautious of the zhīzhū, even him. A discomfort B.C. Avinashini might call sadness coated herhis own thoughts. “I also will not discuss non-factual concepts. No price is attached, however. I cannot speak untrue facts even in Standard. A ‘gift’ is given without conditions or expectations. If you accept the information, it is yours to do with as you wish, or to ignore.”

“I accept, then, and thank you.” She looked at himher with one of the facial expressions that enciphered emotions or thoughts that Hogajue-Five could not comprehend. “I am an old lady, and would ask that you excuse me while I take a rest.”

Hogajue-Five acquiesced. “My duties require my return to Beijing. I shall look forward to our next excursion.” Hogajue emitted a scent shehe knew to please B.C. Avinashini, the slightest remembered musk of Cuchulain Padraic O’Meath. Switching primary focus to the quarter closest to the door, shehe left.

Four

I have shipped with Burgess once before
And I think I know him right well
If a man's a sailor, he can get along
If not, then he will land in Hell.

Year: Approx. 2416. Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong
(Groombridge 1830) (Cuchulain "Murphy" O'Meath).

The boy's mother could be seen in his face. He'd known the mother years before. Long before Avinashini had come to own his soul, after he'd first gone to Shanhe-Wotu, Murphy had sometimes spent time with a woman who looked like this youth. Despite the pounding headache, O'Meath remembered seeing something that he recognized of Sigard Thorrsen. He had met the boy several times over the course of the years. Sigard had told Murphy that he was not the father, though she had refused to identify anyone else.

When the boy was four, Sigard had disappeared.

Murphy found only one word. "Son."

"Thank God in all her Faces, no," the youth responded.
"But I'll finish you off for her, anyway. Now we're free

and clear. Heading for Alula as soon as you're really dead. You won't be able to protect the spiders this time."

Son of a bitch. The messenger torpedo labs were ready to go. They were loaded. He had no way left to destroy the ship while they were still deep in Panlong's gravity well. Avi wasn't in-system yet, and even the zhīzhū were still hours out.

And, a moment later: how had the boy learned to hate beings that were just *different*? How did anyone? Was it human instinct? It wasn't instinct in the genes Murphy had for himself. What made some humans hate difference, others seek it out?

How many messengers? One? Five? Ten? Urwah's hoarse voice echoed in memory. "*Destroying it doesn't destroy the knowledge!*"

Granuaile had no remaining nukes, no missiles at all. The particle cannon was sheared away. A jump torpedo might do some damage by ramming, might do more if he could program it to pulse over the lip as it approached, but *Clementia Astrum* still had defenses. She could pick off anything he had left to lob.

All he had left to lob was *Granuaile* herself, and the last battering had reduced *Granuaile*'s agility. He doubted he could get in close enough to ram *Clementia*. *Granuaile* would be shot out from under him.

Granuaile.

Long ago, he had written a program.

"Sorry, son. I'm going to have to turn tail for once." Murphy did just that. He set comm to an open frequency. "*Granuaile*, record and repeat indefinitely: *Clementia Astrum* is the main target. All vessels, find her and destroy her. Zhīzhū spheres, lob your nukes and to hell with worries about spoiled meat! Messengers to all zhīzhū worlds in range. *Hibernia*, launch all Gandivas."

He diverted power to the main dish, pushing the signal as high as possible. He set it for widecast. He was

punching out so much EM, *Clementia* would see him clearly despite the interference.

He wanted *Clementia* to see him.

“*Granuaile*,” he said, “Lead Jin Jun Cuchulain O’Meath, identify. Open deep command sequences. Aodh Agni.”

“Identified,” *Granuaile* responded. “Deep command sequence Aodh Agni loading. Manual key confirmation required.”

Murphy tapped at the keys.

“Key confirmation accepted.”

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

The mountains rose almost unnaturally from the grey plains. They were geologically more recent than the pinnacles, showing only minimal erosion around the bases. Almost no rolling altitude gain led to them. Kirthi guided the rátha toward the cave entrance Murphy’s data had revealed.

She saw it as they came around a curving section of rock wall. The gaping mouth was large, easily wide enough to allow small ships entrance and egress. She wondered at the force that had created such a hole. Had it been volcanism, or had one of Zhu Rong’s superflares carved it deep and round? She allowed the survey sensors free reign to scan, ping, and record the approach visually. Earthbound scientists would have arguments for years.

She slowed the rátha down as it came to the entry. The interior was dark. No atmosphere helped diffuse light into the deep pit. She brought on the headlights, set them to their highest intensity.

The cavern was smooth, almost glassy. Sharp, perfectly smooth stalactites hung down from the rounded ceiling.

Kirthi cut her heads-up into the visual circuit and zoomed in on one. It had the same glassy smoothness as the ceiling. There was no evidence of repeated layering by lime dissolved in water. Something had melted deep into the rock. These glassy spikes had formed as the dripping ceiling cooled.

"Agni was at work here," Ajji commented. She had clearly come to the same conclusion about the cave. *"The gods do not play small games."*

Kirthi could not help but agree. *"We mustn't waste time."*

"We have wasted time to come here," Ajji responded.

"I have a contract." Kirthi felt her voice echo with uncertainty.

Obote had gotten out of his seat, crowded forward. He pointed out ahead. "Aim the lights down there," he said, pointing deeper in the cave.

Kirthi found no reason to squabble. She keyed the control.

Not that far ahead, the headlights illuminated domes, cylinders, and aged spacecraft, clustered toward the rear of the large cavern. Kirthi put her hands back on the drive levers. For a moment, her fingers gripped only loosely, lazily. She found herself considering running the wheels in opposite directions to swivel the vehicle. She overcame the moment and started the rátha forward. The metal wheels ground over the hard rock and into the immense chamber.

A few minutes in, the gleam of metal reflected in the headlights. Kirthi pulled back on the throttle, slowing the rátha. Ajji leaned forward. Obote leaned in between the two seats. "More light," he said. Jwu alone sat motionless. Shehe undoubtedly saw far more clearly, able to process any portion of herhis 360-degree vision through all four of its main lobes.

Kirthi reached forward and increased the power to the lights. The dark pushed back, opening the cavern to them.

The metal was a habitat's support leg. In the edge of the light, they could see a number of habitats. Some were long cylinders, others domes. They sat in the center of a large chamber, long ago melted into the rock.

"No light, no power," Kirthi said. Her heads-up told her what it could: there was no sign of any life, as if there would be. The two opposing zhīzhū factions had kept L-II isolated for over fifty years. No one had come here to supply the Manifester rebels, and they had lacked the equipment and supplies to become permanently self-sufficient. At best, they might have lasted ten years after the destruction of *Clementia*, if they had carefully rationed power.

She felt a chill down into the depths of her soul. How had they faced such a death sentence? Had they struggled to survive, against the odds? Gone on having babies and hoping for rescue? Behaved like the civilized gods-fearing Manifester followers they claimed to be? Or had matters gotten brutal quickly? The latter was more likely. She had seen enough of humanity in her short years, traipsing from Jannah all the way out the reach. Brutal was the way of mankind.

Perhaps these last few had gotten lucky. Perhaps the heavy flares of 2416 had been powerful enough to irradiate them despite the layers of protective rock. A slow, painful death by radiation poisoning would have easily been more pleasant than a slower, more painful, dragged-out death as power, food, and atmosphere had dwindled.

But why, she reminded herself, should she feel sympathy for people who had almost executed a plan to destroy an entire sapient species?

The rátha had crept to within ten meters of the closest habitat. Kirthi brought it to a halt, idling the power. "Not this one," Obote said. "This was just housing. The main lab complex was in a dome, according to the Jonas Bartlett interviews."

“Interviews?” Ajji spat the word out. “He was drugged half the time, tortured the other half.” Kirthi was surprised at the tone of open criticism.

“You sound sympathetic,” Obote replied, his voice edged with contempt.

“Torture is revenge, not intelligence-gathering.” Ajji replied, again almost stoic. “It produces statements that cannot be trusted.”

“Savagery wasted,” Jwu commented from the rear. “Tastesmell and absorb. Zhīzhū truth learn simple.”

Kirthi felt her stomach churn at the thought. “That’s the sort of thing that started the wars in the first place,” she shot back to the zhīzhū.

“Human zhīzhū ‘must’ both. War waste is ‘Must’ illogic,” Jwu responded. “Common illogic, still sometimes held.”

“There’s a super-flare on the way sometime this year,” Kirthi reminded them. “Am I driving, or are we walking from here?”

“Drive around,” Obote suggested. “There should be a way.”

Kirthi nudged the wheels into opposite directions, pivoting the rátha. Moving forward, she saw the faint hint of vehicle tracks. On most airless worlds, they would have remained stark. Here, though, the occasional fine dust had eroded and filled, pushed by magnetic fluctuations.

The tracks led her deeper into the complex. They passed several habitats, several old vessels that had remained. Finally, they came to a common of sorts. Several old vehicles of purely human design stood abandoned. Crates and equipment rested where they had been left six decades before.

“There should be vultures,” Obote commented. “Like the old west.”

“There *are* vultures,” Ajji commented. She leaned back in her chair.

Obote unlocked his harness and climbed out of his seat. "It's that dome over there," he said, pointing at a large habitat.

"Seal your suits." Kirthi did so herself, then confirmed that the other three had done the same. She released the hatches. Obote and Jwu wasted no time clambering down to the surface, carrying their equipment.

"I will wait." Ajji folded her hands across her lap. "I have no need to see any of this death, nor shall I participate in retrieving Bartlett's work."

"Suit yourself." Kirthi unlocked her chair and turned it. She helped herself up with a grip and went to the open side-panel. The battlesuit's supports made the jump to the ground below simple and painless.

Her suit sensors chose a combination of enhanced low light and short-range radar to assist her. She doubted that anyone or anything was lying in wait for her, but there was no point in changing the settings to full lighting.

She went around the habitat. There were more behind it, as well as several of the old missile corvettes Manifester had favored. The "favored" was not precisely correct; that class of ships had simply been plentiful, and relatively easy to man. Her great-grandmother had helped the Manifesters steal most of the old vessels from the cache-depot near Centaurus.

Ajji had chosen the Empire over family shortly after the theft had been discovered. She had, so the history books said, faced her own mother's fleet in battle during the ensuing civil war. Perhaps that explained Ajji's disdain at Kirthi's own acquisition of *Rani*. Though the salvage of *Rani* had been entirely legal, Smithsonian had been close to finding her.

Perhaps Ajji feared that the grey-area ethics were returning to the family line.

And perhaps Ajji was correct, Kirthi thought as she came to the habitat marked, "Biology." She was, after all,

helping retrieve the Manifesters' "great work." Idanha claimed it would never be used. It would exist only as a threat.

Had anyone ever made similar promises to Admiral B. C. Sunitha regarding the ships she had stolen? Had she helped divert supplies based on assurances from honorable men?

Kirthi brought herself back to the present. She was not her grandparents, skirmishing in the momentous events of the Expansion. She was a shuttle driver and smuggler, a washout from Fleet, a paid errand-runner just one step away from piracy.

The dome's lock had recently been opened. Obote and the zhīzhū had obviously preceded her. Kirthi turned the wheel and tugged the hatch away from its gaskets.

The inner lock hung open. The wall panel was unexpectedly lit, red warnings across the board. Like *Granuaile's* last messenger, some emergency power cell had retained enough charge to run the environmental sensors. The interior had long been depressurized.

She stepped through the open hatch into the corridor beyond. That led her to a common room. Once again her suit lights and sensors chose the best combination to provide a visual of the interior.

The bodies sprawled on chairs and couches were of both genders, all racial types. One young couple lay together, an infant cradled against the mother's breast. Was she more shocked by that, or by the centimeter-wide circle painted on the woman's forehead?

She knew that her great-grandmother had been seduced into Manifester Destiny. Despite this, she had not imagined traditional Indians as parties to genocide.

Her eyes were caught by another panel, its last message still glowing low.

"Oxygen purge commenced 12:00. Oxygen purge completed 12:15. Heating shutdown at 12:25.

Depressurization commenced 12:30. Depressurization completed 13:01.” All were dated the same day as her grandfather's last battle.

These Manifesters had chosen to die, win or lose. Their suicide had begun minutes after *Clementia* lifted out of the hole, away from the flowing rivers of sand.

Better that they died this way, even if they had taken their children with them. Silent asphyxiation coupled with rapid cooling was reputed to be the kind of painless death preferred by cowards.

Obote and Jwu were in the next room, again working in parallel. Obote had plugged a self-powered backup drive into a computer console. The zhīzhū was taking a different console apart, seeking its physical memory units.

There was nothing here for her to do. Kirthi moved on to find another narrow corridor. She followed that to a set of rooms equipped with lab equipment. The most she could tell from the frost-coated machines and such was that it was a biolab. That determination, though, would have been a good guess no matter what. There was nothing to do but record for posterity.

As if posterity would really be horrified by a set-up that looked like any research facility.

This wandering was pointless. Kirthi went back the way she had come. Jwu and Obote were still quasi-cooperating. She said nothing, went past the long-frozen corpses, made her way out of the enclosure. She felt heavy as she went back toward the rátha.

“Success?” Ajji did not turn her chair to look as Kirthi climbed into the vehicle. “Are the vultures eating?”

“They’re getting what we came for,” Kirthi responded.

“It’s too much to hope that they’ll kill each other out there.”

“Obote would try if he thought he could kill Jwu quickly.”

Ajji made derisive click. “And Jwu would try if shehe could get a taste of the corpse in a vacuum. We should just leave them here.”

“I can’t believe you’d say that. We brought them here. We have a duty.”

“Duties can conflict, granddaughter.”

Obote and Jwu came into view. Jwu was ahead, and carried the physical memory units in the EV-egg’s manipulators. Obote was lagging a little behind.

The zhīzhū scuttled rapidly. Kirthi wondered what it would be like to set one lobe-and-eye to control movement, while three others simply observed and recorded the surroundings.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Kirthi guided the rátha away from the mouth of the cave. The windows darkened under Zhu Rong’s glare.

“Too bright,” Jwu commented. “Recalculating superflare.” Kirthi’s console advised her that shehe was accessing the vehicle’s sensors.

Ajji keyed in as well, her pilot suit downloading to her internal heads-up. “Jwu’s right. It’s half again as bright.”

“Bastard zhīzhū must want us to burn here,” Obote muttered. He started to undo his safety harness. “Let me at the controls, washout.” He stood and began crouch-walking.

“Sit down.” Kirthi pulled up the surface map. “We’re going to make a run of it. Straight across. I don’t plan to die sitting still.” She spun up the power plant to maximum and pushed power to all of the motors. “Hang on.” She ran power into all the wheels. The rátha lurched forward,

bumping along the surface and plowing through the swirling dust-devils.

This was going to be tighter than she liked, she decided. She didn't need four lobes to figure out that Zhu Rong was going to fry Panlong and its moons within hours.

Year: Approx. 2416. Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Cuchulain "Murphy" O'Meath).

Murphy hunched over the main console. He would be happier doing this below, in engineering, where he could see bots and handle manual valves at a run. He felt more connected to *Granuaile's* innards down there. He could pilot from there, after a fashion.

Time was against him. He wasn't in deep space. *Clementia* was stalking him at planetary speeds, using planetary obstacles. He was doing the same to her. Two plasma-pummeled ships circled in the screaming metallic dust-storms of an oversized rock. *Clementia* was nearby. He couldn't risk the time it would take to run below.

The digital stream cut through again. "What the hell do you think you're doing? You're trying to protect them again. More than half of them still want all of the blue-green worlds. They've even eaten your beloved Horns, you know. I've seen it."

"You talk too much." Murphy tried to triangulate, knew that the brief burst would not be enough. He skimmed along the surface, set the main display for the dust-eroded peaks to starboard. That was where the boy would most likely hide.

A sensor alert bleated for attention. There, for just a moment, he caught a signature – a power plant. It was stationary, below the surface. The Manifesters' facility, hidden deep where it logically had to be, close to the center

of the original probability cone. Murphy glanced to the left board, unnecessarily assured himself that Aodh Agni was still ready.

The *knowledge* was down there. The source of future attacks, regardless of whether he took down *Clementia*. He skew-turned, went back to try to pin it down, at the same time bringing Messenger 3 online. “*Granuaile*, confirm backup to Messenger 3. Record cover message to Dame Admiral Avinashini: Avi, here’s your target.” He tapped the final key.

Granuaile lurched as the torpedo freed itself and began its ascent to free space. It had a long way to go before it could jump clear of the high-radiation zone.

Murphy keyed comm, wide-cast and full power. “Urwah! Avi! Secondary target located!” He tapped a key, forwarded the sensor readings. Twenty or thirty Gandiva-VI’s would easily bury the Manifester base under the rubble. Enough old-fashioned rock would shatter the memory cores, or at least make them damned hard to locate.

A new flare was erupting, adding to the background noise. He looked to see if he could run any more power through the system. He could – but it would give perhaps three reps before it fried the antenna. He would have this chance only.

He punched it, keyed the repeated message. It might get as far as Urwah, maybe to *Hibernia* herself. It might not.

A flicker on the visual caught his eye. There she was: *Clementia*, rising over the peaks, preparing to come in close. Close was all they had left for each other: no more nukes, beam and particle weapons all but ineffective as the latest flares continued their eruptions. For a moment, Murphy doubted the tactic. It felt wrong. He wasn’t one to turn tail and run.

But then, he was only turning tail.

He pushed the engines, climbed again. He *could* outrun *Clementia* if he really so desired.

A missile flashed away from *Clementia*, tracking on the messenger he had just launched. He lost both in the flare interference.

Clementia closed on *Granuaile*. The young pilot thought he was clever, coming close enough to guarantee the kill.

He touched the flashing icon on the leftward board. "Alert," the computer replied. "Plasma vent valves closed. Safeties overridden. Fusion chamber pressure building."

"That's the idea, beautiful. I wrote you that way."

Clementia was closing behind him. The comm stream came up; the secondary antenna was still working. "Played it wrong, old man. Played it wrong."

"Could be, son. Could be." He glanced at the engineering readouts. The program would open the vents in fifteen seconds.

Murphy backed off on his acceleration, let *Clementia* creep up. She would be close enough in twenty seconds. He keyed at the engineering controls, added more power to the gravitic bottles. That should give him a little more time, a slightly bigger punch.

If the field generators held.

More alerts and warnings flashed. The engineering display went entirely amber. Red rectangles began to appear. "Stop complaining, beautiful," he coaxed. "You've taken worse beatings." He tapped at the key, pushed the power production well over the safe levels. He hummed to himself, an old, old tune.

He could feel the vibration first as the gravitic bottles strained against pressure, as metal and silicon began to vibrate and tremble against pure, physical pressure. "Hold it, sweetie, just hold it another few seconds." *Clementia* was close now, five kilometers behind. If he cut thrust, she would almost certainly be up *Granuaile*'s ass.

No. Not “almost certainly.” *Clementia* had to be so close, she couldn’t *possibly* turn away.

The vibration turned into a wrenching, groaning rumble. “Emergency. Open plasma relief valves. Manual control required. Override Aodh Agni.” *Granuaile*’s computer voice remained calm even as the alarms grew louder and more strident.

Murphy put his finger near the key, held tight to his timing. *Clementia* was almost there. A kilometer behind. Then a half kilometer, her trajectory now inalterable. She began to fire close-range chaff and shells, the age-old weapons of ripping sails and tearing hulls.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

“Flare activity accelerating.”

“Tell me something I want to hear,” Kirthi muttered. The rátha ’s electric motors were already whining and grumbling under the demand. It bucked and lurched with every stray rock and uneven surface.

“Just get us back to your damned ship.” Obote patted the data-safe beside him.

“I’m pushing it hard.” The rátha gave a lurch to prove her point. Kirthi held the controls tightly as the vehicle skittered over a rough patch.

Year: Approx. 2416. Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Cuchulain “Murphy” O’Meath).

Once more, Murphy revived, pushed himself to standing. He wanted to die on his feet, dammit.

The display replayed the final, rushing approach. *Clementia Astrum* loomed up in the visual display, then disappeared as *Granuaile* turned. The camera view changed, showing the view from the upper rear deck. The main gravitics were shut down. *Clementia* tried to move aside, but the crazed pilot insisted that *Granuaile* track, maneuver, and aim the only weapon she had left.

Avi knew how to time matters, get into the right range. She could release the pressure just before the containment blew. Murphy was as ready as he could be to attempt what Avi had done.

Year: Approx. 2416. Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830)

Murphy looked at the display. The rear cam showed *Clementia* looming up behind him. With a stab of his right-hand index finger, Murphy cut thrust. He hesitated just a few milliseconds, then stabbed the pressure-release.

He was a millisecond too late. The blast from behind slammed him against the center console. Power flickered down. Batteries took over, revived dim lights. Plasma was blasting out of the rear vents, flaring out against the enemy hull, cutting through the shunt fields, stripping through the armor. Molten and less-molten chunks of *Granuaile*'s rear hull sliced through *Clementia* like bullets bouncing through intestines. One of the hyperdrive nacelles sheared away, snapping like a twig against the enemy hull.

Clementia was finished, coming apart at the seams. Bits of her spread out in the black. Explosions burst from within, her own reactors and systems blowing. The flaring debris continued up, but fanned and arced downward, pulled by gravity. Some of the gleaming, flaring debris was undoubtedly the messenger torpedoes, or their remains.

Granuaile was in better shape. At least some of the hull was integrated. The con was holding pressure, at least for the moment.

Murphy pushed himself up, ignoring the blood oozing from his forehead. He ran the engineering checks, found that one fusion plant was still operable, hanging onto the rearward frame by a bolt or two. He keyed for a restart, hoping that there was enough battery power to build the grav bottle and re-ignite the fusion.

His head throbbed, and his vision doubled. His right eye refused to track. It hurt the eyelid to close it, but he did. Fingers only, he keyed for a landing sequence, on the off chance that some of the thrust units were still attached to the lower hull.

Murphy didn't think he'd closed his left eye, but the con went dark nonetheless.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

The rátha ground up a hill. Kirthi thought she saw a flickering increase of light. She paused the replay.

"What was that?" Obote's voice was high-pitched, edged with fear.

"Stellar ejected mass." The zhīzhū's rasp was matter-of-fact.

"Christ, it's too late." Obote leaned forward. "Damn –"

"Not main flare," the zhīzhū interjected. "Good news minor precurse only."

"There's always bad news to balance it." Kirthi felt the wheels spin against bare rock as the rátha bounced over a rough patch.

"Bad, defines primary flare," Zwu replied. "Follows flux path. Path leads Panlong L-II."

“Thought so. Bad news.” She keyed the route to her heads-up. “Forty minutes, best speed. Do we have that?”

“Zhu Rong not comprehending mathematical models. Zhu Rong uncooperates star science.” If a zhīzhū had a tone of voice, this would be “rueful.”

She keyed the suit records, fully shut down the replay. “We have to drive like hell, Ajji. I’m going to have to pay full attention.” She linked the rátha’s sensors into her heads-up. “I want you to watch the far scans. Show me routes around any junk. Shortest possible distance.”

“I believe that I can manage that, granddaughter.”

Kirthi gunned the motors. “Let’s put this right out.” The rátha bounced faster over rocks and bumps.

Obote stood checked the protective container beside him. After a moment, he seemed satisfied.

Ajji noted the movement. “We could gain a little speed if we dumped that safe,” she pointed out.

“I have a contract.” Kirthi focused on the way ahead, maneuvering to avoid obstacles.

A fireball, harbinger of the main mass, flashed overhead. The rátha’s glass darkened to black, as did their suit visors, and the light nonetheless bled through. Kirthi shut her eyes against the glare.

The ground shook and rumbled as plasma balls peeled away from the main body. Some fell short, struck the airless moon. One large plasma ball was well within a click.

The rátha shook and bucked. Kirthi’s neck whipped forward and back. Her jaw bounced shut, banging her teeth together. The compass display swung wildly as the nose-end of the rátha hopped and bounced.

The ground quieted. Alarms blared. Obote and Jwu both started talking, yelling really. Kirthi ignored them, keying rapidly through readings on her heads-up. “Seal your suits!” A rain of rock, some still molten, could be

expected any moment. With the sensors available, she made her best estimate of the arcs they could expect.

Kirthi turned the rátha on its access. “Jwu, move forward!”

The zhīzhū scrambled up as the first blast of debris slammed the vehicle. Most of the projectiles were small, not much bigger than dust, but speeding pebbles and rocks bashed against the surface like full-automatic combat fire. The vehicle lurched forward, propelled by the force. A fist-sized rock bore through the rear, then the front, leaving smooth-cut holes in each. Obote screamed and grunted as the zhīzhū bounced into him, then into the backs of the two forward seats. Power and lights dimmed, went black. Atmosphere pushed its way out of the cabin, bleeding quickly to nothing.

The concussion wave passed them by. The rátha came to rest, upright. After a moment, Kirthi realized that she was hyperventilating. “Everyone alive?”

Obote cursed. The zhīzhū made a buzzing sound. A tangent of Kirthi’s thought wondered what scents it was releasing as clues to its ciphers and meanings.

“The goddess seems to have us in her arms,” Ajji opined. There was pain in her voice. “I do not understand why we weren’t incinerated.”

“Not enough plasma,” Kirthi responded absently. She worked at the console. Just how much had the systems been hardened? How much did Idanha want to “solve” the “zhīzhū problem?” She pushed the thought aside as the console returned to life.

She felt the rátha begin reluctantly pulling itself forward. It wobbled slightly in a regular pattern. One of the wheels must be jammed, or its axle bent in some way.

She turned the vehicle back onto course. She was liking this expedition less and less.

“Get off me,” Obote complained to the zhīzhū.

“EV-egg damaged,” Jwu responded. “Arm units responsive not.”

Kirthi put the rátha onto auto-pilot before getting up. She had no intention of losing a minute now. “Watch ahead and call me if –”

“Do you think I can’t pilot a crawler?” Ajji waited until Kirthi was out of the way, then keyed the console in front of her. Control switched to her console.

Obote pushed upward on the EV-egg as Kirthi pulled. She noticed the scorched streak on its external shell for the first time. The chunk of melted planet had been hot enough to pucker the shell, despite the best in zhīzhū nano. They were all luckier still to be alive.

Righted, Jwu managed to place itself into its cradle and retract its legs.

Kirthi went back to her seat. Ajji looked at her. “I can manage for a while, if you would like a rest. I won’t be distracted by the playback.”

Kirthi shrugged. Right now, she thought, rest would be sound idea. She keyed the playback again.

Year: Approx. 2416. Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Cuchulain Murphy O’Meath).

Murphy coughed. It was done. *Clementia* had come too close, as he had planned. Hubris. Hubris born of loyalty. A son seeking to avenge his mother. Dechtire would have understood.

Murphy shut off the display. There was no point in seeing it again and again.

Murphy had been a bastard son. He hadn’t wanted his own father to die.

No child from Avi. Perhaps her refusal had been a blessing, after all. It hurt to realize that hate had crossed

generations, forced him to kill a family line. How much more could it hurt to see a beloved child hurt or killed? Avi had been wise in hesitating, not merely scarred by her own grieving.

Avi. She was out there, somewhere. Murphy keyed comm, even as he doubted that the secondaries had enough power to punch through the flare interference.

“Avi...thank you. The best years. Thank you.” He collapsed, found himself sitting on the deck. “Next life.” He blanked out again. He did not know how long.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Ajji looked steadily ahead through the clear panels. “You took on more than you knew to bring me here, granddaughter.”

“No kidding.”

“You bargained with Idanha, and he with me. He used me to bargain with Jue-Five, and to get you to come here. All of this to do their dirt.”

Kirthi did not look aside to her aged grandmother. “It seems so.”

“I had hoped for better of Jue-Five.”

“SheHe had to break the stand-off somehow.”

“Jue-Five is a fool. Idanha will use it first, before the Reality Nests can immunize themselves.”

Obote chimed in. “It’s only there as a threat. Idanha’s not going to use it.”

“A ‘threat?’” Ajji made a sound of distaste, deep in her throat. “It should have been destroyed when we had a chance. I should have taken *Hibernia* all the way in when I could have burned away half the surface with nukes. Jue-

Two said no – he and the Must Nests were ready to destroy our Gandivas if need be.”

“The next super-flare will resolve your waffling, Admiral,” Obote predicted derisively. “It’ll follow the magnetic flux lines to Panlong. It’s likely to burn away layers on the sunward surface. That cavern isn’t deep enough to take a direct hit. Those habitats will evaporate in all of that plasma. What was in them....”

“What was with them is here.”

“Yes. Not wiped out.”

“The Hogajues have been using the virus threat against the Must nests for years. That’s why both factions maintain their pickets. The coming flare is why *both* Jue-Five and Idanha decided to recover it.”

Obote grunted. “We can maintain the peace.”

Ajji went on as if he had not spoken. “I am *ashamed* that Jue-Five would consider this. Jue-One and Jue-Two were better than this. Some change in the iterations changed them, hardened them.

“The greater shame is that Idanha found support in Parliament, all over again. They don’t understand the temptation to use the weapon. Military people always need to use their toys. And we humans still want all the blue-green worlds for ourselves. We still have some deep desire to kill off anything different.”

“So do the zhīzhū,” Obote pointed out.

Jwu, back in its cradle, graveled out words. “Correct assessment. Must-Reality thin line. Losing dynamic.”

Ajji put a hand on Kirthi’s wrist. “I have never much *liked* the zhīzhū, you know. Even Jue-One and -Two left me feeling queasy. Jue-Five has me quite concerned. But I tolerate them because they have so decisively used logic to overcome instinct.”

Obote snorted. “You were all but sleeping with them.”

“Human sex interesting possibilities tastesmell,” Jwu muttered. “Opportunity never offered. Not instinct anyway.”

Kirthi risked a glance to her right, looking at the dark-irised eyes hidden in Ajji’s wrinkled face. They were round, alive, momentarily amused. “Of course not. No other but Cuchulain O’Meath has ever entered me.” She glanced aside at Kirthi. “Though your other grandfather made very delightful assaults on my morality, some years before.” The slightest hint of a smile crept out. “I seem to have a weakness for the Celtic race.”

Kirthi nodded. “Father calls it the ‘red-headed insanity.’” She was happy to divert the conversation. She found herself less and less comfortable with the almost-admissions of Obote and Jwu.

“Yes. Your own father tried very hard to be solely Indian and reject it for himself. I had to work very hard to trick him into marrying your mother, another half-breed carrying the gene. His rigid, prudish, stubborn insistence that he wasn’t a mix himself. It’s a good thing that he accepted – at least temporarily – my re-conversion to the old traditions. And also good that your mother was willing to play along; she’d had a crush on him since they were children.” Ajji reached out, playfully touched Kirthi’s helmet. “Your own mix is beautiful, you know.”

“Enough!” Obote snapped. “Just get us back to that damned hulk of yours.” He gestured with his handheld. “The EM is building fast. That big flare isn’t too far away, and the shunts are barely holding. We have to get back.”

“We could gain an extra couple of clicks per hour if we dumped the memory,” Kirthi pointed out. “Reduce the shunt power and the weight by a little. It would make a difference.”

“This is too important.” He raised his right arm a centimeter.

Kirthi zoomed her heads-up behind, saw the barrel of the gauss-needler. Ajjī nodded, almost imperceptibly. “He has a gun, granddaughter.” Obote raised his arm. It was small, non-standard, but linked in with the old battlesuit’s systems. When had he smuggled it on board?

Regardless, Idanha had prepared his agent for all possibilities.

The zhīzhū burst out in laughter. “Clever Idanha crossing double. Suit systems still jammed. No arming grab interfere.”

“Yes, Idanha is quite clever,” Ajjī said. “He has had several years to prepare. Your manipulators are jammed because Obote has them jammed.

“Idanha knew what I wanted, knew how to get it of me. This rátha was designed just for this purpose. He even found a way to blame me, and Kirthi, and even Cuchulain. He has me blackmailed on your account, granddaughter. And his offer to you contains incentives, no doubt. Even one for returning this rátha.”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“A mathematical certainty, granddaughter. I spent some time going through the system while you were in the Manifester habitats. There is a remote memory scan in the safe. The rátha is downloading all of the data from the Manifester cores, just in case we try to toss them out.”

“Can we stop them?”

“They’re internally powered. Murphy might have been able to stop it. I couldn’t.”

“Idanha not trusting,” Jwu added. “Hogajue-Five foresight lacking. Needs to learn virus to protect or use end Musts.”

“The ‘Reality’ nests have developed their own ‘must,’” Ajjī explained. “No more patience with the remaining ‘Must’ Nests. If they won’t find a way to coexist with humanity, they’ll be erased, right down to the queens.”

“Not part of plan,” Jwu protested.

“Entire plan.” Ajji spit the words. “Jue-Five is not *Hogajue* who accepted humanity as partners, and foolish human ethics as a baseline.”

“Which is why we need to *end* the zhīzhū problem,” Obote responded. “They always calculate for their own advantage.” Obote smirked behind his visor. “The download is complete. Idanha had great foresight. The rátha will deliver the data.”

Kirthi shrugged. “I made my agreement. You don’t need the gun, or the extra copy.” She peered ahead at the grey, rocky terrain. They were closing on *Rani*, barely visible ahead through breaks in the dust-streams.

Idanha had run them all, even Jue-Five. They both wanted the virus. They both intended to use it, one way or another. Both of them were willing to massacre some part of a whole race.

How the hell could she still be naïve at her age? How the hell could she trust anyone in Fleet? Where were the Jin Jun when they were needed? Even her parents underestimated the zhīzhū, despite having lived and communicated with them. They had, somehow, passed along naïve trust to her. There was no human, no zhīzhū who could be trusted.

A flash of memory jolted Kirthi. “I’ve met you before.”

Year: 2468 (One Year Ago). Location: Iceball (Kirthi).

Kirthi brought *Rani* even with the zhīzhū sphere. She made a slight adjustment to pitch and angle. Fingers keyed comm, tied in the zhīzhū translation circuits. “Ready. You can extend the docking tube.” With a keystroke, she added the proper back-tone of Nest-to-Nest deference despite equality.

“We are extending and locking,” the other vessel responded in perfect English with a familiar Indian lilt. “We thank you for your unusually perfect courtesy.” These low-Nest zhīzhū had not stinted on their software, they had instead bought the best. This voice synthesis had been built using her mother's voice. Her father was the zhīzhū philologist, her mother the data expert who understood zhīzhū encryption protocols.

Kirthi locked down the controls, then got up. She went to the back of the con, down the gangway, down again to the lower level. From there, she went aft to the hold.

The hatch's locking wheel stubbornly held against her initial tugs and efforts. Finally, her shoulder beginning to protest with soreness, the wheel wrenched free. She tugged hard, felt and heard the hinges squeal in protest as she forced the hatch to move. There wasn't enough time to do all the damned maintenance herself on the ship, and the engines were taking the majority of her time. So long as she could get the hatch open, it would have to do.

She walked through to the outer hatch. It was one of the few powered hatches on the old bitch. She keyed her handheld to link to the sensors, confirmed that the zhīzhū ball had extended and locked its docking tube. Pressure was building on the other side.

If her illicit trading partner had been a human ship and crew, she would be armed now, and in one of the battlesuits that had come with *Rani* when salvaged. Her main turret would be active, the x-ray lasers ready to sneak through the hull and fry tender human tissues. “Trust but verify,” the experienced fringe-traders' policy, would apply. A zhīzhū saw no profit in such tactics. HeShe knew that piracy at that level was not a good long-term business strategy.

Kirthi nulled the gravity to pull the first sealed unit in front of the hatch. Meat. Whole cows, straight from Fleet's pastures deep-under Jannah, fast-frozen to preserve as much flavor as possible. The shipment was as black-

market as they came: stolen by some petty officer who had to at least worry that it would be a tastesmell delicacy for the Musts. For that matter, even the Realists would obtain some of this.

How much of the fear-mongering was true? Were the zhīzhū slowly building up an understanding of the Terran biosphere through such smuggled stuff? Last month, it had been fast-frozen llama, and the month before she had transported live porpoises. Would small tastes of earth re-ignite the decades-long hot-and-cold wars over the blue-green worlds that humanity had located?

In short, was she safe from these particular zhīzhū because she was helping them in a longer-term plan that would put humanity on the dinner table? Or was she safe because they were simple gourmets?

As Kirthi moved the next crate into position, comm lit on her heads-up. "Pressure matched," the computer alerted her. She keyed the door, letting the zhīzhū through.

They were swift in their trading. As each unit of meat moved out, a similar container of zhīzhū trade goods replaced it. She sought a greater variety on each trip: nanotech, brainlink enhancements, materials, and more than a few illicit substances carefully tooled for maximum human enjoyment with minimum side effects.

As the transfers took place, one zhīzhū separated himherself. It approached almost deferentially, at least for a zhīzhū. "Scent," it said in a harsh voice. "Known long." It plopped itself down on the deck. "Gift tastesmell?" The proboscis, a twisted cross between an elephant's trunk and a slimy red leech, came erect from underneath. It snaked toward, stopped what shehe considered a respectful distance away from her face.

Kirthi repressed a shudder. It was asking her to be touched, possibly probed. Her skin, at least, would be rasped. This wasn't the first time she had dealt with such a request. The damned zhīzhū had always wanted such tastes

from her as a child, and from her father. He had been patient with their sideways hero-worship of the two humans who had produced him.

Kirthi had grown to hate the requests. She had tried refusing them, tried withholding trade goods. She wasn't, for the gods' sakes, her father, much less her Fleet-rigid, distant, dictatorial grandmother. She certainly wasn't the damnable Jin Jun hero who'd been dead before his only son, her father, was born. She carried other genes, too, from her maternal grandparents.

Grudgingly, though, she leaned forward. "Sure, give me a kiss," she said without enthusiasm.

"Incomprehending," the zhīzhū said. "You." It pushed a puff of air out of the proboscis.

Two scents seemed to carry on that puff: one the scent of a healthy young woman that might waft on a summer breeze in Bangaluru, the other a healthy young man. For some reason, she suspected that the latter was pure Euro origin. Both held the musky evidence of hard work as well as something less distinct. She looked quizzically at the zhīzhū. "Not exactly next year's favorite perfume."

"Incomprehending 'perfume.'" The zhīzhū scuttled left, then right. "Offering Nest Hogas. Tastesmell memory distillation."

"What, you smelled someone a bit reeky and thought I would like it?"

"Hogajue-*Five* memory," the oversized, quadrilateral eggplant expounded, his three visible eyes bulging outward as additional emphasis. "Memory premerger father egg mother."

They had a translator program on board. Why was this four-eyed eggplant insisting on using its minimal English? Why not hook in and let all of the subtexts explain themselves in her mother's voice? Nothing explained these damned zhīzhū, no matter how much the academics babbled.

“*Premerger*,” the zhīzhū again insisted, its voice screechy. “Human deoxyribonucleic acid exchange zygote.”

Zygote. An old biology memory drifted back. “Zygote. A baby.”

“Comprehending.” It bobbed up and down, emitted more of the scent – enough that they became an odor. Sweat, heat, hard labor, fear, singed hair and skin, and quite possibly simple desire – all of those scents somehow mixed together. At that level, the odor was overwhelming, rather nasty.

Kirthi rubbed her nose. “Buddha Christ Almighty, you act like this is some kind of gift.” She backed away, hoping that it would not understand the implied human insult.

“Affirm yes gift.” The zhīzhū continued to bob up and down.

How the hell could the zhīzhū take pleasure in such a noxious mix of human odor? She wasn’t pushed to nausea, though some humans would be. Though she doubted the zhīzhū would be offended if she threw up. It would probably think she was praising the odor.

The zhīzhū’s massive pupils widened slightly. It was changing its focus, away from Kirthi and to the cargo bay itself. “Old. Nest-mate of *Granuaile*.”

Kirthi glanced at the stanchions, the structure. “Not quite,” she said. Why the hell was this zhīzhū obsessed over that long-gone ship? What would it know about it, anyway?

“Nest-mate find,” the purplish eggplant rasped out. “*Find*.” It released another unpleasant scent of emphasis.

“Excuse me,” Kirthi said. “I have to check the manifest.” She turned, called up her heads-up, and managed to avoid retching. She pretended to tick off the cargo while she planned her run past the customs lines.

Five

Oh the sun is on the harbour, my love
And I wish I could remain
For I know it will be a long, long time
Before my arms are round you again.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Kirthi brought the rátha to a halt. There was no doubt in her mind. “You used to helm a zhīzhū smuggler.”

“Met time one yes,” Jwu rasped. “Essential training toward you. Stop now motor problem?”

Obote could be heard unlocking his safety harness.

Kirthi shut down the motors, inhaled. *Nest-mate find.*

A year ago, Jue-Five sent her a reminder of hisher first meeting with Ajji and her grandfather. SheHe had used a scent. It had been a cipher key, at least of a sort. It was a message.

Why would Jue-Five do that? If shehe was intent on destroying the remaining Must Nests? If heshe wanted to permanently and finally resolve the friction within the

zhīzhū? If Hogajue Five was prepared to possess and perhaps use a deadly virus? Why?

Was it *possible* for one or more of a zhīzhū's four main lobes to be in conflict with one another through the coordinating lobe? If one lobe lost an argument, could it still outwit the other three with the zhīzhū version of a Freudian slip?

Kirthi keyed into the rátha systems, scrambled the starting codes. Ajji observed with gravity, then allowed a hint of approval in the set of her mouth. *"You are indeed his granddaughter."*

Kirthi blew a stray auburn hair from her face. Reaching under, she unlocked her seat. She swiveled to face Obote and the zhīzhū.

"This is how it will be," Kirthi explained, putting her hands in her lap. "We are five hundred meters from *Rani*. We can all walk there without getting deadly radiation doses if we have the sense to go unburdened."

"Memory cores no take?" There was an almost hopeful sound in the grating alien voice.

"No take," Kirthi confirmed. "We go back empty-handed. That's the only way anyone gets on board. This rátha stays here."

"You can't do that," Obote spat.

"*Correct decision*," Jwu responded.

Kirthi felt her eyes open wider. Jwu had spoken in Kannada.

Ajji, turning her own chair, seemed entirely nonplussed. *"You are a well educated spider. I must presume that you monitored all of the conversations between Kirthi and myself, and the logs we played."*

"Presume correct. Contingencies anticipated. Human encryption primitive and easily broken. Kannada learned, existence long known to Jwu's roots. Stolen language modules did I."

“*What are your ‘roots?’*” Ajji’s tone was not so much questioning as seeking confirmation.

“*Hogajue-One, direct clone-shoot. Jue-Five determine no remerger one revision.*”

Ajji nodded knowingly. “*Jue-Five realized what went wrong.*”

“Speak Standard, damn you all,” Obote growled.

Kirthi crossed her arms. “You heard me well enough. *Rani* doesn’t lift with this data on board.”

“You can’t do this. You owe – you *agreed*.”

“It’s done. I can’t start the *rátha* any more than you can.”

“We won’t let this by.”

“Let *what* by, Commander? Thinking about genocide? Preparing for it? Breaking the Ross Accords? Conspiring with the *zhīzhū* to double-cross and kill some of them? Or all of them? What does *Idanha* want more – this plague in his control, or foolishness by whichever *zhīzhū* Nests are really in control of *Jwu* here?

Obote crossed his arms, as if he still held some moral high ground. “*Idanha* wants *them* to use a weapon they’re not even capable of imagining to invent for themselves – let it be *their* fault their own species is wiped away.”

“*Jwu* determine all nests Must Reality same species species loyalty only to matter,” the *zhīzhū* interjected. “*Jue-Five* double-cross Must Nests. *Jwu* now double-double-cross *Jue-Five*.”

Ajji’s white teeth could be seen behind her visor in a wide smile. “The next generation proves itself today.”

“Compliment thank.” If it could preen, the *zhīzhū* would have done so.

Kirthi leaned toward Obote, pushing against her own safety harness. “How does *Idanha* really think this will play out? How does he think *he’ll* turn this against *me*?”

Obote leveled the gun at Kirthi's faceplate. She tensed to move, realized that her own harness still locked her tight to her chair.

"Kill Kirthi you dust swirls here," Jwu pointed out.

"No one else can lift *Rani*," Aji agreed.

"I have the deep codes," Obote said. "Including *Rani*'s. The old registries, remember?"

"Key *Rani* now." Kirthi half-smiled. "See if she responds. She won't. The registries are wrong."

"Foolish lie."

"I've dug deep," Kirthi responded. "I stole the registry codes after the salvage. Planned to change them. I didn't need to – the old registries are wrong. I can't get to the Prime Code myself. I'm stuck, two layers above."

"Lying bitch." He twitched his arm, preparing to fire.

Aji gave the tight-lipped smile that might hide laughter. "I was never going to let Imperial Smithsonian have *Rani*, no matter what the House of Knights voted." Aji shrugged. "It is difficult to change Jin Jun records. *Not* impossible, especially for a wrinkled, overly-revered Jin Jun Admiral."

Kirthi looked left at her grandmother. "What the hell are you saying?"

Aji gave a rare smile. "I told you that I calculate, granddaughter. You had to win on your own, if at all possible. But you *had* to win *Rani*."

Kirthi could not hide her growing surprise. "You helped me hold on to *Rani*?"

"By the time I knew, you had her. I got into the deep code listings and had the listing falsified. Then I made sure that House of Knights knew what I wanted."

"You abstained entirely. I know – I *tried* to get you to help me."

"One need not make a speech to communicate desires, young one. Murphy would have been too open about it. I simply made a point of sitting in every voting Knight's office and discussing the weather at some point or another.

The politician knows that an old lady doesn't have hours to waste describing the last sprinkles over the Forbidden City.

"You needed *Rani*. Too much like Murphy you are, but you had no Zhaohui with the sense to cultivate you." She made a face. "Libertine that she was. I thought it especially fitting that *Rani* was a well preserved Lady-class vessel. My granddaughter needed *Rani* more than some museum. Had your salvage rights not been upheld, Smithsonian would *still* have to deal with you, in order to get the deep codes from me."

"I want those codes."

Ajji closed her hands together, palm to palm. She nodded respect. "And you shall have them. I held on to them out of my last concern – that you might actually complete Idanha's mission. I apologize. I did you disservice in such thoughts."

Kirthi felt the odd mix of anger and amusement churn together. Amusement dominated the mix. "You would have destroyed *Rani* in space."

"Yes. Going over the lip into hyperspace." Not Ajji, but Admiral B.C. Avinashini looked back to Obote. "Kill her, Commander. Kill me as well. Then shoot yourself to hasten your own death. It won't matter whether you kill the zhīzhū, it can't open *Rani* any more than you can. *Rani*'s deep codes cannot be mathematically derived, and I have not recorded them anywhere but my own memory.

"The superflare is coming. It will wash us and the data away in fire." She paused; Ajji resurfaced on the old woman's face. "We will all go to the pyre, me with my husband. Not a custom I choose to revive, but one I will accept. We will be reborn together."

Jwu's grating laugh sounded through the comm system. "Not zhīzhū belief. Dead no tastesmelling, dead." It erupted what might be a chuckle. "Acceptable decision. Agree."

Kirthi raised her eyebrows in question. "Well, Obote?"

Obote lowered his arm. "I told Idanha you couldn't be trusted. None of you." His shoulders drooped. "Zhīzhū-loving bastards." He pulled the gauss weapon off the arm-mount with his left hand, tossed it forward.

Kirthi unlatched herself. She reached down and took up the weapon, clipped it to her own arm-mount. Keying open the sliding side-hatch, she turned back toward her grandmother. "You've been riding me for *years* about this ship, old woman. Calling me a thief and a pirate."

"You needed someone to disobey." Her safety belts were already undone, and she stood. "Curse at me later, grandchild. I wish to be on *Rani* before the flare erupts."

Zhu Rong punctuated the statement with another threatening flicker of brightening. "Again flare," Jwu reported. "Mass ejection hour less, following same flux path."

Kirthi blinked, nodded. She crouch-walked, slid open the hatch. About to exit, she remembered the sword, turned to pick it up and sling it over her shoulder. Swinging out, she jumped down into the swirling particles, disrupting the flow into eddies and small tornados. She turned to help Ajji down from the rátha. The old woman backed down the narrow foot-loops between second and third wheels. Kirthi spotted and steadied her until Ajji, too, stood in the swirling dust devils.

Jwu came out via the rearward panel on the far side. Obote hesitated inside, looking at the sealed box which contained the memory cores they had retrieved. "*Rani* won't lift with those on board," Kirthi assured him. "Nor with you, if you try to bring them," she added. She twitched her arm ominously, reminding him of the captured weapon.

Ajji went to the rear of the rátha, touched the container that held the dried body of Murphy O'Meath. She whispered quietly, perhaps in prayer. Ajji thought she caught the names "Agni" and "Aodh."

"I can carry the husk," Jwu offered.

"There is no need," her grandmother replied. *"I have seen him now, and he shall have the grandest pyre he could ever imagine. There will be no need to break his bones. Help Kirthi lift him down."*

The zhīzhū held the metal casket while Kirthi undid the clamps. When it was free from the rear rack, Jwu lowered it gently into the swirling dust. Kirthi and Ajji knelt, opened the lid. Ajji looked at the dried face one more time, murmured a prayer. *"Next life,"* she added, and stood again.

She turned and began walking toward *Rani* through the increasing magnetic winds of dust. Kirthi moved to catch up. "We may need a few hours in the med-pods," she commented.

"I know the inside of one well enough." Ajji stopped. "It's well worth it. I haven't been EVA in thirty years. And never on a surface like this. The gods have blessed me by allowing me to be one of the first and last to see it."

"Are you all right?"

"I shall be fine." Her tone was once again the argumentative old woman. It softened slightly. "I may ask for help at the rough patches, if that will make you feel useful."

About halfway to *Rani*, Jwu passed them. Obote passed a few moments later, as Kirthi guided her over a rough patch. Finally, Ajji and Kirthi were upon *Rani Lakshmi Bai*. Obote and Jwu stood at either side of the cargo hatch. Ajji leaned on Kirthi as they came over a last portion of rough ground. "Murphy is proud of you, granddaughter."

Kirthi felt calmness settle on her shoulders. "You mean that *you* are proud. But you can't say such things." She keyed a sequence with eye-flicks. The cargo ramp swung down for them.

"You place words in my mouth?" There was no real bite in Ajji's question.

"I wouldn't dare." She walked her grandmother up the ramp. As she did she keyed to open comm to the two observers. "We lift as soon as each of you dictates a confession to the attempt to violate the Ross Accords. Name names."

"No." Obote's posture of defiance could be read despite the bulk of his battlesuit. "I'm not giving you that."

Kirthi shrugged. "Enjoy the superflare. Death and cremation in the same millisecond. Jwu?"

The zhīzhū stepped onto the ramp and scuttled up, into the ship. "The People erroneous logic disclosed warned will be," shehe agreed. It shifted attention with a learned hand gesture to Ajji, two of its "palms" placed together. "Human B. C. Avinashini, history your remember tasted by my Nest and successors."

Kirthi looked to her grandmother. At this angle, she could not see her grandmother's face through the helmet. Posture gave few clues of her reaction. "I shall consider that request when it is my time to be tasted."

Kirthi shuddered at the thought. There were better ways to be re-born than having a zhīzhū suck memory out of the skull. There was something to be said for her father's views, though he clung too tightly to the exact traditions.

She turned back to the ramp, looked briefly at the swirling particles flowing over it. Obote still stood waist-deep in the magnetic tide. "Last chance, Commander." She keyed the communications link. "*Rani*, seal and lock."

Obote hesitated only a second, then hopped onto the ramp as it rose. He stumbled through the lock.

"Not the stuff of Manifester martyrdom after all, huh?" Kirthi made sure that the lock was sealed, and that pressure was rebuilding inside the hold. "Jwu, you're on sufferance for now. Help Obote move a mattress into the forward airlock. That's his new home. You're his guard and personal attendant. He's this side of getting flushed out. If

manages to get into ship's systems, I'll punch the door from my handheld."

"Waste of meat," Jwu complained.

"If *you* give me reason to distrust, be sure I won't waste. I'll find some way to tastesmell your lobes – after I cook your carcass well-done. Worse than wasting meat, right? I'm not a strict vegetarian, Ajji."

"I forgave Murphy his taste for beef. He could not help himself."

The chalkboard-screech zhīzhū laugh echoed through the comm. "Comprehending you," it responded.

"I need to be in the medical pod," Obote complained. "I've been out there as long as you."

"Dying of cancer is good enough for you," Kirthi snapped back. "If you get really bad, you can cycle yourself out the lock." She unlocked her helmet, breathed the cool, newly-expanded air from the scavenger tanks. She wanted to push him back out into the dust, let him see the flare up-close and personal.

Some semblance of a conscience poked at the back of her mind. She turned to Jwu. "On second thought, jam him into a medical pod and set it for a long nap. We can't give a freeze-dried corpse to the House of Knights to face charges."

Ajji had also unlocked and removed her helmet, but left her gloves on. Kirthi went to her, put her palms together, bowed. "Please do me the honor of taking *Rani Lakshmi Bai* off world, Admiral Avinashini."

The old woman's eyes glowed. She put her own bare palms together and returned the slight bow. "It is you who honor me, Granddaughter. I accept." She strode out of the hold, helmet tucked in her left elbow. "Take engineering and push the drives," she ordered over her shoulder. "Power the hyperdrives – we'll need a microjump. And keep your suit on. We're not going to be far ahead of the flare."

Kirthi blinked, hesitated, then obeyed. She found herself smiling as she pulled the gloves back on and keyed the seal. She wasted no further time going to the main deck, then aft to the engineering section. Entering, she removed the sword, slid its strap over the back of the main console's seat.

The white noise of start-up told her that Ajji had already keyed the power sequences from the con. Kirthi was reminded for a fleeting moment that the old lady had key codes beyond even Kirthi's own. She might dare discussing politeness, if not protocol, after the ship was up. For now, she looked over her displays, assured herself that *Rani* would be hot when she had to be. She ran her fingers over the main console, adjusted the grav-bottles to squeeze down harder on the bits of deuterium skimmed from the tanks.

Jwu's scratchy voice came over comm. "Main flare erupting calculated minutes," it said. Perhaps there was an inflection of human urgency. "Priority navigation rear Panlong immediate."

Ajji chattered back in pidgin zhīzhū. Kirthi translated it roughly: "Am I too stupid to breath?" she asked, with a place-keeping adjective in place of the scent of derision. In Standard, she added, "If you knew the math you claimed, we would've left sooner. Never gone to that cave."

There was a pause. "Knew Zhu Rong math at *Granuaile*," the zhīzhū admitted. Its tone was almost humanly ashamed.

Kirthi felt her control slip away into the anger that got her in trouble. "If you knew we were short on time, you lied to us!" She turned away from the console, starting for the hatch. "Damn you, I hate thinking Obote was right – " She reached the hatch and spun the dogging wheel.

"Man your post," Ajji said calmly, as if she was watching. "It had its orders from Jue-Five. It was

supposed to bring those samples back, at any cost. SheHe *disobeyed*.”

Kirthi forced back the anger, turned the wheel back to the locked position. “Manning the boards,” she agreed, terse. She found herself shaking, as unused adrenaline demanded movement. She fumbled at the seat’s harness, gave up. With eye-flicks, vocal commands, and rapid finger-stabs, she ran a sequence that would bring the engines all the way up in under a minute.

If the gravitic bottle didn’t collapse under the stress.

The grating under her feet vibrated, then shook. Metal pounded and boomed throughout the deck. Dust puffed out of joints and unseen crannies. The old bitch was unhappy that her aging innards were being put to the test. Kirthi made slight adjustments, but the sequence could not be stopped.

She fumbled at her straps again. This time, she managed to buckle herself down.

The board went from red to amber, then a few green. The rumbling decreased.

“Not more time,” Jwu commented. “Flare almost now.” It had definitely adopted an almost-human tone of urgency.

Kirthi keyed the board, coaxed two more lights to green. Three remained amber. She stabbed at two more combinations without improving the result.

She shrugged, leaned back. “Go now.”

Ajji certainly saw from her own boards that the safeties would be stressed. She apparently did not let that bother her. *Rani* surged upward. The aging compensators failed to hide the full effects of the thrust; Kirthi was pushed back into the pads. She reached out against the g’s to key adjustments.

One of the amber lights flickered between red and amber, indecisive. Kirthi called up the diagnostics. The number three fusion plant’s grav-bottle generator was close to failing. The deck plates vibrated.

Kirthi decreased three's output, increased one and four's. The light returned to solid amber. Kirthi called up the nav plot on a side display. Ajji had *Rani* pushing straight for Panlong itself.

Jumping from the frying iron into the fire.

She looked at the projections, saw what the old woman was doing. *Rani* would at most skim the outermost edges of Panlong before changing vector. She intended to put the hot-j between themselves and the plasma bursts already streaking toward L-II.

Kirthi pulled up the rear cams, dimming the star's disk. Zhu Rong pointed a huge goiter filled with plasma toward Panlong. The thin membrane of stellar gravity holding the bulge back was poised to break, overwhelmed by the growing internal instability.

Kirthi gasped as the flare finally erupted. The plasma snapped free, streaming toward Panlong and L-II. It followed the magnetic lines toward Panlong.

Toward *Rani*.

The massive bulk of Panlong came between Zhu Rong and *Rani*. Number three flickered into the red again as Ajji demanded more power, pushing the drives. Kirthi felt momentarily dizzy as the expert pilot spun *Rani* on her axis, pointing the grav-units ninety degrees. More of Panlong's bulk could be seen as the vector changed.

With the full bulk of the gas giant in the way, Ajji swung the ship again, completing the skew-turn and straightening the vector as best she could. Kirthi watched the boards, adjusting the power to keep thrust at a maximum, keeping unit three from blowing. As the minutes passed, Panlong's disk became more apparent. Panlong L-II could be seen as a pebble, barely clearing the body of its main.

The light behind the gas giant increased. Rivulets of plasma brushed past the hot-jupiter. Tendrils wrapped around the moons, flowed through their orbits.

Kirthi opened a sub-display, focusing on Panlong L-II's south pole region. Blurry long-distance video showed the star's fires sweeping over the surface, immolating anything on the surface. She thought she saw a hint of rock-needles melting away, or at least imagined that she could see that level of detail.

Ajji whispered old prayers over the comm. Kirthi gave her the silence of respect. Eventually, Ajji gave a sigh. "Improperly quick cremation," she said. "No time to truly mourn. But I have had enough decades already."

Kirthi found her throat filling with the congestion of repressed emotion. "Father should be here," she said, clearing her throat. "To break the bones."

"There are no bones to break." Ajji sounded satisfied. "Nor any virus, or instructions for producing virus."

"Never forever destroyed," Jwu cut in. "Always the Must of taking all for the Nest causes the seeking of such knowledge. Not enough different, my People yours."

"True. Now shut up and put all four lobes on checking my calculations. We're far too deep in the well to push safely over the lip."

"Microjump not optional," Jwu pointed out.

"If I thought it was optional, you wouldn't be checking my math."

"All five lobes engaging," Jwu conceded.

Kirthi rushed through the checklist for the hyperdrive. Power was available, the coils were warming, and the control systems were up. The only red light on the board was obvious: they were much too deep in Panlong's gravity well to safely push over the lip. Unless it was perfectly calculated, the gravitic burst would tear *Rani* into bits.

Kirthi pushed out a tension-releasing sigh. So long as Ajji's mind was intact, she had the best human pilot known at the helm. Kirthi's own skills were far less developed.

So long as Ajji was not too rusty, they would have a fighting chance.

A bead of sweat formed at Kirthi's hairline, began rolling down the center of her forehead. She glanced at the sensor reads as the salty drop slid into her left eye and stung. "We fry in ninety-five seconds."

Neither Ajji nor Jwu responded.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Vicinity Panlong (Groombridge 1830) (Yazjwu).

Yazjwu stood between the large rear console and an auxiliary, hiser eyes set so that shehe could view two separate displays. The reduced time in reviewing B.C. Avinashini's calculations concerned himher as shehe divided tasks amongst lobes. The central lobe coordinated the four peripheral lobes and ran the final check-loop.

There was a deep satisfaction in the elegance. The satisfaction triggered a memory cascade from old stores: Hogajue-One's own calculations of a jump *into* the gravity well of Groombridge 1618 II, risking a scout sphere to aid human foolishness. Hogajue-One could have simply alerted the Nests to end all contact with the zhīzhū settlement; the virus would have merely consumed an experimental settlement. Human illogic was impressive, to say the least.

"Calculations correct," Yazjwu commented.

A moment later, the beautiful, cold brightness of hyperspace tidal-waved into all five of Yazwu's lobes.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Vicinity Panlong (Groombridge 1830) (B.C. Avinashini).

Avi saw the coils tighten, then squeeze. *Rani* yawed, pitched, moaned to the core of every stanchion. Avi's physical sight saw dust bursting from seams. The inner eye saw electrons massing near the starboard hyperdrive power coupling, ready to melt the reinforced cables away. Her fingers danced to the engineering sub-board, ready to alter the power flow.

Kirthi must have seen it too, as quick on the boards as Murphy once had been. The massed electrons somehow reduced their flow, bringing the power levels back into balance. The lurch in the deepest pit of her stomach told her that *Rani* was safely in hyperspace.

"Next life," the whisper came from somewhere behind. She nodded her agreement, dream or not. The pyre in her mind's eye was first the traditional Hindu crematorium, then well-oiled logs stacked on a flat rock. The alien grasses waved gently in the darkness on the breeze. She stood, saw himself in his Jin Jun ceremonial garb, then his proper blue-green leathers, lying on the pyre. The flames erupted, Agni's two heads and seven arms visible within.

Avi dismissed the hallucination, forced her mind back to the console before her. There was still work to do, now and in the future, and she would not be fooled by the subconscious tricks the hyperspatial transitions sometimes caused.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

The coiling of quantum levels was acutely evident. Kirthi felt, then saw them in her mind. At the same time, she retched, feeling the burst in every synapse, at every nerve ending. She'd never experienced a squeeze-out exit;

few humans seemed to have the odd talent to watch every bubble of quantum foam as the two space-time-continua intersected. Too many vessels were damaged, too many men and women lost from that maneuver.

Ajji had somehow evoked some part of that math for a microjump deep in a gravity well.

As *Rani* pushed into the new layer, a ripple of some kind amplified electron flow. Kirthi knew, saw it before the amber light blinked on her display. She keyed, adjusted the power flow. The transitioned completed itself.

Was that a flicker of approval, a taste of warm, dark ale passing over her tongue to the back of her throat? Kirthi shook her head, hard, to clear it. She'd heard that unusual hyperspace entries and exits could cause odd waking dreams. The illusion passed.

They could not waste fuel on extended travel in this space. They had not properly calculated a route. They could not even guess at an exit point that would put them near a star. Kirthi keyed, recycled the drives to prepare for the exit burst.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Hyperspace (Vicinity Panlong, Groombridge 1830) (Yazjwu).

The cold, perfect lightness washed through herhis lobes for several minutes only. *Rani Lakshme Bai* protested again as B.C. Avinashini calculated the vessel's exit.

The usual let-down of re-entry into normal space came to himher.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Oort Zone (Vicinity Panlong, Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Kirthi entered the con. Ajji and Yazjwu stood at the circular command console to the rear. “It is beautiful, from this distance,” Ajji commented.

“Safe distance, many dangerous things attractive,” Yazjwu concurred.

Kirthi moved in, stood beside her grandmother. “You’re different, for a damned zhīzhū, she commented.

Ajji placed a hand on Kirthi’s shoulder. “Some of *both* of our peoples are different.”

Kirthi felt the warm glow, decided to hide her pleasure in it. Instead, she reached forward, keyed in a sequence. “I finished rebuilding the final recordings from *Granuaile*, Ajji.” The stellar eruption faded from the large display. They found themselves back at *Granuaile*’s shattered con. The control dome’s lighting was dimmed. Some of the consoles were still active, others dark and charred.

Her grandfather lay half-bent on the floor beside the large tactical console, barely conscious. He struggled to push himself to his knees, then pulled himself to standing on the edge of the console. He half-reached to the console, as if to key a function – perhaps the messenger launch he had failed to complete. “Next life,” he whispered.

Ajji, looking at the recording, nodded. “Yes, beloved. Next life.”

Kirthi watched as her grandfather braced his back against the console. It seemed urgent to him. One eye swollen shut, dried blood smeared across his face, he began to sing. It was quiet and raspy, but the tune was unmistakable. “Fare the well, to thee, my own true love...”

Year: Approx. 2416. Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Cuchulain “Murphy” O’Meath).

Murphy awoke. He did not remember getting up and going to the center seat, but he was there again. The water tube was in his mouth. A few drops slid into his mouth. He bit down on the valve, took a deeper sip. He was sitting. Sitting.

He should stand again so he could die. It was what he had done before. The last time he’d died, he’d tied himself to a rock.

Or had he died, since, in less memorable ways?

The room was dim. He felt the warmth of Bangalore against his skin. He wondered why it was not the cool green hills of Dun Dealgan, with the lapping of waves and the old stone of the Keep. He had shown his father the Keep once, and the standing stone at Knockbridge. Hell, he’d only been to Bangaluru a few times...why there now?

“Heathen...husband...” It was not the lilt of Ireland. It was born in an old civilization, a different language base. She was here, somewhere in the con, though he could not quite catch her flitting from shadow to shadow. Such playfulness was not like her; she often refused to give in to simple play. She had brought him to Bangaluru, where they circled the flames more properly than they had on Shānhé-Wòtu.

He pulled his way back to the now. The main console was dead. With an effort, he pushed himself up to his feet. He limped back to the main survey console at the rear of the con. Its manual keys responded to his touch, re-established contact with the unlaunched messenger torpedo. He keyed it to make a final recording, launch on his death. With only one good eye, he failed to notice that its own small drive was inoperable.

He did not remember sitting one more time, but he found himself so. His mind wanted to detach and leave the

radiation-scalded body. His heart wanted it to stay, to wait for the tall, powerful woman he made love to these many years. She had always hidden the powerful desires, the boiling emotions, trying to fit a civilized mode decreed by the younger gods of Earth. Few knew her as he did. That knowing required a return to older, less refined gods. One had to burn away the veneers of civilization to see humanity as beloved by the oldest gods.

Aodh, Agni, even the Fire of Tau Ceti had burned away her veneers, allowed her to be free to reach for him.

The fire in Murphy's heart won, pulled mind back. He pushed himself up. He put his back against the stone. If he could not see her one more time, he would die standing against the old stone at Knockbridge.

For her, he had put his language talents to work on Kannada, the dying Dravidian branch. Avinashini, she had been. "Indestructible." She could, *would* endure. Perhaps she would take lovers, not waste herself on foolish chastity.

Twenty years was too short a time to spend with such a woman.

Avinashini had loved a song once, a song fair-skinned Dechtire had taught him. He had learned it long before he knew that savage passion hid itself under the softness of women's words. The song had often come unbidden into memory as he coursed through space, fought a battle, made love to a woman – and especially when he made love to Avinashini. She had even asked him to sing it in quiet moments, as few as such moments seemed to have been.

The song was there, waiting for his damaged voice.

Fare thee well to you my own true love,
I am going far, far away,
I am bound for California,
A place that I don't know right well.

So fare thee well, my own true love

For when I return, united we will be
It's not the leaving of Liverpool that grieves me
But my darling when I think of thee.

I have signed to sail a Yankee clipper ship
Davy Crockett is her name
And old Burgess is the Captain of her
And they that say she's a floating shame.

His throat hurt. He. Paused, decided to skip the refrain.

I am bound off for California
By the way of stormy Cape Horn
And I'm sworn to write you a letter, my love
When I find myself to homeward bound.

So fare thee well, my own true love ...

Again, he skipped the remainder of the refrain. His knees were tired. He forced them to keep him standing.

I have shipped with Burgess once before
And I think I know him right well
If a man's a sailor, he can get along
If not, then he will land in Hell.

Once more, he paused, skipped the refrain. He cleared his throat.

Oh the sun is on the harbour, love
And I wish I could remain
For I know it will be a long, long time
Before my arms are 'round you again.

This final time, he pushed through the refrain with his weakening voice.

So fare thee well, my own true love
For when I return, united we will be
It's not the leaving of Liverpool that grieves me
But my darling when I think of thee.

The last whisper trailed away from his lips. His left arm no longer hurt. Nothing hurt, for that matter. The burns healed. His legs were strong. He was ready for the last cords to be cut. Avinashini and Fahnisht, Urwah and Hogajue-Two, perhaps even Chengen and Lanna would stack the wood and light the pyre to free him for whatever might be next.

The vision in his right eye faded. His heart allowed his spirit to go free.

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Avinashini).

“Thank you, granddaughter.”

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Zhu Rong's flares had reduced to their normal, merely excessive levels while Ajji recuperated in the medical pod. The nanotech had cleared the worst of the radiation damage. Kirthi went into the med-bay and started the shut-down process.

Ajji was quick to revive after this short tenure in the chamber. She sat up after it opened, managed to climb off herself. She accepted the robe offered with good grace. “You should spend some time in that pod,” she advised her granddaughter. “You were badly sunburned on that walk across the surface.”

“As soon as we go over the lip,” she agreed. “I think I might trust Jwu in hyperspace, especially with you to watch him.”

Ajji inclined her chin gravely. “Yes. You can trust Jwu. HisHer suffix means ‘branched from the Jue seed at the first cutting.’ It means that whoever chose to create this line wanted independent thought.”

This was the sort of linguistic twist her father had tried to explain, more than once. She had never been much interested in his explanations. She should have listened better. “I’m not sure I follow that, Ajji.” Then another thought occurred to her. “You knew that from the first. He lied to you. About his name-suffix.”

“Of course.” Ajji’s shrug was like a gesture she had seen once in news video of her grandfather. “I told you it was capable of lying so, because it did so. Interesting brain engineering for a zhīzhū.”

“What does this mean?”

“It means that Jue-Five was behind this. SheHe knew from preserved memories that the original Hogajue made a great leap of faith in trusting three humans and a Horn in 2395. Jue-Five has lost much of that originality over regenerations. Shehe made sure Jwu had as much of it as could be given, and this addition. Knowingly or, perhaps, in some odd twist of lobe interaction. The zhīzhū version of a ‘subconscious will to fail.’ Regardless, Jwu can tell an untrue story.”

“How does lying make himher more trustworthy?”

“Not all of the languages have gone off-world with us, least of all the Dravidian branches. Jwu went to *great*

trouble to learn Kannada so that it could secretly listen to anything I might say to you. SheHe then *listened*.”

Kirthi understood. “Acted on what we said. Learned. Changed some of its – hardwiring.”

“Yes.”

Year: 2469 (Present Day). Location: Orbit, Panlong L-II, Zhu Rong (Groombridge 1830) (Kirthi).

Rani Lakshmi Bai again orbited over what had been the south pole. Ajjī sat at the center console, traditionally reserved for the command pilot. Jwu sat in its now-accustomed position at the rear of the con, operating the survey systems. It had somehow managed to extend the long-jammed sampling mast to pull in the traces of dust and ions expanding outward.

Kirthi sat to the left of her grandmother, closely scanning the heat-smoothed surface of L-II. “There’s no sign of any of it. *Granuaile*, the pinnacles, the mountain – they were all burned away. The dust. It’s bare rock.”

“Good,” Ajjī said. She keyed comm, simpler than turning enough to speak to Jwu. “Have you finished collecting?”

“Dust obtained bottled,” the zhīzhū responded. “Unlikely many O’Meath Cuchulain Padraic Murphy molecules.”

“A few are enough,” Kirthi answered. “Let’s get out of this deep well and start back.”

“Incomprehending human motives. Only dust, this dust. Not sentient. Unlikely negative tenth power single O’Meath Cuchulain Padraic Murphy molecule.”

Kirthi reached for her grandmother’s hand. “I understand, Ajjī. He was part of two worlds.”

“Still incomprehending. Worlds not tastesmell mankind dust.”

Kirthi didn't voice her agreement with his sentiment. “Symbolic memory is ‘tastesmell’ for humans, Jwu.”

Ajji squeezed Kirthi's hand. “Why must you assume that it's only symbolism?” The old woman's face suddenly tensed – as if, improbably, she held back tears. “Human and Horn gods have long awaited his soul. Agni, Aodh and K'naftir have released him.”

“The gods of Fire.” Kirthi squeezed back, held the older woman's hand for a moment. “If he's there, I want him on my side when we get back to Jannah. I'm planning on enjoying forcing that bastard Idanha out of the admiralty. That's the kind of fight Murphy'd have liked to be in.”

“He will be in it, through you.” Ajji's eyes were – for the first time in a long time – unabashedly proud as she gazed on her granddaughter. With a quick glance to the main board, she tapped in a code. “You may re-set the deepest codes now, grand-daughter. *Rani* will answer to no one else without your permission.”

Kirthi nodded, keyed the computer. She thought a moment, then tapped in a phrase. “*Rani Lakshme Bai* code change accepted,” the computer voice confirmed.

There was another identification to alter. “Register legal name change. ‘Bangaluru Agnivesh Kirthi’ to ‘Bangaluru Agnivesh Kirthi *O'Meath*.” She keyed her confirmation.

“Registered and set for legal transmission on arrival in Imperial space.”

Satisfaction warmed her innards. Idanha would get the legal notice soon after *Rani* bounced over the lip at Wolf 359. He likely would understand her warning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregory P. Lee is a lawyer, father, husband, very slow cyclist, and humble servant to four cats.

