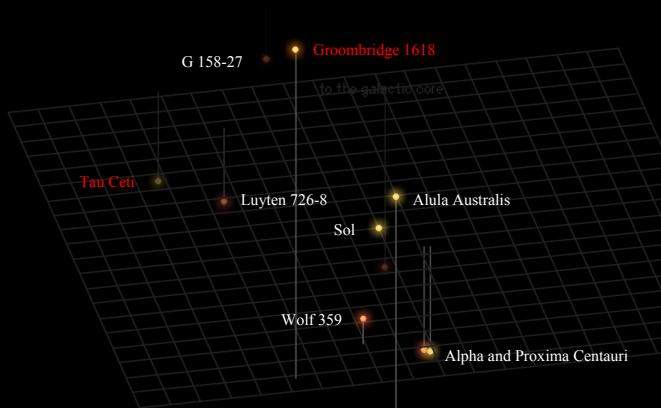


Demand the

Debt

That's

Owing



Book 2 of The Laughing Lip

By

Gregory P. Lee

The Laughing Lip

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Gregory P. Lee



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

Le Tour de Pudge: Lance Need Not Apply

Woods of Memory

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

The Laughing Lip: All Shall Go to Wrack

The Laughing Lip: Demand the Debt That's Due

Credits and Acknowledgements

Once again, Fran V. Hutton Lee, my wife, encouraged me to write and publish this story. She told me to chop it into pieces, but she meant well. As a result, I took huge novel and made it two smaller ones, with part of a third (after massive rewriting). She is also encouraging me on that third half, and possibly a fourth. A fifth, more of a novella, is partially written, but that will have me writing unto the second generation of O'Meaths if she keeps encouraging.

Fran may tell me to give up and keep getting people divorced for a living. She's a redhead. They can be contrary and temperamental.

Again, there are first readers to credit: Fran, Karen Gehm, Rebecca Lee (if she makes it through the first book), Rob Eaglestone (who is also a good proofreader) and others. I also entirely and stupidly forgot Rev. Richard Trudeau in my first book. Richard is personally responsible for regularly asking me to get this second book out before the end of spring, 2011.

Once again, I have to thank Marc Miller and the Traveller crowd, which includes Mr. Eaglestone. Also as before, a vast number of Internet resources have helped make this novel possi-

ble. Again, the idea is to use fairly recent science, spherical space, and stars that might just exist. Silly me.

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

Dedication

This one is dedicated to Fran.

Chapter 1

August 23, 2395 (One Month Ago) Shānhé-Wòtu (Tau Ceti IV)
(Fahnisht)

Fahnisht struggled with the last log, his fingers weak and back aching. He had just barely arisen from his pallet at sunset the day before. He had come to the large flat fire stone out of personal duty. Neither body nor mind wished him here. Each step was weighted with more than wood.

This pyre-fuel had not aged a full season. Its resins were still damp. Green still showed from a bit of bark stripped off when he had stumbled and dropped it back on the diminishing pile. Extra oil would be needed to start the fire and bring it to proper heat. Tapping his last reserves, he rolled the log down his outstretched arms. It fell on the top of the pile, bounced, come to rest at an angle to rest of the logs.

He was too weak to care enough to correct this impropriety. Fahnisht fell-sat backward, panting, clutched his knees to his chest. Panting, he closed his eyes. His forehead sank to his knees.

The Pyre now required only oil and bodies. Too many bodies, too many of them dear. He had no desire to bring this torch. There were no songs to sing. The sons had no battles to remember. The daughter was still learning the fires she would tend for mates. The young consort would never give any warrior a child.

Klysira, the mate, should have sung the Clan's fires until her horn cracked with age.

Slow hoof steps reached his ears from a distance. He strained, listening for the dragging of travois poles through the grasses. He needed no such confirmation. Fahnisht pulled his head up. His own horn and hornband must be high and proud. The Clan demanded no less. He had survived the disease when so many others perished.

Pushing himself up and turning, the Clanlord forced aching knees to support him. The line of beasts approached. Too few warriors led the animals. Seven animals dragged poles behind them, not five. While he had labored at the fire stone, two more of the sick had died. Clan Fahnisht would soon number few more than two hundred, not rightly a Clan. He reached up, fingered the gold band nailed into the base of his horn. Did it mean anything with so few?

The first of the beasts was close now. Pelest walked beside it, guiding. His head was up, angled slightly to look upward. The boy who had come from a settled town had become a proper warrior. He was here when he was needed, honoring those who were to be honored. Perhaps, finally, Fahnisht could admit that he had been unfair to Pelest. Kameef, the oddity of the hidden horn, had become close because of the familiar-in-strange. His closeness had not acknowledged the increasing absences.

Pelest brought the beast to a halt. Fahnisht pushed his tired legs forward, came to face Fahnisht. He reached up to the tip of his horn, pressed a finger against the point. He brought it away, rubbed a streak of blood against each of Pelest's cheeks. "This is but a part of the debt you are owed by the Clan."

Pelest remained mute. He stared ahead, not acknowledging the gift. He had already brought his mate and young to the Pyre. His personal tent was empty, without even a consort to assist.

Fahnisht went to the travois behind the beast. Klysira, shrunk by the sudden and deadly illness, lay on the leather stretched between the poles. Fahnisht gathered the now-light body into his arms and lifted it. He turned, brought his mate to the pyre. He laid her gently on the wood. Pelest and others fol-

lowed him with the other bodies. Jars of scented oils bearing the seals of Town Hortensk, too few for all, were opened. The contents were sprinkled on the bodies and the wood beneath, in hopes that the fire would burn properly.

By rights, the lighting should wait until at earliest dusk. The living should be gathered to sing, to honor the dead into the immortality gifted by flame. Joy and sorrow should be mixed, as it always was, as it had been from long ago. Prior to the last few days, Fahnisht could not have imagined the haste he now showed those he loved dearest. "The torch," he said to no one, to the air itself.

Pelest stepped up beside him, pointed at Klysira's hornband. "It must be passed on," he said, his voice still a rasp from his own bout with the illness. He, too, had barely survived. "It shall not burn with her."

The Clanlord nodded, weakly. "Yes. We must find a new Firekeeper." Perhaps he had willed himself to ignore the obvious: there could be no other Firekeeper for Clan Fahnisht. Without Klysira, the Clan might as well pass to a younger warrior. Fahnisht wondered for a moment whether Pelest could be provoked into Challenge.

He pushed away the moment of internal weakness. The Clan could not be allowed to see that. Too much had been lost already. Fahnisht unsheathed his knife and began gently probing between horn and metal until he had loosened it enough to pry away. The band slowly rose up the horn until it was free enough to remove. As he should, Fahnisht held the ring up for all to see before putting it into a pouch at his waist. He would consult over what Firekeeper was best versed and most worthy of taking the honor forward.

"Give me the torch," he said again. This time, the torch was passed first to Pelest, then to him. It flickered and sputtered. Whoever had prepared the torch had been as stingy with oil as he had been himself. He touched it carefully to the twigs and sticks he had managed to find for the base of the fire. He nursed each flame as it caught, then moved on, finding another patch of oil or cluster of dry kindling.

When he had circled the entire flat stone, a murky, smoky fire rose lazily. It was not at all the blaze of glory his mate and young deserved.

He could not force a sickness to duel. There was no war to bring down on an army of bad gases, nor the tiny creatures Kameef believed brought such disease. He could not force the illness to pay the blood debt he and the clan was due.

Fahnisht watched the fire slowly build into a dark, greasy smear across the sky.

March 18, 2350 (Forty-five Years Ago) – Jannah (Wolf 359 II Habitat B) (Yasar)

Yasar Grunon clipped his tether to the piton. The climb to the peak had been easy, outside the artificial gravity of the habitat. He and his suit were light despite the density of the asteroid. Continued advances in gravitics technology brought comfort and normalcy to the frontier.

The stars above and around were crisp, clear, unblemished by any atmosphere. He would enjoy an atmosphere right now. Any atmosphere. He would enjoy normal sunlight, and a chance to swat at a mosquito, or a biting black fly. The unnatural environment of the asteroid's interior had worn on him, as it had others. This was a ridiculous undertaking.

Moving damned asteroids into far orbit around the single hydrogen mass of a flare star – who had thought this would make sense? Who had thought it would be a good idea to put humans close to Wolf's dead range, force them to live below the surface? Who thought of snatching comets and crashing them into the Mass to add to the fuel cache?

Idiots. Idiots pushing to own all of the useless rocks and cold little dwarfs in space. These idiots wanted to step beyond Wolf, look for worlds at least as hospitable as Ren-Ma. They wanted to find true blue-green worlds for colonization. The elite and nobility would of course control these worlds. As usual, the idiots

Demand the Debt That's Owing

were putting all of this on the backs of the African and Euro races.

Damned Imperialists. The common children of Allah and other reasonable gods labored and died, as they always had. The Zhangs and their lackeys lived on, lived in comfort. They raised large families without being forced to choose bare rocks and the vague promise of transplanted habitat domes.

And why, in Allah's name, had Reformed Islam bought into it? Hadn't the Mother Continent already been plundered enough for slave labor? Why volunteer to slave, without even a yellow sun and rich, dark soil?

Ren-Ma was livable, if not ideal. There was still hope for Tau Ceti, if the Jin Jun eventually got there. He'd heard that the new niner drives could reach Tau Ceti, hope to refuel, and return in less time yet. Such a vessel would be almost entirely fuel tankage and engine just to make the push. Living quarters and equipment would be limited.

Pushing out to Tau Ceti was another damn fool idea, so far as he was concerned. The cost of niner drives would come down. A pusher-engine could be built that didn't have to be only for damnable Jin Jun. The niner drives should all be put into use bringing people, supplies and promised habitats out here to Jannah.

For Yasar, getting to Jannah had required a stop to meet a fuel barge in deep space, the middle of no return. One of the four ships that had carried the colony core had failed to arrive at the barge. It had probably simply popped out short. Crew and colonists alike must have suffocated or frozen, or both.

Most people would be smart enough to stay away from risks like that. Yasar hadn't been. Now he was here, alone. Ada, her dark beauty always emphasized by her hijab, had stayed behind until the colony could be better established.

There it was – that funny stomach-flip. *Abraham* was on schedule. Yasar keyed his heads-up. His visor darkened to allow the display. The helmet cam zoomed out, seeking the ship as he had pre-programmed. With better instruments, the men and women Below might see *Abraham* a moment or two earlier than

he could. Something about being Above made him feel like the watcher on the farthest tip of land. He would see the tips of the masts before the rest of the ship sailed over the horizon.

Ada would be on that ship. She had promised.

She had promised over a year ago, before *Miriam* disappeared, before the perfection of Imperial math was disproved. She might have changed her mind when that became known.

He hung loosely from the tether in near-weightlessness for eleven, almost twelve minutes, acid growling in his stomach, switching between heads-up and clear visor. All he saw were bright stars.

The first transponder signal reached him. Yes, *Abraham*. The suit computer took in the data, zoomed the cam and locked it. The heads-up showed a faint blink every second. The ship's signal laser would pulse that way. No outline could be discerned from this distance.

Yasar held his breath, waiting for the first data stream. Ten seconds, twenty. Light was arriving. What was the delay?

Finally, the icon beeped into his heads-up: the promised roster, crew and colonist. He eye-keyed it, opened the text. Yasar scrolled through.

There: Kasimi, Ada: Colony Ecologist. She had braved the darkness. Kept her promise. She was the wife he wanted, the wife who would bring the colony to its next level. Her expertise would allow the addition of real Terran vegetation in the caverns and, later, in the planned surface domes. His children and grandchildren would see trees and fields. As gravitic technology expanded, radiation shunts would allow introduction of animal life.

A message arrived in his inbox. Yasar keyed it to his heads-up. It was from Ada, having come in from *Abraham* on the data-stream. "You must find the Qadi right away."

Yasar shouted himself hoarse with joy. His ears rang with the echoes in his helmet.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

August 24, 2351 (Forty-four Years Ago) – Jannah (Wolf 359 II Habitat B) (Yasar)

No ship was expected. The niner pusher had left the dome modules and new settlers a two weeks before. There were no couriers expected, no inspection tours of some damned noble or another. The gravitic ripple was different from any that had been seen. There was no proper transponder signal.

Yasar Grunon looked at the faces gathered around the console. “We should just sit tight. I’ve shut down all our beacons. We just listen. We sit tight.”

“It’s one ship,” his wife responded. “It’s moving fast. The vector will bring it here in less than a day. Some of the mining tugs are already out there. They can match and get a look. And whoever it is probably has sensors to detect the power output. They can come get us any time they want.”

“Your wife is right, Yasar. There’s no chance we can go without being found. Pirates or aliens, they’ll know we’re here.”

“If they don’t already,” Ada added.

There was no good argument to refute that view. “All right. Is there a tug ready? One with a good sensor suite? I can take it out myself.”

Ada touched his hand. “You’re a good man, Yasar, but that would just lead them straight here. Faraz is out there, and his in a good vector to get a look. Send him.”

“A mining laser isn’t going to be much good if ...” His voice trailed off.

“Then he’ll get his reward as a martyr,” Ada responded. The others, all men, nodded agreement. Ada had grown highly respected here, despite her gender. “You can’t assume that this will be a fight, anyway. Men! Always thinking that the rest of the world is out to steal from them.”

“If they wanted to talk, they would say ‘welcome.’”

“Tell Faraz to do just that,” Ada responded.

The men gathered around the console seemed less appreciative of that suggestion. One by one, though they nodded their assent.

Yasar's fingers twitched nervously as he keyed in the message. He hesitated a moment, then hit "send." No military strategist, he knew enough to thank Allah that the colony relied on tight-beam transmitters. The intruder would probably be unable to detect this transmission, even with bleed.

It would detect Faraz's power-up and approach, though. It would certainly detect his signal, as intended. Widecast would allow the newcomer to locate Faraz's mining boat.

"We will have to wait now," Yasar observed. "We should get some rest. I can keep watch here." He settled into a chair.

Ada looked at the other men. "You should all be getting to your sections and preparing the emergency crews. "Allah forbid that you men are correct, and that we will be attacked."

They assented, began to move out of the cramped chamber.

When they were gone, Ada sealed the hatch. She came over to Yasar. "You are quiet, husband."

"I am not comfortable, Ada. A human ship should identify itself. An alien seeking friendship would do so, too, I hope. Who is out there?"

"We are not aliens, and they are not humans."

"They are not creatures of Allah if they aren't human."

"How do you men know such things so certainly?" Ada sat down in another chair, her arms crossed. "The mind of Allah is entitled to hold secrets and mysteries. You men can be fools who think they are always smarter than the Prophet and Allah together." Yasar scowled. "We shall see what we see."

Twenty minutes passed, then forty. Yasar and Ada drifted into discussion of various small matters surrounding the colony, without real interest or resolution on any matter. Finally, the console beeped for an incoming signal.

Both stood and went to the console. A terse message came up on the display: "Received message. Vector changed. In five minutes, I will send on broad beam: 'Greetings from Jannah, in the name of Allah and Empress Zhang,' in Chinese, Arabic, and Standard. Will relay any reply on tight beam."

Ada keyed at the boards. The sensor links fed passive data to the computer: power emissions, reflected light caught in the

main telescopes, similar information. It calculated positions and movements of the unknown vessel and Faraz's mining boat, put them up on display. Twenty minutes before, they had been close enough to one another to meet within thirty-six minutes. Sixteen minutes were left before a meeting.

Ada keyed a notice to the other leaders. Most came in quickly, rather than watching the display from a remote. Two stayed where they were, perhaps preparing their sections and families for the worst.

The minutes ticked by. Faraz's short message came on screen, both as text and video. He looked nervous as he spoke. "I send you greetings, ship, from Paradise, in the name of Allah and our Empress Zhang." He repeated the message in Standard, allowed the computer to translate it into Chinese. The transmission ended.

Another ten minutes passed. The discussions around the console were low, short. Some dealt with the intruder; some tried to divert their attention to other matters.

Incoming comm beeped again. Faraz's eyes were wide, even through the visor of the vacc helmet now locked down. "It has fired on me. A missile. It has said nothing. Brother – Allahu Akbar." He seemed about to say something more.

The transmission ended.

Passive sensors supplied enough detail. Faraz's power plant signature faded away.

Yasar looked at Ada's drawn face. "He's been hit. Dead?"

"I hope so." She worked at the keyboard. "I'm aiming all the dishes we have that way."

"Call him," someone suggested.

"No," she replied. "We would be telling them where we are." She concentrated for a few moments, making adjustments to the systems. "There," she said. "I'm getting Faraz's suit." She put the readings up. "His suit is trying to uplink to his boat. It's sending his readings. Heartbeat, breathing – he's still alive."

"Is anyone close enough to pick him up?"

Yasar shook his head. "Not with that ship out there."

Ada changed some settings. "He's turned on his cam," she

said. "He knows what he's doing."

"Good thing there aren't any flares predicted," someone said. "If it weren't this quiet, we wouldn't be getting any of this."

"A flare might be a blessing," Yasar replied. "It would cover us, too. Foul their sensors as much as ours."

The picture came onto the screen. It was jerky, imperfect, the digital stream interrupted and incomplete. He was outside his mining tug, slowly spinning. The view panned in a circle, showing bits of debris and equipment expanding through space.

A dot of light was approaching. It loomed up larger each time it came into view. It became sharper, more clear. It was a ball-shaped vessel, nothing familiar. There were no markings to distinguish it.

"There's nothing like that in use by us," Ada commented.

As the vessel approached, an opening appeared in the hull. Someone, something could be seen inside.

"Rescue?" Yasar hoped. Faraz was his brother, deserved better than this.

The figure exited the apparent hatch. It was some kind of shuttle or small boat, capsule-shaped. It approached closely enough to see appendages – waldoes of some kind. There were eight. Four might well be legs.

The small capsule closed in. Faraz's vital signs jumped, reflecting his fear and stress.

The sphere came close enough for two of the arms to reach out, take hold of Faraz's suit. The craft seemed to change direction, moving back toward its parent ship.

Faraz was brought inside. The cam adjusted for the change in lighting. The signal became spottier; the outer hatch must have closed. An inner hatch slid open.

Two *somethings* stood there. They were four-legged, four-armed, crablike perhaps, with a large eye above each compass-point arm. Their bodies were purplish, shiny, almost an eggplant color. Something about them made one queasy, even through the sterility of a cam.

One of the two scuttled forward.

Faraz must be struggling, flailing. His vital signs were

Demand the Debt That's Owing

pounding higher. The view jerked as he struggled, was thrown to the grey deck. One of the beings loomed above him, stood over him, crouching on its four legs.

An orifice of some kind pulled open, a slimy tube extruded. From the angle, it must have gone for the faceplate. It stopped a moment, then pushed further through.

Faraz's vital signs spiked up, then dropped away to zero. Yasar gaped at the surreal picture.

The cam kept transmitting. The tube undulated, rippled. It finally pulled away. Droplets of red and grey could be seen on its edges.

The thing scuttled away from the suit, out of the cam's range.

Yasar turned. His stomach wrenched, bent him over, forced him to empty a nasty mix of old coffee and bile onto the floor.

August 27, 2351 (Forty-four Years Ago) – Jannah (Wolf 359 II Habitat B) (Yasar)

Yasar watched the display. The alien vessel was on an out-bound vector. It had come too close to Paradise itself, skimming fuel from the not-quite gas-giant Mass. He fingered the pistol that he had carried day and night since seeing Faraz's video.

He wanted a chance and an excuse to shoot one of those things. Faraz and a second mining pilot were dead after the alien vessels inbound trip.

Why had the aliens not looked for more humans? They seemed almost disinterested after their interceptions. They had simply swept into the hydrogen mass, collected enough gas to move on, and pushed back away. They would, with Allah's grace power their hyperdrive and disappear.

Would they be coming back? Would there be more?

The Jin Jun packet was due in ten days. It would take all of the recordings and readings back to Sol. Whether or not more was learned or deduced there, the Court and the Houses could take action, fund the defense fleet that had long been discussed.

Half a millennium of speculation had finally been answered with hard fact. Alien intelligence existed.

February 14, 2036 (Three Hundred Fifty-nine Years Ago) – Earth

Deirdre O’Meath stood at the edge of the abandoned oil field. Khalid looked at her with open contempt. He had no intention of doing anything required by a woman, especially one who flouted custom. She had no veil, refused to wear proper robes. Her open-collared man’s shirt and pants displayed enough of her shape that she was a temptation. Some tempting Western perfume wafted off her bare neck, as it had for the last two days. She was, likely, unchaste like so many from the West.

The “Empress” Zhang had probably intended this affront. It was the sort of thing she did. Zhang delighted in the little insults to anything that was not her own way. The woman who somehow found a way to dam each new river of Pandemic held regard only for the mechanics of human life. She pushed aside anything that gave Allah’s gifts meaning.

“So,” the woman said, putting hands on hips. “This latest fire was another accident.” She pointed a chin across the dunes at the black smoke darkening the horizon. “Simple human error.”

Khalid nodded without looking directly at her. “No one intends such waste.”

“No, of course not. Oil is precious. Your economy depends on it. Mad Saddam didn’t put the torch to near a thousand Kuwaiti wells just forty years ago, either.” She crossed her arms. “You aren’t obscuring the satellite views, diverting with new pollution, nor protesting the Zhang’s policies.”

Direct, to the point. This Agent had no intention of negotiating some realistic coexistence. “The Amir tries, but he cannot keep matches out of every dissident’s hands.”

The Agent turned, walked a few steps away. She stopped and turned. “A new Pandemic strain has been isolated, Khalid.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Dr. Zhang and her staff are working quite hard at developing the necessary treatments and inoculations. They will be in short supply, of course. She had hoped that you would cooperate and deliver Agent Stern's murdering rapists. However, you haven't. Instead, you've harbored them, and you've added this charade on top of it all."

She shrugged. "Your Amir forces Dr. Zhang to invoke Refusal. Shipments of immunizations and treatments have already stopped. The Security Council has authorized quarantine by force. I'm afraid your people are in for rather a difficult time."

Khalid felt blood pound into his temples. "Dr. Zhang infects those who disagree with her. She has from the beginning. She brought the Pandemics on us all."

"Don't speak foolishness," Deirdre O'Meath replied. That accusation had never been proven. The leaders of the waning powers refused to devote resources to investigations. The Americans were brave only when they could drop bombs and fire cruise missiles; they would not admit the truth their own epidemiologists had determined. Too many people had already died of the new and ferocious strains of influenza, cholera, and other dread diseases; they would not anger the Zhangs.

"Dr. Zhang and her people have always fought the plagues," O'Meath continued. "These are natural diseases. Earth herself has taken action against our wastefulness. We're fighting against it, and building new ways to co-exist. It's almost too late, even at that."

Khalid's anger fueled the pounding in his temples. Nausea began to reach at his gut. He rushed at the woman, hands ready to grab her neck.

She moved quickly, did something with flashing limbs. Khalid found himself on his back in the sand, a kneecap cracked. He gasped, then warm blood oozed deep in his throat. His larynx was shattered, hurt as much as his knee.

She knelt down, her face close to his. Her breath was warm, sweet. "I'm immunized. You and your men are already infected. A few of you might survive by the grace of your own immune systems, but most of you will be dead within five days. We'll do

everything we can to stop it from spreading.

“As always, the facts will be well publicized. People will know why Dr. Zhang refused immunization and treatment. If we are to survive as a race, we have to stop abusing our environment. I deeply regret having made the recommendation, but it had to be done.”

He wondered how much the Zhang’s agents really knew, or guessed, about the creation of the Pandemic strains. Stern had been strong, refusing through every moment of the punishments he and his men inflicted to admit her role in genocide. This Irish woman, O’Meath, would have done the same.

Blood began to seep down his throat and into his airway. Khalid coughed it up, hoping that some would spatter the woman, but she was already standing. He rolled over onto his side to cough more blood out. He wished she would leave. Instead, she knelt again, brought her lips close to his ear.

“You should know, by the by, your wife and children have been immunized. They’re already outside the quarantine. We women know what has to be done to save what’s left of the world. Blessed be.” She kissed his cheek, then stood and left him alone in the sand.

Chapter 2

February 8, 2395 (Seven Months Ago) – Groombridge 1618 System (Ramachandra)

The hull was twenty years old, but the computers were new. The drives had been overhauled to perfection and balanced for this excursion. He was pleased with the vessel's performance. The exit from hyperspace at Wolf had been particularly rewarding. The squeeze-out had worked exactly as it was supposed to this time. The eleven-fold increase in velocity had proven his theories and abilities.

Only one engineer had died, an acceptable loss.

This exit had produced even better results. One engineer was in the medical bay, convulsing but almost certain to survive. *Mundi Astrum* had achieved a thirteen-fold multiplication of its entry velocity. Humanity would soon be able to attack the zhīzhū in their own space.

The helmsman rubbed at an annoying speck on his console as he keyed through the calculations. He had calculated the entry to make the best use of velocity. The engines would have to run hard to make insertion, but not for more than a half-hour. *Astrum* would not be in possible sensor view of the zhīzhū for long. Until then, power would be kept to a minimum.

Two hours passed quickly. The passive sensor watch kept busy feeding information to his console. Fleet had not been able

to manage much system reconnaissance since the Rout. All that was certain was that the spiders had been active and visible here. Enough ships came in and out for Manifest Destiny's purposes. Ramachandra wanted to know more than raw numbers. He needed to learn as much as he could about the patterns of in-system traffic.

He was particularly interested in military orbits. He had extrapolated likely patterns from Fleet's Ross data and surveillance in other systems. Statistical extrapolation was only a well-educated guess, however. He preferred real data for the plan at hand.

The planet loomed in the displays. Ramachandra keyed the final course corrections. The Captain's voice came over comm, annoyingly telling the crew to prepare for acceleration and turbulence. If they had read their briefings and had their earpieces in, the crew knew as much already. Any who were not paying attention were welcome to break their necks.

He rotated the ship to properly angle the engines for the insertion thrust. Though the computer was set to handle the activation, Ramachandra leaned forward over the console, ready to take manual control if need be. He waited, calmly. He trusted himself over the computer.

The sixty-second countdown began. The effect was boring. At "zero," he keyed the thrust, slowing the ship and altering trajectory just enough to allow it to gently spiral into the thick clouds. Inertial compensators strained to protect all aboard from the forces. Even with that assistance, he estimated that everyone on board felt twice as heavy as he or she should.

Finally, the engines shut down. Ramachandra quickly rotated *Astrum* to bring the tapered bow into the direct line of flight. He keyed comm. "Bay three, you may deploy the sleeper buoys. We will reach atmosphere in six minutes. Prepare for skimming maneuvers."

Throughout the old ship, hands and marines would be taking their stations. He suspected that they were tense. The automation on the ship was not well designed even in its time. Age made it less dependable. No one on board wished to die in the

Demand the Debt That's Owing

maneuver. Ramachandra was calm. He had chosen this vessel himself. He knew its individual strengths and weaknesses. Fuel dives were essential to its work.

Only one person came into the con: the Captain. He was superfluous, but the cause was not entirely ready to give up traditional command structures. Ramachandra was content to allow him to handle mere administration.

The nose dipped into the first wisps of upper atmosphere. "Reduce dampers to ninety percent." He liked to feel something of the actual flight. Helm operators who relied solely on instruments in fuel dives were foolish and arrogant. Human touch, feel, and balance gave any pilot valuable information. The vibration of his console helped him assess the flight, know that all systems were functioning smoothly.

Astrum descended deeper into the thickening atmosphere. Plasma shunts pushed ahead, gravitic force extending and streamlining the old vessel's prow. "Ready to open scoops," the chief engineer advised.

"Permission in three minutes," Ramachandra responded. "External temperatures are too high as yet." He pulled back on thrust, let *Astrum* coast further into the hydrocarbons.

The ship finally came to the right altitude and temperature. "You may begin skimming operations." Ten seconds later, he felt the tell-tale vibration of the scooping hatches opening. He reshaped the shunts to funnel atmosphere into the fuel tanks. *Astrum* dipped and slowed with the additional drag.

Though she was an old water-guzzler, improved processing had been installed. Pure deuterium would be quickly segregated. Easily converted hydrogen would find its way into the pre-processing lines and subjected to forces that would bring its collapse into deuterium. The remainder of the watery sludge forced through the tanks would be run through the various nano-filters and processors to become coolant, vaguely edible proteins and other materials useful on board.

"Fueling complete," the engineer reported over comm.

The hatches closed again. Flight smoothed out as Ramachandra configured the shunts once again against drag.

“Ascent,” he advised tersely. *Astrum* began the arduous climb against gravity and atmosphere.

February 10, 2395 (Seven Months Ago) – Groombridge 1618 System (Murphy)

Granuaile bounced over the lip, hard. Dust and loose items that should have been stowed bounced through the air as gravity rippled through the con. The two young Jin Jun on the con groaned with varying levels of discomfort. One of the two in engineering could be heard over comm, retching.

He’d picked them up at Wolf 359. Barely done with their mandatory time in the Family Guard, these had qualified for courier training and eventual consideration for the exploration arm. The Jin Jun had lost too many of its space-trained members when *Ibn* had gone missing. They were needed, despite their inexperience.

Zhaohui thought either that trainees would keep him out of trouble, or that they needed their first taste of trouble. He was betting on the latter. Jin Jun teachers could be found who obeyed orders and kept their noses out of closed cupboards.

Trainee Hanifah Rached – “Olive” – was quick to recover. At the right-hand console, she brushed a deep auburn hair back. That done, she keyed rapidly through displays. “Sir Cuchulain, that’s not the correct star field.”

Murphy rubbed his temples to distract from the reentry headache. The calculations had to be made more precise in these ships. “Call me ‘Murphy.’ Buddha Christ Almighty, Olive, how many times do I have to tell you?”

She showed some spunk. “I’ll call you ‘Murphy’ when you’re following orders.”

“Jesus, Buddha and Mary, the disrespect.”

“You forgot to curse my own Prophet,” Olive pointed out.

O’Meath unlocked the chair swivel, turned to face the younger Jin Jun. He slouched back in his chair, crossed his feet at the ankles and his arms over his belly. “It’s not my damned

Demand the Debt That's Owing

fault I got handed a bunch of future mailmen for training. You guys barely have your Guard time done. Suddenly she's rushing kids into space." He leaned forward. "But Zhaohui handed you to me, I'm Lead, and that's that. When I'm lead you damn well do things my way, including illegal, unscheduled stops."

Murphy sat back, swiveled back to his own console. "And I'll blaspheme whichever god or shaman I please."

The young woman swallowed, nodded, and turned back to her console. She finished locking in the star sightings, then read the computer's response. She looked stunned. "Groombridge 1618. We ...". She allowed the sentence to trail off.

"Right. We're about ten centimeters inside the Oort boundary. Zhīzhū space. Fleet made a huge mess of it, and we shouldn't be here. If they hadn't gotten it in their head to try a land snatch, we wouldn't have almost stirred up a full-fledged war. We might even be able to sneak around close enough to see how a zhīzhū colony grows from scratch, now that we know one's really here.

"And that's a real loss – because maybe if we'd watched a while, we would have figured out just how to really talk with the zhīzhū. Or get them to talk to us."

"This system is absolutely off limits." Olive's concern was genuine. "Parliament –"

"That's why I let Zhaohui shove you kids on me. Hell, that's probably why Zhaohui shoved you on me. She knows that I bend the rules now and again, and she's been curious. Give me a free hand, I go freely." He glanced at his board. "Oh, and by the way – the logs are clear. You kids had no idea. Not that they couldn't have been faked, but a fingerprint or two might have been left behind. None of you have to face Zhaohui down on my behalf."

Doughboy Duggan, at the left-hand console, broke into the conversation. "I'll call up the weapons." He started to key.

"Stand down, kid." Murphy checked his own console. The operational codes were locked, as he had left them. There had been no real concern that Doughboy could start a new war. "As soon as we pounded over the lip, power went down to minimal. We're not venting any more plasma than we have to, we're not

pinging out with active sensors, we're not running any kind of external comm, internal comm is at lowest possible output, and we're not powering the cannons.

"We're here to look and listen, that's all. There'll be comm chatter from the zhīzhū ships to record, maybe some other information to get. If we push the zoom, we can get an idea of ship movements. As much as I'd like to, I'm not going to try to send out a 'hello' with you kids on board. Hell, not one of you is over twenty-five."

Olive cleared her throat. "You were twenty-five ten years ago."

"And I had twenty years of weenies listening and watching to steal from. Which, as boring as it was, and half of it unnecessary, still gave me one hell of a leg up. The Cetians are a lot more human than the zhīzhū, too.

"This is the lecture part of our class, babies. So far as I can tell, you don't get very far in talking unless you talk. But with the zhīzhū – hell, we've tried talking enough times. We send them signals, we drop off messages, and a few of us in the Jin Jun have tried to be very nice to them. I'd send them a dancing-girl zhīzhū if I thought it would break the ice." He pretended to look thoughtful for a moment. "If I could figure out which zhīzhū are girls."

He leaned forward. "They don't talk back. Not a word, not the little we know of zhīzhū, no Standard, Court Mandarin, Swahili, or Horn. I think they listen, and I'm damned sure they get everything we say. Most of it, anyway. They all have four lobes running in every brain and computers smart enough to hop hyperspace. Or maybe no computers, just themselves. They ought to be able to decode something as simple as human language.

"So we're just here to look and listen today. Maybe at some point I'll find the right zhīzhū for, 'Let's go out and pour some beer down our necks.' As soon as I think that happens, and I don't have a bunch of yapping kids nipping at my heels, I'll send the message. Not before. Got it?"

One at a time, then as a group, the other, younger trainees assented. Olive nodded. "Your – suggestions?" She cleared her

throat. "Murphy?"

"Divide up the bandwidth. *Granuaile* has a lot of unused computer power, especially floating dead in space. One of you start looking for comet heads. Another can keep an eye on vessel movement, the rest of you see what you can suss out of the various comm streams. We'll sit here just long enough, then maybe push out a bit into the Oort Cloud to snag a big ball of ice for fuel. That at least will be 'useful' education for you."

"That's a lot of work," Doughboy noted. "Why not just skim?"

"And go in-system? Power plant way up, grav lighting up our ass-end, pinging the hell out of that gas midget to make sure we don't bump into something?" Murphy shook his head. "Why not just comm straight out on a continuous beam so they can slam us with a few tons of rock? That's an easier suicide, isn't it?"

Doughboy nodded sheepishly. Murphy looked at the six trainees. "Divide up the work. Set up shifts. I'm going below to get rid of this headache." Murphy turned the center seat all the way around and pushed up out of it. He crossed the circular con to the rear hatch, went through, and clambered down the gangway. A few meters away, sickbay waited. He went in, found the pain killers, swallowed two with a glass of water.

The kids were right. This had been a silly whim. Zhaohui wouldn't punish them, but she wouldn't be pleased with himself. Not that she ever seemed to be, lately.

She'd sought permission to divorce Chengen. Blackstone had vetoed it, on behalf of her brother. No one wanted a childless Imperial auntie out there suddenly free to be a power broker and a nuisance, least of all Murphy. Blackstone's decision suited Murphy just fine. She would try to tie a man down if she had half a right to. He didn't want to be tied.

His half-sister, Maureen, would have pushed for it, possibly. Even if he was the family bastard, a bastard married that high couldn't hurt Ren-Ma. Maureen wanted more than she already had. She didn't yet have the influence their mutual father had enjoyed. As annoying as it would be to stoop to getting more

through her half-brother's mis-spent youth, she would somehow have accepted it.

Fortunately, several factions well beyond Maureen's influence considered Murphy an unsuitable choice for any such marriage. Should Zhaohui ever obtain permission to divorce, he had a layer or three of insulation.

Hell, he agreed with them. He should never have taken up with her in the first place. She wanted a commitment she couldn't give back. She also wanted a younger show-piece, and needed a man who would look good at elegant balls and parliamentary functions. She needed a man who could sit next to one of the Lords or a Fleet Brasshole without causing someone to throw a punch. The husband she had was better for her where that was concerned. She should call Chengen back from Tau Ceti IV and make him pretend for those purposes.

Murphy went to his cabin and tapped into ship's functions from his handheld. The kids were doing well, pulling together the information he had sought. One of them already had an icy comet located. A course was being calculated. The others were handling their assigned tasks: various zhīzhū signals were being parsed out and categorized. The passive sensors were locating ship movements. All of the zhīzhū vessels were the preferred sphere, with minor functional modifications. They were almost entirely smaller vessels, the zhīzhū equivalent of merchant transports and the like. Only a few were military vessels.

This colony had become active earlier than the zhīzhū had apparently planned. That much could be considered certain. They seemed to be making greater efforts to get material in and out than they might have.

There was nothing more to be done for the moment. Murphy shed his shipsuit, letting it drop to the deck. He crawled into his bunk for his first sleep in twenty hours. Damned kids on board were creating more work, not less.

He was pulled blearily out of sleep four hours later by *Granuaile's* insistent beeping and voice. "Anomalous data," the computer stated between bleeps, alternating between Standard and Mandarin. "Probable human vessel. Lead attention needed."

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Murphy rolled up to a sitting position. He took his handheld from the shelf above his bunk, felt the itch of heads-up through nerve induction. He ran the information that could be gleaned from the passive sensors to run comparisons, as the kid handling that task should be doing.

“Shit. Isn’t he paying attention?” Murphy tightened in on the ship, confirmed what he could from the data. Its EM emissions were wrong for any zhīzhū ship. Reflected light as well as emissions said that it wasn’t a sphere. It sported external generators for its hyperdrive, for Buddha’s sake.

Granuaile supplied the “most likely match:” an *Eighmy*-class missile corvette, damned near thirty years old, a mostly retired and mothballed class. Its transponders were off. It showed no active EM sensor signals, no comm – no different than *Granuaile*.

His heart beat a little faster. The ship might just be *Ibn II*, ‘graciously’ given by Fleet to the Jin Jun for exploration. After the refit, it had been lost with all hands. He’d lost friends and comrades. If so, how had it found its way to this part of space? It was a long way from the Reach. Was this one of Zhaohui’s wheels-inside-wheels, a ship supposedly lost, actually sent to observe and research the zhīzhū? The Jin Jun and civilians assigned to *Ibn II* could have handled such a task, and Zhaohui might not have told him about it. She’d kept him away from *Hillary*’s similar attempt.

That made little sense, though. Zhaohui would have been unable to hide that. He’d have managed to stow on board. Besides, that kind of sneaking about was better handled by ships like *Granuaile* and *Hillary*: small, harder to detect, agile, and fast enough to scoot if noticed. The *Ibn II* refit of the *Eighmy* class had been meant to give a hundred or so Jin Jun and civilians a chance of combat survival if they bumped into an undiscovered species as surly as the zhīzhū.

Granuaile gave up the next nugget of information: the ship was headed outbound toward the Oort boundary. It had already been deeper in the system. It could be planning the same thing he had planned: scraping a comet-head for ice.

Murphy keyed comm. “Is anyone up there paying attention? Why is the computer waking me up? There’s an *Eighmy*-class missile corvette out there, headed toward the Oort boundary. Take a look. You folks should be telling me this.”

Olive, as senior trainee, came on comm. “I was just told, and started analysis, Sir – Murphy.”

“*Granuaile* and I are ahead of you. Put someone on seeing whether it’s *Ibn*. *Granuaile* has detailed specs.”

“This would be great news -”

“Just do it. Olive, figure out whether we can intercept, or even get close.”

“OK, Murphy.”

Murphy leaned back, scratched a two-day growth of beard. What was going on? Murphy grabbed his shipsuit from the deck, exited his cabin, walked across to the galley. He chose a quick meal, popped it into the microwave.

While he was eating, Doughboy came on comm. “It’s probably not *Ibn*,” he reported. “It’s missing the forward sensor arrays, and its bubble-generators are standard. *Ibn*’s generators were beefed up.”

Not *Ibn*. All of the rest *Eighmy*-class missile corvettes were supposedly mothballed somewhere near Nánmén’èr, awaiting some future conflict. The location was so secret, Fleet refused to trust the Jin Jun with it.

Did they actually think the Jin Jun would tell the zhīzhū where the reserve ships were?

Murphy pulled out his handheld and keyed up the holo system in the table. The trainees were getting their acts together. More data was being coordinated now. The ship’s course in and out of the system was being projected, its power output estimated. Olive was putting together an estimate of its current mass based on its acceleration and handling characteristics, compared to specs for the class – damned good thought.

Murphy keyed comm. “Olive, let one of the others finish that. You work out an intercept trajectory, maybe even a micro-jump. I want to find out who that is, and we need to get closer to do that. I’m coming up to con.”

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Murphy tossed the food wrappers into the recycling and went back to the con, planning as he went. He had known that there was a remote chance that they would get into trouble out here.

Olive was the best pilot on board, better even than Murphy. She would take center chair. Doughboy, too eager to pop off the guns, might well fire prematurely. He would be given sensors and nav, leaving Murphy to the guns, seconding on the sensors as a matter of course.

The other four hadn't distinguished themselves in any way. A coin-toss would be enough – or he could leave it to Olive to put them where they would work best. She was a future Lead. Might as well throw her in for sink-or-swim training.

Murphy scrambled up the gangway and through the hatch. The center chair was still vacant. Damn, these kids had to learn a little arrogance. “Olive – center. Doughboy – sensors and nav. I'm guns.” Murphy went to a standing console and keyed his access. “*Granuaile*, give full Jin Jun access to all trainees, all stations.”

“Access granted.”

The trainees looked stunned. “Time to move. Take the stations. Doughboy – you don't go active on the EM sensors unless I say so, or Olive does. Not a single ping.”

The trainees got over their shock and began moving. Olive sent two – Ram and Dingle – down to the engineering compartment as she took her own place. Murphy took the left-hand console and keyed up his gunnery set-up.

Olive was working on her calculations. “I've never set up a micro-jump,” she said.

“The software does most of it,” Murphy reassured her. “I've had her program a few. Not pleasant, going over the lip twice in a few minutes.”

“I was more concerned with trajectory error on the short hops. That's what the texts say.”

“We'll get close enough to get a look, maybe even hit them with a laser comm. Find out who they are.”

February 10, 2395 (Seven Months Ago) – Groombridge 1618 System (Ramachandra)

“Helm, Main Passive here. We have a passive sensor contact. It’s small, maybe nothing, but it could be a ship. I’ve up-loaded the track.”

“Is it close enough to intercept?”

“Those damned spiders can do some spooky things.”

Ramachandra keyed up the readings, looked them over. It was clearly not a spherical vessel. What idiot thought it might be zhīzhū? With a few more keystrokes, he ran a secondary analysis.

The results confirmed the only logical hypothesis. Any fool would have guessed this without the scans. “It is a *Lady*-class vessel. Jin Jun. Why must I do your work as well as my own?”

He keyed the channel off without listening to the angry reply. A swift tap put him through to the Captain. “A Jin Jun vessel is inbound. It will likely detect our power outputs and maneuver to an intercept vector. We should leave the system as quickly as possible.”

“I want to be further out.”

“I am calculating the jump.” He began keying.

“Belay that! Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I think I am the pilot charged with bringing this ship back to Manifest Destiny Base,” Ramachandra replied. “I have made the calculations, and I am alerting engineering to prepare. We will accelerate in ten minutes, and cross the lip twelve minutes later.”

Ramachandra switched off. The Captain was on board only to keep the rest of the crew organized. She was the only person on board who held any different opinion of her minimal importance.

The communications post began the warnings, as expected. The Captain would not try to play her ‘authority’ card here or now. She would find it a low card. The Cause had many who could keep a crew working. It had only one pilot at Ramachandra’s level.

Perhaps Aunt Sunitha would eventually be able to bring a

Demand the Debt That's Owing

second into the fold. Avinashini was not his equal, but she was certainly more capable than any other helm operator he knew. She was wasting herself as both a fighter pilot and a spinster. When she finally carried his children, she would be produce more mathematical geniuses.

February 10, 2395 (Seven Months Ago) – Groombridge 1618 System (Murphy)

Of the trainees, only Olive seemed to be calm. She keyed rapidly, testing the solutions the computer provided for the short hop through hyperspace. "Ready to start the clock."

"Are you asking or telling?" Murphy felt no need to check the weapons controls any further. "Count it out when you're ready."

She keyed in the final command. "Over the lip in five." The computer quietly assumed the countdown.

At zero, Murphy felt the bottom drop away from his stomach. His head spun, as it usually did, but the sensation was not as bad as if he had allowed the computer to handle the jump entirely on its own. When the sensations died away, they were inside the bubble, sliding through the quantum layers.

"One minute forty-seven seconds to exit," Olive reported. She rubbed her forehead. "Get ready." She seemed more nervous now as she rubbed her temples. "Now I know why we don't do this so much."

"I can think of more fun things to do," Murphy agreed.

Granuaile settled into hyperspace. Murphy started the set-up for the exit, in case Olive wasn't up to it. She quickly began the work herself. He glanced at her solution, concluded that she would be fine.

The re-entry to normal space was harsh. *Granuaile* lurched and shook over the expanding ripples. Someone below in engineering could be heard over comm retching. Murphy's skull felt like someone was twisting it into a knot.

He recovered and keyed the sensors. Beside him, Olive was also demanding sensor scans, seeking planet sightings and other position information. The computer accommodated them both.

“We’re not where we should be.” Olive stabbed at keys. “At least fifteen minutes before we’re close.”

“Can’t be helped.” Murphy located the power emissions. “Not much chance of a perfect vector synch. Fleet’s best can’t do it.”

“We are at least closer.”

“Yep. Figure the vector and work out the new intercept.”

A new hint of dizziness intensified the throbbing in Murphy’s temples. Almost simultaneously, the sensor display announced a gravitic distortion.

“Shit.” Murphy hesitated only a moment. “They just went over the lip themselves.” He hesitated only a moment to consider the situation. “Vector in on that comet, Olive. We need the fuel to get our asses back to Sol.”

“Do you think they detected us?”

“We saw them. I’ll work on the assumption that they were looking, too.”

“Our masking is solid, and we have a lower power output profile.”

“We were also damned close to their trajectory, all things considered. If they were keeping their eyes open, they saw hints. A human ship in zhīzhū space keeps its eyes open. And we put out some ripples just now. They saw us. Get us to that comet, and then calculate that trip out of here. Fastest route home.”

Chapter 3

February 23, 2395 (Seven Months Ago) – Wolf 359 System (Avinashini)

Hibernia bounced over the lip. The feeling was momentarily unpleasant. As was too usual, the helmsman was not too particular. Avi could do better, she knew, if she were to take a bridge position. However, that would require that she finally spend some time attending Humanitas services. She refused to compromise herself. She would continue to make transition sitting in her *Gandiva*.

She was now the primary squadron commander. That much, she had done on merit alone.

Six months of patrol in Ross 128 had been exceptionally quiet. Only three zhīzhū scouts had cruised through the system. Avi's squadron had made quick work of two of the small spheres. The third had been taken out by a missile corvette. The buffer zone had again been preserved.

Hibernia would spend the next month at her home port. There would be resupply, refurbishing, small repairs. Personnel changes could be expected.

"First Wing, clear for launch. Launch to the numbers. Thirty-second count."

"Aye," Avi responded. She checked her boards and adjusted herself in the seat. She keyed comm. "*Gandiva*-1 to Squadron,

launch to the numbers and form up in the standard sphere. Stay to assigned points.”

The count ran down to zero. Her Gandiva detached smoothly from its pylon. Avi spun the craft on its access; the nose now faced outbound. She would be the farthest to the rear, protecting the carrier from any zhīzhū vessel lurking somewhere in the deep, planning on a rapid attack. She had taken this role many times.

The zhīzhū had never made an attack.

As usual, the sensor display showed only what it should. Two of *Hibernia*’s escorts were ahead. Their own eight FDC’s – modular fighter/delivery craft – were already deployed. Four carried full sensor suites, the other four ordnance modules. Encrypted data was already flowing from the advance craft, providing her with details on system activity. It was hours old, but reasonable projections could be assembled. *Hibernia*’s main tactical computers were analyzing, guesstimating the current real-time position of all of the known craft and installations in-system.

She looked at the assembled analysis. The eleven other Gandivas of the First Wing were of course moving with her at high acceleration. Closer to Paradise, their transponder signals long delayed, were other Fleet craft and civilian craft. Most of the civilians were miners, taking what was valuable from the barely-formed system. Other signals came from the various habitats and factories.

Hibernia’s other two destroyer escorts were due to bounce over the lip. Avinashini set the computer to watch the expected entry zones. She spent the next thirty minutes analyzing signals, making sure that she received nothing unexpected. Long-range passive EM detected nothing moving, no energy sources out of place.

Gandiva-1 reached its target distance. She spun the craft again, ran the power to again accelerate on the same course as *Hibernia*.

Two gravity ripples expanded to her rear. They were consistent in amplitude with the two expected destroyer escorts. The shape of the ripples confirmed that the vessels had come inbound

Demand the Debt That's Owing

from Ross-128. Transponder signals followed at speed-of-light, positively identifying the ships as *Hibernia*'s second two escorts. Avi focused on the other readings she obtained from passive sensors. Everything – vector, power output, and so on – agreed with the identification.

With all of the protocols satisfied, Avi relaxed. There would be no reason to fire on these ships.

She settled in for the next day of flight, expecting it to be routine. Much of the time would be spent being vigilant. She would check the sensor scans, seek anomalies that computer analysis might miss. She would also maintain a check on the fighter's systems. Beyond that, she would as always monitor the rest of her squadron, keep twelve fighters coordinated and ready to converge on any threat that presented itself.

The day passed uneventfully. As her wing's rest period approached, *Hibernia*'s Second Wing deployed from the pylons, putting fully one-half of her fighting craft out in space. Avinashini transmitted the briefing and watch over to the Wing Commander as she positioned herself, then stood relieved. "Clear cycling. Back in six."

"Clear cycling."

Such a silly way to wish each other luck. Gandiva training carried its odd traditions forward.

Avi left her cockpit and went to the small cabin in the rear. She spent a few minutes dealing with necessities in the cramped head, then ate from the rations stored there. She returned to her piloting station and chose to listen to a section of contemporary poetry written in her native Kannada. Her mind drifted and body rejuvenated.

Near the end of the six hours, she roused and went aft again. Thirty minutes of spinning both legs and arms on the cycling rack brought her back to full alertness and a warm glow. She was back in the pilot's seat ten minutes early, reviewing the summaries and briefing from both the Second Wing and *Hibernia* herself.

The carrier group was twelve hours out of port. As desired, and largely expected, nothing unusual or of note had occurred as

the ships and fighters came closer to matching vector with Wolf Base. "Clear cycling," the Second Wing commander wished.

"Clear cycling," Avi acknowledged.

The Gandiva's powerful computers pulled together the various streams of data from its own electromagnetic and gravitic sensors, as well as the feeds from the other vessels. The composite gave her a clean view of anything close enough to evaluate as potential threat. She found nothing of concern, just as there should be nothing.

Avi settled into her next six-hour watch.

Over three hours elapsed with nothing unexpected. Deep in the system, mining shuttles pushed rock. Fleet shuttles moved people and arms. Normal comm signals and transponder codes ran through the system. No unexpected vessels were located, nor any orbiting bodies out of place. The watch was, so far uneventful. Avi updated her reports.

A ripple in time-space propagated through the system. Avi's fingers skipped over the keys; eye-flicks and a hundred subtle motions were transmitted to key other controls. The sensors came into focus.

The incoming vessel was to her rear, small but close. It was perhaps two light-minutes away and moving inbound. Her own Gandiva was closest to the vessel. She keyed the nav systems to calculate its likely origin. It came from Groombridge 1618.

Zhīzhū space.

For just a moment, she allowed herself to be incredulous. That moment allowed, she calculated her intercept course. If this was a zhīzhū sphere or attack force, it was already at high vector. The usual target for the occasional foray was the Jannah cluster, but a large force could sweep toward the Fleet Base.

Avi pulled up her contingency outlines and keyed comm. The five other odd-numbered fighters in her own wing would come with her. The evens would tighten the defensive perimeter while the entire Second Wing came off rest and went to alert. *Hibernia's* Third Wing would be ready to launch, and the Fourth Wing brought to full alert.

If a full-scale swarm of zhīzhū spheres tried to come through,

Demand the Debt That's Owing

the Gandivas would be in their way. Wolf Base's fighters in residence would also be alerted, ready to throw up all of the defensive fire and chaff that could be brought to bear. The zhīzhū vessel would be shredded if it tried to pass directly through.

So far, there were no signs of additional entries from hyperspace. Likely enough, this was a single sphere. It was likely the occasional scout-and-agitate foray.

She keyed comm for voice. "First Wing Odds, download my course and correct for your starting points. Prepare to unlock your weapons and move at 02:03:35 hours. Repeat, 02:03:35 hours." Acknowledgments came in reasonably quickly, allowing for the round-trip time lapse.

The computer finished its analysis of the gravitic ripple that had alerted her. The incoming vessel had definitely come from Groombridge. It was a smaller vessel, four to eight times larger than a Gandiva.

Fleet had a few smaller ships, but not many. Economy of scale ruled out here. The zhīzhū had shifted their logic somewhat since the Groombridge rout. More but smaller vessels were more difficult to attack as they streamed into normal space. That much, Avi had taught them. Though they had won the battle as a whole, she'd made them pay a high cost by being in the right place. The spiders respected the Gandivas now.

Avi rotated her own Gandiva to the correct orientation for an intercept course. If it were a zhīzhū ship, it would be moving at high vector already, propelled by their squeeze-out maneuver. It would be accelerating further, no less than eight-g's, on normal drives. Even at that, another eighty seconds would pass before any other speed-of-light data reached her. An active ping would take twice as long.

She could assume that it would be heading toward the Paradise cluster. That was what most of the zhīzhū scouts did. She could finesse the intercept later. Avi chose a course that would allow intercept in about two hours.

She watched her own time count down, keyed for full thrust at the right moment, perhaps beating the computer by half a second. The usual three-dimensional diagram of ships and vectors

built in her head. She did not need the nav display. The other five Gandivas trailing her were a few seconds behind her.

If this was a zhīzhū advance sphere, it already knew it trailed *Hibernia*'s carrier group. The spheres-of-the-line that popped in behind would come in close behind, no more than three or four light-seconds away from the initial jump-in. They would get their system data from the advance sphere in condensed and pre-analyzed form. By then, *Hibernia* would be ready to launch the rest of its fighters.

Fleet had no sensor buoys or other assets closer than her own fighter. Avi declined to bother calculating the odds against her being in the exactly wrong place at a critical time twice in her career. This was more likely a nuisance scout than a full attack force.

Nonetheless, she prepared for an all-out ordnance launch. She had done this before. This time, though, she had other pilots and their ordnance. She busied herself preparing fire solutions that would buy Wolf Base time, regardless of her own fate.

Sixty seconds. Avi keyed through her displays, looking for any red lights. None showed. She keyed out a terse, encrypted message: "Project five light seconds ahead of enemy vectors. Minefield." The first missiles would accelerate, then flip and decelerate. They would be on the zhīzhū vector, too close for zhīzhū braking to be of any use. The mines could maneuver to get still closer and finish the job.

Avi set up her displays for maximum information, waiting the last few seconds. Even if she learned that it was a zhīzhū ship, she would be an hour away from engaging with fire.

Signal hit the grids. Imperial codes sprayed across her display. The ship claimed to be *Granuaile*, a Jin Jun ship. Her database searched, presented the information. *Granuaile* was one of the *Lady*-class vessels. She was designed for independent operations, anything from courier duty to deep-space exploration. As usual, it would be in the hands of the spoiled brats of the nobility.

Some of those spoiled brats had just been in or near the Groombridge system, probably stirring up the zhīzhū. No one here on the border needed zhīzhū stirred up. The Jin Jun should

leave the spiders be.

A voice signal followed. "Jin Jun Cruiser *Granuaile*," a woman's voice said. She sounded young, spoke Standard with a clipped accent. "Sir Cuchulain O'Meath, Lead. Wolf system transit with refueling priority requested. Transmitting verification and authorization codes."

Avi almost shivered with a whisper of Euro-accented Standard from her memory. *Hell, you thank the disobedient son-of-a-bitch, too, if you get out alive.* Lady Zhaohui had never bothered to explain the cryptic message. No one in Fleet believed that Cuchulain O'Meath had done anything to deserve Fleet's thanks after the Groombridge Rout. For all the Brass could say, he had been behind the attempt to spy on the brain-suckers, somehow goaded them into attacking the settlement.

Nonetheless, the codes were fresh. They checked. Nothing explained what Zhaohui's Mistress and any other Jin Jun were doing at Groombridge. They were all too arrogant to explain their doings to Fleet.

Avi keyed a command out. "Stand down to yellow. Gandiva 3 and 5, vector to match with *Granuaile* and stay with her until hand-off to system defense. Weapons warm. Gandiva 7, 9, and 11, with me. Weapons hot. Correct vector to intercept. Confirm ID or kill. If it's really *Granuaile*, we'll let her pass and stay on deep picket until relieved or brought in, in case the spiders are pursuing the idiot." She keyed in a quick report to send to *Hibernia*, along with orders for the Evens of the First Wing to join the Odds on picket.

Avi went into her database of known ships and their routes and missions. She expected to find nothing properly filed on *Granuaile*'s mission. Her expectations were met. Jin Jun arrogance.

Avi ran the calculations. They would be in range within fifty minutes.

February 24, 2395 (Seven Months Ago) – Wolf 359 System (Murphy)

Olive brought *Granuaile* nicely over the lip. The momentary fluctuations in gravity flipped his innards less than his own pilot-ing would have. The ship was solidly in the universe again.

Murphy sat in the main engineering deck, as he preferred. Two cadets worried themselves in and out of the power plant and hyperdrive structures, annoying the robots. The bots skittered up, down, and around the machines on their small anti-grav systems, re-checking everything the cadets did. If the Jin Jun weren't rebuilding an in-space presence after the loss of *Ibn II*, he would send these two back to guard duty.

Comm insisted on his attention. "Murphy."

He reached across the console and tapped the key. "Yes, Olive."

"We're on target at Wolf 359. The standard hail is due."

"So give it," Murphy responded.

"Excuse me, but you're Lead."

"I heard that somewhere." He paused. Olive said nothing. She was still too damned deferential. "Jin Jun, you're running the con. Right now I'm just a tool twister. You handle anything that comes at you. You can mention my name if you want, or try to imitate my voice, or whatever. Just make it clear that it's a system transit, and line up a fuel barge. No time to waste. Murphy, off."

Murphy skimmed over the engineering displays. He decided that the newbies weren't incompetent enough to blow the ship, at least not with the bots helping out. The boards would scream for him if they touched anything they should leave alone. He could let *Granuaile* run on automation for now.

Murphy called up the sensor displays. Transponder and comm traffic showed a Fleet task force not too far away – under three light minutes, perhaps less. The Fleet units must have been in-system for a while. They would know of *Granuaile*'s emergence from hyperspace, but her own transponder and signals could not have reached them yet.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

His own information updated. The Fleet units were *Hibernia* and her escorts. She would have at least four destroyer escorts out, and at least a dozen Gandiva-class fighters. Six of the fighters were already setting an intercept course, no doubt. "Olive, set out the nice china. We'll be having guests. Call it forty-five minutes ahead for full intercept."

"Full intercept...you expect them to treat us as hostile?"

"Most sensible thing they could do," Murphy responded. "Hostile until proven otherwise. Those fighters have already measured our ripple and know where we've been. They'll make sure we don't have four eyes each and a taste for brains."

"Paranoia."

"Paranoia's common sense with the zhīzhū. Until we find some common ground to talk, anyway."

"That sounds like a Fleet attitude."

"Hell, no. I think we'll learn how to talk and make nice with the zhīzhū. One of these days. Or we'll wipe each other out. To myself, the talking makes more sense. Fleet takes the other view. One of us will be proved wrong, sooner or later."

"That's awfully cynical."

"Just realistic. Mind your piloting."

February 24, 2395 (Seven Months Ago) – Wolf 359 System (Avinashini)

Avi began the last vector change. Her Gandiva and the three subordinate fighters had described long, hard arcs, getting well in front of *Granuaile*. She keyed comm, kept it on Fleet's encryption. "Weapons hot, but do not fire unless I order it. Keep your fingers off the firing buttons and the safeties on." Two of her pilots, at least, would be happy to 'accidentally' kill off a Jin Jun vessel.

They each confirmed their orders. Two were, as expected, displeased.

Avi keyed to hail the Jin Jun vessel. "Commander B. P. Avi-

nashini, Imperial Fleet, hailing Jin Jun Cruiser *Granuaile*. Cut your engines and hold all maneuvering for inspection pass. Lead Jin Jun is to make appropriate personal identification, per order of Commodore Jones, commanding *Hibernia*.”

Her weapons display showed all green. Chaff spreaders were loaded, missiles hot, particle cannons ready. With five other similarly armed fighters closing to the deep black’s version of point-blank range, a small ship stood little chance.

Her orders had come, in the interim. Jones was openly Manifester in her politics since the forced removal of the Tau Ceti IV settlement. She had communicated nothing illegal in her orders, but was nonetheless clear that O’Meath was highly suspect, especially coming in on a Groombridge vector.

From this distance, Avi’s scans left no doubt that she was dealing with a Jin Jun vessel. There was little likelihood of an order to open fire being appropriate.

“Ranging,” Gandiva 3 reminded. “Give the word.”

The eagerness was disturbing. Wolf Fleet had not been involved in removing the Humanitas settlers, but resented the man who had temporarily commanded a Fleet task force. She was, perhaps, the only officer in range who retained any sense at all about the situation. “Do not unlock your firing controls unless I give the order. Understood?”

Avi imagined the Admiral’s reaction to this situation. As far as Admiral Sunitha had gone on the Humanitas and Manifester paths, even she might understand the reasons for not firing on a Jin Jun without excellent cause.

Still, she had her orders. “*Granuaile*, respond. I am ordered to confirm that Cuchulain O’Meath is Lead and on board. Hold your acceleration.”

A minute passed, a long time at high vector.

Avi unlocked her own firing controls. Despite any common sense, she would not waste ordnance on warnings.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

February 24, 2395 (Seven Months Ago) – Wolf 359 System (Murphy)

Murphy pulled himself up the gangway. Without argument, he took the center seat vacated by Olive. “These damned Fleet idiots are getting a little hair-triggered lately,” he commented. He keyed, re-ran the last several recorded messages. A few quick taps at a side display confirmed his guess. “Sunitha’s daughter. Buddha Christ, probably sings in the choir.”

“She may not agree with her mother,” Olive pointed out.

“Three-quarters of Fleet does. Why the hell wouldn’t she?” Murphy called up the comm protocols. “Sir Cuchulain O’Meath, Jin Jun, Lead and commanding Jin Jun Cruiser *Granuaile*,” he said into the cam. “Voice verification protocol. Transmitting personal codes and authorizations.” He tapped the necessary command into the console.

There was a delay as the message traversed and was re-viewed. The response came voice-only, with the lilt of the Indian sub-continent. “Your codes do not verify orders to be in Groombridge system.”

“No, they don’t,” Murphy agreed. “They only carry full discretion. This is a Jin Jun mission. No system limitations.” He thought back on his tampering with the orders, felt sure that he had left no evidence when he’d deleted the system limitations.

Neither distance nor digital compression could hide the derision in Avinashini’s response. “Understood. You have the unlimited discretion to go where you want and aggravate the zhīzhū. Fleet then holds the line.”

Murphy silenced the pickup momentarily. “There you go,” he commented to Olive. “Fleet thinking.” He re-opened the channel. “We’re happy that Fleet holds the line,” he replied. “Needs to, for now. Later, maybe we find better ways to deal. By the way, are your weapons live?”

“My weapons are very live.”

“Good. While we’re discussing aggravating situations, are

there any Fleet ops in Groombridge the House of Knights should know about?”

“You may discuss such questions with the admiralty,” the pilot returned. “I certainly am not authorized to discuss Fleet operations with you.”

“Good point. Listen, you and I ought to go out for a beer sometime, Avinashini. Talk about our experiences with the zhīzhū and ghost ships in zhīzhū space.”

“That will not happen. You will be escorted through your transit by two of my flight. Avinashini, out.”

The comm connection was cut.

“She doesn’t like us,” Olive observed.

“Welcome to Fleet attitudes,” Murphy responded. “The funny thing is, she owes the Jin Jun one – she’s the smart pilot who paid attention to a message torpedo from *Hillary*. Damned gutsy pilot, from what I found out – she took out a big pile of zhīzhū ships on her own. I could like a woman like that.”

“Are there women you don’t like?”

“Have you met my sister?”

“Sisters don’t count.” Olive switched attention to her boards. “Two Gandivas are turning to match trajectory with us. The other four are turning the other way – setting up a circling course, I think.”

“Sounds right. She’s not stupid – if we stirred the zhīzhū, there’d be spheres on our tail. That much is pretty predictable.”

“Do you think we were detected?”

“I doubt it. We never got in far enough. That missile corvette, now – it may have caused trouble.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“What we already talked about. I’m getting us to Sol, sooner than later. Zhaohui needs to know about that ship. Fleet’s up to something.”

“Could the ship be stolen, somehow?”

“I sure as hell hope not,” Murphy responded. “Fleet has an agenda, but its bean-counters know where the beans are.”

Demand the Debt That's Owing

March 6, 2395 (Six Months Ago) – Sol III (Murphy)

Murphy stood at the main engineering console. As well automated as the *Lady* class was, *Granuaile* still worked better with someone deciding how to balance out the power and manage the hyperdrive. The main computer was a better pilot than engineer.

The comm panel lit. “Murphy, we’re ready to slide over the lip.” Olive looked confident, finally, in her role as command pilot. She might yet rate survey duty.

Who was he kidding? He had better watch out. Zhaohui would be happy to give *Granuaile* to Olive, just to put Murphy in his place. She’d let him run free longer than he’d expected.

“Your run, Olive. Set the count.”

Murphy caught a fluctuation in the power flow, sent a bot and a cadet to investigate. It wasn’t enough to call a ‘hold,’ and *Granuaile* had to drop out soon, anyway. Olive had plotted a close exit, near the safety limit of the gravity well. He wasn’t interested in not surviving a catastrophic failure today.

“Thirty seconds, everyone,” Olive announced.

Murphy was glad to see the power steady down by minus twenty. The seconds dragged. Finally, the usual wrenching nausea struck. When the waves passed, he called up comm and sent the prepared data stream out, heavily ciphered.

March 10, 2395 (Six Months Ago) – Sol III (Admiral B. P. Sunitha)

Admiral B.P. Sunitha listened to the discussion, taking care to keep her own opinions to herself. She saw no point in taking a side on this issue. The action was necessary.

“This is insane. We will be hunting our own.”

“Our options are limited. The loyalists have drawn attention. They’ve taken too much now. If we don’t do the job, and do it right –”

“Appear to do it right. Warn them to pull back.”

“They’re not really listening to us. Many of them actually believe in the Humanitas faith. They’re zealots. We may have to destroy one of the fools.”

“They need to be put in their proper place. They need to remember who has pulled this all together.”

“They’re zealots, I said. They’re not with us. They’re just happy to use us.”

“So –”

“So we send them reminders to keep on task. A blunt reminder. Tell them to back the royal hell away from the main shipping lanes to Trianguli. They need to toe the line, or the House of Knights could push their way in. Another Tiāncāngwu.”

The Admiral grimaced, finally weighed in. “‘Commodore’ O’Meath. More careers ruined.”

“Our species given a back seat to savages, and our help to the loyalist Cause almost in view. Let Zhaohui’s Mistress into a Fleet computer again and he might just find something. He should stay in the wild with his animals. Thankfully, that world will open up soon enough.”

“And what we learn there helps us against the real enemy.”

“If the loyalists stay focused. Make sure they get that message.”

The Admiral nodded, stood to leave. “Of course.”

March 10, 2395 (Seven Months Ago) – Wolf 359 Outer System (Hogajue)

The sphere’s landing legs gripped the icy surface well. Most of the subNest moved about outside in their personal spheres, tending to the drilling and scraping. This skulking was tedious at best, but the Nests had chosen the routes and methods. Hogajue had bowed to the collective wisdom.

A proper exit at high vector would have pleased the subNest

more. The vermin never seemed able to contain their screeching and fury when a zhīzhū sphere raced past, scooped fuel from the orbital mass, and raced onward.

The recent appearance of the old ship of the vermin brought the Nests to concern. The projectiles they fired exploded at or near a sphere. Some unleashed nuclear forces, vaporizing entire spheres. Such denial of afterlife was extreme, abhorrent. Though other vermin ships now made the same threat, these particular ships had only barely been held at the border systems. With more of the vessels and weapons, the vermin might well have pushed on to Alula Australis.

The Nests were made uneasy by the reappearance of one of these ships. As the vermin had replaced the vessels, they had brought them to a point in space to be held, to hang as a threat against the People. The vermin were, perhaps, preparing for their next attempt to steal that which belonged to the Nests.

Comet-head ice filled the tanks as well as hydrocarbons scooped from a mass. A secret approach toward the vermin's anchorage of older vessels was essential. Hogajue and the sub-Nest would remain content to refuel in secret, deep in the dark.

Chapter 4

September 22, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtǔ (Tau Ceti IV)
(Murphy)

The setting sun cast long shadows. Steady wind pushed at the summer-high grasses that covered the rolling plains. Murphy stood among the crowd of Horn warriors, few taller than himself. He knew many of them from the two years he had spent with them, day in and out, one of them save for pale skin and lack of a curved, bony spike.

He knew too few now. At least eighty percent Clan Fahnisht was dead. Most of the warriors he had commanded as a Tentlord were gone, along with their mates and young. The survivors had banded together at the main camp. Their pyres had almost exhausted the wood they gathered each winter to last for a year of honorable cremations.

The Hornless of the Towns – Cetians who looked to the nomadic Clans for protection – had done little better. Perhaps “modern” sanitation had saved an extra life or two per hundred behind the stone walls and wooden palisades. The death toll remained high. Pandemic had swept the continent.

At least six craters could be identified from space. The rocks had come down, carrying the promise of iron ore and other metals for this metal-poor world. The rocks had probably not been formed out of this star’s dust. They had been drilled deep to pro-

Demand the Debt That's Owing

tect manufactured glass from the heat of re-entry. The shafts had been sealed again, the rocks loaded onto a vessel.

Impact had burst hundreds or thousands of virus-laden containers. Some of the mist was released near the craters. More was carried up with impact-splashed dust to be spread by the winds. Horn warriors who approached to claim metal for their clans carried the infection back to their own tents and yurts. Disease jumped rapidly through contacts with other clans, and with Townfolk.

Many suspected that Earth's own Pandemics of three hundred years past had been caused by biological weapons. A few knew with certainty that the Pandemic Strains of the late 2020's were manufactured, though with the best of intentions. The roads to both Empire and Hell had been paved with the best of intentions.

The human scum behind this genocide could claim no such thing. They had wanted, simply, a planet free of Horn and Hornless alike. All they sought was an opportunity to replay the great human migrations across continents, all under the belief that some ass of a god approved of such thinking.

Buddha Christ Almighty.

Fahnisht, ten years Murphy's Clanlord and friend, spoke decisively.

"I will go with you, Kameef. You will bring me to your highest Clanlord. I will speak with him, tell him what he must do, and let us do."

Murphy looked at his friend's dark, intense eyes, the flushed face. *"Fahnisht, you are needed – "* He silenced himself. Needed here? One more male would not guarantee the recovery and repopulation. One less Clanlord would neither increase nor decrease the bloodshed of Clans consolidating, carving and re-carving new trek-paths, new circles of influence.

What else was there? Parliament's laws? Rules of the House of Knights? Zhaohui's stern disapproval?

Hell, he was already going to have to explain arresting two Fleet officers on a faked Plenipotentiary. Lt. Commander B. P. Avinashini's "arrest" was going to cause him more than enough

trouble. Her mother, Admiral B. P. Sunitha, carried some weight. Avinashini's own record only added to the trouble he could expect. Lt. Urwah Grunon, the Fleet marine he'd also brought along, was just a footnote to the rest of the charges he might face.

Bringing a Horn Clanlord off Shānhé-Wòtǔ was less than a footnote. It was a mere peccadillo. That wasn't going to be the charge that put him in some stone-lined cube deep inside an asteroid. If he couldn't convince the House of Knights of the necessity of his other minor transgressions, he was going to be in deep, deep manure.

Fahnisht stood, his horn high. He mistook Murphy's silence for refusal. *"Kameef – I allowed you here. I gave you place, tents, Horns. I traded blood for blood to allow Ooh-mahn thieves to be taken away alive. I now owe all of my blood to both Horn and Hornless."*

Murphy caught the scent of battle offered. *"Bring your war gear,"* Murphy said. He smiled. *"We will go together."*

September 23, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtǔ (Tau Ceti IV) (Urwah)

Urwah skimmed over the fields. The gravpack had tuned itself to him in his initial race to save Schwartz from Clan Lanna. It still had not been fast enough. By the time he'd gotten to the massive impact crater, the Jin Jun exobiologist was already dead. Lanna's warriors had hacked at the human, as defenseless and unprepared as he was. Despite Jin Jun training, Schwartz had been overwhelmed.

The Horns would have blood in payment for blood. Horn honor was enough like its human counterpart to call for simplistic justice. Warrior psychology might also be close enough. These Horns had killed Schwartz because he was human, not because he was guilty.

Was being human enough of a crime?

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Humans had loosed the rocks from space. They'd drilled deep holes to implant glassware containing a fast and deadly virus. Protected from the heat of entry, the vials had released the virus from the impact craters. A few vials had survived as recognizable artifacts. Horn warriors, eager to find metal, had been infected. They had infected other Horns, as well as Townsfolk and wandering Bards. A vast number of Shānhé-Wòtǔ's natives had died miserably.

It was eerily reminiscent of the Earth's own Pandemics, though the Pandemics had been naturally caused. In the Horns' place, finding evidence of human tampering, Urwah would have hacked at the first human he could ambush.

Avinashini was lucky that she'd been with O'Meath. He'd fought hard, by all accounts. The damned pygmy hadn't personally acknowledged the number of warriors he'd killed yesterday. He seemed almost ashamed. The evidence of his skill had been in the sickly, underfed Pyre the assembled Horns had used to dispose of all of the bodies.

Jin Jun training coupled with hot rage was dangerous. Urk suspected that O'Meath would be even more dangerous once the rage went cold.

September 23, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtǔ (Tau Ceti IV) (Avinashini)

A hot shower was essential after yesterday's battle. Sweat and the greasy cremation smoke had permeated the fabric of her shipsuit, stuck to skin itself. She shed the cloth, almost tossed it into the recycling rather than the laundry bin. Avinashini keyed the stall; *Granuaile's* systems recalled her preferences. Hot streams of water started as steam billowed. She stepped in and began to scrub, hard.

The memory of the short, wiry redheaded Euro's unleashed fury was difficult to square with what she'd seen of O'Meath during the voyage. She'd known that he followed few rules, ac-

cepted little authority. She'd wondered how these traits actually allowed him to be useful to Zhaohui and Yi Tan's regency.

Yesterday's combat was not merely anti-authoritarianism. His intensity had frightened her. His usually light demeanor had disappeared. The alien sword he carried had come out of its sheath to cut wide swaths. O'Meath had not stopped spilling blood until one of Fahnisht's warriors had stopped him to observe some sort of truce.

Letting the water run through her hair and down her back, Avi did not wish to accept what frightened her most. He'd been defending *her*. She might have been able to handle some of the Horn warriors on her own. She'd taken the mandatory training in blade weapons. She was taller than most of the Horns, as well as O'Meath himself. She had a standard-issue cutlass and a good reach.

She hadn't needed his help. Was she merely offended? Why did she feel a hint of relief that O'Meath had been there? Urwah Grunon, tall and ebony, would have been more welcome. The Fleet marine was with her in part because he'd been her official escort when O'Meath had "interviewed" them in his purported investigation of a missing Jin Jun vessel.

She reminded herself that the vessel was not the Fleet corvette that had been turned over to the official servants and guardians of the Imperial family. It had been a similar ship, taken from its deep-space anchorage near Nánmén'èr. An excellent hypothesis suggested that Fleet had at least turned a blind eye to its theft and misuse.

Avinashini stayed in the shower far longer than she needed for simple soaping and washing.

September 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtǔ (Tau Ceti IV)
(Murphy)

They stood at the foot of the cargo ramp. "I can leave you the ground rover," Murphy pointed out. "It'll give you some ex-

tra range, at least for a while. Solar batteries crack water for the fuel cells.”

Chengen shook his head. “I know how it works. But this is my chance to ‘go native.’ It has to be done. Whatever comes of this plague, the Horns are going to change. Humans were lucky with the Pandemics. We had a lot on computers. We ended up re-emphasizing different cultures and languages, without losing history and stories. The Horns still rely on oral history. The Townfolk don’t manage too much more.”

“The Bard Chengen.”

Chengen adjusted the ceremonial hood to hang better on the “horn” he’d fashioned. “It looks good on me. Hides a lot.”

“You’d better hope so. Good thing they’re not so good at figuring human gender. Not yet.”

“Gender? What does that have to do with it?”

Murphy laughed. “Right, as if you don’t know.”

Chengen remained silent, angrily questioning. A fact drilled slowly through O’Meath’s momentary density. “You don’t know, do you? Chengen, it’s built right into the language. Think it out – the word we translate as ‘Bard.’”

Chengen spoke in his poorly accented Horn, then again in Standard English. “‘Wandering Keeper of Embers,’ near enough.”

Murphy nodded agreement. “Did you read any of the reports I dictated for you? Two years worth, almost three?”

“Every smug word,” Chengen replied, his face becoming red with anger. “Get to the point, will you?”

“Chengen, it’s the Horn *women* who bank the coals and keep a few in hotboxes, especially when the clan moves around. *Only* the women. Men get the great fun, fighting, joking, and drinking, and heroes getting their husks burned to release their souls – but the women make that possible. Typical sexist set-up.

“The highest of the women – sometimes we’ve called them priestesses – their title translates as ‘Fire-Keeper.’”

Chengen rubbed his forehead. His shoulders began to shake as he buried his head in his hands. He shook for a moment, then gained control. He looked up. “Zhaohui always said I was too

much of a *scholar* to be a real Jin Jun.”

Murphy smiled, reached out his right hand, and grasped the hand that came to meet his. “She has her damned opinions.” They held the grasp for a moment.

Chengen finally released, reached up to again adjust the headgear that would protect him from challenge and hide the lack of a horn. “I should have thought of this years ago.”

“I stole it from you,” Murphy said. “House of Knights wasn’t going to let two of us live full-time with the Horns.”

Chengen took his hand again, gripped firmly. “You’re paying the price. You have all the responsibility.”

“Sticking it to me to the end.”

Chengen tightened his grip. “Protect them, O’Meath. Whoever did this can’t be allowed to finish.”

Murphy squeezed back. “We’ll be back.”

Chengen turned to Fahnisht. “*My blood debt to your people will be paid in the words, Fahnisht. The words will be remembered for all.*”

“*You do us honor,*” Fahnisht responded. “*You will command respect, no matter that you are not a woman.*” He gave the traditional sign of respect to the Bard.

Chengen returned the respect. “Time for me to walk. I’ll stick to plan for now – avoid Clans Fahnisht and Lanna.” He shifted the pack-bags slung over each shoulder. “Good luck.” Chengen turned and began walking toward the path that led down to the stream.

Murphy watched only for a moment. “Let’s get aboard.” Murphy turned, directed Fahnisht. The Horn Clanlord went up the ramp, suspicious of the steel about to surround him.

Murphy followed the Horn aboard. He stopped at the hatch, keyed. The ramp retracted the ramp, the hatch slid in to seal the hull for space.

September 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtǔ (Tau Ceti IV)
(Murphy)

Murphy climbed the ladder to the con. Lights came up as he entered. He went to the main station and sat. “*Granuaile*, Cuchulain O’Meath, Lead Jin Jun. Unlock main systems.”

“Please enter authorization code.”

He keyed in the manual code. Boards lit and unlocked. The main power plant was next; he brought the engineering systems to the board. With a few taps, he had the gravitic bottle compressing hydrogen, the laser ignition set to fire. The slight vibration that coursed through the hull confirmed that the power plant was operating.

Murphy checked the readings, prepared all of the other sub-systems for launch. “I’m getting her ready to go,” he reported over the comm. “You can bunk in as usual.” He switched to Horn. “*My liege Fahnisht, I invite you to a favored seat by the fire.*” In Standard, he added, “Grunon, bring Fahnisht up to the con.”

Murphy turned his attention to the navigation sequences. A fuel-dive was in order, to be followed by a quick exit from the system. He doubted that the calculations and assumptions were wrong. There was no time to waste in confirming it.

Two sets of footsteps padded up the ladder. Murphy glanced over his shoulder. Fahnisht came through the hatchway almost hesitantly. He looked curiously at the panels, lights, displays, then stepped aside.

Avinashini ducked through the hatch, stopped, straightened, saluted. “Permission to enter the con,” she requested.

“Huh? Sure.” Murphy leaned back. She walked to the forward end of the dome, stood, not quite at full attention, hands behind her back. Fahnisht hung back, still looking over the room.

Murphy addressed himself to Avinashini. “Standard Jin Jun set-up,” he explained. “Center is usually for helm, left for sensors and arms, right for engineering. Standard interfaces, including neural and eye-flicks. All three consoles can call up all func-

tions. There's enough computer for an untrained monkey to fly her."

"You have already gone to great lengths to prove that." Despite the dig, Avinashini appeared to remain aloof, formal.

Murphy chuckled at the dig. Any joke was an improvement. He looked up at her, studied her, consulted his gut and what he knew of her. "*Granuaile*, log B. P. Avinashini, Lt. Commander, Imperial Fleet, for level one privileges." He pushed himself up out of the seat. "You have the main chair, Commander."

The computer wasted no time pulling up Commander Avinashini's records from some deep database. "Avinashini, Bengaluru P., Imperial Interstellar Fleet, rank lieutenant commander, qualified," *Granuaile* replied. "Logging denied. Effective February 1, 2395, field brevet of Fleet officers to level one crew requires override code, per First Jin Jun."

Avinashini showed no reaction to the clear distrust of Fleet.

Murphy had no problem showing emotion. "Bullshit. Grant brevet. O'Meath, Cuchulain, Lead Jin Jun, commanding *Granuaile*. Authorization code: bite me."

"Clearance override granted and logged for secure transmission. B. P. Avinashini now has level one helm privileges."

Murphy motioned to Avinashini to take the seat. "Damned paranoia," he muttered.

Avinashini hesitated only a moment. "You do not trust me beyond 'level one.'" She took the seat. "Will it read my set-up preferences?" she asked. She pulled her Fleet-issued handheld from a waist pouch as she reviewed O'Meath's personal console set-up.

"It probably has them already," Murphy replied. He decided against telling her just how much he had managed to download from *Harris'* computers while he'd had the chance.

Her face said that she could guess. Nonetheless, she turned back to the console and keyed. The panel and display went gray for a moment, then came back in a vastly different arrangement. "Main Con configured to Avinashini," *Granuaile* reported.

"The con is yours, Commander. Power up and go any time you're ready. Up, a run to the gas giant for fuel, and then straight

Demand the Debt That's Owing

to Sol. You can handle that, right?"

"You know my ratings, which I am sure well exceed your own," she replied, haughty as ever.

Murphy laughed. "But you'll never tell me so." He turned to Fahnisht, who seemed small and subdued, switched fluidly to Horn. "*We begin our ride shortly. You should be in your saddle when we begin.*" Murphy guided him to the right seat, helped him sit. With some adjustments for the different leg and torso proportions, Fahnisht was able to sit comfortably. Murphy showed him how to clip the safety harness on, then took his own seat to Commander Avinashini's left. A few quick keystrokes configured the board and seat to Murphy's own preferences. The console lit up; seat motors adjusted height and leg lengths, pulled the seat closer to the console.

September 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtǔ (Tau Ceti IV)
(Avinashini)

Avinashini paused at her own preparations for a moment to glance at the adjustments being made to O'Meath's station. Her own chair had been much too high and close to the console when she took the seat. O'Meath was proving again that he was a typical short man, arrogance compensating for some feeling of inferiority. That was the best explanation she knew. Urwah, far above average height, certainly needed no bluster.

Still, O'Meath had decided to let her pilot the ship. She could not help noticing a tingle. By all accounts, the Jin Jun's Lady-class couriers were responsive, powerful. It would not be as maneuverable as Gandiva-class fighter in normal space, but it would certainly handle far better than the few starships she had helmed in training.

O'Meath keyed the main holo-display system. "Mind if I give Fahnisht the full show?" he asked.

Avinashini shook her head. "I will over-ride if it proves distracting."

The Jin Jun tapped the final command. The domed ceiling went from dark gloss to the blue of the outside. Rearward, she knew, it would show the higher mountain peaks to *Granuaile*'s aft. She remained focused on her own console displays, adjusting proposed vectors as she felt out the controls in quick simulations.

Tau Ceti's sole gas giant was pre-set. Her helm privileges would not allow her to change the basic course: refuel, then get far enough out to bounce over the lip into hyperspace. Still, she would have an opportunity to feel the vessel, get a taste for the ship.

"I am ready for the final count, O'Meath." Out of habit, she keyed ship-wide comm. "Preparing to lift ship. All hands, prepare for acceleration."

Urwah's voice came back over comm. "If he's letting you fly, I can pour myself a cup of coffee and relax."

Avi said nothing, showed nothing. She hoped, at least, that she showed nothing. She did not trust O'Meath, despite all. She had no desire to let him see any sign of satisfaction.

"Final count – fifteen seconds," Avi announced as the last light went green. She applied power to the grav drives, felt the thrum of the ship as it came fully to life. The displays showed all that she needed to see. Vertical thrust brought *Granuaile* to a hover a few meters above the mountain-top clearing.

Avi retracted the landing gear, nudged the thrust to inch forward. *Granuaile* took up the count at "five."

At "zero," Avi pushed full power to the engines. *Granuaile* jumped forward, angled up. The Horn beside her gasped at the slight clues of motion detectable through the protective fields. He turned his head rapidly this way and that, trying to see all. He spoke in the Horn language; Avi keyed the translator bud off to avoid distraction. O'Meath responded in the growls and clicks, then returned to Standard. "Feel free to give him the full show," O'Meath suggested.

Avi said nothing, but began a gentle roll to starboard. The horizon tilted up, became almost perpendicular, rolled back. She repeated the roll to port. *Granuaile* was already nearing the

Demand the Debt That's Owing

coast. The Horn, Fahnisht, growled, clicked and snarled, in what she hoped was some sense of pleasure.

In minutes they cut through the air into deepening blue, then purple. There was little enough to see clearly now. She tilted *Granuaile* into a full climb, allowing Fahnisht to see emergence of black and stars.

In a few more short moments, they were out of atmosphere. Avi checked systems, then reduced acceleration. "We will be accelerating to break orbit," she said. "Inertial fields are all green. Free to move about."

Fahnisht stood, clearly awed by what he saw. He growled something. "All of these are fires," the translator assisted. "All of the heroes and gods are here."

Avi flashed back to the mythology her mother had once taught her. Agni, the old god of fire still invoked in ritual, must have at some point met the Horns. Though the nomadic horns were primitive, their cultures shared a reverence of cleansing fire.

Her thoughts led her to a long-festered emotional sore. The Admiral had once been as fervent a Hindu as she now held to the Humanitas religion. Her mother had sternly pushed for family acceptance of the change in faith. Avi's father had stolidly refused to attend such services, but had not permitted Avi to refuse.

Avi concentrated on finalizing the course for the gas giant, though the computers could handle it well enough without her help. *Granuaile* needed fuel for the trip back to Sol. Avi, on the other hand, needed as always to put aside the bitter aftertastes of the unchangeable.

September 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity of Shānhé-Wòtǔ (Tau Ceti IV) (Murphy)

"I'm going to take him to the medical bay and clip on an earpiece," Murphy said. "It'll be easier to work through *Granuaile*'s translation matrix." The earpiece would also begin to more fully map Cetian brain activity, preparing the possibility

of Horn use of advanced systems. So long as he was breaking the old rules against introducing the Cetians to technology, he might as well break them fully.

Murphy led the Horn down the gangway and forward. "Sit there, Milord," he said, motioning toward the diagnostic chair. Murphy took up the small laser, pressed it against a fleshy earlobe, and triggered the device. The unit emitted rapid pulses, burning and cauterizing a pinhole. Fahnisht gave no impression of experiencing pain.

A Clanlord would never display pain.

An earpiece post fit easily into the hole. Murphy locked the unit in and activated it. "*Granuaile*, lock in to this earpiece and identify it to Fahnisht. Key the standard to Horn translation matrix. Fahnisht is given full Jin Jun status and access. No helm, engineering, or ship's weapons without training or confirmation. No other restrictions."

"Confirm, please."

"Confirm, O'Meath, Lead Jin Jun."

"Status of Fahnisht confirmed."

Fahnisht looked surprised. "Your words are repeated in your voice and made mine."

"Yes," Murphy replied. "You need to learn to listen to the earpiece whenever we are speaking in Standard. Your words will be spoken into our words."

Fahnisht looked at Murphy's ear. "Is this how you spoke to me and my people?" He gave a look and gesture of sudden suspicion.

"No," Murphy replied. "I created the translation matrix. I speak to you with my own knowledge, my own heart. My fire is my own."

Fahnisht appeared relieved. "This small space – do you spend all of your days away from the Clan in this box?"

Murphy laughed. "Too many, but not all. This brings me to the places and people I need to serve or fight."

"I do not believe I shall enjoy this, Kameef. We will not be fighting under blue skies." The Horn fingered the hilt of his sword. "There is wrongness in the way your people shut them-

Demand the Debt That's Owing

selves away.”

“We do it to search out new skies.”

“The skies you have should be enough.”

“There are always new skies, to see, Milord.”

Chapter 5

September 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity of Shānhé-Wòtǔ (Tau Ceti IV) (Fahnisht)

Fahnisht considered his Tentlord's answer. Why should new skies be wanted? Each day of the annual trek was new. Each battle, each alliance was new. Each lick of sacred flame along a twig could be studied.

Kameef was a great warrior, a stalwart friend. His flaw was to be forgiven. "How many days will we journey to your world?"

"Two six-days. You will have time to rest, learn, and prepare."

"For what must I prepare?"

"We're going to have to bring this to – to bring together all of the Clanlords, Fahnisht. We will have to speak of what has been done."

"There will be battle?" He felt a moment of familiarity. "You will claim your own place at the fire?"

"It will be like that, Milord, but the blood will be – hidden. A battle of wills alone. Swords would be cleaner."

"You will behave like Townfolk." Fahnisht felt his disquiet return. "I must talk and talk, and listen to others talk." He touched the new metal on his ear. "You prepare me to dishonor my Horn, Kameef. How can you do this?" He did what he could

Demand the Debt That's Owing

to hide the despair he felt.

“No,” Milord,” Kameef took out his dagger and offered it. “You must cut my throat if that is what you believe. You will not be dishonored.”

Fahnisht offered a Cetian shrug. “It is no great matter, perhaps.” He motioned for O’Meath to put the knife away. “My blood-debt must be paid, Kameef. Your blood is not owed, and is not enough even if it is. The plains must not be allowed to die because your people know better ways to be cowards than the Hornless Townfolk.”

Kameef sheathed the weapon. “You will return to the plains with your blood paid and your horn intact, Milord. You have my oath as your Tentlord. Now, let me show you the place in which you can sleep.”

Fahnisht spent the next hour observing the bewildering environment of this vessel, the thing Kameef called Granwhooeel. From too-comfortable sleeping pallet to devices that produced edibles, it seemed designed to make life easy. The more he saw, the less he believed that Kameef could have become such a Tentlord among Tentlords. Something here failed to fit.

July 1, 2380 (Fifteen Years Ago) – Earth (Avinashini)

Avi, fifteen, walked up the white stone steps. Her knees wanted her to stop, stand, turn away. The granite steps, the building at the top, were too white in the sunlight. The building itself was too square, too plain. The stone lacked any carvings. Nothing of it signaled the pit of her stomach that she approached a place the gods might visit.

And yet, the Admiral, two steps ahead, carried milk to offer and leave for the gods. Ramachandra, once again staying with them in Bangalore, walked dutifully beside her mother, asking his usual toadying questions.

Only the Parent was free to stay home and worship the gods in a proper temple. He had not refused to come on this jaunt all

the way to Kansas Province, but also had not agreed. He had simply stayed home. He would not allow Avi to refuse to obey her mother, but also would not interfere. He seemed always to have held that restrained, neutral view toward issues surrounding the Humanitas Church.

Most of the other people here in Kansas were Euro stock. Some African descendants were also noteworthy, though less so. Euro stock had regained dominance in North America during the post-pandemic centuries. A few enclaves retained diluted Asian or Hispanic genes and cultures, but Anglo-Euro American arrogance had re-established its stranglehold over the continent.

The Admiral looked back over her shoulder. “Keep *up*.” To Ramachandra, she said, “We are privileged to hear Bishop Quayle speak today. We are his invited guests. You, I know, will be polite.” The way she added the last, glanced over at Avi, implied her belief that Avinashini would behave less appropriately.

Avi would not embarrass herself or her family before these strangers. Her mother’s lack of confidence in that was more disturbing than the attendance to the false godheads. Avi kept her hurt silent.

They came to the top of the steps. The wide, rectangular landing demanded perfection of thought and behavior. The heavy wooden doors swung open with the firm effort of a man ahead of them. He looked back, saw the Admiral in her purple sari, and smiled broadly. “It’s good to see that we are reaching out,” he said in drawling Standard. “We’re all part of the one Soul.”

Avi wanted to turn and leave. For once, though, the Admiral seemed to speak for Avi. Looking down her nose, she said, simply, “Actually, it is the Oversoul bringing *you* back from your own long detour.” She smiled, perhaps to pretend that she was joking.

The man’s responsive laughter also seemed a pretense. He held the door open and ushered the three inside.

The Admiral led the children into the vestibule. The white

Demand the Debt That's Owing

stone walls distracted her with its many simply carved symbols. She recognized the bare Christian cross, the more ornate Catholic crucifix, the Islamic crescent, Star of David, Yin and Yang, a cross-legged Buddha, a dove, drab depictions of Ganesh and Lakshme. Other symbols, faces, and variations abounded. She had taken her required class in religious tolerance, but nothing in greater depth.

The man behind them came up behind her, put his hand on Avi's shoulder. She did not like the feeling. It was far too familiar, as these Americans generally were.

"It's wonderful that Pater Quayle seeks to reconcile all of the gods back to the One Universal, isn't it?" He squeezed her shoulder.

Avi thought to pull free. The Admiral's advance look of reproach was sufficient warning to stay still.

"All of the other gods are just masks for the One, as Pater Quayle calls it." The Admiral reached out for Avi's hand. "Come, Avinashini, you will make us late."

"Yes, Mother." Avi took the Admiral's hand – a rescue? – and pulled away from the strange man. The three of them moved through the second set of doors, into the main chamber.

This was no temple Avi understood. Rows and rows of benches faced a single raised place. The white stone walls had no character. There was no central alter, no side alter. No old women sat to the side, assembling flowers into garlands. No offerings could be seen anywhere. Those present did not walk around, stop at a shrine, pray and worship independently. All of them simply sat in the benches, waiting, as if the gods were to be delivered.

The worshippers were dressed both in civilian clothes, mostly of Western cuts, and in various uniforms. Most of the uniforms were Fleet, or Fleet marine. Only one other, a man, seemed to come from the Hindu tradition. There were two Sikhs and a few might be Islamic. The vast majority, though, were dressed in Euro-American styles. They all sat, all waited politely.

The Admiral seemed oblivious of the sterility. She let go of

Avi's hand and marched down the long center aisle. When she came to the bare, broad table at front – what a Christian would call an “altar” – she placed the milk down, underneath. She turned, directed the children to a seat near the altar, and sat beside them.

Avi studied the altar. It sat on a slightly raised stage. It was a place from which a lecturer demanded attention, like a stern teacher. This would be like the services her mother watched via the comm networks. On the wall behind the stage rose brass pipes, an organ. Its keyboards and pedals were not visible. There would be no one more interesting than the lecturer to watch, unlike most large Cathedrals, even smaller Christian churches.

A rumbling bass chord coursed through the arms of her chair. Emanating from the organ pipes, it grew louder, finally becoming audible sound. With mathematical precision, a horn added an ascending announcement, and then crashed. Tympani pounded. The motif played again.

She had heard this often enough at home. The bass music celebrated Zoroaster, predating space flight, but had become almost synonymous with that reach.

Her mother and all of the others stood, even Ramachandra. Avi wanted to sink into her seat. The Admiral would not allow such a thing. Angrily, she tugged at Avi's braid, pulling until she had no choice but to stand as the music rose to its enlightened, majestic crescendo.

When the music was over, she was allowed to sit again. The man, this Sri Quayle her mother had come to meet, came forward. He stood behind the podium.

“Good day to you all,” he began. The congregation responded in kind.

“Let us sing together from the Hymns of Humanity.” He pulled an old-fashioned paper book from a wooden pocket on the side of his lectern, opened it to a pre-positioned marker. “Number 35,” he said.

Her mother reached for a similar black-bound book in a rack in front of them. At the same time, the display behind the lectern

Demand the Debt That's Owing

came up, displayed the words for those who did not wish to be burdened with the old paper.

The music was familiar. She had heard it before, as well, from the services her mother had reviewed at home. It was an old Euro-style tune with few harmonies. She supposed it came from one of the less ornate traditions of Christianity, but could not be sure. Her mother and those around joined as the lecturer – Qualye – gestured for them to begin.

It's a gift to be human,
It's a gift to be free,
It's a gift to go Out
Where we ought to be.
And when we
Reach up to the stars,
We'll ripen the fruit of
Earth's great Living Tree.

Dance, dance,
On plains of verdant grain
We will till the fertile soil
For mankind's greater gain.
And when we
By fertile loam are blest
We will know the One-god's love
As we go to our rest.

The hymn went on, similar words, all smugly assuring that mankind had the right to inherit all of the blue-green worlds. The people here seemed to enjoy that. Avi herself had little difficulty with the idea. She wanted humanity to rebuild itself, as all reasonable humans did. Certainly the zhīzhū wanted all of the blue-green worlds for themselves, at any cost.

Nonetheless, the music failed to move her. She glanced at Ramachandra. He was intently singing with his usual mathematical precision. Her mother, on the other hand, seemed to find undue passion in the bland, Anglo dirge.

When it was over, they sat. Avi was glad. If she could have slid down slightly in the rigid pew, she would have. She knew that the Admiral would prompt her to sit erect. She did so, doing her best to ignore the lector coming back to the podium.

“We come together from all faiths,” he began in Standard. His voice had a drawl to it, a lengthening of sounds different from the proper British tones Avi had been taught. “We are here because, like our special guest today, we all know that there is one Force that made the world, and the solar system, and the other solar systems, and the planets. One great Creator. It wears many faces, many masks, but it’s one Creator over all of those thousands and thousands of stars.

“Our guest, Captain Sunitha, will soon be setting out again for one of those stars, so she asked me to speak to her. She asked for a special blessing on her, her family, her mission. Like so many of you out there today, she wears a Fleet uniform. She goes out to command, a command she has wanted very much, so that she can continue to do the good work that she has helped with already. She is protecting us.

“She does the good work you all do – the work that you have all said you would do. Captain Sunitha will go out to protect us all against the creations of the Adversary.

“The Adversary’s been called many names in many times. You all know enough of them. You all feel the wrongs the Adversary can do. The Adversary has always worked against the Creator. And the Creator – making of Himself both Man and Woman, he gave us Gaia, the Earth Mother. Give her whatever name you want – Gaia, Mary Mother of God, Demeter, Devi – She is the Female of the Male. She brought us about!

“The Adversary works out there, too, and has gained a foothold. A dangerous foothold. Don’t be fooled, brothers and sisters! There is one All, Maker of this universe, going by many different Names – but those names are *all* for Gaia, the Earth-Mother. Gaia is the true Bride of the Creator, the *only* bride. *Her* children, you and I, humans, Humanity, are given this entire galaxy, every star. Gaia speaks to the Creator, then to us. Only to us, *humanity*.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

“The others, the best of them are just first attempts, experiments. Even Cro-Magnon, Neanderthal, apes – our Mother’s and Father’s unfortunate first children, *miscarried*.

“The imitations from Shānhé-Wòtǔ, with their grotesque horns – grotesque imitations, nothing more, made by a *jealous* Adversary. The Horns – look at them! That should be enough! Gaia gave us memory – racial memory, whatever you want to call it – so that we would see what the Deceiver’s spawn would look like. And then what? Some fools, thinking they know better, keep us from that beautiful, blue-green world that was prepared for *Gaya*’s children.

“And every day, our children, *Gaya*’s children hear some fool or other telling them that the Horns are just different. Every day – thank Gaia and Creator Himself that we know better!

“The Horns, though, are just the Deceiver’s lie. Teach us to tolerate his spawn, because they are ‘like enough.’ Two legs, two arms, almost as tall as most of us, a head looking enough like ours. And male and female, just like us. They laugh, I hear, a lot like us! The Deceiver was smart – suck us in!

“So that we would be ready to accept the next – his *zhīzhū*! Scheming, vile. No emotion, four ugly eyes. They *eat their own*. Their young! They eat any prey. Human babies, adults, anything. Their first ‘hello’ to our brave people at Jannah was to *eat* one of them. We had to take Ross 128 to build a buffer, and they fought us dearly for that. They would happily come here and eat us all, barely cold, not yet dead.

“When the bleeding hearts, the weepers, point and say that I preach hate, preach the old White Man’s land of theft and slavery – for one thing, look at me! Gaia made *me* dark enough to stand out!

“More important, look around. How many of us have horns? How many of us scuttle around like cockroaches?

“Humanity has destiny. Humanity *is* destiny. *Gaya*’s destiny, the Creator’s destiny. Shiva and Parvati, the great Father and Mother who gave our sister Sunitha her own beloved Ganesh!

“Live our destiny! Build it! Manifest it!” He raised his arms, stood triumphant, clearly signaling the end of his sermon.

There were shouted “Amen’s” and similar words of praise. The auditorium quivered with the congregation’s excitement.

Avi herself was still, unmoved. Whatever this man was, he tried to take away the old and proper gods in favor of his views. Worse, he tried to somehow say that Ganesh was no more than a part of a new myth he wanted to create. She could not understand her mother’s acceptance of the theft, nor why her father quietly refused to openly reject it.

She had asked. Her father had simply remained silent.

“And now, brothers and sisters, children of Gaia, let us again sing together, in closing, Hymn number one, “Ode to Humanity.”

They stood, again, and the music began: familiar, clearly from the Euro tradition. Avi stood, happy that the service was almost over.

The final hymn ended. Reverend Quayle stood to address the audience – congregation, Avi reminded herself – one more time. “May the blessings of the One with many Aspects, many Prophets, go out to all of you. God or Goddess, One or Many, the Creator gives and speaks to all Humans. Our sister Sunitha has listened and brought this One God the gift of milk, because she has heard the Voice.

“Let us all go out to our tasks, and give humanity the stars and the worlds promised to them. Amen.”

The assembled people repeated the word. Ari could not bring herself to join the congregation. Something in this man’s expression made her uncomfortable. Something in the message was wrong. The zhīzhū were a threat, but perhaps there would be species worthy of sharing the universe. The Cetians had not been proven dangerous so far.

The opening music was repeated as a closing piece. The people began to mill out. Her mother, though, went toward the stage. Quayle was just coming down. He reached out to touch the Admiral’s shoulder. “I’m glad you could come,” he said. “You know that we all are happy for you, Sister Sunitha.”

“Thank you,” the Admiral replied in Standard. “I will be a long time away, but it will allow me to do so much more in Fleet.”

Demand the Debt That's Owing

"Just be safe," Qualye said. He looked at Ramachandra, then Avi. "Your son and daughter?"

"My daughter, Avinashini," the Admiral replied. "This is my cousin's boy, Ramachandra. He stays with us often. He's quite gifted in mathematics. He wants to join Fleet when he gets older." Avi glanced sidelong. Her mother saw the look, frowned. "As of course does Avinashini," she added.

"Both will be fine additions," Quayle said. He reached a hand out over each of them, holding the outstretched palms a few inches over their heads. He closed his eyes, tilted his head back slightly. "May the One give both of these children the strength and wisdom they will need as they go toward the future," he intoned. "And may they help mankind in the goal of expanding to its destiny."

He paused like that a moment, then lowered his hands and opened his eyes. He looked back to the Admiral. "I would like to sit with you, but know that your time is tight. Let me walk you to the door." He gathered them together and turned them around with a sweep of his arm. They moved back up the aisle. After final goodbyes, they went back to the bare, white steps. Avi was glad to be in sunlight again, looking down at the streets of this too-new city.

"*We need to get to the grave port,*" the Admiral said in Kannada. She looked up and down for the ground bus. "*You and I will discuss matters later,*" she added to Avi. Her tone allowed no argument. There would be no point in disputing over the proper gods with the Admiral.

Ramachandra shot a derisive look at her behind the Admiral's back. The bus came; they boarded. The Admiral's uniform gave them a free fare. She found the scrutiny of most of the passengers uncomfortable. She was not sure they were admiring her mother's service uniform. Some openly glared.

The passengers were largely of Euro stock, mixed judiciously with well blended features from Africa. Well over a century of travel and emigration limits had resulted in even more racial mixing than had occurred before the Pandemics. The Euro Caucasian majority's gene pool had won out in North America.

Accurate histories – denied by many North Americans – spoke of post-Pandemic riots and pogroms against people of Asian descent. The Euro and African stocks had united based on epidemiological evidence that the swift and deadly viral strains had originated in Asia. In the ugliness of human anger, they had ignored the fact that survival had also come from Asia. The First Empress Zhang had kept teams developing treatments against the successive, fast-mutating viral waves. Her son had continued her work after her death, solidifying the Zhang Dynasty. They had done much to keep the human race alive, and to rebuild the world.

The North Americans had also come to resent the loss of their traditional, often arrogant “independence.” More American natives of Asian stock had died. “You look different” was enough to put a collaborating physician or researcher at risk, delaying and even derailing research into the Pandemic viruses.

Americans and Euros had suffered almost as much backlash in Asia. Long-repressed territorial instincts had come to the fore. Travel begot migration; migration begot racial mixing; racial mixing begot more travel; and more travel begot the Pandemics. The tautology was false, but it had substantially reduced the desire to go beyond one’s homeland.

Substantially reduced travel had re-balkanized the world, even as the Zhang Dynasty exerted more and more control. Controlling the information and disseminating it via the computer networks created the paradox: an empire of enclaves.

The bus ride could not be comfortable with this in the background.

The bus left the built-up portions of the city. Corn, the American rice, grew in the fields almost two meters below road level. They passed old buildings that were still at road level, their foundations placed by the earliest Euro settlers. American waste had decimated these fields before the Pandemic. Every harvest sent elsewhere had taken topsoil with it, leaving islands of buildings, roads become levees.

Despite the resurgence of racism and regionalism, the Pandemics had reduced such stupid short-sightedness. The Pandem-

ics had alleviated the Two-Earth dilemma, given the land some recovery. With fewer people had also come better use policies, better education, less waste.

This recovery had not been enough. Earth remained damaged. Restless though more united, the race reached out for the blue-green worlds. They found a few.

They also found the zhīzhū. The zhīzhū wanted the same worlds, as well as the stepping-stone systems needed to reach those worlds. The Admiral would soon be at Ross 128, helping secure Earth and humanity. Avi tried to find balance between that knowledge and the Admiral's growing obsession with a Euro-centric religion.

Did the staring Euro-Americans on the bus really understand that? Did they see beyond features and skin tone? Why couldn't the Admiral's abandonment of Ganesh and the other gods be more forgivable in this light?

She kept the arguments to herself. She would not question her mother in public.

The bus came to the grav port. Avi left her thoughts behind. Their first stop was the small Asia-bound terminal. They got off the bus, went inside. The Admiral's identification eased passage through the security and medical stations. Finally, the Admiral sat them on a bench. "You two wait. I will see to the tickets." She left, self-important as always.

Ramachandra scoffed once she was gone. "*You never understand, do you? All you need to do is pretend. Haughty bitch.*" He reached out to touch her leg. "*Good only for breeding my children.*"

Avi pushed the hand away. "*You're disgusting,*" she replied. "*I won't marry you, ever.*"

"*Oh, you will, and I will be between your legs every night.*" He again moved a hand toward her legs. She closed her thighs tight, struck the hand away.

Ramachandra shifted, balled the hand into a raised fist. Avi flinched back. At the same time, a firm male voice spoke out. "Don't. This isn't Calcutta, boy."

Both Avi and Ramachandra looked. An obese police officer

watched from nearby. His taser was already out. Seeing that he had Ramachandra's attention, he added, "Give me an excuse."

Ramachandra lowered his fist, put on a pleasant face. "Apologies, sri." He sat back in the seat and pulled his handheld from a shirt pocket.

Avi stood facing the officer and clasped her hands together in Namaste. "Thank you."

"Just go back to Calcutta, dot-head," the officer retorted. "He can beat you there. I won't have to arrest him."

Avi found herself sitting again, turned slightly to keep the police officer in the corner of her eye. After a moment, the man put the taser back in its holster and moved along.

Satisfied that they were again unobserved, Ramachandra smirked. "*Even he knows that I already own you.*"

"Never."

"*Your parents want the match, and so do mine. It is all but done.*"

Avi said nothing. Imperial law forbade forced marriages in theory, but the law was rarely enforced. Indian courts and opinion remained conservative. A law not enforced, she knew, was no law, nor even custom. "*We will be in Fleet,*" she reminded him. "*Always away and apart.*"

"*We will see each other enough to make babies,*" he retorted. "*You're almost smart in math.*" He paused for a moment, thinking. A cold smile emerged. "*We are already betrothed before the gods.*"

Avi turned away. The claim was disquieting.

Chapter 6

September 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity of Shānhé-Wòtǔ (Tau Ceti IV) (Murphy)

Fahnisht had finally given into exhaustion, and was settled in *Granuaile*'s fourth cabin. Grunon had gone into his own cabin, where he was apparently accessing the database of Horn heroic poetry Chengen had updated. Tired, Murphy nonetheless went aft to the engineering deck. Something in the pre-plasma flow was off and the bots weren't handling it well enough. Now that he had a helmsman aboard he had time to get the engines fully right.

Murphy went to the portside pump assembly leading out of the man tank. Hydrogen extracted from the tanks by the processors was pumped into the prep chamber for gravitic treatment, yielding deuterium for the fusion chambers. The process was a little rough of late. He put the tool box down and selected a hex wrench to open the access panel.

He was just getting into the work when Avinashini called him over the comm. "Someone else is out here," she advised. "It's a ship, O'Meath," she said. "It's just pulled out of a fuel dive."

Damn. Who the hell else was out here? "Anything you recognize?"

"It's about the size of a small escort. Not spherical. She's

vectoring outbound. She appears to be preparing to go over the lip, but the gas giant is partially obscuring sensors.”

“Buddha-damned convenient way to keep from being seen. I’ll be right up.” Murphy closed the access to the pump system quickly. He grabbed a towel, wiping his hands as he went up to the con.

Avinashini had the main display up at the rear of the con by the time he was there. Murphy looked at it. “Anything?”

“I am still getting readings.” She keyed, looked at the results. “She is an advance scout,” she decided. “An older design, retired by Fleet.”

Murphy looked at the readings. “Damned if I know how you can tell that, from this distance, with a gas giant in the damned way. And I’m not bad with sensors.”

“*Granuaile* has an exceptional sensor suite,” Avinashini replied. “It has compensated for the difficulties.

“The other ship’s design is over twenty years old. Its characteristics are well known to anyone trained in targeting. We are not interested in firing on our own vessels.”

“Another old Fleet ship.”

“Yes. It should have been was retired and placed at anchor-age.” She seemed genuinely perplexed. “That class of scout went in ahead to look at the enemy. They have good sensor suites, but are not heavily armed.”

“Jump in, scan like hell, get enemy positions and vectors. Then run – all while you’re broadcasting your data and pushing out active EM scans. Telling the zhīzhū right where to point. Wasted some crews that way.”

“Unmanned advance torpedoes weren’t cost-efficient twenty years ago,” Avinashini pointed out.

“They’re not all that cost-effective today. The four messengers I started with total up to about half the cost of *Granuaile* herself. And zhīzhū brains are a fair match for our best computers. It’s a good thing that human beings are a lot cheaper than some of the technology.”

“I don’t understand.” Avinashini looked genuinely perplexed.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

“Well, if an unmanned probe could do a better job than you or me, why the hell would anyone let *me* out here at all?”

Avinashini brought the attention back to her scans. “I believe we should do our best to avoid detection.”

“Why?”

“Someone has stolen another Fleet vessel which should be mothballed in the reserve,” Avinashini responded. “It’s reasonable to believe that they have used a Fleet vessel to observe Shānhé-Wòtǔ. If they see us, they may fire. They certainly will report to ... to whoever has attacked Shānhé-Wòtǔ.”

“Right so far.” Murphy crossed his arms. “What’s your duty, Commander?”

“My duty is to learn what I can and report.”

“What if you don’t like what you learn?”

Her lip tightened slightly. “I intend to do my duty.”

“Right answer. Let’s get at it.” Murphy took the seat to her left. “I’ll run the sweeps. You do the numbers.”

“What numbers do you require?”

“I heard once that ‘entrance implies exit,’ Murphy replied. “I’ll bet you can figure out where she’s going by the way she bounces over the lip.”

September 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Shānhé-Wòtǔ (Tau Ceti IV)
(Avinashini)

Avinashini finished the calculations. She was still troubled by the implications of O’Meath’s comments, and by what they had observed.

The vessel had been just what she had thought: an older advanced observer scout. Like the *Eighmy*-class corvettes, those scouts had seen service during the Ross campaigns. The Admiral had told stories of those years, having served with the command group at Wolf Base. She had later commanded a small task force of *Eighmy*-class ships, getting her necessary points to rise into the Admiralty, and had such a ship attached to her group.

The class had been retired and preserved in deep space. They were supposed stay at anchorage, available for reactivation if the zhīzhū massed for an attack. The Admiral had fought for preservation when others had suggested simply scrapping the vessels entirely.

This scout had pushed her older engines to their highest output and gotten to a safe distance for its entry into hyperspace. She had emitted no active sensor pulses, demonstrated no evidence one way or another of having spotted *Granuaile*. She had pushed into hyperspace, creating tell-tale ripples of gravity. Avi had put her entire effort into calculating the likely course and probable exit point, something she might be able to do with *Granuaile*'s exceptional sensors and computers.

She looked to O'Meath. "G 158-27."

The Euro frowned. "Nothing much there," he said. "Barely enough star to fry an egg on. A pretty empty system – no settlements, no support. No interest."

Avi looked at him without speaking. She knew that her calculations were correct. There was no other destination that made any sense on the possible vectors, given the known qualities of the ship. "Entry implies exit," she reminded. "It is only seven light years away, within easy reach." She gave a look of disgust. "Had it occurred to none of the Jin Jun to maintain observation on systems near Tau Ceti after you were forced to remove illegal settlers?"

"It hadn't occurred to us that genocide was on the menu."

She chose silence. There was nothing to say to this.

Finally, he smiled. "Let's go, then." He keyed up a command screen. "Calculate the trip to G 158-27. I want to come in a fair way out, without much ripple."

"We are bound for Sol," she reminded him. "We have already detoured. I am entitled to be brought back to Sol and to obtain my release from unlawful confinement."

"I have a Plenipotentiary," he reminded her. "I get to decide."

"I doubt very much that you have a valid Writ." She leaned back. "Even if you do, I have a right to petition." She softened. "You also have to report what you already know."

Demand the Debt That's Owing

His face grew red. "What I know *now* is where to look for the bastards *right now*, *and* where to look for a whole bunch of stolen Fleet ships. I intend to do just that. You can be part of it and redeem yourself, or you can go back below."

"Redeem myself from *what*?"

"From goddam *suspicion*," he sputtered. "Which is enough, the way things work in politics. Do you get this? Your mother's command is bean-counting, and some damned big beans are about seven light-years away."

She swallowed the reminder that the Admiral herself was under suspicion. Despite all, she knew her mother remained loyal. She might have been duped by someone on her staff, but she would not have betrayed, broken her oath. The suspicion misunderstood her mother, regardless of any other faults she might display. She had gone into the Humanitas faith to move ahead, not to accept all of the precepts. The Admiral had always brought milk to the church, an offering.

O'Meath would not care if her mother were convicted wrongly. She would have to stay near him to do what she could for the Admiral.

"I will plot the course," she agreed. "We will find the thieves. My mother, though, is innocent."

"Motives I get," he said, with the hint of a smile. "Family. Not sure I'd do that for my sister Bridget."

"You are defective, then," she shot back. She turned to the console. It annoyed her to realize that he had allowed her to drag herself into an investigation against Fleet itself.

Or, she hoped fervently, against Fleet veterans who were abusing Fleet vessels and more. She allowed herself to disbelieve that her mother would have any part in such a conspiracy.

"I'll take the main board for the entry. You can take the left seat."

September 27, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En Route Tau Ceti IV to G 158-27) (Fahnisht)

The narrow sleeping pallet was sufficient, but Fahnisht could not sleep. There were no birds, no insects buzzing. No beasts could be heard in their nighttime shifting, no plains grasses rustled in the easterly winds. What sounds he heard were muffled, as if his ears were wrapped by a layer of cloth. A constant but barely audible hiss lurked at the edge of his consciousness.

There was no sleep for him aboard Kameef's vessel. Gran-whoeeel was no restful sanctuary for a Horn warrior. What part of this life appealed to his Tentlord?

Fahnisht sat up. If there would be no sleep, he would explore the vessel again. Perhaps something would strike him to aid his understanding of Kameef and his kind. He pulled on his leathers, then went to the door. The latching mechanism stymied him for a moment, as it had each time. It was perplexing that such mechanisms were needed at all, if all expected to serve on this vessel were to be trusted as warriors sworn together by blood.

The latch finally released. Fahnisht opened the door and stepped into the larger room shared by all. The room was dim. A new sound reached his ears: the rhythmic humming of the device Avinashini pumped with her legs. Kameef had explained that all of his kind found ways to maintain their bodies during long voyages.

In the few short days, Fahnisht had noted that the female isolated herself. Despite travelling with the hornless Tentlord, she was not clearly an ally. Though human movement and mannerisms were difficult to judge, the Clanlord felt sure that Avinashini was at best uncertain that she and Kameef should ride the same circles. She might well oppose him.

Fahnisht stepped closer, spoke in his own language. "*Well met, warrior.*" She had worn and unsheathed a sword when first encountered. Kameef had said nothing, but it was to be assumed that she was due the courtesy. Zhaohui had also done so, and now the male Chengen wore the cloak of a Bard.

The device Kameef had clipped to his ear carried the words

Demand the Debt That's Owing

to her so that she could understand. She stopped rotating the device with her legs and turned her head toward him. She replied in Kameef's speech. Deep in his own ear, he heard her speak in the language of the plains. "*As are you well met.*" She clambered off and stood, placing her palms together. "Namaste," she added.

The word was not sent buzzing into his ear, nor did he recognize it from the words Kameef had taught. "*The whispering does not tell me what you just said.*"

"*It is an old word,*" she replied. She hesitated a moment, then explained. "*The Fire in my soul greets the Fire in yours.*"

Fahnisht awkwardly mimicked the gesture. "*My Fire also greets yours.*" He was unsure if she understood that fire was only one aspect of the great forces that controlled the plains. She might well be offended were he to question. He chose a different subject, pointing at the machine. "*You often sit there,*" he said. "*Your legs move, but you do not.*"

"*It keeps my legs strong. We spend many days travelling. It keeps us healthy.*"

"*You would stay healthy if you stayed on your plains.*"

"*Yes, I would, so long as there was enough food and water. So long as my Earth stayed green, and my people weren't threatened.*"

"*I have seen your flyers. Kameef has told me of your weapons.*" Fahnisht shuddered at the thought that Kameef would without compunction kill from a distance when away from the plains. "*No animal threatens you.*"

Avinashini made a gesture of the head. "*People fight each other when they're hungry, or afraid of being hungry.*" She hesitated a moment, then went on. "*We are not the only people in the skies. Others would take our circles, our dwellings.*"

Fahnisht nodded. "*So Kameef has said.*" He struggled with the human word. "*Zhee-Zhoo. Hungry spiders, he has called them.*"

She moved her head in the motion that Kameef used to affirm, but more slowly and deliberately. "*They want all of the good worlds for themselves. Even our own. When they have our*

world, yours will be next."

"You defend your own circles against the other clans, but your people kill my clans."

"Yes," she affirmed quietly. She looked down at the deck, then back in his eyes. There was a change in the color and warmth of her cheeks. "Please excuse me." Without waiting for an answer, she climbed back on the machine. She worked her legs harder than before. Her eyes closed as her legs rotated the foot-devices.

As he met more of Kameef's kind, he understood them less. Fahnisht went back to his sleeping chamber and laid back on the narrow cot.

October 2, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Murphy)

Granuaile slid gently over the lip and out of hyperspace. Avinashini was good, that was clear. He'd decided to trust her with the helm during the slide through hyperspace. She hadn't killed him in his sleep since he'd taken her from *Harris*. She'd practically drooled over taking the helm for the exit. He'd relaxed and spent the time in the engine compartment. The automation was good, but *Granuaile* was better for his attention to the details.

Murphy checked the shut-down procedures, assured himself that the bots could be left alone again. He left the engineering compartment. Going around the main-deck turret bulkhead, he heard Fahnisht sparring with Grunon.

That was good. Fahnisht had found difficulty adapting to the long down-time of space travel. Grunon had been moping.

Murphy climbed up the gangway to the con. He went forward, sat in the left-hand seat and turned his attention to the sensors. Avinashini already had the passive array in full operation. Her fingers played over the console, recording and adjusting. Her eyes were focused up, at the center console's main display.

"I am picking up signals" she said. "There are a number of

ships here.”

“What did you expect? Empty space?” Murphy looked at what she had already done. He keyed in an alternate algorithm to complement her work.

“And what *did* you expect?”

“I expected to find bunch of Fleet relics that went missing,” Murphy replied. “Or most of it.” He opened the database he had compiled near Nánmén’èr. “Bet I’ve found it. Look for matches.”

Avinashini looked over the data. After several moments, she keyed data in, reviewed screens, began making correlations. She showed no emotion as she began her analysis.

Murphy got up, went to the large console at the rear. He began mapping system objects from the available passive sensor data, compared that with what was in the computer. As a long-ago brief survey had shown, this system was nothing much. It had never formed large bodies. Its central star was dim enough that there had been no point in exploiting it. Better systems were available, even without blue-green planets.

The system had been ignored, bypassed. Nothing more than a solitary claim buoy had been set in deep orbit on the vague hope that the Zhīzhū would respect human claims. Someone else was taking advantage of the sloppiness.

Jin Jun sloppiness, most likely. Too many of the exploration branch had been lost in a single vessel. Too few remaining were available as the Emperor’s eyes and ears. Zhaohui should have adopted his suggestion, invested in more of the Lady-class vessels.

After more than an hour of silent work, Avinashini spoke. Her voice was low. “I do not wish to believe these readings.”

He went forward, looked over her shoulder. The data was solid, definitive. “Believe it.”

A towel around his sweaty neck, Urwah Grunon came up the gangway, into the rear of the con. “What’s to believe?”

“There are ships here,” Avinashini said. “They appear to be Fleet hulls. Older hulls.”

“Appear, hell,” Murphy said. “They *are*. Ships that were

mothballed years ago. Should be in anchorage out near Nánmé-n'èr, waiting for reserve crews to be called back against an all-out attack. These were supposed to be Earth's last defense if the spiders finally get too hungry to stay in their own ball of space."

Urk came closer, looked at the analysis on the display. "That explains the spoon."

"It certainly does," Murphy replied. "At least seven missile corvettes are out here. And then there are escorts, supply ships, tankers, a few battlewagons, and some tenders. That ship you boarded wasn't *Ibn Battutta* before it went skullbones."

Avinashini stood. "Excuse me," she said. She walked to the back of the domed deck, went through the hatch, and went below.

Chapter 7

October 2, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Avinashini)

Avi felt dizzy. Her head pounded. Her breathing was difficult to control, and pain shot through her chest.

This was not real. None of it could be real. There weren't Imperial Fleet ships out there. The ships weren't missing from the reserve anchorage.

The *Admiral* was responsible for those ships, among other areas of her command. These ships were *not* stolen on her mother's watch.

Avi went to the medical bay, sat in the exam chair. Systems came up automatically, sensors began their analysis. The computer suggested a combination of light medications to slow her symptoms. It wanted to tranquilize her. She almost tapped the "accept" key on the screen. It would be the easiest way.

Instead, accepting that her emotion was running away with her body, Avi got out of the chair. She went into the common area, took a seat on the cardio frame. She began pedaling, easily at first, warming up. Soon, she was at full cadence, her heart beating, sweat building up along her shoulder blades and under her wild hair.

Either her mother had been kept in the dark, or the Admiral at least *knew* they were gone from the reserve depot. No third possibility could be considered. Her mother had joined the Human-

tas faith for her career. Humanitas preached against some Imperial policies. Those like Urwah and Avi herself who resisted that path to Fleet advancement had been treated more and more like traitors to earth itself.

Admiral B.P. Sunitha knew these old Fleet ships were out here. One of these old ships had been used in a genocidal attack on the Cetians. Another had been attacking shipping for useful supplies. Her mother had to know something about this. Merely refusing to take note of such information broke the Admiral's oath to the Emperor.

Avi pedaled still harder, wishing there was a real road ahead.

October 2, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Murphy)

"I don't think I've seen her like that before," Urwah commented. "Nothing gets to her."

"Nothing she lets show." Murphy keyed the sensor controls. "She keeps it deep. The passive scans continued to obtain information on the vessels gathered here. They were clustered in orbit around the single gas midget, a flotilla of living space in the middle of a bypassed star system.

The gas midget must supply hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, and other chemicals for raw needs. At least two farming vessels were also part of the group, producing food in domes as well as interior hi-yield tanks and racks. The flotilla could not be entirely self-sufficient, though.

The grouping explained piracy along Yi's Reach. Spare parts, some foods and supplies, could be taken from the water-guzzling pushers plying the routes to and from Trianguli. They brought the best ores back toward Allende and Earth, finished technology back toward the blue-green planet.

Fleet had put one of its best fighter pilots, Admiral Sunitha's daughter, into this mix. It had done so recently, at that. Was it just for show? A serious attempt at controlling these rebels? Proof that Fleet was innocent, at least largely? Zhaohui would

Demand the Debt That's Owing

tell him to suspect that Avinashini was part of a conspiracy, along with her mother and most of the admiralty.

The answers were not going to get pulled out of the air. He might have to ask them of Avinashini.

October 4, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Urwah)

Urk finished his basic strength exercises. He moved to the slidemill installed beside the cycling frame. *Granuaile's* computer network detected his iffy and called up the routines he'd already used. Most of the time, it recalled, he had jogged and run through images of Jannah's Berkshire corridors. As a youth he'd gotten to know them well.

He started through his most regular routine, the one which took him up the ramp into the surface dome. The slidemill matched incline and surface to what was expected in the simulation. He increased his effort as he trotted up hills, found himself changing stride to brake as he went down.

As he always had, he found himself approaching the massive geodesic frame and its nano-produced pressure film. As a child, he'd sometimes imagined going outside, unprotected. Something deep in the human psyche seemed to want that, despite the dim grayness of the landscape, the simple fact that cold vacuum would suck all life from his lungs and body in minutes.

Urwah halted. "Change simulations. Berkshire landscape, Earth." The system complied. Now he stood in a similar field. The simulation was based on the landscape of four or five hundred years ago, before industrialization and overpopulation had stripped so much of the Earth. He'd visited the area once, while in training on Earth itself, and had seen that it was not quite as seen in the simulation.

What would it have been without the Pandemics? Would humanity have survived at all?

Why the hell was he thinking this way? Urwah shook his head. Allah forbid he should start thinking about such things.

The race was here, and it needed to survive. The people out there in those beat-up Fleet reserve vessels thought they were helping humanity survive.

October 4, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Fahnisht)

“Tell me where can be found Kameef.” Fahnisht had become used to flicking his eyes a certain way so that the devices understood he sought their attention. The devices had learned to hear him in the Horn language, without forcing him to search out the hard-to-pronounce human words.

The voice he had come to call Granwhooeel, the steel casing itself, responded in words as clear as those of any Bard. *“Kameef can be found in the yurt of engineering.”*

Fahnisht left his small cabin. Oor-wah moved his legs on the odd portion of floor that allowed one to run without moving. His gaze was somewhere ahead, in the images that could be seen through the devices.

Did all of Kameef’s people do such things? Why were images preferable to real plains, real hills? Had Urwah ever gone to the places where ocean met land?

He came to the heavy door that sealed off the chamber. He had learned to turn the wheel and pull the hatch open. He went through, walking the platform that kept him above some of the machinery.

He could not see Kameef at first. He panned around, looking at the narrow gaps between structures large as a warrior’s family tent. Finally, he saw the hint of the pale-skinned human. Fahnisht went closer, saw that his Tentlord was moving other bits of metal and devices in and around an opening. The floating devices Kameef called “bots” handled other bits and tools.

Kameef noticed him. *“Milord, how may I serve?”*

“Here, Kameef, I believe that I should serve you.”

“There is little that I need, Milord, and I would not so dishonor you.”

Demand the Debt That's Owing

"I see that you do not sleep as long as a warrior should. You do much here."

Kameef made the shoulder-motion that accepted an unchangeable reality. *"There are things I have to do to make sure Granuaile is prepared."*

"For what do you prepare?"

Kameef made the shoulder motion again, and moved his face in human amusement. "I wish to hell I knew," he responded in his own language.

October 5, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Avinashini)

Granuaile had not yet fully deciphered the data transmission being used by the ships in system. Fleet vessels were being used, but at least some caution had been exercised. Whoever held the vessels had changed encryption protocols. The encryption was tight and multi-layered.

That alone spoke of involvement with Fleet higher-ups, as if the presence of the vessels was not evidence. Without the primary codes, changes this complex would have been difficult to make. Fleet's support of this illegal flotilla was more and more apparent. She avoided considering her mother's level of involvement for the moment.

Her main focus, though, was the vessel at the center of activity. Or, rather, the two vessels, both of the same basic design. They were being mated together into a single unit.

Avi was familiar enough with the old missile corvettes. The Admiral had commanded one for six months to get the minimal necessary credentials in her struggle to finally achieve flag rank. Long before that, Avi's mother had known of their capabilities and needs in her more customary role as a supply officer. The vessels had been introduced in the fight for control of Ross 128. They had brought substantial firepower to bear against the zhīzhū and their simpler mass-drivers. The high-capacity missile launchers had turned the tide.

All of this had been learned through passive observations. *Granuaile* herself never emitted a single betraying active EM pulse. O'Meath had locked those functions carefully down. It annoyed her, quite illogically, that he still thought it possible that she and Urwah were part of the apparent mutiny.

Why *shouldn't* he distrust them with this going on?

Regardless, the flotilla surrounding the conjoined ships emitted enough active electromagnetic emissions to allow *Granuaile* to build a picture of the overall structure and progress. The two corvettes had been linked with a framework. They now orbited belly-to-belly. At least two boarding tubes allowed easy shirt-sleeve access between the two vessels. The hull over the forward missile bay of one had been partially stripped and a cradle extended outward.

Tugs were pulling a small asteroid toward the cradle. Smaller rocks than that had been used to deliver the Cetian-specific virus to Shānhé-Wòtǔ. Were they simply using a larger rock to hold a virus? Or were they planning for a Tunguska effect?

What world did they plan to attack this time?

Whatever the plan, four more missile corvettes were in varying stages of being paired, as these two had been. The work had stopped on the other two pairs. The entire focus was on the one pair that was almost ready for flight. The flight patterns and congestion – dangerous congestion at times, with near-misses between work pods and other craft – reminded her of the hasty refitting of vessels at Jannah just after the Groombridge Rout.

Granuaile's main computer spoke up. "Gravitic ripple detected." Avi focused in on the readings and keyed through the analysis. A ship had just bounced into the system, fewer than five light minutes away.

She keyed comm. "O'Meath, come up here." Avi focused the array toward the incoming vessel, waiting for speed-of-light to catch up with the gravitic ripple.

Her ear nerves tickled with O'Meath's voice. "I'll follow from engineering. That's too Buddha-Christ close. We may need to power up."

Demand the Debt That's Owing

"Your masking is good, and power is at bare minimum," Avi responded. "She won't see us unless she is looking for us."

"Damned well better be right. You might know someone on board, and I'm happy to nuke her if it looks like my hide. Out."

Avi felt her lips tighten. She was learning that a light tone did not mean that O'Meath was joking. He would defend himself and his ship.

Electromagnetic waves finally splashed onto the receptors. Avi keyed quickly, reviewed the analysis. The incoming ship's power signature indicated a contemporary design. She ran it against the recognition systems. It was Fleet, not zhīzhū. It was certainly one of two classes of Fleet escorts.

With a chill, she concluded it was most likely her own ship – *Harris*. The crew had been permeated with Humanitas religious followers. *Harris'* possible routes after O'Meath had detained herself and Urwah made *Harris* one of a very few logical choices.

The long-repressed anger over O'Meath's faked Writ went from a carefully banked coal into flame. The damned fools were making the Jin Jun's illegal, high-handed behavior less and less outrageous. They were proving the Jin Jun's case for him. If *Harris* was here, active Fleet commanders were deeply involved in sedition.

A new EM wave splashed against the sensor receptors. The vessel's comm system was sending an open identification, as if it was approaching a proper Fleet installation. Its commander was claiming friendship.

She had no more doubt. *Harris* had indeed come to G 158-27.

Avi's fingers trembled. For a moment, she regretted that O'Meath alone could order *Granuaile* to fire a missile. How far did the mutiny reach?

October 6, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Jibral Grunon)

Jibral Grunon rode the zipline through the access tube to *Harris's* airlock. The line braked to a gentle stop as he came to the hatch itself. The hatch slid aside into its recess. Behind it, standing in the artificial gravity, was a blonde woman, also tall. Here features were decidedly Slavic. She saluted him. "Sir."

Grunon returned the salute. "Permission to board."

"Permission granted."

He glanced at her identification. Sergeant Larissa Vele backed against the side of the lock, allowing him to squeeze by. When he had done so, she sealed the outer door, opened the inner hatch. She allowed him to step into the corridor first. "Straight back to the marine mess," she advised. She followed him as he set off.

"Thank you," he said.

Vele had served with Urwah during the forced "evacuation" of the human settlers from Tau Ceti IV. He'd been promoted for following bad rules of engagement. She'd faced court-martial. His brother had collaborated with the Jin Jun most likely to betray humanity, but Vele had been punished.

He came to the door into the marine mess. Grunon stopped, let Vele go around and slide the door open. She stood aside, let him enter first.

Harris's marines stood to attention as he entered. He counted quickly. As he had expected, several were missing. Urwah's other top sergeant, he already knew, had declined to accept the change of mission. She was apparently being held in a locked cabin to rethink matters.

"Welcome," he said. "You've joined the Manifest Destiny Fleet. Most of you attend Humanitas services, so you already know who we are and what we will do. Most of you will stay on *Harris*. Our ships will need your help to establish control over Trianguli.

"Some of you will be asked to volunteer for another very important mission." He felt Vele's eyes boring into his back. She was ready. He would re-write his personnel requests for *Mundi*

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Astrum to include her. "Now, I understand that you have a Sergeant Milewski. Vele, take two marines and get her here, now."

Grunon selected two marines from the other end of the line, went out. In a moment, they came back, dragging Milewski. Plastic ties bound her at wrists and ankles, arms behind her back. She could do little to actively resist, but did nothing to help the marines transport her.

"Stand her up to face me," Grunon ordered.

The marines complied. Milewski glared while the marines held her arms. They had taken enough classes in close-quarters fighting from her to know that shackles only limited her. Left free, she would injure anyone she considered an enemy.

"You've been given enough time to think over your position. You have your last chance now."

Grunon pulled out his handheld, keyed up a page. "'Under the Provisional Regulations of the Manifest Destiny Fleet, you have been declared a Grade One security risk,'" he read. "'All Grade One security risks are subject to immediate and convenient resolution, to be carried out under the orders of the marine command.'" He tucked the handheld back into its pocket. "Sergeant Vele, cycle her through the nearest airlock that's not plugged in to a boarding tube."

He looked at Vele, then the rest of the marines. There was a moment of hesitation, as he had expected. Even if Milewski was reluctant to do what was right, she had been their top sergeant. They would not want to be the ones to carry out this order.

He did not have time for gentle indoctrinations. With *Mundi Astrum* almost ready, the entire task force scrambling to prepare for voyages, he had to see which of these marines would be weak points. Those would be reassigned or themselves declared security risks.

Vele was quick to understand. "Airlock 4." She pointed to the two marines that had helped her fetch Milewski. "Let's move."

Predictably, Milewski spit at Jibral's face before she could be turned and dragged away. She missed, but at least she had the courage to try.

Vele and the others were gone perhaps five minutes. The marines left behind wore their most impassive faces, saying nothing, communicating nothing.

Vele and her marines returned without Milewski. The three saluted Grunon.

He returned the salute. "The other two are only Level Two security risks," he said. "Transfer them to *Antigone's* brig as soon as possible. You will get notices about your own assignments within twenty-four hours. Vele, come with me back to my office."

"Aye." Vele looked to the rest of the marines present, having become the unequivocally senior marine on the ship. "Dismissed."

Grunon went back to Airlock Two, Vele following in tow.

October 8, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Avinashini)

The small galley tabletop display was partitioned into various sensor readings and calculations. The central partition showed fuzzy outlines of the ships, still not much more than dots at this magnification, clustered around the two-ship unit.

"They are in an open sphere formation," Avi pointed out. "It isn't a true defensive formation. It's more like an honorary escort. In fact, this is more typical of a formation to honor a capital ship."

"Four missile corvettes, half-stripped. Two more tied together, being treated like a battle-carrier. And one has a damned big rock in one of its forward missile bays." O'Meath crossed his arms. "I've cracked some of their comm encryptions. There's been talk about a Dr. Bartlett and his final preparations. Ring a bell?"

Urwah shook his head "no."

Avi had met him once, years ago. He'd been at a Humanitas service in Bangalore to which her mother had dragged her. Bartlett was a bio-researcher of some kind. The preacher had fawned

over him, though she did not know why.

O'Meath took her silence as the lack of an answer. "He used to consult for Fleet. He proposed studying the zhīzhū and finding something that would infect them. Kill them off, once and for all. House of Knights vetoed. Fleet was told to cut him loose. Resisted, but he eventually lost his defense contracts. Got a retirement to Trianguli, like a whole lot of retiring Fleet officers. And then he disappeared.

"Add it up. The same kind of ship they've already used in genocide. The Horn epidemic. Bet they're going to finish up the Horns?"

"That's a lot of ship just to run back to Tau Ceti," Urk responded. "It would have been just as easy to use the ship that's already set up, right? More small rocks."

Avi nodded once. "Much easier. They did not need to join the second vessel for that purpose."

"What can that hulk do that two separate corvettes can't?" Murphy asked. "That's the question, isn't it? They didn't go to all that work for nothing."

"I am not a design engineer," Avi pointed out. "I understood assumed that you knew all of the answers."

"No need to be nasty." O'Meath shifted in his seat. "All I can guess is that it's going to generate one hell of a screwy hyperspace bubble. And it's going to be a bitch to steer if they skim for fuel. Those struts connecting it won't be much like wings."

Avi tapped at her handheld. A schematic of a missile corvette came up. "This class of vessel was designed to be versatile. The volume between these bulkheads" – she indicated with a tap of her finger – "could be easily refit for future needs. One of the plans was as a small tanker for fighter support."

"Your specialty."

"Yes. I am well aware of my primary training." She drew a breath and repressed anger. "If that refit were performed on one of the two, most of the life support taken out, control slaved to the other ship, it would almost double the base range. It also has lower overall density. With both hyperdrives running, it could

generate perhaps point eight-five.”

“Guess you know enough about it.”

She paused, cleared her throat. “It was a contingency plan studied in helm classes. The object was to bring a large deadfall weapon to another world, one that would be difficult to deflect or destroy. The Tunguska effect, as you said.”

“Faster, further, and hard to stop. Cause an extinction event with the damned rock.” Murphy simplified. “With schematics stolen from under Fleet security’s nose. Christ and Buddha!”

Avinashini looked down at the table. “Yes.” She cleared her throat. She was about to mention having once met Bartlett, but thought better off it. O’Meath might conclude that she or her mother were guilty of genocide by mere association.

Fahnisht had been listening attentively to the translation. “*They go to murder others,*” he snarled, then waited for the translation to echo through the speakers. “*Not Horns. What others are there to murder?*”

Avi looked up at O’Meath. “You would know more about that than anyone else, O’Meath. The Jin Jun have been quiet about their exploration in the last several years.”

“We’ve actually been sticking a lot closer to home, lately. Since we lost *Ibn* especially. And we thought it was a damned good idea to learn keep eyes on the Manifesters and their damned Humanitas Church.” O’Meath frowned.

“Not an answer, Murphy,” Urwah pointed out.

“Getting there.” Murphy leaned back. “Right now, though, there’s just the two – Cetians and zhīzhū. And they’ve tried killing off the Horns already. Bartlett probably had something to do with that.”

Urwah scratched at the tabletop. “I wouldn’t miss the zhīzhū. They’re bad neighbors.”

O’Meath’s eyes snapped left, locking with the marine’s. “Kill what you can’t talk to? I thought maybe you grunts learned something a few years back.”

“Kill any that’s about to eat me and mine *raw*, damned right! And push us right the hell back to Earth, and then finish us there.” Urwah stood, towering in the small space. “You forget-

ting a ship or ten? Wolf? Ross? The Groombridge colony? Damned zhīzhū aren't like us!"

"Plenty of cannibals in Earth history," O'Meath jabbed back. "And plenty of genocide, too. Not to mention pure mass murder. Are you planning on helping out? Why not just start by tossing Fahnisht out the lock?"

Urwah's face darkened as he sprung to a stand in the cramped space. He reached easily over the table, grabbing a handful of O'Meath's shipsuit. With a single jerk, he slid O'Meath onto the middle of the table.

The Horn moved as quickly. He had his own grip of marine shipsuit. His knife was out, pressed against the cloth over the marine's right kidney.

Avi found herself standing, unsure what to do.

The moment dragged.

O'Meath shouted something in the growling Horn language. The translator sputtered. Fahnisht pulled the knife back two centimeters, but did not sheath it, did not point the tip away.

Urwah tightened his grip on O'Meath's clothes, pulled him closer. His eyes were dark and narrow. Fahnisht watched, a twitch away from ending the standoff. The two men's faces were perhaps three centimeters apart.

O'Meath bent his head up, kissed the tip of the marine's wide nose.

Shocked, Urwah released the Jin Jun. "Jin Jun *bullshit!*" He rubbed the imagined saliva away with the back of his arm.

O'Meath rolled to a seated position on the tabletop. "Your snot doesn't taste that good, either."

Fahnisht laughed in the peculiar Horn way, slid his knife back in its sheath. Avi felt a smile, repressed the inappropriate laughter that might follow. "We must finish our work," she reminded as seriousness reasserted itself. "We need to know what they are doing to make decisions." She set her eyes on O'Meath. "I will not compare the zhīzhū to the Horns, much less humans. They would not hesitate to destroy us."

O'Meath slid off the table, took his seat again. "*Granuaile* follows Imperial policy. No genocide. Anyone in favor of geno-

cide can pop out the forward lock right now and see if those bastards out there will give them a ride.”

Urwah glowered, slowly resumed his seat.

Avi called up a navigational display. “Where will they seek to drop this ‘rock,’ O’Meath?” She centered the display on Jannah. “The best route to zhīzhū space takes them through Sol and Wolf.” She hesitated. “That assumes that they will have additional support in Fleet.”

“That’s not an assumption, that’s a given. *Harris* is out there. She can’t be the only Fleet ships in on this.” Murphy looked at the star chart. “The largest zhīzhū population in that area is at Alula Australis. Most say it’s their home world. I’m not so sure – pretty complicated system to develop intelligent life. I suspect it’s their first colony system, for what it’s worth. Information *Hillary* sent on before it got wiped out tends to support that.”

Hillary. The Jin Jun had sent her to spy on the zhīzhū with no warning to Fleet, at the same time Fleet was sponsoring the Groombridge colony. The Jin Jun had stirred the zhīzhū, that much was certain. Many had died. Avi herself had almost died, her lone Gandiva between the streaking zhīzhū spheres and the barely habitable planet.

Still, *Hillary*’s Jin Jun had warned them of the swarm. That much, the Jin Jun had done for them. Crediting O’Meath himself, they had sent a messenger torpedo to alert the colony.

O’Meath was still talking. “There would be a lot of ships going in and out. They could hope to spread the disease from there. Infect other zhīzhū worlds.”

“No,” Avi responded. “That doesn’t make sense to me.”

“Why not?” Urwah pointed out the zhīzhū systems in the vicinity. “It’d be the most efficient way to spread disease. If they don’t quarantine effectively, the whole population could go. We had a mumps outbreak in Jannah when I was a kid. All the tunnels were shut, all travel was stopped to get it right under control. We learned something from the Pandemics. No travel means no germs moving.”

“I have been to Humanitas services,” Avi responded. “My

Demand the Debt That's Owing

mother sometimes forced it on me when I was younger. I sat through the ridiculous hymns and watch my mother waste milk on a bare platform..." Her voice trailed off. "The theory is correct, but not the place. I do not believe these people would risk damage to a blue-green world. They used much smaller rocks on Shānhé-Wòtǔ because they want the *world*. A significant global cooling and major climate change would defeat their own efforts."

O'Meath nodded. "And they've put out a hell of a lot of effort. That rock on the nose out there is big enough to get through any defenses, even if they lob it slow. There'll probably push it in fast and hard. It would cause one hell of a long dark spell. Probably a major die-off."

Avi pointed out several other systems. "We believe that there are populations here, here, and here. These are habitable, but not optimum. The disease could be started there. Evacuation would bring it to other worlds."

Urwah frowned. "You're missing one. Easier for humans to get to. One long ride through hyperspace, if you have extra fuel to extend your range." He pointed.

Murphy gave a grim smile. "With an added dose of old-fashioned human revenge."

Avi felt herself go pale. She had no desire to return to Groombridge 1618.

She barely heard O'Meath's next words. "Avinashini, you'd better start calculating possible courses. Messenger torpedo and ship. *Granuaile*'s fast, but we're going to have one hell of a race."

October 8, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Urwah)

Urwah held his counsel to himself. No one else at this "briefing" had ever seen a zhīzhū army up close and in person. Avi's job was to destroy targets she would likely never see with her own eyes. Murphy had never stood on the same ground as

one of the damned plant-spiders things. Fahnisht was still trying to adjust to life in a can, could not imagine what the enemy was.

Humanitas was wrong about a lot of things. Fleet certainly didn't understand the Jin Jun, or didn't want to. Both Humanitas and Fleet had at a good idea of what it was to watch a zhīzhū stop and taste a dead playmate in Jannah's corridors, to uselessly carry a dying sergeant to a pick-up point. Urwah shuddered.

He was by no means sure that he could assist O'Meath, no matter what the law said. Sometimes laws and rules of engagement were just plain foolish. Prophet save him, Urwah was not sure he would obey Murphy's orders.

October 8, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Avinashini)

"I'm going to get *Granuaile* ready for a full power-up," Murphy said. "We may need to move on short notice." He stood and started aft. The Horn warrior also stood and followed, saying nothing.

Avi withdrew herself from the memories of Groombridge. "We must set watch," she said. She turned to Urwah. "You understand basic sensor operations."

"Of course," Urwah agreed. He leaned back, looked to either side, pulled out his handheld. Saying nothing, he tapped at the screen. He held it out to her to show the results.

Avi nodded, pulled out her own handheld. Like Urwah, she shut off the comm and translation matrix links. Urwah looked down at the table, waiting. At the sounds of the hatch to engineering opening and closing, he looked up again. "I'm not so sure of this, Commander."

"Sure of what? O'Meath is correct about Imperial law."

"Not sure about worrying over the zhīzhū. Or chasing those ships down when they go. Whatever he's thinking. The zhīzhū wouldn't do the same for us. I don't love the zhīzhū at all."

"They are not to be loved," Avi agreed.

"Are you sure we should help O'Meath? I grew up in Jan-

Demand the Debt That's Owing

nah. Groombridge. I've seen things."

"You have placed great trust in O'Meath," Avi pointed out. "You seemed to trust his general instincts."

"That was before he and Fahnisht started talking up the spiders." Urwah stood, saluted. "Permission to stand down to quarters."

Avi appraised the marine's eyes. There was no point in pushing the matter for the moment. The younger officer was trembling and sweating; his eyes were wide. "Granted. I'll go to the con for now. You take the next watch."

Chapter 8

May 29, 2384 (Nine Years Ago) – Berkshire Dome, Jannah Colony (Wolf 359) (Urwah)

Urwah strode through the field. The grasses were only waist-high. He remembered being much younger, barely able to see over the top of the breeze-waving sea of green. Jibral had often brought him here when they were younger. Jibral had sometimes been reluctant to have his younger half-brother in his charge, but had done what he was told.

Jibral was seven years gone now. Like so many of Jannah's other youth, he'd joined Fleet. Life on Jannah itself was fine, but Fleet offered adventure, skill, and the possibility of earning colony status elsewhere. Even Trianguli was open to those with service. It was far enough away from here that the spiders were not a threat. Urwah had no plans better than Fleet for himself.

Urwah found himself in a patch of milkweed near the top of the hill he was climbing. He pushed through, stopping to pull a pod from a stem. He stripped the green leafy exterior off to find the silky white seed layer inside. These had fascinated him as a child, especially when the seeds were ready to burst and float away in the domes convection breezes.

He moved further up the hill, and saw the decline beyond. A massive wall of hexagonal frames rose up only thirty meters away, slowly curving inward. It was currently clear, allowing the

Demand the Debt That's Owing

meager light produced by Wolf to assist the dome's artificial lighting. Beyond the dome was the rock and dust of the large planetoid's surface.

He'd gone outside many times on inspection duty and various educational field trips. Without the benefit of artificial gravity, a person could cover great distances easily. The freedom of such movement contrasted with the need for the heavy protection of suits designed to shield against Wolf's frequent flares. Jannah was not far enough away from its central star to be completely safe.

Inside the domes one was safe from all but the most powerful of flares. The gravitic shunts helped move most of the dangerous radiation away, into useful energy stores. Artificial gravity within the colony itself helped maintain the human norms. Children here grew up in as normal an environment as possible.

Urwah came to the massive dome wall itself. He leaned against it to look out. From here, he could see the main shuttleport. Jibral had come down in a shuttle three days before, home on leave. The family was treating him like the returning hero he was. Jibral and the rest of Fleet kept the zhīzhū away from Jannah, for the most part. Urwah planned to follow his brother into the Fleet Marines as soon as he could.

Urwah started to follow the wall, clockwise. It was a well worn path in the hard, brown dirt. Jibral had shown him the path as a youngster. It led up and down the rolling hills contained in the massive structure. Insects hopped and buzzed; small animals could sometimes be heard in the grass. An orange and black butterfly flitted above another patch of milkweed; bees moved from one spiky flower to another. Urwah looked for the rabbits that lived nearby; none could be seen.

His handheld buzzed twice, paused, buzzed twice again. Urwah keyed to receive the general notice on audio-only. "All residents take note. Flare activity is forecast to increase in frequency and amplitude. Anyone on surface or in domes should be within seven minutes of a tunnel or a shelter. If you are within that range, stay in that area. If you are not within that range, take the most direct route toward a shelter or tunnel access."

Urwah keyed his handheld with an eye-flick. Nerve induction from his earpiece placed the heads-up in front of his eyes. A schematic of the dome floated in the air; the nearest locations were marked by flashing arrows. An old shelter was close. By rights, he should stay in the area, ready to duck into the old concrete structure. He'd been told of the importance of protecting the gene pool from early youth.

The cautious thought annoyed him. He didn't feel like being stuck in an old shelter for hours, just to make a geneticist's sperm screening a little easier. The lead and concrete would likely cut him off from all comm. Worse, the shelter was certainly stocked with old rations catering to Jannah's Hindu minority. If he was going to eat rations, he wanted well-spiced beef sticks. He wouldn't find those in a shelter. As his father often said, Hindus were good neighbors so long as they didn't invite the family to dinner. Ab was fond of his beef. He'd passed that on to his sons.

He'd heard Jibral boast of having his first intercourse in a remote shelter during a prolonged flare. Other young men made similar claims, and a woman had been jailed last year for using shelters for liaisons. There was always the chance of being caught alone with a willing woman, though preferably not a prostitute. The desire lurked, ready to make him do something foolish if he allowed himself license.

An emergency tunnel entrance was farther away, but along his planned route. He knew the dome well; his mother had often brought him along to help with her surveys. At a quick march, Urwah could reach the tunnel entrance in only fifteen minutes or less. Everyone knew that flare prediction models were conservative. The seven-minute warning was one-third of the time he had before a flare eruption was likely.

The tunnel was the better destination. Urwah moved his long legs faster and harder. His stride would help him cover the distance easily, possibly in record time.

The pace suited him. The pine woods were not that far ahead. He wasted no time getting toward their edge, though the deep shade would do nothing to protect him from an x-ray burst if the shunts weren't enough.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

The path led him through the worst of the dense pricker-bush barrier between the fields and the inner portion of the woods. Only a few thorns snagged at his clothes; he deftly kept them from tearing anything. He found himself walking along the soft bed of pine needles that had built up over the last several seasons. His mother had mentioned the need for a burn at some point. She was probably letting the tinder build up. As chief ecological engineer, she was constantly looking for ways to emulate the original Terran environment.

Comm again demanded his attention. "This is a seven-minute warning. Solar activity is accelerating. A class three flare is expected. This is a seven-minute warning. Take shelter within seven minutes. This is not a drill." The heads-up intruded in front of his eyes, flashing the prediction and warning. Wolf was boiling up quickly for once.

Urwah keyed the map again. He was still closer to the old shelter than the tunnel entrance, though just barely. He should turn back. The route to the tunnel led through the relatively clear surface under the tall pines however; he could manage that more quickly. Besides that, he still doubted the seriousness of the warning. The shunts would hold against a class three flare.

Urwah picked up his pace to a solid, rhythmic trot. He'd run cross-country in school, knew the ways to maximize his footing. He keyed the handheld with an eye-flick, putting the area map at the upper left corner of his field of vision.

Four minutes later, he came to the other edge of the woods. He slowed only slightly, decided against a detour to a clear path. Thorns tugged and tore at his clothes as he pushed through, bare arms held high and level. A few of the sharp pricklers left burning scratches along his ribs and legs before he burst back into the meadow.

Comm itched again at his ears and eyes. "Three minute warning. This is a rapidly evolving event. A class four flare is expected. Three minute warning."

Prophet, Wolf was suddenly angry. A class four flare would do more than scramble a few DNA strands. If it lasted long enough, it could take years off a life. If the shunts collapsed, the

damage could be worse.

Before this latest upgrade in the predictions, he had held back a little, as he had learned to do. Now he pushed, hard. He had been twelve or thirteen the last time a flare had gone so quickly up the scale. He wanted to be in the tunnels before the radiation blasted into and probably through the shunts. He was concerned for the first time. He would not admit that he was becoming a little scared.

Sweat ran down the nape of his neck, soaked his shirt. He watched his footing as he pushed through the grasses. A wrenched ankle would do him no good. His breathing became heavier as his muscles demanded more. Urwah continued to push. From the top of one hill, he started downward, leaning backward to maintain his balance. His gallop slowed.

“One minute warning. A class four flare is imminent. Heavy x-ray exposure is expected. This is a rapidly evolving event. One minute warning. A class four flare is imminent...” The warning continued. Urwah muted the sound, but could not shut it off entirely. He moved even faster down the hill, risking a fall.

He scanned for the entrance, saw it below. The concrete structure rose less than two meters out of the ground. Birch saplings grew in a cluster to the side and back; a milkweed patch filled in from the other side, and in front of the hatch. Urwah made for it, keying the emergency unlock that would allow him access.

The door did not open on its motors. Urwah reached it. The manual crank was spotted with rust. The wheel resisted his turn, making him grip more tightly. Three tugs failed overcome the resistance. The recorded warning blared up. “Class four flare confirmed. Class four flare confirmed. Shunts have been overwhelmed.”

Urwah tried to ignore the tears of fear that were trying to escape. He gripped the wheel with both hands, and braced his feet against the weathered concrete. The boy wrenched at the wheel with all his strength.

It gave way suddenly, so suddenly that he lost his balance.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Urwah fell, scrapped his hand against the concrete. Getting up, he finished turning the crank. The lead-lined hatch came open a crack. He gave it another massive tug, getting it open enough to slide inside. He turned and pulled the hatch shut, turned the wheel to lock the hatch before starting down the stairs.

"Too late, you're already dead, stupid boy."

Urwah froze. Jibral stood at the bottom of the stairs, his marine uniform looking out of place in the old tunnel. Three other marines stood with him.

"You've been worrying your mother, stupid boy. This isn't the first time you've been slow in a drill."

"This isn't...isn't a drill." Urwah began to wonder about that. He keyed. All of the warnings had come over the proper channels, using the proper overrides. Nothing seemed out of place.

Another of the marines, a husky woman, spoke up. "You need to be very glad that it's a drill. You'd be walking dead by now, just waiting to get sick and die. A few days at most."

"It's too bad," Jibral said to the woman. His white teeth gleamed with a malicious leer. "Stern lost the bet."

"Too bad for Stern," the woman replied. "He'd have liked spending some time stuck in a shelter with her libido."

"Always best to follow sensible orders," Jibral agreed. He looked up at his younger brother, engaged his eyes. "You need to learn not to upset your mother any more. Come down here."

Urwah looked at the four. He turned, broke for the hatch. Laughing, Jibral was on him before he could get the wheel turned. Jibral and another marine hauled him down the stairs, holding him tight no matter how he writhed and tried to kick. The other two joined them in the beating.

October 9, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Urwah)

Urk had dimmed the lights in the con for his watch. He took his time reviewing the scans. The lieutenant commander was

dead asleep in her cabin. O'Meath was preparing the power systems for a rapid start.

During his rest, he'd decided he could cooperate to a point. Whatever else they might do, the ships out there bore watching. Some of them would be going after the spiders, but others were likely the mutineers they appeared to be. Not all of them were honorable men and women looking to protect Earth from the zhīzhū.

Still, this wasn't his kind of fighting.

A grav tank would have been acceptable. Foot-soldiering would have been preferable. Battlesuit sensors and heads-up displays were limited – but he knew how to fight within those limits. He could fire weapons, swing blades, and move quickly. The battle was personal, as a battle should be, one man against another.

Avi was a lovely little girl, and the damned best pilot he knew, but she fought in an entirely different way. Prophet take these panels and buttons away. He wanted a weapon in his hands.

O'Meath, short and wiry, somehow bridging the two worlds, could at least make a decent sparring partner. Fahnisht, the Horn was an inspired swordsman. He wished that he could trust the Cetian, and himself, when they sparred.

Somewhere out there, though, the two or three honest grunts from *Harris* might be waiting. If they were still alive, they were waiting. He refused to believe that all of the marines he had commanded were traitors. Milewski wasn't a simpleton. She'd shown what a marine was supposed to do for her own people.

If those honest soldiers were dead, they needed escorts to Hell. What would Fahnisht call it? "Blood debt."

He would collect the debt.

The patterns in the ships began to evolve, change. More power registered from vessels in the Humanitas task force. Archaic, they couldn't mask their signatures as well as newer Fleet units. Engines were powering up. Dots of light appeared on long-range visual, waste-light from the gravitic thrust gen-

Demand the Debt That's Owing

erators.

The first hints of confirming motion came in from the sensors. Vessels were beginning to change vector, slightly at first.

Urk slapped the comm key. "Sons-of-bitches are moving out!"

October 9, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 – (Ramachandra)

Ramachandra sat at his boards, calibrating, testing, feeling the ship move. He had not had enough opportunity to test the handling. Its handling characteristics would not be ideal, especially in scoop-refueling operations. He had requested tankers, but Fleet could not be openly helpful, outside Sol itself. There, pure necessity would give him support.

The vessels gathered around in Honor Sphere were more a navigational nuisance than anything else. Fleet brass was too prevalent in Humanitas, especially in this branch. The Admiral herself would appreciate this sort of display, but she had no real sense of operations.

The all-hands sounded from consoles and personal comms throughout the bridge. Ramachandra ignored it, continuing his tests and queries, his minor adjustments of thrust and balance. He felt the ship, knew her through the nerves in his fingertips.

The all-hands sounded again, this time with a demand for acknowledgement. Ramachandra glanced at the comm inlay in his display. It announced some sort of flotilla-wide address by Commodore Ngyuen.

Ramachandra maintained his unreadable façade, despite annoyance at the demand that he waste his time. Ngyuen was a religious fanatic, like so many others here. He'd accepted that Buddha wanted humanity to reach perfection, but not other races. Ngyuen was another fool who needed a god to authorize pure common sense.

Ramachandra intended to pay as little attention to that air-waste as he could manage. Aunt Sunitha may have fallen for the

lunacy, but he would not. The Cause needed no encouragement from false gods and charlatans. He tapped the “ignore” key.

The all-hands sounded again, louder than before, threatening to draw attention on the bridge. Irked, still maintaining outward passivity, Ramachandra keyed in his attention. Too many of the believers on board had already voiced suspicion and dissatisfaction with the more rational members of the crew. Ramachandra feared none of the handling characteristics of this hybrid; simple mathematics governed it. The believers, though, bore watching.

Comm took over his main display, shunting the more important calculations to a small inset. Commodore Ngyuen’s face appeared in the main area. He was visibly impatient. Others, apparently, were also slow in keying in their attention. Humanitas busy-bodies were probably running through quarters, dragging napping off-shifters out of their bunks and cubbies.

Waiting, Ramachandra continued his exploration of the helm characteristics, sharpening his eyes to focus on the small inset.

Ngyuen finally began speaking. “We are blessed today to begin moving out for the next phase. Most of us will have other assignments, but we all know that one crew has been given great honor by the One-of-Many. The Reverend Father has forwarded his blessings to the crew of *Mundi Astrum*.”

Ngyuen’s face faded out; another figure faded in. Clothed in the various robes and colors he affected, the charlatan took a pious stance, head bows, hands clasped, on the altar of the main Church.

He was an adroit performer, waiting just a moment for effect. Despite the reality that this had been recorded months ago, he was intentionally acting for the audience in the moment. Aunt Sunitha, Ngyuen, and others fell for such simple displays. Ramachandra refrained from shaking his head.

Finally, the Reverend Father Quayle lifted his face to the camera and spoke. “My People, a *day* has come. We are *ready*. The People Humanitas is moving toward their destiny. The One God of Many Aspects has sent us this opportunity. We are directed, and we go where we are directed. We will continue humanity’s ascent. We *belong* in the stars, and will not let others –

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Evil's attempt to ape the Light of the human soul – keep us away from all that has been prepared for us.”

The man's eyes glowed with conviction and fervor. “Some of our own kind will oppose your great Work. They'll try to convince you that the One God in Many Aspects could be *fond* of these vile creations, help them evolve, could bring us together for some greater good – foolishness.

“*Ignore* those voices. They have been seduced. They speak for the Adversaries, the Dark Angels. They are the enemies of humanity. They want humanity to simply die out.

“And remember – the enemies of Humanity *have the Emperor's ear*. They have surrounded the youth so that he cannot save his own soul. They whisper their corruption to him. Yi Tan has been seduced and corrupted. The true loyalists have labored for Humanity. Humanitas has members in many places, as you all know – some of them secret. With their help, we have gathered the information we needed, the tools we needed.

“One ship carries the tools now – the beginning of our clear ascendancy in the galaxy, and of a new government. As regrettable as it is, Yi Tan must also be removed.

“You cannot all go, though we know you all would if asked. The crew that has been assembled is ready to do what it must. They are blessed, and will be guaranteed their places in all of the Afterlives. Humanitas will honor them throughout the millennia.

“Their vessel may appear odd, cobbled together from other old vessels, but it carries Omega and Alpha. It carries the end of the zhīzhū threat, and the beginning of a new human government. It is, shall be, *Mundi Astrum* – and I so christen her in the name of the One God.”

He raised his hands, eyes now so intense that they sent uneasy chills up the spine. “I bless *Mundi Astrum*, and all who cruise in her. I bless her divine mission, in all the Names of the One God. All who cruise in her may do so in the knowledge that they are freed of all sin.

“They are all guaranteed the future of the Afterlives.

“Blessings upon all of you.” He lifted his hands high, tipped his head back, closed his eyes, and smiled the charlatan smile

suggesting direct communication with some greater being. The light glowed on his face, softened it, a computer-generated effect anyone should see through.

The Commodore returned. "We are greatly blessed. Now, all hands, get to stations and move the Great Work forward!"

The comm signal shut down. His display returned to normal. Ramachandra returned to calibrating his systems.

October 9, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Avinashini)

"He just threatened the Emperor." Urwah shook his head. "They're planning on shooting him or something."

The four of them stood clustered around the large display console to the rear of the con. O'Meath spoke tersely. "They won't get through the Jin Jun. They know it, too. They're planning something with this ship."

"That's senseless." Avinashini keyed at the sensors as she spoke. "There are far better ways."

"Maybe," Murphy agreed. "Maybe this is a statement. Or maybe we just rushed them, somehow. They're just using what they have. Or we'll find something in the data I managed to key out."

"It's trust," Urwah commented. "They just don't have anyone in position who they can trust."

A sudden massive EM emission flared from the orbit the enemy had only recently vacated. Avi focused on the scans. "Two nuclear warheads just detonated. I believe that they destroyed the two missile corvette hulls that were left behind."

"Just hulks, I suppose." Murphy

Urwah nodded. "Leaving no evidence behind."

Fahnisht simply stood, looking lost. The warrior was entirely out of place.

O'Meath continued. "They're heading out for a jump. The rest of the task force is gathering – looks like they'll be heading out along the Reach." He watched as *Granuaile's* navigation

system worked out further information. "Buddha Christ Almighty. That damned paired ship is breaking away. Vectoring for an inbound jump, by the looks."

Avi nodded. "Do you doubt it?"

"*Granuaile's* smarter than me. If she says it, I have to believe it." He keyed for the main display to enlarge and display the calculations.

Avi said nothing. Her stomach was too knotted to reply. She knew of few pilots who could or would dare to helm a ship rebuilt that way, despite the training and contingency plans. The calculations would require finesse and mathematical intuition beyond most abilities. She herself might manage, with practice and training. She had passed her basic courses in helm, despite her decision to enter the Gandiva training.

Ramachandra, though, had specialized in helm operations. His skills were of the highest order. Avi would hesitate to risk lives on such a configuration. Ramachandra would not.

Avi felt the knots tighten further in her stomach. The Admiral had never responded to her request for reassignment. Her mother had *wanted* her on this side of Imperial space. She had probably pushed for the orders, or simply arranged them herself.

Ramachandra had written to her all too recently. He'd provided some kind of additional message, deeply ciphered. She had put that aside, not all that interested in him or his general attitude. It still waited for her in her personal data.

She had agreed to the match with Ramachandra, out of duty and to assure children. She had not found a good enough man who met the other requirements. Urwah was a far better man, but both younger and a Muslim. Donal Macpherson was a pleasant memory, but again not Hindu; worse his cynical willingness to attend Humanitas services reminded her too much of her mother. Ramachandra had at least agreed that any children would be raised properly, and outside the Humanitas church.

Even O'Meath had an oddly attractive primary ethic, despite his reputation as a profligate, an adulterer, Zhaohui's tool. Apart from that, he was too short, too brash, too undisciplined in all the ways that mattered.

Ramachandra was her fiancé. If Ramachandra had anything to do with that paired ship, she needed to know what he had sent her. Between future spouses, what needed to be encrypted and hidden as it streamed through official mail?

O'Meath's voice brought her back to the current needs. "I'm going below to power up. You have the con. Get ready for an attack run." He left the con at a run without waiting for a reply. He was already skittering down the ladder.

She keyed comm ship-wide. "O'Meath, we will never close to firing range in time. We have stayed too distant." She hoped he might be listening, though listening wasn't his strong suit.

She heard the muffled clang of hatches opening and closing. Moments later, the main power screen came up on her left display. "Main power startup codes have been entered."

The idiot was going to do what he wanted to, regardless of realistic advice. She looked up at Urwah, who still gazed at the display. "Urwah, that idiot is going to get this ship detected and hunted by enough ships to overwhelm our defenses. Talk to him, maybe you have influence."

"I have more influence with a bulkhead," Urwah replied. "And if he kisses me again, Commodore Pygmy is going to die."

The Horn spoke for the first time. The translator circuits delayed the statements into an echo of its clicks and growls. "Kameef smells the battle. My Tentlord is ready." The Horn gestured toward the forward consoles and the three chairs. "He told you. There."

Avi stared at the alien, no taller than O'Meath. Was it ordering her, or threatening? She glanced at Urwah, saw his slight smile. "He's got the scent all right. If we can catch them, we go."

"We cannot catch them," Avi replied. "And they are Fleet ships. Fleet personnel. Our duty...." She trailed off.

Urwah shook his head. His voice sounded strained. "If they were Fleet ships, they'd still be hanging somewhere between Jan-nah and Nánmén'èr. No air, no one on board. They're out here. Someone's running them."

"There's no chance we can survive an all-out attack against

Demand the Debt That's Owing

that many ships. There is a time for tactical retreat. *Convince* him, Lieutenant.” Something in O’Meath’s willingness to fight against the odds had stirred Urwah.

Urwah straightened up, saluted. “Aye, Commander.” His tone was not disrespectful, but she heard disagreement. He turned, ducked through the rear hatch, and scrambled down the gangway.

Avi continued to work standing at the large console. She keyed rapidly, setting up the equations and analyses that would prove her theory.

The sensor alert beeped. “New readings,” *Granuaile* announced. Avi glanced at the display, keyed for further data. “Grav ripple.” She looked closed, keyed in for analysis, but she thought she already knew.

Granuaile’s calculations confirmed her speculation. *Mundi Astrum* had already left the system. Electromagnetic waves, including last communications, would catch up with the gravitic ripple only at the speed of light. “O’Meath, *Mundi Astrum* has just left the system.”

“Damn,” the Jin Jun cursed. “Work out her likely route. I want to know where they’re going. And the rest of those damned ships. Find out where *they’re* going.”

“If she is bound for Earth, *Mundi Astrum* is most likely going to Lacaille 9352,” Avi responded. “I will confirm.” She dug into the calculations.

“That’s the ship to follow.”

October 9, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Urwah)

Urk ducked into the engineer compartment. “O’Meath, if Avi says we don’t have a shot, she knows what she’s talking about.” He lacked real passion.

Murphy looked up from the console. “My ship, my –”

Avi’s voice came through comm ship wide. “O’Meath, *Mundi Astrum* has just left the system.”

“Damn,” the Jin Jun cursed. “Work out their likely jump, if you can. I want to know where they’re going.” He keyed something into the console.

“*Mundi Astrum* is going to Lacaille 9352, I suspect. I will confirm.”

“That’s the ship to follow.”

He keyed again. “And the rest of those damned ships. Find out where *they’re* going, too.” The power re-start continued, but O’Meath called a sensor display front and center. The Jin Jun looked back to Urk. “What the hell are you doing down here, anyway?”

Urk walked over. “She says you’re being an idiot. She’s right, you know.”

“Neither of you are Jin Jun,” Murphy replied. “And I’d rather have taken a shot at that ship where I could see it. I should have tried it a day or two ago, while we were still taking pretty pictures and listening to comm signals.” His face got red. “God damn it, when did I get *cautious*?”

“No way we’d have gotten in close enough without getting a dozen ships on us. No way *at all*. This was ‘look and learn’ time. You knew that when we got here. They never saw us. They have nukes. Proved it out there, on two of their own damned hulks. They still don’t know we’re here, or Avi’d be letting us know. If we weren’t already vapor.”

O’Meath’s face set in a defiant mode. “Are you sure you’re with me here?”

Urwah felt his face heat up. As much as he wanted a fight over sitting around, the idiot was questioning the best pilot in Fleet, and his proper commander. “*No Jin Jun bullshit*. First time I laid eyes on you, you were play-acting the High Admiral. You gave a speech – some crap about ‘I’m in charge because I know what this stuff is about.’ You even believed it – hell, the Emperor’s aunt believed it. *She* was taking orders from you.”

“So what?”

“You are the most Goddam thick-headed pygmy I’ve ever dealt with, you know that?” Urk leaned forward. “Commander Avinashini took out *twenty-three* zhīzhū ships with a single

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Gandiva – a couple after her fighter was *slag*. Used their own speed against them. She was ready to shoot at one with her damned sidearm. How dense *are* you? She did all that, and *lived* to get the pretty medals.”

He found himself banging the console. “And she saved me” – bang – “and a hell of a lot of other grunts” – bang – “doing it. So if *she* tells you *she* can't make it happen, you put aside your Jin Jun bullshit and *listen*.” He banged the console again.

There was silence for a moment. Urk's hand ached.

The affable O'Meath demeanor returned. “You'd better not break my ship.” He grinned. “OK. We'll pursue, if we can. Look for a good shot.”

“Good.”

“What about trying to get a data dump from the rest of them? You have a problem with that?” Murphy was already keying commands.

Urk keyed his handheld. “Avi, O'Meath wants to use his codes to get information. You have a problem with that?”

Murphy tapped the final key before the pilot replied. “It will be too late if we don't try soon,” she agreed.

“Glad she agrees. I'm still Lead here.”

Urk brought his face close to O'Meath's. “I mean it. She's the best pilot around.” He leaned into O'Meath. “She knows space tactics, better than you. Better than almost anyone else. You make her work *for* you. Prophet knows why I'm still with you on this. *I want to get out of it with my hide*.”

“I got it already.” He keyed at the sensor controls. “By the way, you and Avinashini never asked to stow your EVA suits.”

The sudden switch surprised him. O'Meath was already thinking about something else. “Mine's on the spare rack in my cabin. Can't fold the bed up for space, but it's not like I brought my dress uniform along.”

The Jin Jun finished keying. “We have a few minutes. Let's go below to the forward lock.” He came around from behind the console and led the way out of the engineering compartment, to the deck hatch leading below. The pygmy opened the hatch, scrambled down the ladder with monkey-fluid movements.

Urk followed, then walked forward to the main lock. There were large compartments to either side, one marked “EVA,” and the other marked “Gear.” He’d seen them before, going through the ship in the weeks of travel. They had not opened to him before.

O’Meath went to the door of the EVA locker and keyed in his code. The door unlocked. He slid it open, stepped aside to give a better view..

Urk felt his eyes widen. The suits racked in the EVA locker weren’t what he would have expected. “Marine battlesuits for EVA? I thought the Jin Jun out here are explorers.”

“Never know what you might find on the next rock out. Zhīzhū haven’t exactly sat us down for a beer. Plus, those suits are loaded with sensors and computers, not just guns. Good design for exploration. Off-the-shelf technology, so far as we’re concerned.”

“Superior off-the-shelf,” Urk agreed.

Murphy went on. “Every Jin Jun starts in the Guard. Most of us spend our lives just keeping the Emperor alive. We grab what works. These work.”

“Better with a marine in one.”

“I’ll put my money on me over the biggest damned grunt you care to name. Naked or in a suit. And I don’t like to lose a bet.”

“Me. Try to take *me* down. Hand-to-hand.”

“Even you.”

“Arrogant pygmy bastard.”

“Just the facts. Anyway, the other locker to port is stocked with all of the standards – lasers, gauss, plenty of power and clips. Grenade launchers. A few other things. Set yourself up. Choose your favorites.”

Urk pointed at a rather short battlesuit, apparently customized for O’Meath. “You’re fully checked out?”

“You were listening, good. Yes. Including grav-pack.”

Urk made no attempt to hide his smile. A memory of O’Meath fighting from atop his Cetian mount flitted through his mind. Training and guts on his flank was always a good thing, if they would be fighting together. This battle would probably be

Demand the Debt That's Owing

fought by ships lobbing ordnance, but there was always a hope for something more interesting.

Murphy would regret his bragging if he ever faced Urwah, but his go-to-hell style would be welcome if they had to use these suits. If things went ship-to-ship, neither of them would be useless. It was best to be prepared. "Thanks for showing me this."

"I'll add your access to both lockers," Murphy said. "Never know what's going to happen."

"Trust me with a gun?"

"You haven't tried to kill me with your bare hands, yet. And I don't think I have much choice anyway."

Urwah looked over the suits. "What about the Horn? Fahnisht?"

"He can probably wear a human suit. See if you can adjust it. He's never going to fit his horn into the helmet, though."

"The armor will help if we're boarded."

"If we're boarded, he'll fight, armor or not. Sort of like you, taking down a Horn on a horse."

Urk nodded. "Not exactly a horse. But I get the point."

"I'm going back up to con. See if I can make nice to Avinashini."

"You do that."

"And then we're going to get data into messengers. We need to get word to Zhaohui. Maybe she can muster up some help."

"Help. Help the damned zhīzhū." Urk felt his stomach begin to burn.

"Help ourselves, maybe," Murphy pointed out.

"You know I don't agree on that."

"Did you notice that not all of the Horns and Hornless died down there? Are you really sure that Manifest Destiny is going to wipe out enough of the zhīzhū quick enough to keep them from mass retaliation?" Murphy turned back toward the access to the main deck. "Be thinking about the zhīzhū getting revenge on Jannah while you decide on your equipment," he called back over his shoulder.

Damn the pygmy. Urk hadn't considered that before now. Even weakened zhīzhū could kill half the population if they got

Gregory P. Lee

through the Fleet pickets. He'd seen what zhīzhū did when they got past the defenses. Marines and civilians had died at the Groombridge rout, been mutilated and eaten. The thought of a weakened spider gave cold, damp comfort at best.

Chapter 9

October 9, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Avinashini)

O’Meath’s readings were clean and detailed. With *Granuaile*’s sensor suite, accuracy was to be expected. O’Meath knew how to sort and focus, though – additional training for system survey had its value.

The gravitic dent caused by the jump into hyperspace left hints of intended destination for the least skilled of navigators. A skilled navigator with a powerful computer and detailed observations could calculate the entire planned jump, start to finish, within a few hundred kilometers.

“Entry implies exit.” The first maxim of jump stuck with anyone qualified to bypass the speed of light. The gravitic helix propelling a vessel into hyperspace gave subtle suggestions of the likely “vector” of travel. If the hints were properly read and recorded, a good helm officer with a good computer could determine the likely target systems along the way. Nothing she had learned since her basic education, nor any jump she had actually run, had changed this rule.

A great navigator might divine the intended exit points with precision. Ramachandra was certainly that good. She knew, though, that her skills were not as developed as her fiancé’s.

Avi found the programs she needed for her own predictions, however rough they would be. She began connecting databases

of readings – the odd consolidated ship on one hand, its gravitic wake on the other.

In an hour, she had a good idea of the planned course. In another two, based on her estimates of fuel and cruising “velocity,” she could be precise to within two hundred thousand kilometers and two hours of exit. A review of the system data itself narrowed her estimate further. *Astrum Mundi* would need fuel. It could make a fuel dive, or meet a tanker. Either way, it would head for a body with plenty of hydrogen. Only one planet would fulfill that need.

She could effectively pursue. *Granuaile* could travel faster, allowing more flexibility. Avi became almost entranced by the beauty of the calculations, working without noting the passage of time.

October 10, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Fahnisht)

Fahnisht balanced his knife in his left hand. It had been taken from Irthasht long ago, who had taken it from his own prior Clanlord. The weapon had been cared for properly, and used many times in the giving and taking of debt. The blade had tasted Kameef’s blood more than once for the betterment of the Clan.

The Clan was all but gone. He had left the few warriors and firekeepers behind. He had thought he might somehow influence the counsels of Kameef’s other people, somehow collect the blood-debt owed Horn and Hornless alike.

Fool. He was trapped in the steel now. Days and weeks had passed with little to do but watch and wait. He was useless here.

Still, something was changing. Kameef had declared action, a plan. Fahnisht was glad; his own strength had been returning. Something in the meals Kameef conjured from the steel innards had returned to him the vigor lost to the sickness these other humans had set upon him. If battle called, he would meet it as he knew how, and as Kameef thought wise to teach.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Fahnisht tried to activate the device that made images, but failed somehow in the sequence. He could exercise without them, without some fraudulent combat. Indeed, without the risk of blood, there seemed no reason to fight, even if it helped him feel stronger.

There was a real fight coming. He saw it in Kameef's face, his movements. The hornless albino looked as he had before proper battles in the Clan's circles. The pale blue eyes had become sharp, certain. His soft mouth had become more stiff, as it had when saddling his mount or attacking trespassers.

Battle would not be in mere talk, as Fahnisht had expected when he begged Kameef to let him come.

Fahnisht growled out a few words. This time, the fraudulent battle images formed in the air beside him. They were all humans, all dressed like Kameef and the others. Fahnisht half-crouched in a fighting stance and snarled.

Kameef came into the room. Fahnisht growled again. The images froze. He gestured at the knife, spoke in the proper language of the circles. *"There will be battle."*

Kameef gave the head-nod of human "yes." He spoke easily in the language of the plains, not needing the translating device that annoyed and buzzed in the ears. *"I plan so, milord."*

"We go together, Kameef. I will fight with you."

"It will not be with knives and swords. Our enemies fight at a distance. There is no honor in them."

"You will fight as they do?"

"I will not have a choice." Kameef moved the shoulders to indicate helplessness. *"I will have to find my honor in doing what must be done."*

There was a question in Kameef's words, perhaps. He was not telling a mere truth. Kameef was asking Fahnisht a question. *"We are not on the plains, Kameef. You are not wholly of the plains."* He disliked that truth, but could not change it now. *"You fight for my people, yours, and these others. You will do what must be done. The Clan expects no less."*

Kameef signed assent in the Horn way. He sank to one knee, as he should. *"My Clanlord, I ask that you take my oath in*

blood.”

Fahnisht shifted the knife to the proper hold. Kameef angled his cheek toward the blade. He prepared to inflict the slight crease that would ooze only. Blood must pass for the oath to be valid. Hesitation took hold, stayed his hand. Kameef sought the blade’s honor for fighting that could not honor the blade. *“I cannot feed the blade such blood, Kameef.”*

His Tentlord nodded, stood. His eyes spoke his sorrow. *“You have my oath regardless, milord.”*

“I have no doubt of you, Kameef, or your oath. I cannot ask the blade to witness for the Clan and its long history. We shall do what we must.”

Kameef accepted. “We do what we must.” He shifted to his own language. “I will be sending a kind of rider with messages of all we know. It can go faster than we can, a little, and warn others. I would like you to speak as well. The zhīzhū need to know that this is more than one species helping them.”

“I do not speak for all Horn and Hornless. I am one Clan only.”

“Speak only for yourself.”

Fahnisht gestured assent.

October 10, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Murphy)

O’Meath looked into the lens. The display beside it prepared to transcribe. He keyed it on.

“I am Sir Cuchulain Padraic O’Meath. ‘Murphy’ to my friends. I hope you folks will end up friends.

“I’m one of the Emperor’s Jin Jun, if that means anything to you. I’m not a Fleet officer, and not a high government official. I have some influence in the Imperial family – probably not enough. And a lot of humans will do the opposite of what I suggest. No point in lying to you just now.

“I hope that your translation matrices work better than ours, and that you understand these things I’m saying. I’m breaking

plenty of rules to send this to you. Even rules of the Jin Jun, and we've tried to talk with you before." He paused. "And, maybe like idiots, we put a ship on a comet to collect information. Spy on you, I suppose you thought. Not what we intended. We wanted to know you. Still do.

"I'm sending this as text and voice. Data files are appended. Study them, study them hard. But do it fast. If you get this at all, you don't have a lot of time. Even the Jin Jun might try and stop this, though I'm telling them not to be fools. But I need to warn them, too, so I have to send the damned thing through Sol system. If you're hanging out in our Oort zone and hear this, pay attention.

"So here it is. You're going to be attacked by a human ship, probably at one of your outlying colonies. It might try for Alula Australis. Anyway, I'm not sure where just yet. You need to set up defense perimeters. The ship will be an older type, two put together, but it will be coming in fast and hard. It may even be a suicide mission, kamikaze. You know that concept. Your smallest spheres hammer into our ships at full thrust, and we've pulled out dead pilots.

"The files that follow will give you everything I know about the attack. Not enough. And everything I know about the ships. I'm even including old override codes for its computers. They've probably been changed, but they might give you a way into the computers.

"Here's what I need you to know and believe: this attack is *not* from Yi Tan's Empire. It's not from our government, our 'Mother Nest.' It's from humans who want no peace, no way to work together. They want all of the blue-and-green planets, no matter who was there first. They don't care how they get it all. They think you want the same thing, and they may be right. I think that something behind those big eyes of yours is rational, maybe just a bit.

"The ship is going to launch an attack that will kill with disease. Biological warfare. I suspect that you won't understand that, because you eat anything you kill. You probably wouldn't infect something you planned to take a bite out of.

“They’ve already tried to kill another whole species this way. Another planet’s intelligent beings. More like us than you, so maybe you won’t care so much. But you need to know that these other humans are serious. They really want you dead.

“You need to block the attack. If we can’t. We’ll be trying to get them long before they cross into your space. I won’t let them do this if I can stop them.

“I’ll be pursuing them. I might be joined by some other ships, too. But hear this: any ship that is with me will have transponders up and running. That’ll give you enough to lock weapons quick and easy. They’ll be repeating this message if they decide I’m not an idiot. They’ll be running sensors on full active. Crazy like me, making easy targets. You’ll have more than enough time to blow us all straight to hell.

“What I’m doing – this is a different kind of ‘kamikaze.’ A kind of human behavior I doubt you’re wired to understand. We’ll be looking only for other human ships. We won’t be hiding, and won’t be running a target-lock on your ships. You’ll be able to take us out. That’s the only good faith we can offer you.

“I hope you get this. I’m doing something you’ll think is foolish. You won’t understand that not all humans favor genocide, because you’d probably have us all for dinner to the last bone if you could. I guess we’re tasty and nutritious. I don’t think you see anything more than that. That makes me a Goddam fool for trying to save you.

“So I’m a fool. Whatever else you do, *stop any ship* configured like the ships described in the file. Don’t fail. Failure means your race is dead, and we never try to talk it out. So succeed, and we can finally talk it out after.

“If you don’t, it could end the zhīzhū. That’s the goal. That’s what those ships want. That’s what I’m trying to stop.”

Murphy ended the recording, stepped aside. He suspected that he’d repeated himself enough times.

Murphy looked at Fahnisht. “*You must speak now,*” he said in Horn.

Fahnisht signed understanding. He looked at the device. “I – Fahnisht. Human language – hard. Humans – some bad. Some

Demand the Debt That's Owing

bad. Not every. Not Kameef, just talked. Not Avih-nash-een, maybe not Oorh-whaah. Trust, believe Kameef most. Kameef is also Horn, like me – I make so.”

He paused, then spoke in the Clan dialect. *“Kameef believes that you have ways to help you understand his words, as he has machines for my words, so perhaps you can also understand my words. Or Kameef will help.*

“He tells me that you have minds divided in many parts. He does not know if you know words like ‘trust.’ He does not know if you can believe that different bodies do not matter. Kameef has no horn, like me – ” he touched his own banded ivory – *“but the different body does not make Kameef wrong.*

“I know Kameef’s soul – it is brave. He has traded blood for blood with me. He has fought for us. He vows that his people owe mine much, much blood. He vows this. He vows to pay the debt. He will owe the debt himself if the rest of human people refuse. He vows this.

“He does not wish to owe your people blood. He will give his own blood to you if he must.

“I know Kameef – he will pay this blood he does not owe. He risks his own blood because he is a Tentlord above Tentlords. He will fight his own kind until they join in his blood-oath. He will demand their honor. He is such a warrior. He will bleed his own red into the wild wheat, feed the wheat, when another should bleed. He will do this even if he fights at a distance, and so I cannot grant him the Pyre of a warrior when he dies. He is a Tentlord above Tentlords.

“You must believe that he will repay any blood you bleed. He has sworn blood feud against the humans who will attack you. Kameef has sworn blood feud for what remains of Clan Fahnisht, and all of my people, against Oo-mahn-eetas. He swears to buy back blood of all the Clans, enemies and friends, and of all the Townfolk.

“Kameef is my Clan blood. His blood-feud has been made mine.” Fahnisht touched the knotty scar on his chin that showed his often-repeated oaths. *“If you join blood feud against Oo-mahn-eetas we all blood feud together. His dishonor ...”* The

Clanlord stopped for a moment, trembling with emotion. *"His dishonor is also mine, and my Clan's."*

Fahnisht pulled out the old knife which had passed from Clanlord to Clanlord. To Fahnisht, Murphy knew, it stood for all of the Clanlords in the long line of what was now referred to as "Clan Fahnisht." The great Bards could invoke prior names back at least a hundred generations.

Fahnisht sliced gently into the ribbon of scar. *"You have our blood oath."* He signaled. Murphy knelt, overwhelmed with Fahnisht's sudden decision. He felt the well-honed edge crease his cheek. The tears he fought to hide had nothing to do with the minor irritation of the cut.

"Kameef is such a Tentlord. I should be his liege – not he mine. Trust Kameef."

Buddha's damnable balls. No one should put his soul at risk for him. Murphy restrained his emotion. Still kneeling, he busied himself with his handheld, tapping at icons as quickly as he could. The Standard-Horn language matrix would be essential to the zhīzhū. He ran Fahnisht's statement through the matrix and created a text file in Standard. Linking the files for final upload, he keyed. The torpedo was ready.

"Avinashini, check the math on the messengers. Prepare to fire them off." He sat, tired. He should just give her the full command codes so that she could actually fire off the messenger. She wasn't a typical Fleet officer, half-brainwashed by the Manifesters and Humanitas.

Or was he just fooled by long legs and a perfectly firm posterior? Zhaohui would say as much.

Murphy pulled himself up with a handhold, went to the gangway, up to the con. Avinashini occupied the forward helm, the console and displays set for her convenience. He took in the displays, saw that the messengers were ready to go. He plopped down in the second seat, called up the displays for himself in his own preferred screens. The course layouts looked right.

Both would go through Sol, copying the messages, sending what he knew. Buoys would record and retransmit based on the override codes. However, they would take different routes to

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Sol, and away from Sol. Two would go through Luyten 726-8 A, despite Fleet's heavy presence in the system. Duplication would give one at least chance of completing its fuel dive and getting out before interception. One or both would reach Sol quickly, perhaps giving days of extra warning.

The third would go the longer route through Lacaille 9352. The minimal forces there were far less likely to successfully attack on a messenger.

All three would of necessity go on to Wolf 359. None would transmit there, per Avinashini's decree. If any Fleet base lived with fear and hate, it was at Wolf. Before the zhīzhū, Fleet had been small, of little consequence. The zhīzhū had made Fleet what it was – necessary, and full of those who thought that the zhīzhū should be eliminated. Jannah had been the border until the bloody human annexation of Ross 128.

Transmission of this message at Wolf would virtually guarantee that none got through. At least one messenger had to move on to zhīzhū space. One had to transmit enough in the hope that the spiders would bother to listen.

Murphy called up the recording program one more time. "Private message, Sir Cuchulain O'Meath to Lady Zhaohui. Yes, I'm a damned fool, usurping, paying no attention to rules, regulations, chains of authority, or goddam common sense, and you'll be pulling hair out and dealing with screaming idiots in government.

"I've seen enough. Humanitas isn't just religion with a little politics. There's no doubt now. This is open rebellion. Humanitas is a cover for Manifest Destiny, pure and simple. And Fleet's up to its neck in this. No way Humanitas got those ships without help.

"Get your nephew out, Goddam fast, and get him *safe*, if you haven't already. He's a target. Don't trust Fleet. Only Jin Jun. Put all the ships you have on it. And if Fleet doesn't manage to kill him, the zhīzhū might. Unless this damned genocide works perfectly, the survivors will be after us. I'm willing to bet they know about revenge.

"But *pay attention* to what I'm trying to do – we're going to

be in a huge mess with the zhīzhū. Humanitas has it figured, I think – if genocide works, they have some beautiful real estate. If not, they figure the Empire will be busy with pissed-off zhīzhū. Maybe they figure on a power play – ‘You need us all now, including Humanitas, so toe the line our way.’

“It’s Goddam *coup*, Zhaohui. Revolution. Get ready for the worst. We’re going to be stretched thin.

“Forward these messages to the zhīzhū. Messengers are already going there, but it’s a lot of damned long jumps for drones. And I have no idea if any of them’ll make it, or be intercepted by those Humanitas bastards. Bastards in Fleet. So help out, fire off a few more messengers and *let the damned zhīzhū know*.

“I don’t care *what* these damned zhīzhū are – no more genocide. *No damned bloody more*.”

Murphy caught his breath, forced a lighter tone. “I’ll wave hello on the way by.”

October 10, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Urwah)

“He’s giving them everything.” Urk slumped into the right-hand station. “He doesn’t have to.”

Avi worked at her boards. “He is in command,” she replied tersely.

“We’re not exactly crew.” Urwah leaned forward. “I didn’t sign on for this.”

She fixed him with a cold stare. “We’re here,” she said. “And yes, you did volunteer. You volunteered *both* of us. You told me to trust him, and you were with me when he pulled away from *Harris*.”

Urwah put his face into his hands. “Prophet.” He sat that way for several minutes, thinking.

She was right. Urwah had put them onto this ship. Murphy had done the kidnapping, but Urwah could have kept them on *Harris* under some excuse.

Was the pygmy right, in some way, to insist that genocide was

Demand the Debt That's Owing

a bad solution? How many times had Murphy seen zhīzhū gorge on friends and comrades? Did he have any forbears from Jan-nah? Had he seen zhīzhū in the domes and corridors of his home? Did Murphy really understand the zhīzhū mentality and drive?

The damned pygmy had spent too much time on Shānhé-Wòtū. The only non-humans he really knew were warm-blooded, bipedal and more-or-less mammals. They weren't ugly eggplant-purple spiders that sucked flesh and brains into their asses in the middle of combat.

He reminded himself that Yi Tan was also a likely target. That damned preacher had as much as said so. Urwah brought his head back up. "I'm in this as far as Sol. After that – I can't be sure, after that."

The lieutenant commander seemed to relax. "The lifeboats are always ready. If you feel you must go."

"Same for you." Urwah looked closely at her, tried to read her damnably stoic face.

She looked away.

October 10, 2395 (Present Day) – G 158-27 (Murphy)

The deck plates thrummed their strained bass harmonic. The displays graphed up through the green, edging toward warning orange. Murphy ran his fingers along the panel, tweaking the gravitic compression, slightly decreasing the hydrogen injection.

Granuaile was made to push these limits, but he'd never tried it without a full support crew. Bots were help, not crew. Murphy scanned the diagnostic logs. He had the power, if he could keep it stable. *Granuaile* could push hard, cover almost a light-year per day.

If, as the sole half-qualified engineer on board, he could keep plasma flowing and fusing, for ten days.

If the gravitic bubble maintained its shape and smoothness.

If the internal protective fields that kept quantum effects out

of living human cells withstood the pounding.

He set doubt aside, locked down the settings, and keyed comm. “Take it, Avi.” Murphy hummed to himself; the words stayed in his memory. “*Fair thee well to you, my own true love...*” The lip into hyperspace was going to be higher and bumpier than he’d ever felt before.

Avinashini began the final ten-count, reached zero. Dizzy nausea twisted Murphy’s innards as the ship bounced over the threshold, into not-space. Floating or falling blind, not sure, a tap on the face or a roundhouse punch, cold console or hot wood-stove. Synapses never really worked out what senses reported.

And then he was on his knees, dizziness past, white knuckles showing his desperate grip on the console. A trickle of blood ran down his cheek. A grav-flux must have pulled him down to bang the console.

Or his knees had just folded up under him.

Murphy straightened up, scanned the diagnostics. All lights were green for now. “Good piloting, Avinashini.” He pushed himself back to full standing. “Grunon, Famish – roll call.”

As they reported in, he wiped the blood from his face with a sleeve.

October 10, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route G 158-27 to Lacaille 9352) (Murphy)

“Hammocks – best invention for ships ever.” Urk looked around the cramped engineering space. “If you really plan to stay down here, might as well sleep better.”

Murphy keyed a change in the injection sequence. “I’d sleep in my bunk if you and Fahnisht would hurry up and learn the system. I don’t have much other choice. A blown board can end us.”

“Grunts get taught important shipside skills like polishing and sweeping, you know that.”

“I’ll write you a cheat-sheet.”

Demand the Debt That's Owing

“Write fast.” Urwah looked at the supports holding the catwalk. “Attachment points there,” he said, half-pointing with his free hand.

Murphy agreed. “Designed for watch-on-watch. Never thought they’d get used. I always thought I’d get her out with a full survey crew.”

“Jin Jun brats only, of course.” Urwah began hanging the hammock.

“Maybe one Marine to swab the decks.”

Urwah scowled, finished his work. “Sleep well.”

October 14, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route G 158-27 to Lacaille 9352) (Urwah)

Training was suddenly necessary, not just mere exercise. With O’Meath now busier than before, the Horn and he had begun to spar together. The blades were real and sharp.

Urwah slashed at the Horn. Fahnisht stepped back, parrying. Urk pressed the attack. Shānhé-Wòtǔ, Horns, O’Meath – what had they really done for him?

They’d put him here, in an impossible position. Live up to his oaths. Save the damned zhīzhū from an end they deserved.

Urwah swung hard, used height and weight to his advantage. He pressed the Horn back against the forward bulkhead.

Somehow, the Horn slipped aside, swung his blade. Urk felt the jarring vibrations through his own blade, all the way up to his elbow. Small but fast, the Horn changed the course of the battle, slipping in under the marine’s guard.

A line of hot pain slid across Urk’s left thigh. He felt the shipsuit open, felt and saw the blood. In anger, pain, fear, he raised his own sword back, swung it with all his strength.

Fahnisht had backed away, seemed prepared to sheath his sword. He raised it again just in time to parry. The tip of Urk’s own steel nicked the compact alien’s forehead near the base of the horn.

Fahnisht jabbered in his own language; *Granuaile's* comm seamlessly translated through his earpiece. "First blood is mine," the little Horn was saying. The system even managed to hint at anger over the impropriety of such tactics.

Urk raised the sword, stopped. He fought the impulse to finish this beyond "first blood." Fahnisht wasn't his problem, no more than he was Humanitas' problem.

"You are magnificent," Fahnisht went on. "I would be honored to foster you to Clan Fahnisht."

Urk tossed his sword to the side, unable to trust himself with it in his hands. "Maybe we should 'foster' you to the marines," He touched the blood seeping from his wound. "I'd better get that to the med bay," he said. He left the common area quickly, while the rage was still in abeyance.

October 14, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route G 158-27 to Lacaille 9352) (Murphy)

An alarm beeped at the console. Murphy pulled himself out of the hammock, checked the boards.

Pressure was high. He increased the venting of plasma into the surrounding hyperspace. Why the hell hadn't the automatics handled that without him?

He didn't have a full engineering crew. He finished the adjustment and went back to his hammock. He was getting slow.

October 14, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route G 158-27 to Lacaille 9352) (Urwah)

Urwah held the gauss rifle out to Fahnisht. Fahnisht refused, spoke. The translation ticked through his ear nerves. "I will fight with my sword."

"If anyone boards, they'll have guns. They'll be here to finish

Demand the Debt That's Owing

us. No prisoners, no honor. Your sword – no good.”

Fahnisht made a gesture. Urwah suspected that it was a sign of disgust. He remembered his few days rounding up the Humanitas settlers. Horn warriors fought up close, seeing each other, killing by rules valuing methods over result. A warrior killed another warrior only in personal combat. Only Townfolk and other cowards killed at a distance.

“You’re no good to us if you die honorably,” Urwah emphasized. “I lived by your rules a long time ago, remember? You need to fight by my rules out here. If you intend to collect that blood debt, you collect it with these.”

Fahnisht touched the weapon reluctantly, then took it. “It is wrong. Blood is personal.”

“This thing doesn’t change that. All it does is help you make sure that you collect more blood, that’s all.”

“I will fight your way, Oorh-whaah, but I need not like it.”

“So long as you do it.” Urwah showed Fahnisht how to hold the weapon, moving the non-human fingers himself. “This finger brings up the laser pointer,” he said. “The other one presses the trigger button.” He helped the Cetian feel each button with the proper finger. The practice magazine was empty; only the quiet hum of the electromagnets spoke.

Urwah keyed up the simulator program, ran it to the forward display. *Granuaile*’s computer interlocked with the practice magazine’s internal computer. A simple target appeared in the display.

“Paint the target with the red dot,” Urwah explained. The simulated red dot appeared on the edge of the target. Urwah guided the exit end of the weapon to the right, putting the dot into the red circle. “When the red dot is on who you want to hit, or what you want to hit, you pull at the trigger button.” He nudged the Cetian’s index finger. The magnets pulsed again. Dots appeared in the display, simulating the hits.

Fahnisht took control of his own practice. “It will kill more surely if I seek a person’s head or heart.”

“They’ll be well armored on the chest and head,” Urwah explained. He called up an image of a man in a battlesuit. “You

need to look for seams. Joints are easier to hit. The visor isn't all that weak – special material. Clear but strong. The seam at the neck is weak, too. Takes a clean shot to break it, though.” He keyed the simulation to begin.

Fahnisht began his practice, distaste evident in the otherwise alien eyes. Urwah began to understand why O'Meath liked the Horns better than most humans.

October 15, 2395 (Present Day) Hyperspace (En route G 158-27 to Lacaille 9352) (Murphy)

Another alarm beeped. Was this the fourth or fifth in the last few hours? Murphy checked the console. The plasma flow was off. He tried adjusting it from the console, could not. He cursed, sent one of the bots over to the pump housing, then went to the locker to grab the special tool set.

Manually adjusting and re-balancing plasma flow in hyperspace wasn't on the list of recommended procedures. Dropping out and recalibrating was by far safer.

Murphy approached the pump, whistling. When the hell had he ever followed a rule, anyway? He plugged in the unit, began his adjustments, finicking. The bot scuttled around the pump's main gravitic generator, making adjustments.

Balance returned to the flow. Murphy brought the equipment back to the locker, then crawled back into the hammock. He needed good sleep.

Comm beeped. “You're whistling that tune again.”

Murphy shifted to get more comfortable. “What are you talking about, Avinashini?”

“Every time there's another problem and you fix it, you whistle a tune.”

“Oh. Never thought about it before. It's an old, old sailor's song. Irish, sort of. ‘Leaving Liverpool.’ I'd love to talk music, but I want to grab an hour before the next problem.”

“That tune is good. It means you have things under control.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

A happy song.”

“Not if you knew the words.”

“I will let it remain optimistic. Get your rest.”

“You, too.”

For the Fleet-trained pilot, she was positively effusive. If he had the time and energy between adjustments, he might well have looked to see how much more friendly she could get.

October 17, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route G 158-27 to Lacaille 9352) (Fahnisht)

Fahnisht ducked in through the hatch, carrying a microwaved meal. He set the meal on the tray Kameef had rigged at the confusion lights and switches, what Kameef called the “console.” As with so many of the machines and surfaces, there was no translation to the Clan dialect.

Kameef looked as worn as a warrior fighting a week of battles. “Thank you, milord,” he managed in Horn. “You do me honor.” He took up the fork and began eating absently, mechanically, while he studied something on the console.

Fahnisht gave the equivalent of a head-shake. This was not the warrior Kameef he knew. How could he choose such over the open fields and winds?

Chapter 10

October 17, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route G 158-27 to Lacaille 9352) (Urwah)

Urk had pored over O'Meath's notes for two hours, memorizing control sequences and alerts, locations of replacement boards and units, the right way to diagnose certain similar problems. The arrogant pygmy seemed to think that this was easy material.

Urwah was mentally tired, physically rested. He needed something to do with himself.

Grunts on shipboard were trained in all of the odious tasks. O'Meath hadn't needed to pay close attention to those on his own. One body wasn't much burden to a ship designed to carry eight. Nano-based scrubbers and filters could handle those sorts of things on their own.

The air was a good mix, but he'd begun to notice a hint of something less pleasant. He couldn't remember O'Meath getting at any of the reclamation systems since they'd left tau Ceti. It was time to be a nosy houseguest.

Urk keyed comm. "Commodore, I'm going to muck out the algae tanks, if you'll let me. Something's off in them."

"Good enough," O'Meath responded. "Show Fahnisht, while you're at it. He may as well carry some of the load."

"I 'll do that. I'm not sure he's enjoying this ride."

Demand the Debt That's Owing

“No, it's not a hell of a lot like sleeping under the stars all night.”

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Murphy)

Granuaile slid neatly into normal space. The exit was nothing compared to the entry.

Murphy needlessly keyed the change-over routine. No quantum bubbles had glitched any systems. The main computer and the engineering computers had already chatted and ordered the hyperdrive to cycle down. Power was diverted to sensors, weapons, and maneuvering. “Con, you have it all.” He locked down the controls.

He confirmed greens across the board, turned, and went forward to the hatch. The fun would be in the con. He could get back down here quickly enough if anything went wrong. The bots would handle the minor adjustments.

He scrambled up the ladder and into the con. Avinashini was intent over the main console, fingers flying. Displays changed from second to second, going from simple diagrams and visualizations to rows and columns of numbers. Her head barely moved. She was no less controlled than her black hair, tied tightly back in a bun.

Murphy slid into the second seat and began calling up his own displays. The engineering monitors come up on his left, nav to his right, sensors and gunnery dead center. “I’ll take the guns,” he volunteered, keying in the command.

“I have them, O’Meath,” she said, not a single hair moving. “*Granuaile* can handle enough like a Gandiva. I have spent ten days in simulations.”

“I don’t want to miss a shot because you’re distracted,” he responded. “Division of labor.”

“You’re distracting me,” she shot back. Her voice did not increase in volume, but the intensity was palpable. She looked

sidelong at him, eyes ready to cut. “A Gandiva carries one active pilot, and is far better armed than *Granuaile*. It does not have the computer power, though.

“You impressed me into your crew. Use me well. Fleet specialty training has uses.” Her head pivoted back to the main display, hair momentarily swaying.

“*Granuaile*’s a Jin Jun command,” Murphy retorted. “I decide —”

He choked the remainder back. Jin Jun custom clearly supported her claim. The best took the seat. Why in hell was he getting into a pissing war?

He turned control back to Avinashini. “I’ll monitor only. Let me know if I can help.”

Avinashini gave no response, focusing on her displays.

Murphy called up the passive sensors. At this range, virtually on top of *Astrum*, its maneuver drive’s light by-product should easily register.

Nothing.

He switched over to fusion-plant emissions. Instruments designed to take stellar measurements from far orbit should pinpoint the target.

Avi spoke. “Sensor diagnostic.”

He saw why. “On it.” Murphy keyed quickly, watching the display scroll through. “Sensors are fine, Lovely.”

Avinashini muttered something under her breath in Kannada. He was going to have to pick up that language once he had some grasp of zhīzhū. “I didn’t catch that,” Murphy noted.

The annoyance in her voice was evident: “‘Unwashed Hea-then’ is close enough. Stay on point.” She ran her fingers over the console. “I’m transferring power to the drives.” She keyed the alert. “All hands, stay put.”

Artificial gravity disappeared. The jelly field diminished. Murphy felt *Granuaile* push to higher acceleration. Nothing spilled or moved; Avinashini maintained a tidy con. He did not do as well, left on his own.

Murphy called up the engineering boards, checking all systems. The automation was functioning perfectly. Bots moved

Demand the Debt That's Owing

about handling basic tasks. He switched to nav, let himself be duly impressed by Commander Avinashini's piloting. No Jin Jun he knew could have matched the efficient vector changes she had plotted in so little time. *Granuaile* herself would have wasted fuel and time on the intercept.

How had she missed matching the exit? Jump nav was more complicated than in-system Newtonian, but she had taken far more time and care with the latter calculations than he would have. He had to admit that she was good at what she did. *Granuaile* should be just about sniffing the larger ship's exhaust.

He noted the other ship's acceleration and vector, compared it to the models and predictions Avinashini had run before the hyperspace entry. He had checked the numbers himself. The differences between prediction and reality were simply too great. "That bastard's way too fast. How did she do it?"

"We're closing!" Avinashini answered tersely. "We'll get our missiles to the target."

"She's already going for her fuel-dive. Damned dangerous speed and angle. Maybe we'll get lucky and she'll burn up."

"I do not believe so." She glanced backward. "I need to focus. We will be making our own fuel-dive in her wake. In one hour, seventeen minutes, I will be making demands on the power systems. You should plan to be below and prepared."

"Aye, sir." Murphy gave a genial salute.

Avi seemed disinterested in humor, focusing on her boards.

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Ramachandra)

The sweep summaries were clear. The ship that had jumped in behind was *Granuaile*. The lack of transponder identification could not disguise the lines and power signatures of a Lady-class vessel. O'Meath had been out here in the Reach. Somehow, he'd found his way to the temporary base.

The Cause had underestimated O'Meath. Somehow, he was

there, and in pursuit. There was no time to waste on calculations, but it had to be assumed that *Granuaile* had been observing the Manifest Destiny fleet.

Fortunately, the squeeze-out acceleration had put *Mundi Astrum* at a much higher vector than any comparable human vessel, and with only two spare engineers dead. The Jin Jun would not become a serious threat. O'Meath was not an expert at the helm.

Ramachandra locked the console. There was nothing more for him to do until they reached the fringes of the atmosphere. Then he would become busy testing the framework holding two hulls together. It was a potentially destructive test, but he had no doubt that he and *Astrum* would pass.

The marine, Vele, came over. She touched him with too much lingering familiarity on the shoulder. He shrugged her hand away. "What?"

She raised her eyebrows, as if that was going to somehow affect how he viewed her attentions. "Captain wants you," she said through over-red lips.

He nodded, walked the aisle back toward the captain's station.

The Captain looked up as he approached. "The Chief Engineer is furious. She lost two engineers."

Ramachandra shrugged. "I expected to lose four. We have many extras on board. In any event, I am refining my calculations. The next squeeze-out could be less deadly."

The Captain paused, apparently agreed. She chose a different tack. "That damned Jin Jun is behind us," the Captain accused. "How did that happen?"

Ramachandra shrugged. "Obviously, he was observing us as we left. The Jin Jun are closer than we expected."

"Cuchulain O'Meath is arrogant. Zhaohui's Mistress thinks he can do anything. He'll try. What can he manage?"

"He has one of the best ships designed by humans. He will make use of it."

The captain gestured dismissively. "We're sure of what we know. He didn't plot that pursuit. Came on us by dumb luck."

"His vector is very close to our own," Ramachandra pointed

out. I doubt it is entirely a coincidence.”

The Captain leaned forward. “Who in *Fleet* could do it?”

“Quite a few,” Ramachandra replied. “I would not take worry, though. I am the only human who can perform a squeeze-out. Our work was kept from the Jin Jun. He will never be able to close on us coming out of a jump.”

The Captain looked appraisingly. “Could a zhīzhū do it?”

“Of course. I learned it from studying their exits. They have used the squeeze-out from the first time they were seen at Jannah. You lost a command at the Groombridge Rout to it, if I recall.”

The Captain glared. “That bastard would sell himself to the zhīzhū if he could. He talked to the other animals. He might have a spider helping him, for all we know.”

Ramachandra calculated momentarily. “I doubt that O’Meath has a zhīzhū on board.”

“Why?”

“Assume O’Meath is pursuing us. The zhīzhū *always* squeeze out. O’Meath did not do so. *Granuaile* would have been on top of us already if he had, and we would be evaporated. Be sure that O’Meath has fusion warheads on that ship.”

He watched the captain take his educated estimate in. “So. No zhīzhū helping the Jin Jun.”

“You listen too much to the propaganda. Humans, even the Jin Jun, will never work with the zhīzhū.” Ramachandra stood without asking for leave. “Now, I will rest before the refueling skim.” Ramachandra dismissed himself.

These idiots were assuming that his fiancée would never assist the Jin Jun. That she was loyal to her mother, and secretly loyal to the cause. They paid attention to their own voices and nothing else. If Avinashini was still aboard *Granuaile* – and she almost certainly was, based on what the crew of *Harris* had revealed – she was at helm.

He’d followed Aunt Sunitha’s direct order and sent higher mathematics to her. If she broke the added layers of encryption he’d used, she could possibly use the squeeze-out technique herself. Avinashini was not quite at his level, but she was certainly more proficient than most Fleet-trained helm officers.

Aunt Sunitha was right to want the genes mixed, reinforced, but marriage wasn't needed for that. Sunitha was soft, where Avinashini was concerned. Eggs should have been collected, perhaps. Or, if necessary, a woman could be kept in a cell while impregnated.

He might get a chance, if they could close and board. His betrothed was almost certainly on *Granuaile*. Helping O'Meath and the Jin Jun betray humanity, she was.

The little bitch.

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Avinashini)

Avi calculated a seventeenth possible maneuver, assuming more sheering resistance than the makeshift frame should possess. Such a refueling skim would be almost certain suicide. One of those old hulls alone would be stressed to near-compromise by such a dive. Two together were unimaginable.

She studied the math. A few Fleet-trained pilots could make it work, perhaps. Ramachandra, certainly. Even then, the ship's commander would be betting that no unusual upper wind patterns buffeted the structure holding two ships together.

She keyed back to the thirteenth projection. Its early gentler braking made sense. The crew would survive the refueling. Not even the most arrogant Fleet-trained pilot would take a greater risk.

It was the best middle-choice to plan from in any event.

The intercept calculations ran quickly. Avinashini checked them and locked them in. *Granuaile* would brake less, avoiding the refueling skim. A tight trajectory, created by both gravity and the main drives, would keep her above the outer fringes of atmosphere. She would put *Granuaile* in position to fire a missile as soon as the Humanitas vessel emerged from the hydrocarbon clouds.

Avi ran checks on the sensor suite. She would go active only

Demand the Debt That's Owing

if needed. The enemy power plant should betray it to the survey-quality instruments, allow her to track through the clouds.

She looked at the count running at a corner of the display. "Battle stations in thirty-six minutes. All crew in pressure suits. O'Meath, plan for maximum power to the maneuver drive and sensors. Lt. Grunon, please prepare for breach control."

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Murphy)

Who the hell did she think she was, barking out orders? Lead? Nonetheless, Murphy went to the locker and pulled out the engineering vacc-suit. Avinashini was probably right, after all, to expect return fire. Made sense to suit up, even if she was bossing him on his own ship.

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Urwah)

Urwah relaxed at the firm commands from the con. Lt. Commander Avinashini was firmly in her seat now. He felt safe with her at the helm.

"Come on." Urwah went to the vacc-suit rack beside the forward lock. His own battle suit was there, waiting as it should be.

He'd adjusted a human suit for Fahnisht, but the helmet had proven impossible. The gold-banded horn would keep the collar-ring from engaging. "You'll have to stay in a rescue-ball," he decided. "I'll get it ready after I'm in."

The Horn looked mildly confused as he listened to the translation through the earpiece taped to his non-human ear. If his kind was coming to space, adaptations would be required.

Urwah started to pull on his battle suit. Fahnisht slunk away, somehow conveying shame.

Or, perhaps, Urwah was just imagining how he would feel if made to sit by, helpless.

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Fahnisht)

Fahnisht ducked into the engineering section. Kameef was already in the suit that would allow him to work and breathe even if something robbed the stale air from this cramped place.

Kameef had tried to describe all of this to him over many hours riding the plains together. He wished those days were still on them. He had found some comfort speaking with Oorh-whaah, learning from him, but not enough.

The days riding in the Clan's circles were gone. His family, most of his Clan, most of the enemy clans, were dead. Kameef's kind, living in these cramped metal self-worlds, planned his people's murder.

His lip curled back, the beginning of a challenge-snarl. Kameef's kind – could any of them be trusted? Battle-rage built, boiled, ready to spill. Kameef – not a Horn, not – what was he? He'd known Kameef on the plains, not here in the closed spaces of *Granuaile*.

Fahnisht forced himself to turn, to duck back through the hatch. He came on Oorh-whaah, now dressed to survive the cold nothing Kameef once tried to describe. He spoke, and the ear-echoer sputtered its impoverished attempt at the plains tongue. "Come with me and ..."

The tall, dark human's words drifted off as Fahnisht ripped the sticky-cloth from his ear and the echoer with it. Urwah gaped as the tangled mess slapped against the metal wall, bouncing away with the force of the throw. Fahnisht allowed the human to hear the deep-throat growl, hoped he might understand and respond properly, even honorably.

The human stopped, stood ready, but did nothing more. Fahnisht growled louder, began sinking to a pre-leap crouch.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

And let the growl die away. Shame replaced fury. This one had once fought well bravely, against a mounted warrior. Kameef trusted this one. This one was here, now, whether or not he could be fully understood.

Fahnisht turned, hurried toward his own small compartment. Urwah called, but Fahnisht could not understand the words. He slid the door shut and latched it.

He needed a Fire to purify his soul.

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Ramachandra)

Artificial gravity and inertial fields obscured but could not entirely hide the buffeting of upper-atmosphere winds. Cyclones and sheering threatened to tear the combined vessels apart. Hydrocarbons funneled through the refueling scoops. Filters shunted the least useful back out, beginning the process that would yield deuterium, deuterium that would power the ships through their next jump.

Ramachandra's entire skill and attention was needed to hold the ships on a steady course. Creaks and groans told him as much as the numbers that streamed across his heads-up displays. The ships pulled and bucked against the thick orange clouds. Ramachandra kept the ships on course, at speed.

The chief engineer reported, two minutes early. "Tanks full." Ramachandra acknowledged. He adjusted thrust slightly without waiting for the nav computer's automatic calculations. The slightest adjustment of the few aerodynamic surfaces helped the vessel begin its journey back up through the murk of frigid hydrocarbons to the atmospheric sea's surface.

The two ships' extraction plants were already filtering and breaking down the chemicals. Nanotech moved and sorted molecules, pulled out carbon to use in life support, put water and nitrogen into the appropriate tanks. Fuel-grade deuterium atoms were segregated into smaller tanks as they were located. The

tanks would eventually provide a place to sink heat, and to help dissipate waste energy while the vessel sliced through hyperspace.

The sensor slut's voice came over comm. "Contact ahead. Feeding helm and secondary gunnery."

Ramachandra looked at the data as it came to his display. The data was not as certain as she suggested. It could be something other than a ship. Unlikely, but possible.

Either O'Meath or the entire class of vessel had been underestimated by Fleet. Typical short-sightedness. The Movement needed to stop relying on such faulty thinking. It was one thing to dupe the Admiral and those like her, another to trust such easily duped officers.

Those fools thought the gods blessed them. The gods simply sat behind their masks to snigger at those who saw divinity's support. The universe always ate its weak offspring.

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Avinashini)

Avi watched the displays for any hint of the Humanitas ship the breaking surface of the hydrocarbon sea. The helm controls were configured, firing controls ready. O'Meath and Urwah were doing the same at their own repeater consoles. She did not need the redundancy of the inexperienced, but did not begrudge it, either. A quick end was needed to this conflict so that she and Urwah could go back to what they should be.

She caught sight of a ripple return on the infrared scan, further away than she would like. At the same time, Urwah spoke over comm "Got her!" Avi's fingers played over the keys, focusing on the ripples, looking for confirmation.

The infrared increased. Other power generation signs became evident. Hints of massive, metal bulk came up in the numbers. The computer analysis of the ripples came through. It was consistent with her seventeenth projection. The Humanitas pilot

Demand the Debt That's Owing

was either very good, or suicidal.

Unsuccessfully suicidal. He and his ship were alive.

Avi increased braking, dropping into a lower orbit to range on the quarry. She might have one shot. She might not. *Three more systems*, she reminded herself. Few nukes, few chances. Now was not the time for gambling. She would fire only if the shot was sure.

She watched the signs closely, targeted the point at which the ship should emerge from the clouds.

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Murphy)

Murphy watched the sensor displays closely, letting the computer handle engineering for the moment. Avinashini was too damned conservative – Fleet logic and procedures drummed into her.

Damned good thing he retained all command codes.

She was refining the firing solution well, though. She had a damned good sense of what the enemy pilot was up to. Murphy ran the assumptions against the reality.

It would be a close shot, but he would make it. A kilometer-wide fireball right along the trajectory would be hard to avoid.

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Avinashini)

Avi watched closely as the decision-point approached. She poised her finger calmly over the firing button. This pilot was good, but heedless of the small ship's tracking capabilities.

She made last adjustments.

The waves changed, suddenly boiling up. The Humanitas ship cut through, trailing half-liquid streams that only slowly fell

back. It was not where she had expected. “No solution!” she reported by reflex. *Granuaile* made the same report. Simultaneously, she tried to get a new solution.

The enemy vessel cut its mains, spun on its axis, and loosed a missile barrage from rear defense barbs. Avi analyzed quickly, spun *Granuaile*, and booted quickly out of the barrage’s immediate path.

The ship had not made escape velocity. It was already arcing back toward the atmosphere-sea. Avi’s fingers sped over the keys. Two, then three times “No solution” flashed on the screen.

The enemy vessel’s maneuver drives cut back in with a flash of waste-light. The pilot was diving back in, using atmospheric resistance to slow the vessel. *Whale-flip*. This pilot was one of five or ten skilled enough to risk such a maneuver at all.

How many could manage it in *that* oddball ship? Without snapping the framework that held them together?

She avoided answering the question. The answer was more and more obvious.

Granuaile continued on, not having slowed enough to enter orbit.

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Ramachandra)

Ramachandra forced the combined ships into a sudden, steep climb. Metal popped and protested audibly. “Gunnery, find solutions on my mark.”

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Avinashini)

Avi keyed the gunnery programs once more: “Marginal solution.”

Demand the Debt That's Owing

She wasted no time accepting and locking the calculations, but kept her finger away from the firing key while she assessed.

The chances were worse than marginal. The closest detonation would probably hit as the enemy was already back into the clouds. The hull might spring leaks, but the energy would be dispersed too much for anything like a clean kill.

She exhaled, accepting the enemy pilot's brilliance. "No solution," she again reported.

"Screw that," O'Meath retorted. "Fire!"

Avi was shocked. Did he think she would squander irreplaceable ordnance because he barked? "I won't waste the missile."

"God damn it!"

Helm and weapons control shut down. Avi ran her fingers over the keys, trying to regain systems, but could not. O'Meath – *idiot* – had locked her out.

The con vibrated as the port rack discharged its fusion-tipped missile.

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Murphy)

"God damn it!" Murphy keyed in his override, pulled helm and gunnery to his console, pressed the firing button. *Damned regulation-owned Fleet officers. Granuaile's* marginal solution was just over-cautious. The nuke would detonate close enough to take the enemy out, by direct blast or electromagnetic pulse. If the pulse simply knocked out *Mundi Astrum's* systems, she would drop back into the atmosphere and break up. Didn't Fleet teach tactics?

He tracked the missile as it streaked toward its target.

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352
(Ramachandra)

The ship creaked, complained as the dual noses plowed through the last few kilometers of thick clouds. Ramachandra watched the meters carefully, assuring himself that the pressures never exceeded seventy-five percent of tolerance.

The forward visual screen cleared. Stars dotted the black curtain of deep space.

“Enemy ordnance launch!”

“Defensive fire,” the Captain ordered. “Evasive.”

Ramachandra danced the ship back and forth, changes that did not affect his overall course. He heard – not imagined, heard – the joined hulls and struts creak and moan as he pushed the engines to their limits. He felt fear edging up, a fear he did not like. His intellect agreed with the fear; a glance at the readouts showed that the ships were in danger of separating.

The far smaller missile was also far more maneuverable. It would reach them easily. He stopped the evasive maneuvering, let the missile close.

“Evasive!” the captain screamed. “Damn you!” Other voices on the bridge joined him, all discipline forgotten.

“Shut up.” No one obeyed his order.

Ramachandra’s fingers raced across the keys, scrambling orders down to the chief engineer. He calculated the vectors, waited for the missile to close, ignoring the hubbub, ignored the Captain up off his console and screaming in his ear.

Calmly, as the missile closed to a few thousand kilometers, he cut thrust entirely, rotated on the axis. *Astrum* screeched with stressed metal as it twisted through the vestiges of atmosphere. When the aft end was leading the way, Ramachandra keyed for all the thrust both sets of drives could deliver. *Astrum* shook violently as it dipped deeper into the thickening hydrocarbon soup.

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Avinashini)

Avinashini wanted to curse. O'Meath had over-ridden her, fired one of the two precious nuclear missiles. He'd ignored her. She repressed the fury, looked at her screens again. There was no solution, just a chance that the warhead would detonate close enough to pulse out *Astrum's* main systems.

She would never have taken such a chance. Ramachandra would find a way to outwit the single missile.

"Missile converging with target," *Granuaile* reported. "Target maneuvering. Missile adjusting course."

Avi keyed intently through her displays, catching each bit of information before moving to the next. Perhaps, perhaps she had been too quick to accept the computer's verdict on firing solutions. Ramachandra was almost out of the atmosphere. He had limited options. He could continue to climb, or he could dive back into the atmosphere. Neither choice would eliminate all effects.

The missile continued to close.

Avi focused the sensors as tightly as she could on *Astrum* and the fringe of atmosphere. *Astrum* kicked itself back out of orbit, descending back into the clouds. This time, it was almost plummeting. Ramachandra must be killing all forward velocity, diving as deep into the cloud cover as he could. He sought the blanket of protection.

"Detonation." The sensor display showed the expanding range of the nuclear fireball. *Astrum* was still there, outside the zone of destruction. It was almost certainly within the pulse effect, though. Computers and controls would be failing.

Avi leaned forward in excitement. "You may be smarter than I think, O'Meath!"

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352
(Ramachandra)

The missile streaked by, unable to correct on time. *Astrum* dropped deeper into the atmosphere. Fifteen kilometers away, no more, it flared into its full brightness, an expanding globe of plasma. Controls flickered as the electromagnetic pulse kicked through the hull. The main computer blacked out momentarily.

The hardened secondary electronics took over. Many systems were unsupported, but the mains were active. Ramachandra linked into the secondary vessel's guidance systems. Cutting the main drives off, he pushed maneuvering thrust to wrench the noses forward. Full power to the mains gave hard burn into the exit vector.

Astrum began its slow, painful climb. Crosswinds buffeted her, but Ramachandra wanted to follow his pre-calculated vectors as closely as possible. Proper arrival at the next system was critical for the coming jump.

Finally *Astrum* burst out of the atmosphere into open space. Main systems began to return. Someone sensible had gotten to a sensor station. "*Granuaile* is far ahead. She has too much vector to swing back."

"Make all systems ready for entry into jump," Ramachandra ordered. "Captain, see to damage control. I would like the main computers up in fifteen minutes."

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352
(Urwah)

The suit computer linked through to *Granuaile*'s systems. *Granuaile* simplified and interpreted the data for him. O'Meath had been lucky – damned lucky – making a shot Avinashini thought a bad risk. *Mundi Astrum* was going in, even if she hadn't been vaporized or even holed. "Be a kill, dammit."

As he waited for confirmation, *Granuaile* was streaking out-

Demand the Debt That's Owing

ward. Avi would be decelerating, looking to come around for a second shot. At these speeds and ranges, the second shot would be at best an hour away. It would be better if the pygmy's dumb luck had finished the job.

Chapter 11

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352 (Avinashini)

Fahnisht stood in the open hatch. O'Meath sat at his console, back to him, operating the machines. Displays of confusing arcs, dots, lights somehow told the Tentlord what was happening beyond the steel walls.

“*Balls!*” The tone was sharp, angry. Fahnisht heard without fully understanding. He should have left the translating earpiece in place. “He made it through.” Kameef’s hands moved rapidly over the devices. “Get the next one ready.”

“We’re out of range.” Avinashini’s voice was clear, definite. “No possible solution.”

“They’ll get away!”

“We’ll follow them.”

“Push us in. Get us there.”

“They’ll be over the lip before we can come around again. We need to focus the sensors on the jump.”

“We can’t let them get to Sol.”

“She’s *getting* to Sol. Do you think you can change physics? There’s nothing we can do now but plan to catch her and stop her.”

Kameef shouted, cursed. “We can’t let them that close to Yi Tan.” He kicked at a leg of the console. “Push her and get us

back into firing range. Get those fuckers before they go over the lip!"

Urwah ran up behind. "Make way." He rapidly but gently put a large hand on Fahnisht's forearm, guiding him out of the hatch. He had removed the air holder from his head. The magnificent warrior went around the console, facing Kameef and Fahnisht. "Do you think you can do something she says can't be done? Prophet, you already tried, and she was *right*." Big open palms, clad in the thick gloves, raised up. Urwah thrust hard against Kameef's chest. His Tentlord stumbled backward, falling and skidding from the force. Urwah started around the console.

Blood sworn. Fahnisht pulled out the knife, got between the two humans. Urwah stopped himself, awkwardly, looking for an opening. Fahnisht whirled to face Kameef, brought the knife to his neck. "*Who shall I kill? Who here is right?*" He again pointed the tip at Urwah. "*I am not in my Circles. Which of you must die so I can pay my blood debts?*"

Kameef understood him. The steel and machines must have translated for Urwah. Fahnisht prepared to spring for the larger man's neck and face, the only real target available to a knife. No one moved for a long moment.

Kameef finally spoke to the air. "I'm powering down the guns. Get observations on Astrum's ride over the lip. Make it count. Then we dive for fuel and plan to catch up." Fahnisht's Tentlord got himself up, glared at Urwah. "Pull that grunt shit again and Fahnisht won't have a chance to get in the middle."

Urwah spit on the metal grating. "Lot of wind from a little man." He strode out, pushing by Fahnisht.

Fahnisht made a gesture of disgust. "*We are warriors together, Kameef. Listen to your Tentlords, as I have listened to mine.*" He turned away and followed Urwah back to the living compartment.

October 18, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Lacaille 9352
(Avinashini)

Avi keyed comm. “*O’Meath.*”

The Jin Jun’s voice came through, hoarse with near-exhaustion. “Yeah, pretty-eyes?”

She ignored the familiarity. “I have the calculations done. *Astrum*’s exit point is close to Earth – just outside the grav-well limits. She will be vectored for a tight, fast fly-by. This is ...” Her throat tightened. She paused, cleared her throat. “This is certainly to launch ordnance.”

“We figured that. What can they hit?” Murphy responded.

“Anything, of course,” she replied. “They can plot a fast or slow ballistic. However, Beijing will be in line-of-sight.”

“They’re going to lob something at Beijing.”

“Yes,” Avi agreed quietly. “A fast ballistic. It will be difficult to intercept.

“Civil war,” Murphy said. “Direct attack.”

“As we suspected.”

A long silence intervened.

“Fly-by,” Murphy. “A fast run in, lob something, then run off. A nuke?”

“They wouldn’t need to risk their main weapon so close to Earth for that. With Fleet deeply involved, they could hijack Fleet warheads. And a nuclear missile would be too easy to intercept,” Avi responded. “Even ten or twenty. Satellites and ships have interceptors tipped for radius bursts and EMP. We must assume that there will be loyal Fleet vessels there, as well as traitors.”

“Maybe even a Jin Jun or two. So what, then?”

“Are you truly so blind? Do you have no memory at all?”

“I haven’t slept more than a full hour since we went over the lip, and your damned Marine started to kick my ass not so long ago, remember? Spell it out for the idiot Irish Jin Jun who shoots too quick.”

“They rebuilt *Astrum*’s forward missile bay to launch rocks,” she explained. “Smaller rocks, like the ones they launched at

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Shānhé-Wòtǔ. They almost certainly have rocks in there now.”

Murphy's eyes seemed to lose focus. “Buddha Christ Almighty. Biologicals.”

“Biologicals would not be needed for a close strike.”

“No. No, that's right. Just rocks. High velocity.” He cleared his throat.

Avi puzzled for a moment over his suddenly somber tone. He seemed unconvinced. She turned back to business. “I have my own calculations complete. Can you be ready in an hour?”

“Sure.” He still seemed distant. “Tell the grunt that I need another arse-full of stims, unless he wants to watch the boards this time. And no more hitting the engineer.”

October 23, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Lacaille 9352 to Sol) (Avinashini)

Avi pulled open the heavy hatch, ducked through the opening. The engineering decks were dimly lit.

She climbed the gangway to the main control platform. O'Meath was not there. She looked, saw him in the lower section to starboard. She went down the steps and over to him. “I know what their pilot did. Is doing.” She paused.

O'Meath kept at his task, turning a wrench.

She took a breath. “He is over-coiling the exit burst. It should have been obvious.”

“Oh, sure. Of course. Obvious.” Murphy never looked up from the pump assembly he was adjusting. He gave a quarter-turn of an adjustment screw. “I'm an ignorant unwashed Jin Jun, so explain what's so obvious.”

“It is what the zhīzhū do. How they multiply their vector when they pass over the lip. The exit burst is a coil in space-time. It's a wide coil. The normal coil imparts no vector. It simply creates a large opening between the quantum layers. The vessel retains the vector it had on entry.

“If the coil is tighter, though, it creates a narrower opening.

The tight coil squeezes the vessel out. It multiplies the residual velocity.”

Murphy rubbed his head. She was surprised to realize that she was concerned for him. She put the concern aside. “This pilot will create a very tight gravitic coil as he exits hyperspace. It is like pressing on a wet seed with your thumb and a finger, forcing it to fly out.”

“Never heard of such a thing,” Murphy interjected. “I thought velocity was conserved – it’s the same on either side of the flow.”

“This has only been a theoretical maneuver for us. Zhīzhū ships exit at high speeds, but we have not seen their ships accelerate to such speeds before their jumps. They obtain extra vector through the jump itself. We spent many years determining how they do it.”

“Theoretical – that sounds a lot like it hasn’t worked yet, at least for us. Zhīzhū – well, their brains are just different.”

Avi hesitated. Ramachandra was her cousin, if barely. She had agreed to make him husband. Family loyalty urged against revealing anything.

Family loyalty? She had recently tried to kill Ramachandra, certain that he was on board *Mundi Astrum*. She was a step back on the long path to rebirth.

Still deeper betrayal still would set her still farther back on the path out of rebirth. Her family, her gods, her race, her ties to Fleet – the obligations tugged at her, even if she was doing a greater good.

Which advanced karma?

Betrayal of family? Perhaps betrayal of species? Or protecting the Emperor, perhaps even the zhīzhū? Urwah was still uncertain that he wanted to stop *Mundi Astrum*. His hate for the zhīzhū ran deeper than her own.

Avi’s mouth was dry. “Fleet was very close to working out the calculus and procedures two years ago. We gave up. The consensus was that it was not possible.” She tried to wet her lips. “That was not true. One Fleet pilot did it, once, in a test vessel. He exited with almost ten times his original velocity. It was a

rough reemergence. All three of his engineers were killed.”

“So, he up and quit?”

“Not at all. He demanded that Fleet try again. He was sure that his revisions would reduce the difficulties. Fleet refused and ended the research.”

Murphy looked at her with a discomfiting, appraising look. Was he judging her? “Three engineers per jump – pretty costly.”

“He was sure he had worked that out after the first test. Though he might not care if there were – costs.”

She heard what she said about her fiancé. Gods. How had she agreed to accept him? How had her father agreed to accept her mother's choice in this?

O'Meath set down the tools. He sat back, looked up at her. “We can't even talk to the zhīzhū. I doubt we'll figure out their math.”

Avi took a breath. “You saw the readings yourself. He exited with fourteen times his entry velocity. O'Meath, believe at least your own instruments.”

“You've got me there. And maybe these bastards think it's worth an engineer or three. What kills the engineers, anyway?”

“Proximity to the quantum fluctuations themselves. It causes damage in the brain, other parts of the body. He believed that refining the calculations would reduce the effect.”

“How the hell did you get all this?”

Avi hesitated. “I knew him.” She looked down at the deck, then back up, but could not meet the inquiring blue eyes. “Know him. Well.”

“Nice of Fleet to tell us about this.”

Her face flushed, but she held most of the anger back. “And how much do the Jin Jun share with Fleet? Tell me, how much?”

“Good point.” He grinned the damnably disarming grin. “So, how can we get around this? He has the program, remember?”

Avi swallowed the dusty feeling in her mouth. She was suddenly too dry to speak. Instead, she reached into her waist-pouch and felt for the media card. Finding it, she took hold between thumb and forefinger, pulled it out, held it up.

She expected him to take it. Instead, his damnable blue eyes met hers. “You know this guy well. Brother? Husband?” His voice was surprisingly gentle.

“My – cousin,” she said, raspy but again able to speak. “A distant cousin. I believe that he wants to – to be sure that what he knows is recorded.”

“Just a cousin?”

“That – what was arranged – that is not your business!” She stood straight, looked down into his eyes. “I should not tell you this. He is – was – family. Our marriage was first discussed long ago. I have – acquiesced. Agreed. I should not betray him, even if he is not worth the air he breathes.”

“Will you?”

Avi discovered uncertainty. She lowered the media card to her side. “I cannot blame him for wanting the freedom of all space. The zhīzhū ...” She repressed a shudder.

She had seen enough of the zhīzhū. Urwah had seen more. Apologists who had never been as far as low-earth orbit had no clue what humanity faced in its desire to expand. O’Meath, who should know better, was unrealistic. He did not even see how dangerous Fahnisht and his kind might become.

And yet O’Meath was questioning her loyalty. She kept her anger out of her tone. “I did not swear my oath to Fleet. We both serve Yi Tan and the Zhang Dynasty.”

“Just being sure.” O’Meath seemed relieved, though. He reached for the media card. She let him take it. “So this is it? It still doesn’t –” O’Meath stopped, looked at her with dawning realization. “I’m already pushing the engines hard. How much stress will this put on top of them?”

“I am not sure. You will have to help me get into the data. I haven’t yet been able to determine the key code.”

“There goes my half hour beauty sleep a night.”

“If we can do this, we will come over the lip almost matched to *Mundi Astrum*. Perhaps even at higher vector. With surprise, I could launch the missile before they could fire any defenses.”

O’Meath’s eyes lacked their usual care-free laughter. “Yes – *you* might be able to.” His cheeks flushed, and he looked down

Demand the Debt That's Owing

at some speck on the grating.

Avi left his petulant male pride to the side. "It will be a simple matter of range and clear firing."

He looked at the card back the card. "How long to work out the numbers? If I can get this open?"

"I will make the time. It is no more than you are doing."

The care-free glint returned to the pale eyes. "Try to keep your engineer alive. You don't have any spares on board."

The light words sent a chill down her spine. She concealed it from the Jin Jun. She had no desire to worry for his safety, apart from pragmatism.

She left engineering quickly, worrying.

October 26, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Lacaille 9352 to Sol) (Fahnisht)

The Tentlord's pale, soft face seemed long, weak. Even more darkness had formed under Kameef's alien blue eyes. Visions flickered around him from the displays and devices. Some of the symbols were the simpler ones Kameef had taught him, rigid symbols that made words in the language called "Standard." Others were little more than indecipherable curves and squiggles.

Sounds came from the console. They were words, perhaps like words Avinashini would use, but they were a human's words. Kameef seemed intent on the words.

Fahnisht displayed the tray of hot food to his Tentlord. The Tentlord ignored him. "Kameef."

Kameef motioned for him to put the tray down. "I'm almost getting it."

"You cannot fight if you cannot stand."

"I'm trying to get the references, dammit!"

"I do not understand."

"It finally hit – this guy's first language isn't Standard. He spoke a different language at home. Buddha Christ Almighty, I'm stupid."

“He rides far from the circles you first rode in.”

Fahnisht listened to the translation, though many words were incomprehensible. “Yes. Close enough. Earth – lots of languages, still. Most people learn Standard, especially those in space. It’s built pretty deeply into computers from the earliest days. And quite a few learn Mandarin. Local languages survived, mainly because the Pandemics stopped a lot of travel for a long time, and just because people are damned stubborn...” Kameef seemed to catch himself. “Anyway, some of his childhood words are the key that unlocks the information.”

Fahnisht gestured at the screen. “Different words, spoken from youth.”

“Yes, that’s the point.”

“Avinashini also learned these words.”

“Yes.” Murphy began keying again.

Fahnisht reached and took his Tentlord’s arm. “Avinashini *knows* the bard who gave these words.”

Kameef stopped. “I wouldn’t call him a bard.”

“You have become stupid in exhaustion. Ask Avinashini.”

Kameef blinked. “Buddha Christ. Yes, a real idiot.” He keyed comm. “Lovely legs, I’m three layers in, and I need a new key phrase. Time to teach me some Kannada.”

October 26, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Lacaille 9352 to Sol) (Avinashini)

Avi set her shoulders back. “When will you learn a sense of decency? My legs do not exist for your amusement.”

“Stay on point. A key phrase in Kannada. Something you would know.”

“I know many phrases in Kannada. It is my first language.”

“And it’s a beautiful first language, just like your legs. I had the computer feed in his entire letter in various combinations, and nothing opened it up. It can’t. All I’m sure of is that it’s in Kannada, standardized fifty-one letter alphabet. So, what the hell

would your damned fiancé probably use as a key phrase for you?”

As always, Avi contained the anger he somehow released with his poking. “It cannot be that simple.”

“Of course it’s not. It’s even simpler, once you pay attention the obvious. Like shared language and culture. Maybe even a shared experience or two. *Think.*”

She was too tired to think, to remember. She had been too long away from Bangalore. She had not spoken directly to Ramachandra in a least a year, and had allowed herself to lag on letters. They shared no special names, no small jokes. He never complimented her legs; in fact, he’d considered them “too muscular” when she’d returned from fighter training.

What words would he expect her to remember?

There were few if any gentle words. He had been more likely to taunt her. “*Imbecile,*” “*baby-oven,*” “*unworthy mother of geniuses.*” Those had been among his kinder phrases. He wanted her as a possession, a trophy, not for herself. He wanted her because the Admiral had wanted the marriage, pushing and pulling the Parent until he accepted it as inevitable.

He’d described it in a phrase. Most of his letters ended with the phrase. “*Betrothed before the gods.*”

Avi shuddered at the memory. He had regularly repeated the taunt after the day they’d gone to America. Ramachandra had not become a better man despite fifteen years.

He had not used the phrase to close *this* letter. He had left it out, purposefully, expecting her to note its absence.

Avi called up a Kannada symbol set and keyboard, typed, and sent it to O’Meath’s station.

There was only a moment’s gap before O’Meath’s voice exploded through the comm. “Buddha Christ Almighty!” The files began spilling out onto her own display, window after window opening to show calculation procedures and advanced subroutines for the navigation programs. Avi skimmed quickly, looking for hooks to grasp. She called up a simulation to begin studying the process from a practical point of view.

One set of figures stood at the center: the adjustment for the

gravitic coil that forced the vessel out of hyperspace. This would work best in a spherical vessel, like those used by the zhīzhū. An imperfect symmetry could damage ship systems and living tissue, especially those closest to the generator. The calculation routines for symmetry were imperfect at best.

The math brought the danger home. Popping over the lip was going to be dangerous, especially for O'Meath. This math might well be beyond her understanding. She was not sure how she would master it in time.

Chapter 12

June 8, 2385 (Ten Years Ago) – Earth (Avinashini)

Her earpiece buzzed. “Avi, get the draft on Macpherson. Janney, draft on her and get ready to make your move.”

Avi looked ahead, up the hill. Heat shimmered above the new asphalt, despite the 2250-meter. She was tired from the climb. It had been gradual, ascending most of the time, with an occasional descent for rest. Each such descent had lost altitude to be made up again.

The red-haired, tall, wide-shouldered American of British descent, Donal Macpherson, pedaled without apparent effort. His almost mechanical ability to maintain pace had left most other members of his own squadron far behind. Janney, her cadet commander, and Avi herself were the only two from their own squadron this far up the mountains. Three of Macpherson’s cadets were trailing behind by at least five meters.

Nonetheless, Macpherson’s training squadron was already poised to win. They had demonstrated better teamwork, better understanding of the strategies. Macpherson had proven his nerves in the occasional descents. His people had blocked well, allowing only Janney and Avinashini to come closer. By putting drag on Macpherson, Avi would give Janney only a narrow window to take the lead. The strong cyclist would have to fight to hold any lead she gained over Macpherson.

“Pilot” training. The tenuous logic of cycling as training for fighter pilots escaped most. Yes, it was certainly good conditioning. It taught long-term patience and strategy. It stressed the mind into new ways of thinking – drag and blocking, maneuvering for position, endurance over direct conflict.

Beyond these benefits, though, Avi saw nothing. These exercises put valuable trainees at risk of serious injury. They had spent a week skimming over archaic asphalt pavement at reckless speeds. Three trainees had already gone down to shattered bones and torn skin. Others had suffered less severe injuries; scrapes and dark bruises covered a good . They were in medical, questioning whether they would rejoin training.

A simulator made more sense, even if it was a cycling simulation. Fewer potential pilots would be lost. The Admiral could have easily done that math; it was about supply. If her mother could see such a thing, why were the training officers blind?

A slight decrease in angle gave Avi her opportunity to close on Macpherson and draft. Standing on the pedals, she crouched low, pulled hard on the downbars and pumped until her front wheel was perhaps two centimeters from Macpherson’s rear. Janney followed, using Avi’s rearward draft as an advantage. Together, they dragged the big young man slightly back.

Avi felt her own endurance was waning. She would not win this race. The coach, somewhere above in a gravver, knew it as well. Thus, she would ride Macpherson’s wheel, force him to burn calories pulling her in his draft. Janney would be free to get to the top more rested, get ahead in the primary descent.

Avinashini matched speed perfectly behind Macpherson. She felt the slight changes in speed, knew she was dragging him back by that small amount needed. The squadron commander’s lectures on strategy and teamwork had come home to her.

Somehow, though, she heard the Admiral’s voice behind the words. Not encouragement to excel. Advice to be what she was, a cog in the larger machine. She was doing her part, slowing down Macpherson’s machine as they came up the last rise.

Janney came up beside her, powerhouse legs pumping. She pulled abreast of Avi, then ahead until she was abreast of

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Macpherson. Macpherson stood on his own pedals, trying to accelerate. Avi stayed on him, as tight on his rear wheel as if the bicycles were attached.

Janney used the opportunity to pull ahead, kept going, pushing toward the crest of the road. She got three, four bike lengths ahead, and started down the winding road on the other side.

Avi kept on Macpherson until the last, nibbling away at his speed with her own drag, until they both swept over the crest. Janney's lead was widening, gravity her new friend.

Macpherson tucked low, piston-pumping down the steep incline. Avi kept on him as best she could, but he was larger, heavier. Gravity was his also friend, pulling him down the hill. Fearless disregard for his own safety also increased his speed as they began the winding descent.

Avi tucked as tight as she could while still pedaling hard, but Macpherson began to widen the gap. She could no longer help Janney. She would have to work now to keep Macpherson's team-mates behind, if her own team-mates could not do so.

Janney hit something, a speck of sand or spot of ancient motor oil. She went down in a bounce-sliding tangle of arms, legs, and bicycle. Macpherson and Avi swept around the wreckage while it was still moving, Janney cursing in pain.

The race was over. Hicks had been right. She was in the wrong place, the wrong training.

Rage. She felt boiling, seething rage. The Admiral's expectations, Hicks' disdain, the supposition of most other pilot candidates that the Admiral's influence alone got her to Utah – all of it burned in her stomach.

There was no "honorable second."

Avi brought her flagging legs back into perfect rhythm, pushing down and pulling up in perfect circles. Hard-pumping anger cleared the fog of weariness and heat. Avi thought ahead, considered the turns to come. She had studied the maps, watched the videos of earlier runs on other courses.

Macpherson was big. He had a tendency to go wide on downhill curves. Perhaps he had no choice, or perhaps he feared sliding out. This route snaked down the steep hills.

She feared the sliding out, too. Hitting the pavement, or one of the pink canyon walls, would put her in sickbay for at least a month. She imagined the pain of skin scraped away, bones snapped.

The solution was obvious: she would not let the wheels slide out. Avi willed herself to calculate her own course, considering Macpherson only to avoid collision. Despite lingering fear, the momentum, the angles, the route she had studied all fused in her head as simple calculations.

She knew, with certainty, that she could use the descent to gain and hold a decisive lead. She would bring her squadron into Helper first, ahead of the American.

She took a breath. "I'm going to take him," she advised the gravver above.

"Don't be an idiot," the training coach replied. "You're not up to it."

She ignored the denigration. Avi let up on her pedaling for just a moment, leaned slightly right, looked for the right bit of pavement.

And then, lungs burning, she hammered her way into the turn, taking the bicycle deeper into a lean than she had ever before dared. Macpherson sensed her move. He stayed in front of her, blocking her way. She braked, held back. He managed, barely, to keep his lead for the next half-kilometer.

Another steep, twisting right-hand curve lay ahead. Again, Avi went wide to the left. Macpherson again anticipated, stayed in front.

Avi cut back to the right, angling hard. Her rear wheel skittered left, caught again as she did something unexplainable with her torso, holding the bike up against gravity. Macpherson was to her left, going the long way around the turn. Avi had clear road ahead on her more direct line, pedaled hard to gain as the curve eased.

Her front wheel came even with Macpherson's, crept ahead. He looked at her, unbelieving behind the goggles. His mouth was moving, but she could not hear the words over the air rushing by her ears.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Then she was cleanly ahead of Macpherson. Avi continued to push forward, sweeping down the pass. The pink canyon walls grew around her. She pedaled with perfect rhythm, fused herself to the time-honored design of frame and curled handlebars.

She controlled the road. She concentrated on keeping that control, holding her lead. Avi accelerated to sweep to the right of a boulder in the road. Macpherson would go to the left, slow down just a little more. Avi dug in, looking ahead for other obstacles that would help or hinder. Her gaze narrowed to what she needed to see. The burning in her lungs seemed to let up. Her heart maintained a perfect beat. She kept tucked as tightly as she could.

She was five meters ahead now. Macpherson pedaled furiously to catch up as the road straightened. She came to another curve, leaned hard into it. Macpherson fell farther behind, again taking the turn too wide.

She stayed in front of Macpherson, blocking his moves, controlling the slope.

Her body dug deep for its reserves. In adrenaline-fogged thinking, she started to push to widen the gap, even a little. She thought someone spoke through her earpiece, or perhaps her mind had separated into two. "Not yet. You'll tire out, or go down."

Avi heard the sense, held back her last energy for the run onto the level road about to come. She continued down, past the remnants of a society that had arrogantly built highways to waste fossil fuels in the name of individual independence. The Pandemics had reduced such travel for most of a century. Now most people used human-powered vehicles, trains and gravitic vehicles.

Some of the highways were maintained, as was this one, for less destructive recreation and travel. It was possible to cross the continent via human-powered vehicle or light ground car. It gave Fleet plenty of routes for training.

She came around a last bend, saw the road leveling ahead. Pushing hard, she increased the gap as much as she could. Lungs burning, she crossed right to the exit ramp, passed the sensors at

the finish.

She let the bike coast away its energy along a road first laid out in the steam age. She finally pulled to the side by the ancient railway right-of-way. Several transport gravvers were already there, waiting. Someone reached, took the bike as she got off.

Macpherson came in behind her, sputtering. Avi did not catch the exact words.

The male complaints stopped abruptly as Commodore Vicks stepped out of the nearest gravver. Avi removed her helmet, came to attention.

Vicks came straight to Avi. “‘Stupid,’ making cycling part of your pilot boot. That’s what you told Commodore Sunitha yesterday, isn’t it?”

The post-race euphoria blunted the words, but she was irked at the apparent eavesdropping. Her mother, to her always the “Admiral,” might have something to say about that violation. “Aye, sir. In a private conversation.”

“I spoke to her this morning, Ensign. She told me herself.” He shook his head. “I told her that you were a born rice-counter. All the math, none of the inspiration. Asked her to pull a string and get you out of my squadron.”

Avi hid her shock at the airing of family discussions. She tried to make sense of the words while the Commodore shifted his attention to Macpherson. He walked over, pushed himself nose-to-nose. “Son, you lost because this rice-counter counts *fast* under pressure. Fastest I’ve seen in years. Surprised you. Surprised us *all*.”

“Fighting in space is mostly slow, lots of time to think and position. Until it gets close-up, and then it’s too damned fast. So fast you die if you’re counting slow.

“She does math faster than you. Keep that in mind. That’s what we want out here. Real pressure, real exhaustion. Gets you ready for thinking out *there*.” He glanced upward to emphasize his point. “Ross is a bad system to get slow in. You’ll be a zhīzhū meal.”

He insisted that she meet his cold, grey Euro eyes. “You’re taking real tests out here, Cadet Avinashini. Before you ever

Demand the Debt That's Owing

have to face a real sphere piling through with way too much vector to waste time itching your nose.”

He addressed the arriving trainees as a whole. “Tomorrow’s a rest day. The next day we start counting coup.”

He looked back to Avinashini. “That’s why we put you out here on bicycles, Avinashini. That’s why it’s not a damned time trial, and why you’re on crazy roads like this. Get to debriefing, study your telemetry, and dictate a report. You’re stuck in this squadron. Same for the rest of you.”

“Aye, sir.” Avi saluted, went to the transport. Vicks’ mixed messages left her angry and unsettled. The Admiral had as usual tried to interfere. She would not be satisfied with her own efforts or desires. It wasn’t enough that Avi joined Fleet, avoided unsuitable men, stayed true to family and tradition. The Admiral had to spill confidences to Vicks, too.

Would the Admiral have been satisfied if she had sought to specialize in helm training, like Ramachandra? She had pushed Avi hard to make such a choice. To hear the Admiral talk, Fleet needed every possible officer ready to monitor the intricate but stable computer programs that squeezed ships into and out of hyperspace.

The zhīzhū were no more killed in hyperspace than they were on bicycles.

She would get her helm training as her secondary, but she knew what she was best suited for. She knew what she wanted to do. She knew how and where she wanted to serve.

Avi stowed her helmet and sat. The sweat was beginning to build inside the spandex. The rush of air on a moving bike assisted in the evaporation process. Sitting in a gravver did no such thing.

Macpherson came in, plunked down beside her. He sat still for a moment, looking forward at the back of the seat in front of them. Avi shifted a little, but not much. Taking the only seat beside her in an otherwise-empty transport was stupid male aggression, nothing more. He wanted to intimidate her. He could not, after this test.

Finally, he looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

“You’re good,” he said. “He’s right. You’ve been hiding it.”

“I hid nothing,” she said. “It was there to see, if you had come away from your mirror.”

He turned to glare at her. “Don’t bullshit me. You let us all think you got here on Brasshole privileges. I don’t like being lied to.”

Avi found herself laughing. “You don’t like lying to yourself and being caught by your own lie.”

He seemed about to say something, then decided to hold his tongue. He turned away.

The high red blush he displayed was suddenly endearing. His pale skin and reddish hair were interesting, seen in the right light.

October 30, 2395 (Present Day) – Earth (Premanand)

“I do not understand. Where are we going? Why are we leaving so quickly?” Sunitha was moving from drawer to drawer, pulling her clothes out and stuffing them into a Fleet duffle.

“You are staying behind, husband. I have a mission.”

“A mission? What are you saying? You have said nothing before today. Where do admirals go in such a rush?”

“You do not need to know.”

Someone pounded on the front door. Prem went to answer it. His wife moved quickly, pushing him out of the way. She opened the door only a little. Through the gap, he caught a glimpse of a young Euro woman, her blond hair cropped close to her skull. She wore a standard Fleet Marine uniform, but the shoulder patch had been altered.

Sunitha jammed the door shut, went back to the bedroom. She called through the open door. “Sit down and say nothing. It is best that you know nothing. That much, I do for you. No more.”

She came out, lugging her duffle over one shoulder. “I have

Demand the Debt That's Owing

terminated all network access. There will be a guard watching, ordered to kill you if you leave. She will not harm you so long as you stay here and do nothing. I can do no more for you.” Sunitha went to the heavy, antique door and pulled it open. The Euro marine was still there, her rifle ready.

Sunitha left without wishing him peace. The young woman stepped inside, watchful. He looked at her more closely.

Prem went to the divan, settled slowly. Old knees suddenly felt weak. The foolish religion and false godhead must somehow be involved. He could see no other reason for this.

What had that crazed religion finally made his wife do?

October 30, 2395 (Present Day) – Earth (Bishop Quayle)

The craft waited at the lock, clearance given, launch clock ticking. Quayle walked slowly, hesitantly. Stopping at the door to the elevator, he found himself unsure. His flock on Earth, in the Empire, needed him.

He pressed the button, stepped into the cylindrical unit. It began its preprogrammed movement. Admiral Sunitha was right. The authorities would be questioning, persecuting. His support for what must be done with the zhīzhū and the Horns would be misunderstood, seen as conspiracy in the early witch-hunt.

And, he reminded himself, the Admiral was making sacrifices. She had gotten late word that her daughter had been taken off *Harris* by the Snake's tool, the Jin Jun O'Meath. Arrangements to put her into one of the safest ships in Fleet had somehow failed.

Failed because O'Meath had somehow subverted a Fleet marine.

The elevator stopped at Fleet hub. As soon as the doors opened, he stepped out. Admiral Sunitha waited for him there. “Welcome,” she said in her accented Standard. “I will take you up, Reverend. We will be heading out in a few moments.”

“Thank you. Is your husband already aboard?”

Admiral Sunitha shook her head. “He will not be joining us.” Something in her voice was final, even relieved.

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Lacaille 9352 to Sol) (Murphy)

“I’m set, Avinashini.” Murphy keyed up the sequence. The computer would handle most of the process. All he had to do was hold the engines together, with his bare hands if necessary.

“Exit is on schedule. Be alert.”

“Damn, I was planning on a nap.”

Avinashini did not respond, probably too focused on calculating and recalculating the exit coil. Or, perhaps, she remained her enigmatic self. She had slept little in the past several days. Urwah and Fahnisht had spent time bringing her meals and other necessities as she had puzzled over the math.

Murphy keyed in a sequence.

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Lacaille 9352 to Sol) (Larissa)

Larissa locked down her helmet. “Come on,” she said to the rest of the squad. “We’re about to be up.” She led them out of the ready room.

They wove their way down to the lowest deck. Vele undogged the hastily welded hatch. Two marines grunted as they lifted it on its hinges, hooked it into place.

Larissa went through, undogged the matching hatch in the Deadfall. The hatch resisted her shoulder. “These should have been powered,” she commented as she stepped into a foothold. She called another marine forward through the tube. Together, they pushed until the hatch opened.

Ship-wide comm buzzed through her earpiece. “Prepare to

Demand the Debt That's Owing

go over the lip,” the Captain advised. “This will be a rough transition. Battle stations. Pilots to your ships.”

The four pilots must have been on their way already; they came through the connector right after the announcement. Rasmussen was in the lead. Lar tapped him on the back as he passed. Rasmussen gave a thumbs-up sign, but did not slow. The four pilots split into two groups, each going toward one missile bay hastily converted into hangers.

Larissa led her marines to the ventral missile bay. “Manual procedures,” she said. “Call them off one more time.”

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Lacaille 9352 to Sol) (Avinashini)

The main system icon flashed up on an auxiliary screen. She gave it a side-long look. Avi read the words that flashed up faster than the computer voice could repeat them: “Lt. Commander B. P. Avinashini upgraded to full Jin Jun status. Security clearance level: 000. All command codes and paths open and active.”

Below, in similar letters: “Lead status transferred to Jin Jun Avinashini. Primary command codes transferred.”

Avi maintained outward impassivity. The Jin Jun were damned fools, spoiled extra children of the nobility. She was Fleet, and always would be, always wanted to be. She had no desire to join the ranks of the unfairly elite.

And yet, she had just been thrust into them. O’Meath had given her full trust, full command. In a way, she had progressed further than the Admiral ever had.

She had perhaps directly betrayed the Admiral. So her mother would say. O’Meath had decided to trust her.

Did the Admiral trust? Would the Admiral ever trust?

Could she trust the Admiral?

Was the Admiral involved in Humanitas’ rebellion? If so, was she a bishop or pawn? She wanted her mother to be a pawn,

used by those who had built the Humanitas Church and the Manifest Destiny movement. She doubted that the Admiral could be fooled enough to be a pawn.

Why was she pleased that an idiot Jin Jun had decided to trust her more than did her own mother?

She pushed the questions and conflicts aside. With a moment of effort, she re-focused herself on the task of calculating and recalculating the exit. She could not claim even a tenth of her cousin Ramachandra's genius. He had walked a new path. She could only follow the footsteps in the dust.

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Murphy)

Murphy listened to Avinashini count the seconds down. At minus ten, the computer was in full control. He was just a wrench-jockey now. For all he knew, he was effectively dead, just overripe for his burial.

Murphy smiled at minus five. The damned marine would have to scrape his blood off the walls.

"Zero" slammed into his head, his toes, his gut, burned and sparked through his nerves, pulled bile up and pulled at sphincter muscles. A noise roared in his ear. His sight blurred, geometry pulled in a hundred off-directions. Somehow, he kept his finger on the key.

Noise became a voice: "O'Meath. O'Meath! *Murphy*."

"Son of a bitch." He groaned as vision cleared. Red lights covered the displays.

"*Murphy*," the voice insisted. He placed it: Avi, recently brevetted to the Jin Jun. Murphy wanted to laugh, but he was busy vomiting. Zhaohui was going to be foaming mad.

"Yeah?" He wiped something sour from his chin with the back of his hand.

"*Shut down* the hyperdrive. Wake up. Manual shut-down."

His stomach emptied some more slime. "Sure." He pushed away from the board, half-stumbled to the port bulkhead. Sup-

Demand the Debt That's Owing

porting himself against the cold metal, he went to the power junction box, pounded the oversized red breaker.

Balance failed, gravity succeeded. Murphy's ribs slammed down to bruise against the deck grating.

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Avinashini)

Avi felt the coils pulse through her body, a bass harmonic of existence. White noise rushed through her ears, or more likely the nerves themselves. Her eyes tingled with sparkles shooting across her field of vision.

The curves of space became visible through suddenly transparent consoles and displays. Avi felt the layers of quantum foaming through her, washing cold clarity through her thoughts.

Did she see? Or did she simply imagine, hallucinate, as she skipped through visuals on the displays? What was real?

She peered through the deck, saw Urk holding his head in hands. Fahnisht, beside him, seemed less affected. Turning her perception, she looked back toward engineering.

O'Meath collapsed over the console.

Clarity. A mistake in the calculations presented itself to her non-verbal brain; fingers and eyes danced and keyed, correcting the error. The spiraling coils visibly corrected themselves.

O'Meath was struggling to stand erect. He was clearly in bad shape, but would survive. His heart nerves pulsed erratically, putting the muscle itself into spasm. The brain's blood vessels were constricting, and the neurotransmitters were firing and morphing as the quantum layers sloshed through.

Avi wanted to shudder. He had been standing too close to the gods despite her best efforts. He would live.

Would he be the same?

The gods might take the best parts of him – few as they were – to punish her impudence. She pushed away a surprising ache at the thought.

O'Meath vomited, pitched forward as his knees buckled. His

body began to normalize: heart beating in perfect rhythm, brain fully oxygenated.

Granuaile surfed roughly back into normal space. The perspicuity began to dissolve, but not before she easily confirmed the re-entry, speed, vector, position. Coils of gravity spiraled outward to dissipate. The computer sought to shut them down a hundredth of a second after Avi's key-tap sent the impulse to the computer running the hyperdrive. The coils streamed away. Heightened senses faded back to normal.

Power lights remained red. Avi reached to the left, tapped the keys, tried to switch power. The power systems refused to pay attention to her requests. For once, *Granuaile* seemed sluggish, unresponsive. Why was the computer not switching over?

Where was O'Meath? Was he unconscious? Dead?

Why had he done rotting *nothing* to shut down the hyperdrive power supply? The power would build up in the system. An overload would tear the ship into dust. Human bodies would simply vaporize, or dry up in the vacuum.

She pulled up the internal cams, saw O'Meath still collapsed over the main engineering console.

Avi keyed comm, barked orders. To her relief – the ship would survive if he did this one thing – the Jin Jun looked up, mumbled, and pushed himself up. He staggered toward the manual shutdown, almost falling despite the support of the bulkhead.

Urwah and the Horn were already in motion. Comm confirmed that they had struggled out of their bunks. The marine was almost to the hatch, the Horn right behind.

Murphy, damn him, finally stumbled to the manual cut-off. He pounded it with a fist.

One light went red, another green. More of Avi's muscles relaxed.

Urwah appeared in the view. He went straight to the console, fumbled out a handheld, and began hesitantly keying. He consulted the handheld from moment to moment, obviously still uncertain in his new role.

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Urwah)

The hatch opened heavily on graphite-lubricated hinges. Urwah grunted as he stepped aside.

Fahnisht was already ducking through. “Kameef!” He jabbered excitedly in the Horn language as he scrambled up the ladder and around the main console.

While the Horn tended to O’Meath, Urk pulled up the “engineering will” that O’Meath had put together for him. The keys were slimy with something foul-smelling. Red lights dominated the display, but the most important light was green: Murphy had cut power to the outboards.

The power change-over subroutines had locked up, as Avi had predicted. “The systems will refuse to believe that the massive fluctuations in local space-time quanta are acceptable,” she had explained.

Why was a human brain right and the computer wrong?

Despite his doubts, Urk keyed carefully, following the checklist. Red lights shifted to amber and green. Power output reduced. He shifted power to maneuvering and weapons as Murphy had instructed, then reset other systems one at a time.

Urwah read and keyed the commands to re-link the con with the engineering computers. The display returned gibberish the first time he tried. Lights remained red.

“Take care, Urwah,” Avi advised over comm.

He cursed and cleared the board for a second attempt. Sweating, he tapped again, confirming that he had the sequence correct.

The display matched the audible output: “Unable to comply. Network links down. Reset network.”

Urwah cursed. A battlesuit heads-up would reboot itself if it needed to. Why not a starship network? He took up the handheld and looked for the necessary sequence. Finding it, he set the handheld down and keyed.

“Command confirmation needed.”

“Jin Jun red-tape bullshit!” He looked helplessly up. “Avi!”

“I don’t know what it needs,” Avi responded.

O'Meath struggled to a seated position. Fahnisht supported him. "'Avinashini. Confirm.'"

"O'Meath, let us get this done."

"That's – damned – command. 'Confirm.' *You.*" He doubled over, retched noisily, and coughed out a few more dregs of sour vomit. "Did you get that?"

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Avinashini)

She keyed for vocal input, as O'Meath had. "Avinashini, confirmed."

Avi's boards began clearing. "Network links resetting ship-wide," the system advised. A moment later it added, "All links re-established."

Avi stabbed at keys. Displays showed power reassigned to the needs of normal space and combat. One at a time sensors, maneuver power, and weapons became ready.

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Murphy)

Murphy's head pounded, his muscles ached. His gut twisted itself inside-out. Dry heaves wracked his body. "No wonder those other poor bastards died. Buddha's balls, they had a *choice.*"

Fahnisht gave the Horn equivalent of a shrug. Heartless bastard of a Clanlord. Murphy retched again, pulling up only bile for all the pain and effort.

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Fahnisht)

Fahnisht tried to understand Kameef's human words without

Demand the Debt That's Owing

the translation device. His Tentlord had been far more successful in learning the language of plains than he had ever been with this language of steel and machinery.

He heard the tone that meant humor, however dark, and let that be the answer. Kameef was not yet for the Pyre if he still laughed. "*You will face the blade another day.*" He helped Kameef stand, supporting almost all of his weight.

Kameef responded with an attempt at the human mouth-sign of humor. "I hope so," he said. "I hope."

Fahnisht gestured for him to save his energy. "*I will bring you to your blankets. Whoever you fought for us today, you deserve your rest.*"

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Avinashini)

The Horn's work with O'Meath, still visible on an inset display, regained her attention. The small alien had the Jin Jun sitting, obviously regaining consciousness. She could not tell how solid he was as yet.

She jerked her head back to her displays. She had more important things to do than worry on that arrogant fool. Her fingers flew across the keys.

Avi stayed at passive sensors. Their quarry must have caught *Granuaile's* gravitic ripple. She looked for power emissions from the ship that should be just ahead, a light-second or less. At the same time, she confirmed that the torpedo messages were widecasting out, full power, on several main frequencies. Narrowcast laser and maser joined, streaming the message toward the nearest satellites and stations.

"Make a loud noise," O'Meath had said. Make a target of themselves. Make *Mundi Astrum* use up ordnance with defensive fire.

Power was set as it should be. Three seconds were gone, with no target found. She bit her lower lip, punishing herself for

her own arrogance.

Five seconds gone.

Earth sat large and bright in one display. If her calculations were correct, *Mundi Astrum* was crossing the Lagrange perimeter.

“Target located,” *Granuaile* reported. Avi checked the scan, decided that she could trust the assessment. It was a good hit.

The gap between vessels was wider than she had expected, though narrower than it had been before. *Granuaile* nonetheless had to close on *Astrum*. Avi would push all available power to the drives, bring them to the brink of melting down. “Maximum cooling,” she commented to Grunon, in case he wasn’t paying attention.

Urk was slow to respond. “Can’t find it...”

Pushing away frustration, Avi brought up her own engineering interface to her left. She keyed with one hand. With all her computer power, *Granuaile* should be fully as automated as a Gandiva. “Done. She switched power feeds, taking even life support off-line. There would be enough fresh air in the hull for the pursuit. “Call up your power management routines to your main display, default configuration. Keep them there. I may need you again.”

Avi ran the throttles up. *Granuaile* began to shudder with the force, despite the best efforts of the inertial dampers.

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Fahnisht)

Fahnisht half-dragged Kameef to the small medbay. A cylinder dominated the compartment: long and narrow, round like the trunk of some massive tree laid on its side, cut lengthwise, hollowed out, and hinged. The upper half was open, waiting.

The Tentlord tried to resist as Fahnisht turned him to sit on the edge of the automed. “To the con.” Kameef’s voice betrayed the most weakness he had ever heard from him.

He responded in the Standard he was learning from the

Demand the Debt That's Owing

speaking devices and Urwah. "Here. Body fix." Fahnisht pushed back on his chest.

Kameef tried to sit up. "Be okay."

"Body *fix*, Kameef." Fahnisht pushed again. The human lay back.

The Horn reached up and pulled down the lid, as Oorh-whaah had shown him. Kameef made as to struggle as he was forced to lie back. The lid closed over him and clicked shut.

The room's display powered itself. Lines and symbols appeared. Oorh-whaah had tried to explain the importance of each. One, though, was all he truly needed: a square, green symbol at the bottom right-hand corner. Fahnisht touched the display there, telling the machine to go ahead and do whatever would help.

He stepped back, looking at the cylinder encasing the one human he had once thought he could trust. He was not sure how much that trust had been injured, no matter what he had said to those others in a message recorded too long ago.

Chapter 13

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Avinashini)

Red lights flashed across the engineering sub-display. Avi ignored them, focusing only on her firing solution. Nothing else mattered. This missile had to find range.

It was time to go fully active. She keyed the array. Radar and laser scans focused on *Astrum*, giving away almost as much data as they returned.

Astrum had plotted its course well, finding a route between defensive satellites which might have planted a nuke in her belly. This was likely only a precaution. With Ramachandra piloting and other Fleet personnel on board, they likely had pushed out deactivation codes. The automated defenses were useless.

Passive scan located three other vessels. All three were breaking Earth orbit at high acceleration, doing their best to plot intercepts. They were probably too far away, but pushing every erg through their grav thrusters.

Avi discounted all three. Only one would have a good shot at *Mundi Astrum*, and that one near the end of the bombing run. That ship read as one of *Granuaile*'s sisters. Though fast and maneuverable, it could not load any more ordnance than *Granuaile* herself. If she carried a rack of nukes, she would be a possible threat nonetheless.

Ramachandra was good at the helm. The missile corvette

Demand the Debt That's Owing

should have plenty of chemical rounds for defensive fire. The Jin Jun ally could not guarantee a hit, any more than Avi could. Avi wondered briefly who was piloting the vessel, but knew only one other name. She doubted that the Emperor's aunt himself was aboard.

The other two vessels were Fleet missile corvettes, more modern than their opponent, but too far off to guarantee a hit. If their nukes were primed, though, they could join the ground interceptors, do some damage to falling rocks.

All three were running "dark," transmitting no transponder or active EM sensor transmissions. It was a good battle tactic, minimizing their profiles to the attacking enemy. *Granuaile* could see them with her sensor suite, but the older corvettes were less well equipped. These ships might evade full ranging by *Astrum*. If they were paying attention, they could even use *Granuaile*'s active sensor bounces for any attacks on *Astrum*.

If they were paying attention.

If they all remained loyal to the Emperor. The two Fleet vessels might well be here to assist the Manifest Destiny attacker.

Avi brushed a stray black hair from her face.

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Murphy)

Murphy felt the automated fuss with syringes and IV lines. At the same time, it was no doubt imaging and analyzing every organ, determining what might be out of place. His innards felt skewed and out of sorts. All of them.

The scans were complete quickly. The fluids running through the tubes reduced his symptoms in minutes. The lid of the automated was raised. Murphy blinked in the light as he propped himself on his elbows.

Lights went off throughout *Granuaile*. Emergency lights took over, drawing on their batteries.

Murphy sat up again. His head was clearing. Fahnisht again put a hand against his chest.

"Another battle must be fought," he reminded the Horn. He was well enough to speak the native language.

"Avih-nash-een fights now, Kameef. Leave her the sword."

Murphy coughed, nodded. *"She fights,"* he agreed. *"Bring me back to engineering."* He threw his legs over the edge of his bunk, pointed back over his shoulder. *"The medpack can be carried with us."*

Fahnisht gave a sign acknowledging the inevitable. Urwah had shown him how to unlock the smaller machine from the larger system. He flipped the latches and pulled; Murphy dragged himself up on a handhold.

Murphy's head throbbed as he walked aft, the IV tube tethering him to the Horn. He reached the hatch, stepped through.

Urk looked back from the main console. "About time," he murmured, looking back at the displays. "She's a crazy little sweetheart. Treating your ride like a damn fighter."

Fahnisht helped him up the gangway with hands firmly planted against the bottom of his ass. "Taking advantage of me," he quipped, not worrying about translation. With a last aching heave, he pulled himself onto the platform.

A quick look at the display answered his questions. "Bot one, power plant only. Bot Two, drives. Bot 3, plasma pumps." He eased in beside the marine. "Keep them busy and we'll be ok. Most of this job is decision-making." He looked at the display. "Good idea, putting power management front and center. Fahnisht, go to locker three, get board seven."

Fahnisht obeyed, struggling with the human numbers.

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Avinashini)

The power displays began to stabilize. *Murphy.* She was glad to have the annoyance himself taking that worry from her. Avi put the thought aside, concentrated on closing the gap. She adjusted the gunnery projections.

Comm lit up on a peripheral display. The Jin Jun seal called

Demand the Debt That's Owing

for attention. "All incoming vessels, by order of Lady Zhaohui, Protector of the Emperor, acknowledge Imperial allegiance or change vector. Operational commander, transmit command codes and place all systems under local control." The transmission repeated itself. The voice was familiar, the Emperor's aunt herself.

Avi keyed internal comm. "Murphy – O'Meath," she corrected herself. "Handle that."

"Can't," he responded. "Transponder names Lead on Jin Jun ships. You. You're Lead"

"Jin Jun – *manure*." She keyed external comm. "Jin Jun ship *Granuaile*, Lt. Commander B. P. Avinashini, Imperial Fleet commanding – Lead – O'Meath on board. We acknowledge allegiance." Her lips tightened. "Codes *refused*. No time for remotes. *Granuaile* targets Manifest Destiny ship *Astrum Mundi*. End."

She focused again on the pursuit and targeting. *Granuaile* was perhaps five minutes from range.

If Ramachandra was the pilot, he would be preparing something. Orbit could not be his destination. *Astrum* had far too much vector. He would have to veer away, at most skimming the atmosphere.

Another ship would be out here, somewhere – sunward. *Mundi Astrum* had co-conspirators and support in the home system. A larger vessel, a tanker or battleship, was already vectoring toward a rendezvous. Avi envisioned the hourglass of possibilities as she rapidly keyed.

A final keystroke transferred the math to the main engineering console. "Murphy! Refine these comps, find the tanker, and send to all loyal units. It'll be a second chance." She cut comm before he could reply.

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Murphy)

Murphy finished the calculations. Avi was right; the refuel-

ing ship had to be in a sunward trajectory, almost in solar orbit. *Astrum* couldn't waste time in Sol system, a target for any loyal ship or fighter. Jupiter and Saturn were too far away to be practical for her. Venus was no place to refuel. A supply was prepared in an almost-matching trajectory.

Comm came in, personal to him. The codes said it was Zhaohui, live. There would be a second with a second or so delay. He keyed to ignore.

The comm signaled again, more urgent. His ear nerves buzzed with the induction. Murphy slapped the key. "O'Meath here. Get off comm!"

Zhaohui jabbered at him in Court Mandarin. "*You have handed your ship over to a traitor. You are a penis-controlled fool! You must immediately take Lead back!*"

He remained in Standard. "Get off comm, they'll track you. Idiot." He cut off before her sputtering came back over the time delay. If she wanted to be a target, it would have to be her problem. With any luck, she was nowhere near her nephew.

Murphy checked the updated sensor readings. The other Jin Jun ship was vectoring for *Mundi Astrum*, pushing engines beyond all reason. Was she properly armed? Who the hell was piloting her?

Blips – four – separated from *Astrum*. They were larger, slower than missiles. Two vectored toward the *Lady*-class cruiser. "Shit." He had a good guess what had been carried along.

Granuaile tentatively identified them: modular fighters. They were probably from *Harris*. "Avi."

"I see. FDC's. They aren't standard to an *Eighmy*-class ship. Probably taken from *Harris*."

Comm beeped. A laser comm had come in for him, encrypted under one of his personal passwords. "Olive to *Murphy*. Mail run armament. Make yours count." The transmission ended without repetition.

"Buddha M. Christ son-of-a-fucking *bitch!* Avi, that damned fool's engaging without a single nuke in her tubes!"

He heard the slightest sigh of acceptance. Her voice was

Demand the Debt That's Owing

quiet. "I have never said the Jin Jun were cowards." Avi said something quiet in Kannada. He was going to have to pay attention to the Dravidian language branch when he had spare minutes.

Urwah responded quietly in the background. "Al-hamdu lil-lahi rabbil 'alamin."

"Ordnance launch, FDC's," *Granuaile* announced.

"Balls! Avi —"

He shut up. What could she do?

Transponder lit up from the Jin Jun ship, confirming what he had already guessed: *Elizabeth*, "Olive" Rached commanding. Her EM sensors went active on deep survey settings, painting all four of the FDCs, *Mundi Astrum*, and sundry space junk in the vicinity. At the same time, Olive was emptying her racks of every missile *Elizabeth* might carry. They would be chemical warheads, a shrapnel can or six. Olive's ordnance ignored the attacking FDCs entirely, putting every missile on a straight line for *Astrum*.

"What's she *doing*?" Urk exclaimed.

"Making herself a target." Murphy focused on the engines. "All bots, leak suppression." He increased the pressure to the maximum, compressing the plasma as much as the grav-bottle could. Red lights flashed and alarms began to sound throughout the deck. "Pretty-legs, make ours *count*."

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Avinashini)

Astrum spread chaff ahead of itself, her gunners risking holes to disable *Elizabeth*'s missiles. Two missiles streaked away from each of the FDCs vectoring for *Elizabeth*. They closed quickly.

Four small suns erupted along the small ship's path, vaporizing missiles, ship, any chaff, space garbage, and mere dust in the area. *Elizabeth*'s signals, her hints of mass on the gravitic sensors, disappeared.

Granuaile liked the timing. "Target in extreme missile

range. Firing solutions available.”

Avi gave the solutions all her attention. They were still farther than she liked. *Mundi Astrum* was probably ready for a chaff-dump. She needed to be closer still – through the chaff, if at all possible.

O’Meath was squeezing every erg out of the drives. The engineering display was flashed amber lights in every sub-plant. She adjusted course slightly to get the last possible benefit. She would have to wait another forty seconds or so for an excellent chance. But only forty seconds – *Mundi Astrum* had a payload to launch.

Two missile corvettes – newer designs – were out there. Avi put aside a momentary thought of keying comm, calling for supporting fire. Possibly the corvettes would do so, despite extreme range, but *Mundi Astrum* would hear the comm chatter, know desperation.

“Painting range,” *Granuaile*’s gunnery programs advised.

Avi needed no more painting from this angle. Before she was vaporized, *Elizabeth* had lit *Astrum* up. *Granuaile* used its passive sensors to lock the enemy’s position and vectors. The waste light from enemy engines helped. *Granuaile* would not lose sight of *Astrum*.

The friendly corvettes, though, could use help. Avi powered the painting lasers and locked target. Set-forget took over, firing random bursts to bounce off, illuminating the *Astrum*.

Sparkles lit out from *Mundi Astrum*’s duel hulls. “Enemy chaff canister launch,” *Granuaile*’s overly helpful systems confirmed. Avi glanced at the tracks – most of the chaff was set to burst free between the Earth-based ships and *Mundi Astrum*. Her own single missile would have less to foul it.

She keyed to lock the firing solution, slapped the firing key in a smooth motion. The con trembled momentarily as the missile flashed away from its launcher.

“Friendly ordnance launch, enemy ordnance launch, *Granuaile* ordnance launch.” *Granuaile*’s announcement came as Avi herself muttered, “Missile away.”

Demand the Debt That's Owing

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Murphy)

Murphy fought the returning headache, keyed his numbers, pointed the secondary passive sensors in the predicted direction. Avinashini was good, Buddha-balls *good*. A capital ship was out there, accelerating along *Mundi Astrum*'s path, sunward. If *Astrum* survived, the two would match at Venus' orbit, stay together long enough to refuel the duel vessel, and move along. *Mundi Astrum* would be fueled to proceed onward.

Two attacks. The first strike was civil war on Earth, the second a finalizing conflict with the zhīzhū.

That sun-dive had been planned and coordinated months ago. How many Fleet units could be trusted now? None of them were near enough to stop the refueling operation, regardless. Murphy looked for friendly ships anywhere near, found none in a position to stop *Mundi Astrum*.

Granuaile announced, "Friendly ordnance launch, enemy ordnance launch, *Granuaile* ordnance launch."

Urk was ahead of him. "Missiles," he said hopefully, pointing at the reads. "*Shit*."

Murphy echoed the profanity, keyed comm. "Avi! Tell those corvettes to crack the *shit* out of those rocks!" He keyed the sensors, tracking and computing. "Smaller pieces, more burn-up – *priority*." He keyed comm, re-opened his direct line to the Zhaohui, First Jin Jun. "Jin Jun Prime Duty." He repeated himself in Mandarin. "Ground defense, every goddam nuke you have in the silos! Get those rocks!"

The tracking confirmed his bet: five rocks, all that had been launched, were aimed dead on Beijing. They were about the same size as the rocks that had hit Shānhé-Wòtǔ. Each would probably contain a virus, as if that would be needed to destroy the Imperial City.

Zhaohui had better already be prepared. If she wasn't, too many minutes would be wasted. Had she gotten his torpedo messages? Paid attention to them?

Mundi Astrum gyrated into a wild evasive dance. Ramachandra was an artist – cutting thrust, doubling thrust, rotat-

ing on every axis. Murphy knew the theory, could do it on a horse or a gravver. In *Granuaile*, Avinashini was by far his superior. This would have been fun and educational, with lesser stakes.

Avi was following with the missile, aiding its own tracking with her intuition. The ordnance closed, seconds from deadly radius.

“Blow, God damn it!” Urk’s eyes were wide, forehead beaded with sweat.

No new sunburst erupted.

Sensors read a plume of hydrogen and contaminants. One of *Astrum*’s a fuel tanks was holed.

Still no nuclear sunburst.

“*Fuck.*”

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Avinashini)

Avi leaned back, placed her palms together, and released the tension through proper breathing. “Direct hit on *Astrum*. *Astrum*’s defensive batteries must have fouled the trigger.” She wished, just for a moment, that she might really curse without offending the gods. That Jin Jun with the foolish nickname ‘Olive’ had given her better distraction and cover than any fighter partner might.

Wasted. Olive’s life *wasted*. The life of anyone else on board *Elizabeth*, wasted.

She pushed the anger down, deep, holding it with all of the other angers that had been building up of late. “*Astrum* is pulling out, Murphy. Have you advice?”

Urk responded first. “Keep *on* the whore.”

“Sounds right to me,” Murphy added. His voice was thick with exhaustion. “Safe distance, though. We’ve shot our wad, unless you have ideas.”

“We cannot get close enough to end her with the non-nuclear missiles on board,” Avi confirmed.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

“Fahnisht, help me up to con.”

Chapter 14

October 31, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Fahnisht)

Fahnisht sat uncomfortably in the human-comfortable chair to Avee-nah-sheen's right. Kameef sat to her left, his hoarse voice moving rapidly in the difficult human language. Sometimes he spoke to Avee-nah-sheen, sometimes to the machine in front of him. Sometimes he listened, or looked, as the machine delivered words and ideas.

Nothing here was one warrior facing another. Talking, talking. This was the world Kameef *left* when he visited the clean plains. The air smelled bad, the water tasted like it came from the rivers downstream of the towns he protected, the towns where steel was forged sharp and hard. Such air, such water weakened beings.

His Klysira – she had been strong, a priestess-warrior beside him. The Ooh-man-*eeh*-tas sent the lessons of spoiling their own plains and skies into this deep dark, to steal worlds still fresh.

Kameef could walk in each world. Oorh-whaah might walk in each world. Avee-nah-sheen had the strength of a warrior-priestess, but she was most firmly entrapped by the steel, by the talk and the pressing of images and plates. He was not sure whether she could walk and ride the plains with a Clan.

Fahnisht touched the pad of his longest finger to the sharpened point of his horn. Touch became pressure, pressure became

Demand the Debt That's Owing

effort. The hard tip broke skin, drawing a bead of blood to the surface

November 1, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Sol II Orbital Boundary (Murphy)

Murphy finished uploading file updates. He finished with a warning on the “squeeze-out” maneuver, coded directly to Zhao-hui. “Bugs not worked out. Will kill engineers. Only best pilots should attempt. Will kill engineers. Blockade better. Will kill engineers. Repeating myself for emphasis, pay attention. Will kill engineers.”

Perhaps some engineers would have to be sacrificed. Murphy wasn't eager to urge that decision on his fellow Jin Jun.

He added a thought. “Send messengers with duplicate information at highest jump rate to Wolf 359, Nánmén'èr. Get *Astrum* there.” It would be tough to beat the enemy vessel to the flare star, but it should be attempted. Were any Jin Jun out there to get the information? Would Fleet vessels pay attention at all? How few Fleet vessels would remain loyal on the fringes of zhīzhū space?

The data stream simultaneously downloaded from the Jin Jun comm buoys was sparse, despite heavy encryption. Zhao-hui was not risking revealing her secrets to anyone.

She had secrets by now. Her sensor data on *Mundi Astrum* from multiple scan angles might prove helpful, if it was even remotely complete. At the very least, the heavy electromagnetic exposure from X-ray on up might have sterilized a few of its crew.

Murphy found little comfort in his own silent sarcasm.

Two messages from Zhao-hui completed the download. One was set to be read in his cabin only, doors locked, no one else present. He could bypass Zhao-hui's passwords, but it would take too much time. She probably had her knickers in a twist over Avi and Urwah. Damned woman put him in the middle of

things, let him have her codes to forge his own orders, but couldn't let him make his own decisions on people.

The other message was open, and in Standard. Murphy fed it to all consoles.

"To Sir Cuchulain Padraic O'Meath, Jin Jun, Lead, commanding *Granuaile*." She had ignored his designation of Avi as commander. That bode no good.

"Emperor safely vacationing.

"Your personnel roster noted without approval. Repeat, without approval. House of Knights complaint lodged against you on my behalf.

"Rocks ninety percent vaporized due to timely notice. Impact sites contained and sealed off. Surviving samples under analysis. Viruses highly specific to certain Asian subgroups identified. Engineered variants of Hu-Tu Pandemic strains. Further analysis needed. Sterilization of affected areas will be complete."

Sterilization. Zhaohui might well nuke a town to protect her nephew. She was subtle in Court matters, but pragmatic. Sterilizing the strain would protect her nephew, as well as obscuring any linkage to the Pandemics. No one wanted to light that fuse.

"Quayle missing. Members of Fleet Admiralty missing. Not in custody, not killed. Believed to have left Earth on Fleet vessels.

"Fleet unit loyalties decided within individual vessels and small units. Some commands believed to be aiding rebellious factions. Most vessels in Sol system now under secure and loyal command. Wolf and Ross commands uncertain. Approach all Fleet vessels as hostile unless proved otherwise."

Buddha Christ Almighty, he had figured that out for himself.

"Humanitas-Manifest Destiny vessel *Mundi Astrum* refueling and expected to exit system. No loyal units in intercept position.

"Fast refueling craft on your vector, trusted crew. Rendezvous to avoid delays.

"Considering your earlier recommendations through proper channels. Your *personal* intentions regarding zhīzhū neither approved nor disapproved by Houses of Lords. House of Commons

suggests support for Manifest Destiny attack on zhīzhū. House of Knights votes 'no veto' of your *personal* intentions. Will advise further as situation clarifies."

How hard had she fought for saving the zhīzhū? Whose votes had she played with? She could have done better in the House of Knights. Whatever had been said or done, he had been left out in the cold. Sink or swim. He was getting a leg up on fuel, nothing more.

"Buddha goes with you."

Murphy leaned back, shook his head with a half smile. His fingers skipped over the keys. "Need ten nukes not pacifist false idols. Resupply. NUKES. NUKES. TEN NUKES. Advise."

He leaned back, then hunched over the keys again. "Arrest and shoot all Manifest Destiny supporters in Parliament for betterment gene pool." He banged the "send" before any common sense could intervene. Not that he saw any point in giving in to common sense at this point.

He took a breath, turned to Avinashini. "We're pretty much on our own, Lovely Legs. Any suggestions?"

"You must keep your opinions of and my legs to yourself."

Murphy finally saw a glint of appreciation behind the protest, said nothing more. There was business to attend to. "I agree – but we really need ordnance."

"Yes," she answered simply. She paused, looked down, then engaged him with a direct gaze. "She does not approve your enlistment of Urwah and myself."

Murphy nodded. "She probably has a bunch of logical, sensible reasons to distrust either of you. Starting with your mother. And being Fleet. Your own ship going rebel well in advance. And Urk's reports from the Shānhé-Wòtǔ settler removal weren't very nice to us in a lot of ways. He really pissed her off, especially after we offered to take him into the Jin Jun."

Commander Avinashini's mouth opened in a brief hint of surprise. She quickly hid the emotion. "He refused knighthood?"

"Well, he refused the Order of the Jin Jun. Zhaohui got bitchy and blocked any other order of knighthood, but I found at

least one way to help him out. I was still a Commodore, on the books – I cut his orders to Officer School myself.”

November 1, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Sol II Orbital Boundary (Avinashini)

O’Meath, misguided idiot that he was, had put Urwah into a vice he could never escape. How could he have failed to see that? How could he have discounted the Admiralty’s hatred of the spoiled nobility? Avinashini pushed her palms together, fingers matched and straight. “Your orders have not helped him. Some – *many* distrusted him because of them.”

“Thick-headed Fleet and marines. Christ, no *wonder* Zhao-hui doesn’t get along well with Fleet. She doesn’t trust *anyone*.”

He still did not understand. There was little point in trying to explain under the pressures of time. There were more pressing issues. “I – will understand if you must downgrade my status.” Avi looked down at the console in front of her.

Murphy dismissed the implied offer with a quick, light touch to the back of her left hand. “You planning on jumping ship?”

The question seemed more an offer. He was giving her the opportunity to leave. She could do so easily. The tanker would likely have space for one or two more. She could end the exhausting, vain pursuit. Urwah’s words came back to her, true: the zhīzhū were the worst neighbors possible. They could not be spoken to or reasoned with.

And they were life. They must somehow be sacred to the gods. “I will stay. I cannot speak for Urwah.”

“Keep a lifeboat ready for him. I’ve pushed him hard enough.”

She merely nodded. “My status?”

“It’s not the first time I’ve pissed off Zhao-hui. She likes her blood to boil up now and again. Makes her feel alive.” There was a look in his eyes for a moment, a man’s look. He quickly put it aside. “Get the hell back to work. We need to know where

they're headed – Nánmén'èr or Wolf.”

Avi felt lighter. “The readings are being taken. I will know within the hour.” She leaned over the console, began keying. “I have to assume that it will be Wolf 359,” she commented.

“Why?”

“Do you disagree?”

“Man can't ask?”

“It's Fleet's system, no matter what they think at Jannah. *Mundi Astrum* can expect assistance for her last jump.”

“To...?”

“To Groombridge, I would guess.”

“Wolf 424 is closer. More zhīzhū ships in and out.”

“That's just a small military base orbiting a brown dwarf,” Avi responded. “There is no free atmosphere. The rock-dropping system of infection requires atmosphere. The virus must spread to other zhīzhū to spread to other worlds.” She keyed up a navigation diagram. “Groombridge is closer to Alula Australis,” Avi responded. “*Mundi Astrum* can use it as a stepping stone. Or, if the plague can be started there, it is likely to be carried to Alula on one of the supply ships.” She paused, cleared her throat. “The zhīzhū were there far longer than we thought.”

“On Groombridge.”

“Yes.”

“We tried to tell Fleet that,” Murphy pointed out.

“Yes. But that is past. If started there, a plague will almost certainly spread throughout zhīzhū space from Alula. It reaches the level of mathematical certainty.” She turned, looked at him. “Bartlett and Ramachandra both understand that math.”

Fahnisht was again fitted with an earpiece. When had Urk seen to that? In any event, the Horn Clanlord must have understood some of the translation. He stood, left the con. Murphy saw the taut anger in his posture.

Comm beeped. Murphy keyed, read the message from Zhao-hui out loud. “No nukes available on your vector.’ Damn.”

“We must succeed without them,” Avi said, simply.

“I'd better get some rest,” Murphy said. He stood. “Next jump's going to be hell.” He started toward the hatch and the

rear gangway.

Avi took his wrist in her hands, stopped him. "You knew Olive."

Murphy nodded. "Young. She'd done her three years in the Guard. Wanted to get out here. Like me, when I was a damn fool kid. Better pilot and gunner." He felt his throat tighten. "Pretty little girl." He exhaled.

"She knew what she was doing, Murphy. She understood the chance she was giving us." She could feel her eyes become wet, didn't fight the tears back as hard as she should. She was tired, perhaps.

He nodded. "No doubt at all." He patted the back of her hand. "You – damn, you made a direct hit, Avi. Those bastards just managed to foul the detonators. It just didn't blow."

They stood silently for a moment. Avi looked at his eyes, the Euro blue. She refused to accept that she had not wasted their best chance.

Each released. "You still have Zhaohui's other message to read in your cabin," Avi noted. "And it will not favor anyone in my family."

Murphy shrugged and exited the con.

November 1, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Earth (Murphy)

Murphy sat in his cabin. He read the second message, shaking his head. It was an indictment of enough of Fleet command to confirm his own earlier guesses.

Open rebellion.

Admiral Yang and her highest staff had been relieved. His sister Bridget, of all people, was suddenly an admiral. The missing ships had been tracked back. Avi's mother, Rear Admiral B. P. Sunitha, was waist-deep in the orders that had allowed the theft. The Admiral was also a known Humanitas convert. She'd ensured her rise through the ranks by doing so.

Admiral Sunitha had intervened to get Avinashini reassigned

Demand the Debt That's Owing

from the zhīzhū border to convoy escort duty. The Admiral's third-removed-or-whatever nephew, B. T. Ramachandra – Avi's betrothed – had been on secretive detached duty over the past several years. Urwah's older brother might be implicated. Jibral Grunon had taken early retirement and good land in the Trianguli colony; he could no longer be traced through Fleet resources.

None of the three could be found, at least officially. They knew that Ramachandra was somewhere ahead of them on *As-trum*.

He could see why Zhaohui was concerned about Avi, on the record. Why should *anyone* trust B. P. Avinashini, daughter of Admiral B. P. Sunitha? She was a logical suspect to anyone with half a brain.

Lady Zhaohui certainly did not trust Avi. "I am certain that this woman is part of the conspiracy. You are foolish to believe otherwise. Despite your arrogant belief that you always know best, you are to give her no trust. Restrict her access to files, command codes, and all operations. Set proper codes to maintain control over *Granuaile*. Lock her in a cabin if you must.

"Place that marine in shackles as well.

"You have a tendency to be diverted by physical beauty and your own arrogant pride. I pray to Buddha that you not fall into this trap."

Zhaohui was right. Her logical concerns could not be argued. Avi was likely a Manifest Destiny contingency plan. Admiral Sunitha had put her there, a target for O'Meath and other Jin Jun to pursue. Avi was pretending to help, skewing the math, playing a part. She could have made either shot with the two nukes Murphy didn't officially have, finishing *Mundi Astrum* off. Murphy's own damned gonads and a big helping of exhaustion were blinding him.

Except that Zhaohui was wrong about one thing. Murphy knew the difference between his penis' interest and his gut's trust. He'd had sex with plenty of women he didn't fully trust, including Zhaohui herself.

He trusted Avi. He knew the difference.

The rest of the file provided expanded analysis on the conclu-

sions he had already reached. Humanitas was attempting a coup. They would attack, possibly destroy the zhīzhū and the Imperial family at the same time. Cause confusion. Mobilize ships. What zhīzhū might survive this attack would be in no condition to defend their borders. Loyalist Fleet units would nonetheless have to defend against surviving zhīzhū.

Maximize confusion to maximize the effect of a fleet of human ships taking control of the Reach toward Trianguli, if not Sol system. If nothing else, Manifest Destiny would control everything outward of Tau Ceti. The other ships that had been in orbit were probably headed out toward Delta Trianguli now.

Murphy skimmed through the remainder. There would be time in hyperspace to get a real grip on anything they needed.

He came to the last document, read, sat back in his chair. He read it again to be sure.

“Cuchulain:

“I believe that what you are doing is correct in the long view. However, I still cannot seek a Writ Plenipotentiary on your behalf. My nephew’s position is now too precarious to push such a vote. Humanitas and the Manifest Destiny movement have support among the citizens. Yi Tan must be able to find peace and compromise. If the plans against the zhīzhū succeed, he must be able to distance himself from you, me, and the others who have opposed them.

“Good fortune to you.”

Wheels within wheels. Buddha’s balls, that was Zhaohui all over.

July 25, 2377 (Eighteen Years Ago) – Earth (Sol III) (Zhaohui)

The boy stood at proper attention, but his eyes disclosed unbound energy. He was short, thin but muscular, his face built of chiseled angles in the unique way of the Irish Celts. How had Dame Suzanna described the boy during the review of his application?

The original 'Murphy,' the Lead of the Family Guard had said. Dame Suzanna had not known the boy's father as Zhaohui had. She did not know the irony of the description; Lord Ren-Ma was not as Irish as he liked to believe. Ren-Ma was some four light years and three generations removed from the British Isles.

Nonetheless, Zhaohui smiled at the remembered description, then returned to her frown. Cuchulain O'Meath had transmitted his application to the Knights Jin Jun without the endorsement of Bridget, now Lady Ren-Ma, his family head. He had sought no endorsements of any kind from any of the nobility.

But for his deceased father's insistence on birth registration, the boy would have been treated as one of the occasional youthful hopefuls who thought that they were the exception to the primary qualification for joining the Jin Jun: the built-in expectation of personal allegiance to the Emperor or Empress. He was not the second or third child of a Lord or Lady. Despite his unusually high potentials and skills, he would probably have been rejected, but for his registration. He would have been urged to join Fleet or one of the other services. If he had been too pushy, he might well have found himself shunted off to a colony along the expanding Reach.

The Jin Jun made exceptions, but most of those had already proved both their allegiance in active service. Almost all exceptions had already earned a knighthood. Most of the exceptions came from one of the armies. A very few came from Fleet, or Fleet's Marines. All of them were carefully reviewed by the House of Knights before being passed on to the First Jin Jun's office. They could not come with parochial views running counter to the Prime Duty.

Fleet personnel had been notably absent from the hopefuls in the last decade. Its officers and hands were taking excessive pride in commoner birth and Fleet's lip-service to merit-only promotion. Fleet's commoners had come to thrive on the rivalry they had created with the Knights Jin Jun.

But, as she knew well, Cuchulain Padraic O'Meath was not simply an exceptional commoner. The fourth child of Padraic O'Meath Lord Ren-Ma had his father's damnable charming arro-

gance already. He was shorter, less brawny, but likely to be no less attractive. He was already interesting, at least in the way of unformed youths, though his nose was large for the rest of his face.

Young O'Meath was estranged from his eldest half-sister, but no less prideful. Lady Ren-Ma's arrogance included a hefty dose of Catholic morality. She openly scorned her father's choice to have an Earth-based mistress and the resulting second family. She had fought for the de-registration of Cuchulain's paternity. She might have prevailed had Lord Blackstone himself not intervened.

Making matters worse, the O'Meath family – both the official and unofficial branches – retained its infatuation with Celtic cultural history. This culture had been nearly stamped out by Roman Catholicism, further mutilated by Twentieth-Century America-driven commercialism, then co-opted away by the “American Irish” long before the Pandemics. It had resurged in post-Pandemic isolation, just as many other cultural traditions and languages had regained footing. Seventy-five years and two generations on Xingdiqui had, it seemed, only increased Padraic's infatuation for the lore of early Irish tribes.

The Earth-born mother had not sought to talk sense into Padraic O'Meath. The name “Cuchulain” was more than proof of this. She, too, was proud of battles over cows and handfuls of glory. If this boy chose to live up to such superstition and mythology, he would be difficult to manage.

Zhaohui would have preferred to deny his application and be done with it. She would have done so, indeed, if either politics or common sense had allowed.

Neither did.

Bridget O'Meath Lady Ren-Ma had opposed the application. She had made clear, on inquiry, that her half-brother remained illegitimate. He was an unwelcome reminder of her father's disloyalty to her mother. He was also thought to be prone to ignoring proprieties – for example, transmitting his application without prior family approval.

No one believed that Bridget would give approval, had

Cuchulain sought it.

On the other hand, many members of the government retained personal loyalty to Padraic O'Meath, the prior Lord Ren-Ma. He had been liked by men, loved by women. Zhaohui herself remembered him with fondness for a few chance encounters. His own fierce loyalty to the Imperial family and government had been well known.

After quiet but bare-knuckled diplomacy, Bridget had grudgingly agreed that Cuchulain would be suited to the Prime Duty, protecting the Imperial Family. Nonetheless, she would prefer that he be declined and put in his proper place. She was unclear about what that place might be.

Zhaohui had messaged back, in no uncertain terms, that Bridget's views might be acceptable in the Xingdiqui backwaters, but were unacceptable in Beijing. If Bridget chose to fight this, the fight would be public, and in the House of Knights. She would quickly find herself unable to work within the House of Lords. A number of them had their own illegitimate children whose highest ambition would be the Jin Jun. Bridget would be throwing away all of the good will her father had bequeathed to his successor.

Lady Bridget was arrogant, not stupid. She would, she had replied in damned haughty tones, make sure that her dear brother young Cuchulain was made aware that Ren-Ma wanted him in the Jin Jun, and that he merely should have followed protocol. She of course would have supported his application, had she only known. Lady Bridget had gone on to make it clear that she would be most displeased if a feeble excuse was used to deny the application. She could, perhaps, be forgiven if she had accidentally sent her note using her official messaging, rather than the private channels she had used at first.

The memory of that message was satisfying. The political bitch understood raw blackmail. Zhaohui now had private material which Bridget would prefer not be disseminated. Zhaohui had at least one debt to be called in later.

Zhaohui could see Cuchulain's aptitude scores from the various tests. He was physically fit, highly intelligent, quick to think,

and already had solid training in archaic ceremonial weapons. He was apparently a crack shot, and gifted in hand-to-hand combat. He would, at the very least, be an asset in the Family Guard. He was the right age to be put into Yi's own Guard, for that matter: enough years older to eventually mentor her nephew as he grew, not so old that he would be just an authority figure. There were practical reasons to accept this boy.

His other aptitudes would also be of use. His Mandarin was far better than that of most Euros. He had strong linguistic aptitudes. Related to this, he had demonstrated great aptitude for computer operations. With five or ten years' seasoning in the Guard, he might just qualify for a deep space assignment. He might eventually be useful in Survey, or Messenger. Chengen might someday want him to deal with the Horns. The young man might even be useful at some point to divine the meaning behind zhīzhū chitter.

This assumed, of course, that he learned the basics and to fit in with a team. His sharp edges would have to be filed down before she would authorize such an assignment.

He was handsome, like his father, if not so large. Damn Padraic, going and dying the way he had. Lord Ren-Ma had been a patient, enjoyable teacher.

Lady Zhaohui decided that the boy had stood long enough at attention while she had looked over the displays. She could not refuse the urge to test him one more way. She chose an obscure dialect. *"Take your ease. You are given a great honor. You must never forget that. You must put aside the impudence by which you insulted your sister, the head of your House. You must become more, and better, to truly deserve the Knighthood you will receive."*

He responded in the same dialect. *"My sister refuses me a seat at the table. This is now my house."*

"Still impudent."

He shrugged. *"I expect to remain so, Lady Zhaohui. However, I would prefer to be considered 'ambitious.'"* There was laughter in the boy's eyes, but not a hint of untruth. Taming this one would be a challenge. There was far too much of his late

Demand the Debt That's Owing

father in the boy.

She returned to proper Court Mandarin. *“Report to the training field. Inform Dame Suzanna that your short name is ‘Murphy.’”*

Chapter 15

November 2, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace – En route to Wolf 359 (Avinashini)

Avi lay in her cabin, face to the outer wall, the door locked. Her handheld monitored the feeds from the con. Some part of her hoped that *Granuaile* would encounter an anomaly, bounce out of hyperspace with a wrench that pulled her apart. It would be easier if all aboard were dumped into vacuum.

Avi had easily accepted Ramachandra's role with Manifest Destiny. She had realized that her mother was at least a dupe, through the Humanitas Church.

Avi had been intellectually prepared for the accusation that she was herself considered a traitor, along with the rest of her family.

Her stomach ached. Her father was in custody, under interrogation. The Admiral had left him behind, left Sol system entirely, along with others at Fleet's highest levels. They had taken warning from O'Meath's torpedo and scurried away like cowards – leaving her father to say what little he might know.

He must know nothing. The Admiral would probably not have left him behind if she believed he could harm her goals. She was a competent officer.

Her mother had abandoned her father and herself in favor of a false religion. Admiral B.P. Sunitha had put the destruction of

another race above family, above oaths to the Emperor and Parliament. In the end, the Admiral was closer to Ramachandra than to her own daughter. She always had been that way.

Which of the gods governed the hyperspace level? Which would end *Granuaile's* foolhardy, doomed quest?

She sat up, tried to find peace through meditation. After ten impatient minutes of racing thoughts, she abandoned the attempt. She stood, tried to pace the tiny room. There was not enough length or breadth to pace. She considered going into the lounge to pedal the stationary bicycle, long and hard, but she might have to speak to Urwah or Fahnisht, or even O'Meath. She could not face them.

She was too ashamed to face them.

Avi pulled open the desk-console from the wall, sat on the edge of the bunk. Her fingers keyed absently at the library browser. The display keyed into her heads-up.

She came upon a directory of religious texts. The entire written history of mankind's attempts to understand the gods, how and whether they were all One, could be tapped here. For a moment, given his penchant for cursing well-known godheads, she wondered why O'Meath had not simply deleted this database. Probably he had not encountered it.

She found herself opening the Bhagavad-Gita in its oldest written form. She had studied this as a child, at her father's insistence. Unlike the Admiral, the Parent had never strayed from ancestral traditions and knowledge. She puzzled through it, considered looking for a more modern translation. Instead, she wrote out her own in Standard as she read.

My hand becomes so weak that I
Drop Agni the fire-god's Gift,
My great bow Gandiva....
I *hate* triumph and domination, *hate* wealth and ease
Bought with such waste of kindred life.
How can this "victory" bring delight, Govinda?
How can the rich spoils of war be "profit?"
What microscope will detect the "compensation?"

What long and healthy life to follow can seem sweet,
Paid for with such blood
Spilled to dissolve the hardened clay?

Krishna would convince Arjuna. Blood was inevitable, and so to be accepted. Was he right?

The knots in her stomach did not ease.

There was a gentle tapping on her door. She ignored it. After a polite moment, it repeated.

She sighed, made sure that she was as presentable as she could be in her shipsuit, and stood. She keyed the unlock. “Come in.”

The door slid open, pushed from the outside. O’Meath slipped off his light footwear, stepped in. The courtesy to her customs surprised her.

“We’re in a smooth patch,” he said. “Thought I’d get a stretch while I can.”

“How many languages do you know?” Avi found herself asking. “Mandarin, English, Fahnisht’s – how many others?”

“Too many,” Murphy replied. “Add Arabic, most of the romance languages, the Celtic dialects of course. I can piece through almost anything Indo-European. Give me a couple of weeks, and I can speak it like a native. My odd talent. Part of what got me into the Jin Jun.”

“Zhīzhū?”

“Entirely different. It rotates meaning, almost as if it’s ciphered data. We’re missing something in it that acts as a key. And they haven’t been cooperative in supplying the key. Most of what we’ve gotten so far turns out to be wrong when we try to apply it. Anything I put into that torpedo in zhīzhū probably turned out to be a big joke. Better hope they can translate Standard.”

“Can you read Sanskrit?”

“Sure. Haven’t bothered to, much. Squiggly lines give me a headache. I’m better with spoken language.”

“Kannada?”

“A small touch. Only recently. I haven’t spent time on the

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Dravidian languages.” He seemed almost shy. “Haven’t had a reason until lately. And since then, I haven’t been reading for pleasure.”

Avi looked down. “The gods give us difficult choices,” she said, pointing at the display, speaking more to herself. She looked up again.

O’Meath was, for once, serious, almost somber. “No good choices at all,” he said. “Except to do the best you can. That’s what leads to the final life, right? No other route but living.”

“There are too many mistakes to make in each life for that to be easy,” she replied.

“Will you be alright with the next batch of mistakes we’re making?” Murphy looked her in the eye. “I can’t do this without you. None of us can. I can’t mind the engines and botch up the transition math all at the same time.”

She felt resolution restore to pit of her stomach. “Actually, you would manage perfectly well at botching the math,” she responded. “But I will take care of the helm. In fact, I should get back up to the con.”

“And I need to get back to the engines,” O’Meath responded. “The bots can only handle things on their own for so long at this rate. Every splash in the foam gets them running in circles.” He stepped aside, motioned for her to precede him, then followed her out of the cabin.

November 10, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Jannah (Wolf Habitat Cluster) (Murphy)

Murphy watched the power increase as the coils again tightened. This time, he was properly belted into his seat. He tensed as he heard Avi count down over comm. At “zero,” his head ached, vision blurred. He felt weak and nauseas again, retched, spewed the contents of stomach into a bucket Urk had thoughtfully left beside the console. None of the symptoms were as serious as they had been the first time.

Murphy's stomach twisted again, forced more bile out. He put his eyes back on the displays, prepared for Avi's order to shut power down.

November 10, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Jannah (Wolf Habitat Cluster) (Avinashini)

The disorienting illusion of vision beyond normal sight struck Avi again. Her optic nerves and eyes again seemed to momentarily glimpse what was not here in the con this time. The coils were somehow more perfectly shaped than they had been the first time.

O'Meath, next to the gravitic generators, was again overwhelmed with the phase changes that disrupted his nervous system, though less severely. Urwah and Fahnisht lay in their bunks against the forward bulkhead, as far away from the effect as possible, hoping that they wouldn't find O'Meath dead.

The normal continuum reappeared ahead – normal consoles, a star chart on a display, to the lower right, the tactical display above it. Perhaps, her imagination merely returned control to her proper senses control.

"O'Meath, power down hyper and go to normal operations," she ordered. She immediately called up data from the passive sensors to begin plotting the sphere of battle.

November 14, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Jannah (Wolf Habitat Cluster) (Urwah)

Urwah pushed through the bulkhead hatch, following the smaller Fahnisht. Fahnisht went immediately to the manual power switch, pushed it.

"Already done," Murphy said. His voice seemed hoarse.

Urk looked at the bucket next to the console, shook his head.

"Maybe you should do this on an empty stomach," he commented.

"And miss all this?" Murphy grinned. "Hell of a lot better this time."

"Guess so." Urwah looked at the controls. "*Hibernia's* close."

"Message?"

"Outgoing."

"*Hibernia's* not here by accident."

They were going through with this suicidal insanity. Avi was going to close tight and fire on a larger, better-armed ship with a few chemical weapons, a short-range particle cannon and her guts. She might be able to take *Astrum* out, if *Hibernia* stayed out of the fray.

Hibernia wasn't there to stay out. She had Gandiva fighters, FDCs with boarding cylinders, and her own heavy guns. She could easily take a rear-guard position between *Granuaile* and *Mundi Astrum*. *Granuaile* wouldn't survive the pounding. She would be scrap.

Mundi Astrum would survive and go on attack the zhīzhū. Even dying, the zhīzhū would retaliate. They could wipe Jannah out if they chose almost-suicidal revenge and concentrated fire. Even a failing zhīzhū attack would kill people Urwah knew and loved.

A lifeboat would get him out of the battle for now. He would at least live another day to defend his home world. No one would stop him from getting off *Granuaile*. Even O'Meath would understand.

Urwah sealed his battlesuit. "Getting ready," he said to O'Meath. He hoped his voice did not betray his intention, or a hint of shame.

November 10, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Jannah (Wolf Habitat Cluster) (Avinashini)

As well as the exit had gone, they were still further out than Avi liked. O'Meath pushing the gravitic drive for acceleration, but an effective shot with the remaining chemical-warhead missiles. *Astrum* was still too far ahead.

Hibernia and a Fleet refueling tanker were also ahead, already tightly matched to *Mundi Astrum*. The tanker was transferring fuel, no doubt more pure than skimmed fuel. The Manifest Destiny ship would have better range, and no delay. *Astrum* would lose no time in a skimming maneuver.

This rendezvous was no happy accident. Fleet commanders had been told weeks or months ago to be here, as they had been at Sol. Ramachandra had plotted his course well in advance. The Admiral had built solid ties here and at the Ross Outpost. If her disappearance from Earth had left any doubts, *Hibernia's* rear-guard position of *Mundi Astrum* erased them.

Avi looked at the long-range scans. The tanker was separating from *Astrum*, reeling in its lines. "*Astrum's* done refueling." She checked the firing solutions. "We're still seven minutes out of range."

Traitors – traitors in active-commission Fleet ships. Traitors her mother and betrothed were assisting. Why should she be surprised? Fleet knew that only this system stood between zhīzhū and humanity. Humanitas had gained its first Fleet toeholds here. The Admiral had come to realize its importance in her career when she had been stationed here, handling supply needs.

"I need acceleration, O'Meath." Was she ordering or pleading? She didn't like the latter possibility.

Murphy's voice was exhausted aggravation. "I'm punching out all the juice I have. I can't get more. The grav bottle's barely holding, and the seals'll go if it goes."

"Urwah?"

"*Hibernia* is vectoring in, I think. We're dead."

Avi glanced at the nav display, knew what she would see. *Hibernia's* vector was perfect, coordinated. The carrier's bridge

was working with Ramachandra. Traitors everywhere, throughout known space.

She herself a traitor? She brushed aside the angry confusion. "Locking on *Astrum* first, *Hibernia* second." It was the wrong strategy for survival. Whether or not she hit *Astrum*, *Hibernia*'s Gandivas had to be ready to launch with all of their power and resources devoted to killing off *Granuaile*. Avi could not outmaneuver that many fighters, that many missiles.

"We'll be dead a minute after we launch missiles," Avi reported grimly. "Perhaps less."

"Talk to them," Murphy urged. "You're Fleet, they'll listen."

"They are my mother's Fleet," she said, sad and calm. "Urwah, you need to make a decision."

Still, there were minutes left. She keyed external comm. "*Hibernia*, Lt. Commander B. P. Avinashini, commanding Jin Jun cruiser *Granuaile*. I know you believe that you are doing the right thing. I know that you believe I am – I am a traitor. To my mother, to my ancestors, to the gods. To everyone." A tear formed at the corner of her eye. She held her jaw tight a moment, refused it.

"We must not let the zhīzhū destroy us, but we cannot win this way. Please, if anyone there knows me, knows what I have done – Captain Anselm, I will not hesitate to kill any zhīzhū who comes into our space, you know that. What Humanitas is doing is evil. Please, respond."

She rubbed away the tear that escaped down her cheek. She was too tired for this, suddenly far too tired. It would be easier to simply launch the missiles and fail.

She heard light footsteps from the gangway behind. Fahnisht, always seeming lost in the con, came up beside her. The alien had not bothered with the adjusted battlesuit. He was dressed only in his leathers. He held his hand ready on the hilt of his sword, as if that could help in any way. He spoke quietly in his broken Standard. "Avee-nah-sheen. Warrior."

How many of his species had survived the attack on Shānhé-Wòtu? Avi shook off her tiredness. "*Hibernia*, respond or be

declared a target of the Emperor and his Jin Jun.”

No response came. Seconds dragged into a minute. Avi checked all of the solutions again. There was nothing more that she could do as a pilot.

She keyed comm for a new transmission. “B. P. Avinashini commanding *Granuaile* to Anselm commanding *Hibernia*, please respond.”

Again, silence, as the seconds ticked away. She keyed internal comm, private to Urwah. “Urwah, if you intend to leave, you would best get in the lifeboat now.”

“You’re not in the boat,” he replied.

She swallowed. “I shall not be.”

“You go, I go.”

“I have a duty.”

Urwah did not respond.

Finally, she keyed to record. “Lt. Commander B. P. Avinashini, Imperial Fleet, detached duty with Jin Jun ship *Granuaile*, to any zhīzhū vessel in range.”

If, as O’Meath had said, the spiders were observing the supposedly secret cache of old ships, they were also somewhere on the outer edges of this system. They could have gotten ships to Sol as easily as the Jin Jun had gotten a ship to Alula Australis. She was suddenly certain that they would receive this message.

Or, perhaps, she simply needed to speak her mind.

“Cuchulain O’Meath and the Jin Jun do not speak for all of the human race. They do not speak for *me*.

“Zhīzhū eat human flesh. You would happily take all of the good worlds for yourselves – even those we are already on. You have no sense of morality, no proper respect for life and the gods. You are vile.

“I destroyed twenty-three of your spheres. I killed you after you smashed my ship, and when I should have been dead *myself*. I was there by the will of the gods. I protected my own.

“I will fight you again. Each time you attack humans, I will kill zhīzhū. I will keep what is already ours *safe*. I will keep *us* safe. I will never trust you. Human flesh will never again feed your nests. We will not be pushed out of your way because you

want all of the good worlds.

"The damnable Jin Jun O'Meath assures me that humans were trespassing at Groombridge. Your kind was already there. My people were wrong to land there.

"I do not know who was more wrong. Did you protest? Did you try to ask us to leave? You attacked. I protected my people, and that is enough.

"I shall not kill *you* only out of stupid greed, nor allow any other to do so. Remember that. The gods demand fairness of me. I will not again kill you with hating heart – even if you first try to kill me, and mine. I will only kill as I must to protect my people, and then I will ask the gods to give me the next life I deserve. I will do what the gods decree as just.

"It is *not* just to destroy your race if there is *any* chance of finding terms. We must speak to find terms."

Enough. She was running out of time. Fingers shaking, she keyed to add the recording to O'Meath's earlier torpedo message. She made a final recording. "*Hibernia*, all Fleet units at Wolf, from Lt. Commander B.P. Avinashini. My loyalty is to the Emperor and Imperial law. What I do is to defend those. *Mundi Astrum*, the ship you plan to protect, launched an attack on the Imperial City itself. Its crew is full of mutineers, not heroes. You must destroy *Astrum* if you can.

"Gods protect us all."

She keyed and set the data stream to repeat. The signal would guarantee a missile lock from *Astrum*, *Hibernia*, and *Hibernia's* Gandivas. She was making *Granuaile* as much a target as had *Elizabeth's* Jin Jun pilot.

With any luck, a Fleet buoy would record and retransmit. Other ships might consider what they were doing before *Astrum* could leave the system. Perhaps one or two were fueled and able to follow *Astrum* to Groombridge.

Her hope was not mathematically likely. Nonetheless, Avi keyed the transmission.

November 10, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Jannah (Wolf Habitat Cluster) (Murphy)

Murphy had no strength to manage even a half-smile. “Showing off your cuddly side, Avinashini?”

No reply came over comm.

November 10, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Jannah (Wolf Habitat Cluster) (Urwah)

He’d hoped she would get sane. He’d hoped she might realize that this was a futile battle. She could go with him, prepare the last defense of Sol against the zhīzhū. If they lost, they would lose together.

He thought he’d hoped all that.

He had no right to have any such hope. That was, probably why he had hidden it from himself all this time. She wasn’t People of the Book, he reminded himself. She was also his superior officer.

That was it. She was committed, against all logic. She might go on with the suicidal insanity, but he need not. The zhīzhū were bad neighbors, no matter how wrong genocide could be. He had done his job, protected the Emperor. He could have, should have gotten off ship at Sol. Now, at least, he could help defend Jannah when the zhīzhū retaliated. He could use a lifeboat.

One marine, one battlesuit. How much could he help? How much would he have to if the zhīzhū were sick and dying?

The memory of Horn warriors attacking a single human flashed through his mind. They had sought human blood. He’d killed them.

They had sought to balance the books. One innocent human’s life against those of how many innocent Cetians?

Urwah sealed the helmet of his battlesuit. “Ready to defend against boarders, Commander.” He checked his weapons. “Fahnisht, I want you to keep guard on Murphy, just in case they

board. Going to get ugly.”

November 10, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Jannah (Wolf Habitat Cluster) (Avinashini)

There was nothing else to do. Avi focused on her firing solutions. “A whole bunch of new blips,” Murphy reported. The fool was still trying to do two jobs. “Breaking off *Hibernia*.”

“I know. They’re launching their Gandivas first.” Avi found her tone bitter. “They’ll be in firing range in about two minutes – just as we will be.” She reset all assumptions. “I am going to fire everything on *Astrum*. I can’t fight off that many Gandivas. If you disagree ...”

“I’m just a grease-monkey.”

“May the gods treat us all well,” she said, keying in the re-configuration.

Urwah’s uplink registered on a corner of her display. He entered the con. “I’ve got sensors, pygmy. Keep power up. Need the particle gun to fan ahead into the enemy ordnance.” He took the seat to her right, his battlesuit sealed. “My heads-up is online.”

Avi glanced at him. “Thank you, Urwah.”

“You rank me,” he responded, trying to brush it away. “You stay, I stay. Missiles. The Gandivas are firing.”

They weren’t in range yet – what foolishness was this? Avi broke her attention, expanded her tactical sub-display. Three, then four Gandivas were indeed already engaging. Every weapon system – missiles, particle weapons, chaff projectiles – fired.

Fired rearward.

The only target in that direction, or in their range at all, was *Hibernia*.

Avi shivered at the results. Gandivas still on their pylons took friendly fire. Docking pylons shattered in all directions. *Hibernia*’s main engineering decks began spewing plasma as the

main sensor array drifted away from the hull.

"What span of life itself seem sweet, bought with such blood?"

Men and women she had known once had heard her, taken her side against orders. They had fired on other comrades on *her* assurance that she was fighting for the gods, the just. She lowered her head, overwhelmed with gratitude and despair. *Hibernia* was no longer a threat.

Comm lit up: neither audio nor visual, a single typed message in standard. "*Hibernia* neutralized. Request your testimony at Court Martial. Respects to the Queen of Helper. Macpherson."

Donal was, after all, better than Ramachandra. Gods, she owed puja. She allowed herself a wistful memory of lips kissing down her neck, but that was not mattered to her now. The stronger memory was of his respect after those hard days of training.

She gave her attention back to her firing solutions.

Urwah had been speaking quietly to O'Meath. "Awful," was O'Meath's only comment. His voice openly carried as much sorrow as she pushed deep down her throat, packed down with the other sorrows already there.

Avi focused on the boards, watched the final seconds tick down. Her fingers trembled as she keyed in the final approvals.

Granuaile went through a grav-ripple. Through the moment of nausea, before the EM sensors could confirm, Avi knew that Ramachandra had already taken *Mundi Astrum* over the lip. The missiles would never reach the mutinous ship. Avi keyed the abort. The sensors nonetheless revealed expanding, twisted metal. *Astrum's* gravitic burst had destroyed the fuel tender.

Ramachandra had also sacrificed Fleet comrades. Was she better or worse than him?

Taking no more than a second's break, she began reviewing the readings needed to calculate the jump to Groombridge 1618. She heard Urwah in the background, calling for refueling.

None was offered. No vessel agreed to match and resupply. *Hibernia* most likely could not. Even Macpherson remained si-

Demand the Debt That's Owing

lent. Wolf remained divided, at best.

Avinashini began calculating their fuel dive vector, to be followed by the next jump. This started, she checked the systems. Several had gone to “amber.” She would have to see if Murphy could find time to patch them together before or during the jump.

Granuaile was showing the wear of hard jumps. One way or another, this would have to be the final pursuit jump.

Chapter 16

November 12, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Wolf 359 to Groombridge 1618) (Urwah)

Urk pushed his shoulders through the narrow access into the main turret assembly. The battlesuit was poorly suited for work in *Granuaile*'s tight spaces, but there were no other choices. The turret was no longer airtight. This was the only pressure suit that fit the marine.

He wasn't a highly trained tech, but Murphy was busy keeping the drives from tearing the engineering deck apart. Someone had to make sure that the particle cannon was ready to fire when they bounced over the lip. Fortunately, the problems were with the aiming magnets and motors, simple enough to adjust with instructions.

Urwah found the problem quickly enough. *Granuaile* had pushed through chaff expelled by *Hibernia*. Bits and pieces of metal and stone had punched holes through the armor and lodged in the mechanical systems. Thankfully, pulling the junk out and freeing the mechanisms would be merely tedious.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

November 13, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Wolf 359 to Groombridge 1618) (Avinashini)

The four sat around the galley table, reviewing the main display as they ate. Avi's information had expanded with brief glimpses during combat, but there was nothing entirely new.

"The second *Eighmy* has that large, single rock in its forward missile bay. It has been cradled and heavily braced. As I thought, crew quarters, ordnance and other bays were gutted and replaced with extra fuel tanks. Its main bridge even seems to have been sealed off, though the computer complex is still there."

Murphy spoke around the piece of meat he was chewing. "Scavenged for spares, probably. Makes sense if they're going to use it for rock-throwing."

"It is more than that. The ship is designed to be blown clear at some point. The whole hull is part of their plan."

Uriah had already finished. "An old-fashioned deadfall. Drop it and let gravity do the work."

"Yes and no. It retains its maneuvering drives. It is more like a massive missile, but its engines will be used to spiral it in."

"They still use the rock to protect the virus."

"Yes. Unimportant for the moment." Avi highlighted points on the stanchions connecting the two ships. "Those brackets are the same on every one. They're designed to make placing charges easy."

"The charges aren't built in, though," Murphy pointed out.

"No. They might be lost on refueling dives. The crew will EVA to place them at the last minute."

"Not the crew," Urk interjected. "Marines."

"That is what I meant."

"You know how it works. Those marines are expendables." Urwah leaned forward. "They'll go out from the forward-most locks. They'll have reels with them and use inertia to rappel down the hull. There are four main lines of connectors, so they'll have at least eight marines on it. Twelve if they can spare them. Plus a few inside, passing up charges." He sat back, looked at Murphy. "A Gatling gun would be a big help. Kill them quick

before they get charges on. Then the main ship wouldn't be able to break away."

"That much is true," Avi agreed. "But it makes little difference. The point is that the secondary hull is disposable. It is expected to be part of the missile. They need not launch the missile separately."

"It makes a damned big difference," Urk responded. "It says that the main ship and its crew *isn't* disposable. In their opinion, anyway. The ship, or at least some of the crew, are supposed to come back. It's not a suicide run. Not if they can help it by tossing away a few grunts."

"I'm afraid I do not see your point."

Fahnisht had been following as best he could on the translation circuit. "*The enemy shows a weakness. Always attack a weakness when it presents itself.*" He waited for the translator to give the words to Avinashini and Urwah.

Murphy understood at once. "We have our own weaknesses. To start with, I don't have a Gatling gun."

"I know, I checked." Urwah seemed grim. "Disappointed. Thought you were stocked."

"At close range, *Granuaile's* lasers and the particle gun will be sufficient." Avi frowned, added another concern. "Urwah and I may know some of these marines."

O'Meath looked at her. "You're pretty sure you know the helm officer. Your fiancé? Is that a problem, too?"

Avi surprised with the ease of her answer. "No." She felt no hesitation, no guilt. "So – we add to the plan. If possible, we will disrupt the attempt to jettison the secondary hull. We shall, at the least, force them to die with their weapon."

The other three assented.

"Now, we must break the rules of physics to keep that rock from hitting where it must hit." She exhaled. "Once it starts falling inward, it must fall."

"Only if it *is* falling," Murphy responded. "Not if it's under power. I'm going to need computer access. Take over their helm."

"What, they're going to let you uplink?" Urk sat back, half-

turned his head away in disgust. "I don't think it'll be all that easy. You won't get into that computer unless you're on their bridge."

"We board, then." Murphy pointed at the access tubes connecting the two ships belly-to-belly. "Not regulation, I'll bet. We may be able to get in through there."

"Both the main bridge and the auxiliary bridge will be guarded." Avi shook her head. "You'll not be allowed to stroll in and take over the helm."

"I know that." Murphy enlarged the view of the combined ship, pointed at the second vessel. "The one with the rock — they're planning on dumping it. Whole, with its drives blazing to make sure it goes to target."

"Yes, I explained that" Avi agreed, impatiently. "Even without the disease, it will cause a huge crater, send dust in the air, probably cool the planet substantially."

"Exactly." Murphy pointed at the engineering section. "We've chased it enough times. Its grav thrusters are powered up and running." He shifted attention to the other hull's bridge. "Ramachandra is controlling them both, probably from here. Most of the crew will be in *this* hull, when they go for broke."

"You assume humanity in Ramachandra's thinking," Avi said bitterly.

"*Astrum* can't be that rich in people that they'll keep the deadfall hull fully manned when they break it off," Murphy replied. "It's probably not fully manned now, remember?"

"At most a skeleton crew," Urwah agreed. "Maybe not that. A few engineers. We can get through them. But we don't have an FDC or a crew of our own marines to bore in."

"One marine, one crazy goddam Jin Jun, the hottest damned pilot around," Murphy replied. "Worth a squad or two of marines, at least."

"Quit joking. Still no FDC."

"*Granuaile* gets us close. I have firepower in the lockers. Maybe we can rig the gravver to get across."

Urwah considered. "Easier to use a boarding line, if you've got one."

“I’ve got one.”

Urwah studied the ship schematics a moment, then keyed. “Avi gets us close. Then you and I get over there. We can get on board – probably through a lifeboat lock. We may have to blow one to get in.”

“Easy as pie.”

“Jin Jun bullshit. This is a dangerous EVA. Then we have to fight when we’re on board. They’ll have marines in there until the last minute, if they see us coming. They’ll try to kill us off.”

“They will see us,” Avi assured. “We will be eyeball-close.”

“We don’t care if we blow the hell out of the inside of that ship,” Murphy added. “We go in with grenade launchers and take out anything that moves. Not a surgical strike. Not until we get to engineering, anyway.”

“They may have grenade launchers, too,” Urwah responded. “And they won’t be worried about keeping any controls intact.”

“The controls have to work for Ramachandra to run it from the other side. The computer links, at least. They won’t take out cables. I’m willing to bet I can hack in.”

Avi shook her head. “There must be a simpler way to solve the problem. Two of you against at least a squad.”

“Maybe two squads,” Urwah agreed. “Two crazies.” He smiled. “I’m getting to like this.”

Fahnisht had been following the translation through his ear-piece. He spoke in his own language. “Three,” echoed through the translator. “All warriors.”

Murphy looked over at his Clanlord. “I wish it were,” he said. “We could use you. But I don’t have any way to get you in there. You won’t fit into an EVA suit.” Murphy ran his hand through his hair. “No helmet made for your horn.”

“Maybe we can adapt something,” Urwah suggested.

“You work on that,” Murphy said, dismissing the matter. “I’ll have enough to do getting ready to hack into its computers. If they’ve been smart and changed the access codes, it’ll be a mother.”

“Ramachandra will not have allowed the codes to go unchanged.” The set of her eyes spoke to Avi’s certainty.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

“Like I said, a damned mother.”

November 13, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Wolf 359 to Groombridge 1618) (Fahnisht)

Fahnisht carried all of the collected meal trays back to the galley. The task had become routine again, as serving the Tent-lords had been routine for him as a young warrior. Still, there was no laughter, little joy in these meals. Even Kameef seemed unable to find the humor that had always marked him a warrior.

The trays disposed of, he went into the larger common room. There was nothing here for a warrior to do but to uselessly prepare for the next battle from which he would be excluded. He reached up and felt his horn. Here, unable to wear all of the clothes Kameef said were necessary, he was as ineffective as any Hornless from the Towns.

He had never before found his horn a thing of shame.

November 14, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Wolf 359 to Groombridge 1618) (Murphy)

Murphy felt his hammock sway suddenly. He opened his eyes as he grabbed for the edges. “Shit – what?”

“It’s me.” Avi’s voice seemed out of place in the dim engineering deck. His eyes refused to focus at first, but cleared. The curved whiteness of her eyes almost glowed against the sepia skin.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“We need to discuss something,” she said. “This is a command decision,” she said. “Not something to be discussed in a conference.”

“You’re Lead. You say it – you’re in charge. Not me, not anyone else.”

“I feel you have input I need.”

Murphy sat up, rubbing his eyes. “All right. But I’d like to sleep while the engines are running smooth.”

Avi nodded. “It is simple. If we can catch up, we should be close enough to make contact.”

“I don’t think we’re going to talk them out of this.”

“*Physical* contact, O’Meath. We are out of nuclear warheads. The particle cannons are shorter-range. We have limited chemical warheads. We are agreed that neither the particle cannons nor the lasers can burn away the rock.”

“You’re not thinking positive here.”

“*Granuaile* could be a missile.”

Murphy laid back in his hammock. He felt it sway slightly as he gathered his thoughts. “You have a death-wish, don’t you? Buddha Christ Almighty. Besides, impact will at best fracture the rock. It probably won’t clear out the biologicals. Not all of them, anyway. That’s the whole point of surrounding them in rock, remember? Re-entry.”

“We vent plasma. The fusion drive. Can you overload the drives? Cause an explosion?”

He rubbed his forehead. It was hard to make a fusion drive into a real bomb. A gravitic over-squeeze in the fusion chambers at the moment of impact would release a plasma burst, not a full-fledged explosion. The plasma itself would do a lot, though. It might be enough to vaporize a chunk of the Humanitas vessel. It would be a quick death for anyone on either ship.

It would still leave a rock full of virus ampoules on a final trajectory. Plasma might evaporate steel, but not the entire rock. The ampoules would still be there to crack, release whatever had been designed against the zhīzhū. Killing the crew and slagging the ship would not change Newton’s laws.

“Not a good option. Rock falls, with nothing to stop it. They’ll be on course from the second they bounce over the lip. So that damned rock is going to fall, with whatever virus inside it survives.”

“What else do you suggest? It will fall even if we burn holes in the hull. We cannot sit still and do nothing. At the very least,

we may weaken the virus.”

“Pretty damned desperate, if you ask me.”

“If you cannot keep the rock from falling, desperation will be all that we have left.” She locked eyes with him. “They’ll help us catch up,” Avi pointed out. “This attack isn’t a fly-by, and the rock they’re dropping is huge. They’ll need to slow *Astrum* down slightly for capture, release, then boost vector to pass the planet. They also won’t want to crack the planet’s crust. They want the planet. They’ll be in full deceleration until they release the rock, then accelerate away.”

“Slingshot ballet.” O’Meath shifted in his hammock. “All the fun we can have without me in a tutu.”

She ignored his irrelevant interjection and the image it conveyed. “We don’t have to decelerate. If we keep our speed up, we can strike and take them out. We’ll be losing an advantage by matching speeds. Motion is energy. *Granuaile* can be a projectile.”

“I still don’t like it. Suicidal insanity’s the last resort.”

“A boarding party of two isn’t insane? Or suicidal?”

“We’ll at least get to enjoy the death.”

“You are both fools,” Avi said. She stood. “I am Lead. I will make the decision.”

“It’s yours to make,” O’Meath replied. “But I like two shots over one. If you want the opinion of a man in a tutu.”

“You take *nothing* seriously.”

“No point in dying with a sour stomach.” He leaned back. “Let me sleep while the quanta and my drives are behaving.”

She shook her head and stood. “You are too arrogantly optimistic to understand the truth.”

Buddha Christ Almighty, he was aroused. She’d been causing that more and more, lately. She was more likely to take Fahnisht into her bed than himself. Worse, if she gave in, she would insist that it meant more than good fun between consenting adults. He’d learned to avoid that over the years.

November 16, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Wolf 359 to Groombridge 1618) (Avinashini)

Murphy had been quiet, shifting uncomfortably in the hammock. “We’ll rig it,” he finally agreed. He remained reluctant. “You’re Lead. And persistent. You say do, I do. I can set a simple key-sequence. But that’s *still* the last resort.”

“Lasers against armored hull are not going to stop the attack, O’Meath.”

“No – but mass suicide won’t work, either. I don’t like dying for no reason.” He paused, putting on that idiot grin. “Besides, I want to live long enough to get to – through your own defenses.”

He was fishing, showing the damnable charm which must work on more libertine women. “No one will not ‘get through my defenses’ without marriage. And you are not Hindu.” She paused. “Nor would I marry you if you were.”

“I like a challenge.”

The surprising hint of pleasure she felt at O’Meath’s impudence angered her. “Stay on point. We must end that ship. I see no option apart from ‘mass suicide.’”

“Urk’s been aboard a ship like that,” Murphy pointed out. “We’ve gone through that. If we match speed and trajectory, we can get aboard. And Fahnisht – I’ll take him in any close-arms fight. If Urk can adapt a helmet for him.”

“Three of you – one to whom steel is high technology! You’ll be killed even if you board alive.”

“Short chances of survival are better than no chance.”

“Taking a foolish chance to delay your death may give them time they need. I thought you had decided that the zhīzhū should have a chance to make us their food.”

“Like I said, you’re Lead.” Murphy saw the dark circles under her eyes. She had also been losing sleep over these long jumps. “I’ll rig a key sequence next time I’m up,” he said. “I need some sleep, though. So do you. Either get to your cabin or crawl in here with me.”

“You will never be so fortunate.” She stood, left the platform and the engineering deck quickly. She was afraid she might

make a liar of herself if she stayed any longer. She needed to rest and regain her rationality.

November 17, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Wolf 359 to Groombridge 1618) (Urwah)

Urwah entered the starboard side of the engineering compartment, a spare helmet under his arm. He stood for a few moments, studying the tools and materials available to him. There was not much here with which to work. *Granuaile* was well equipped for a small vessel, but it had nothing like a full marine armory.

He set the helmet on the bench. Taking a marker, he drew a circle on the helmet where the chieftain's horn would have to extend. Urwah took a drill from its clip on the wall and chose a small bit. The device put the pilot hole at the center of the circle. A saw-toothed hole-cutter followed, perfecting the circle hole. That done, he smoothed the edges. As he finished each stage, he placed the tool back in its rack.

Building up an additional space for the horn was not as quick or simple. He had no furnace to allow shaping of the single cylindrical unit he envisioned. Urwah thus spent several hours assembling a bulge large enough from layers of smaller patching plates, painstakingly bonded at the edges with emergency cement. Each bond was bathed with UV light to activate and cure the cement. Finally, he cemented the entire unit to the helmet itself, bathed the entire seam thoroughly, pointing the emitter tip at every possible angle.

He heard Fahnisht enter the engineering deck from the port side. The Cetian addressed O'Meath, presumably bringing food. His role had been diminished to serving Avi and the pygmy. Fahnisht was catering to the Hornless who were now pressing his own suit for a race's right to revenge.

Urwah picked up the helmet, looked closely at the new seams. No obvious holes or defects showed. The assembly

would not survive a direct hit from a projectile weapon, but it might hold pressure. He carried the helmet below decks to the EVA locker.

Urwah locked the helmet to a battlesuit. He lugged the empty suit to the airlock, put it down and activated the life support. Keying into the system, he set the internal pressure twenty-five percent too high. The read-out remained steady. The make-shift horn-bulge seemed to be holding. Urwah became optimistic that the Horn would be able to join the assault.

He stepped out of the lock and sealed it behind him. The acid test was exposure to vacuum. Urwah cycled the pumps, then keyed up the monitor cam to his personal heads-up. The display formed in front of him and made the back of his eyes itch.

The airlock pressure dropped. The bulge held for the first few moments. Pressure went to zero. The bulge continued to hold. He watched the clock. He needed five minutes to be sure.

At four minutes, the horn-bulge shattered. A ragged hole appeared in place of the neatly cut circle. Air rushed out the hole, vapor condensing and freezing in the cold vacuum.

There were no other materials on board which would serve. He could not risk destroying another helmet or using up remaining emergency patches. Fahnisht would have to remain behind.

November 23, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Wolf 359 to Groombridge1618) (Murphy)

“There is no way for you to join us,” Murphy explained. *“The air will be poured out. You will die, with no Fire to send home your spirit.”* He looked Fahnisht in the eye. The Clanlord had recovered much of his strength over the voyage. He and Urwah had spent many hours in the common area, training each other in techniques of war. He and the marine had gained mutual respect, if nothing else.

“You will wear the air-pitchers,” the Clanlord responded. *“The air will stay inside those pitchers. I will wear one, also.”*

Demand the Debt That's Owing

"It needs the head-pitcher," Murphy explained patiently. *"I have no head-pitcher that will contain your long-lived horn. I have no tools to make such a pitcher, or reshape one – I am not Townfolk. Urwah has tried."*

Fahnisht looked down a moment, paused. He lifted his eyes again to lock gaze with Murphy. *"Then I shall have to shorten my horn to fit the head-pitcher."*

"No." The single human syllable was enough.

"Yes." Fahnisht returned to his own language. *"We have blood between us, Kameef. This"* – he touched the ring nailed into his horn – *"is metal, not blood."* He brushed a fingertip along the base of the horn itself. *"This is not blood either. Few remain in my clan. I left them behind."* The alien eyes pleaded. *"Do not leave me behind. Hornless, I redeem much, much blood. Horned, I live with new shame."*

Murphy looked at the horn. It had been shorter when he first met Fahnisht. Now it was a full fifteen centimeters, curved backward. To a Horn Warrior of the plains, it bespoke age, experience, and wisdom. A horn of that length had survived battles and Challenge for leadership. Fahnisht would be looked to for advice in any clan with such a horn, regardless of whether he also had a ring nailed near the base. Cowards and careless warriors did not grow such horns. The careless warriors died; the cowards were shamed by forcible cutting at the base.

"Please, Kameef."

Fahnisht was volunteering to become outcast – "Townfolk." He was asking to be reviled as a Horn who could not survive on the plains, a weakling requiring the protection of a settled, walled-off, dependant craven.

Murphy signed his honor and respect, as best he could with human hands. *"You are a Clanlord among Clanlords,"* he said. *"To you will still more blood be owed."*

"The blood owed to me, that blood I owe – I can no longer measure all, Kameef. Horned or hornless, I do what I must. Promise only that you will ask the smoke of some pyre to help my soul along if I die outside the air. Promise that you will ask the Clan to burn my husk, no matter the hornless shame."

“I am a Tentlord of Clan Fahnisht.” Murphy reached out, put his hand on the Horn’s shoulder. *“I will find the wood, and the flat stone, and I will send your soul out in the smoke. You will not be left to rot like the hornless. Not if I live.”*

“Nor will you, if I can bring your husk to Fire, Kameef. Nor will you.” Fahnisht pulled out his knife. Deftly, he sliced a centimeter-long crease along his left cheek. Blood trickled out and down. He offered the knife to O’Meath.

O’Meath took the knife, mirrored the gesture. He felt the warm blood slide down his left cheek.

Murphy stood silently a moment, gauging the promises he had just joined. They were not different, just more firm than ever before.

A human throat cleared behind him. Murphy glanced back, slightly upward, to see Avinashini. She had padded silently, her feet bare, arms by her side. Urk stood behind and to the right.

“We heard on the comm. Translated.” She held out a hand. It trembled slightly, but her meaning was clear.

Murphy switched to Common. *“This isn’t something minor.”*

“I know what it is, heathen. My own gods may disapprove.” She moved her hand slightly but insistently forward, brown palm waiting. Her almond, brown eyes were wide, moist and certain.

Murphy handed her the knife.

She quickly, deftly made an oozing crease near her ear. She looked Fahnisht in the eye, holding his gaze, handing the knife to the marine without breaking the connection. In the periphery, Murphy saw Urk slice himself efficiently, hold the knife hilt-first out to the Horn.

Fahnisht took the knife back. He honored the red-stained edge, then wiped and sheathed it. *“Our blood is joined. Your debts are mine.”*

Avi stepped forward, placed her palms together, and bowed to Fahnisht. *“Namaste. My people also release the souls of the dead with flame. I will not leave your soul trapped if your body dies.”*

Murphy glanced at Fahnisht. The Clanlord gestured his un-

Demand the Debt That's Owing

derstanding. "*Make me fit the head-pitcher.*"

"There's a bone-saw in the med-bay," Urk said. He turned to lead them there.

Chapter17

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Ramachandra)

Mundi Astrum suffered through the turbulence of its most turbulent squeeze-out, objects breaking loose, crew slamming back and forth in couches. The hull groaned, threatened to pull apart. Fine dust billowed through the bridge. He scanned the boards. She had come out as expected, at the edge of the planet's gravity well.

"Reserve engineers to main," the Captain ordered. "Marines, move the bodies."

The collision alarm blared, cut out, blared again. The forward view flickered, blurred, then focused as gravitic distortion rippled away from the vessel.

"All hands brace!" someone shouted – sensors or gunnery – too late. The stars ahead were hidden by a curving metallic form. Inertia returned, gravity disappeared. The safety harness crushed up against ribs and thorax.

Ramachandra did all he could, all anyone could: rode out the pitch, yaw, and pain as systems crashed, lights flickered, metal moaned and screeched. On external view after view, junk streamed by. Shredded metal and composites, armored hull-plate, cables, bits and chunks of machinery, furniture suited for four-legged creatures, and gods alone knew what else swarmed

around *Mundi Astrum*.

Hundreds of zhīzhū bodies were mixed with the wreckage. Some were close enough to distinguish. Only four facts were conclusively known of the zhīzhū: they were radially symmetrical, technologically intelligent, competitors for habitable planets and systems, and carnivorous without a minimum of human decorum.

No fanciful religion was needed to justify exterminating them.

The inertial fields returned. Gravity did not. Other systems remained down. Ramachandra focused on the data being built on his displays. On one side, other vessels and objects were being charted. On the other, *Mundi Astrum*'s collision damage was being assessed.

Two zhīzhū capital vessels were closing on them. The third, by simple chance, had been dead ahead. Gravitic ripples had done some of the damage. The deadfall's rock-enforced nose had done the rest.

His own ship's damage assessments started coming through. The collision had damaged the front missile bay on *Mundi Astrum*'s secondary hull, the deadfall. That was of little import. The main hull was less damaged. A few of the defensive turrets were sheared away. A few of the crew had been lost, no great matter. The main missile bays were all operational.

The connecting frame between the two hulls was strained, possibly sheared in several locations. It would not withstand much additional stress. It might well come apart if the zhīzhū made any solid hits. The payload might be diverted, if the jettison occurred too soon.

The payload must be delivered.

The Captain was giving orders over comm, preparing firing solutions and maneuvers as if they had no issues, no concerns. The Captain was, as expected, still an incompetent fool. The combined ship had to get through the only next seventy minutes. After that, the secondary hull would become the missile. The open forward missile bay would allow the hull to peel and flake away in re-entry, freeing the rock to flare downward. Connected

to the dead hull or not, the rock would slam into the surface and splash high. The biologicals would be released to drift back to the surface layers of atmosphere.

Zhīzhū would become infected. Whether the colony as a whole evacuated or not, some would travel back to Alula Australis before the disease became apparent. Others would be infected. The disease would gain a foothold before the enemy knew it was threatened.

Ramachandra made for the closer of the two defending ships. He keyed comm. "Helm, assuming full operational control." He keyed another sequence, locking out the captain. "Captain, see to the gunnery. I will handle maneuvering."

The beet-red face forced itself onto a comm sub-display. "Ramachandra, who the hell do you think you are?"

Ramachandra did not bother to respond. He keyed a minor course adjustment. "Marines, you will set the separation charges as instructed." He looked again at the course data. "Captain, please prepare the gunnery solutions using the remaining bays."

The Captain was silent for a moment, then acknowledged. He was unhappy, to say the least. That was of no matter. Ramachandra was not concerned with the happiness of one or two fools. "Skew-and-flip in five minutes," Ramachandra advised the comm officer. "Full braking in seven."

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Vele)

Larissa Vele clamped down her helmet, pulled up comm. "Move it, marines," she heard. "All jettison teams, to your exit points. Blow the escape pods. The One True God goes with you."

She looked at her team. "Got everything?"

"Set, Sarge."

Sirens blared. Most of the small engineering staff was locking down controls in preparation. Its job monitoring the dead-

Demand the Debt That's Owing

fall's drives and power plant were done. The engineers would get through the tubes and back aboard *Astrum* before the charges were blown.

"Jettison teams, I have the sixty-second clearance from helm. The job clock is started. You're all on auto from here."

"We die for the good of God," someone said. Other equivalents sounded through the comm channels. Engineers began to scramble out and through the hatch.

Lar reached for the panel, watched the count. The last engineer was already on the other side of the hatch, closing and dogging it shut. By the fifteen-second mark, the hatch was tight.

Why bother to conserve the air supply on the deadfall at this point?

No matter. "Everyone to your lifeboats." She led her own team to its post. She sealed the exit and pressed the launch button. A shiver of thrust vibrated the hull as the capsule on the other side blew free.

A stud opened the emergency release valve for the lock. The deck depressurized. When the out-blast died away, her assistant cranked open the hatch. "Lines."

The crew clipped their lines and prepared to rappel.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

Granuaile burst smoothly out of hyperspace, as smoothly as any normal transition. Avi's boards cleared to green immediately. Engineering control transferred without a hitch.

Murphy appeared on comm, wiping his chin with a sleeve. "You're getting good at this, Lovely-legs. Hardly a twinge. You're running the whole boat now."

"Acknowledged." She looked at the main sensor readouts. *Granuaile* was close to *Astrum*, far closer than she had hoped. Her math was getting better. She had guessed right about Ramachandra; he had set an arrogantly tight course for this last

leg. “You need to get forward – *Mundi Astrum* is dead ahead, and not more than fifty-five minutes from the release point. It will probably be less. Ramachandra will be maneuvering to brake almost immediately.”

“I can run the guns for you for a few more minutes.”

“I have full gunnery control already. Get forward and get into your battlesuit.”

“On the way.” He whistled a tune, that damnable old Irish tune about long voyages.

“Good luck, O’Meath.” She might not see the dimmable man again. “Murphy.” Avi gave her attention to the boards. She ignored Murphy’s haggard look, not so well hidden by his habitual cheer. He should be collapsing by now. He apparently refused to do so by mere will.

He had to hold together for another hour.

Avi keyed comm. “Urwah.”

“Yeah?”

She hesitated, found her mouth sticky-dry. “Try to get back alive. All of you.”

“It’s in the mission checklist. You try to stay alive, too.”

“I will, Urwah.”

She closed the channel. She needed to review the tactical situation. Passive scans picked up two zhīzhū spheres approaching *Mundi Astrum* from in-system. No doubt existed: the zhīzhū were here, as ready to defend as they could be with short warning.

Sensors picked up an expanding stream of junk, a wake of metal and refuse behind *Mundi Astrum*. A third ship had been pulverized already. Avi’s fingers played across the keys, looking for the data that would confirm her best guess: collision. A zhīzhū sphere had been on top of the exit point.

Avi contained disbelief. Accidental collision was virtually unknown to interstellar flight. There was too much space for such close calls. Could Ramachandra have had advance information on zhīzhū routes? Was it some inspired zhīzhū calculation? Could the zhīzhū predict a hyperspace exit before it occurred?

Dumb luck, she reassured herself. No one could predict that

Demand the Debt That's Owing

exactly where a ship would come over the lip.

Avi keyed the throttles forward. The expanding debris cone would confuse *Mundi Astrum*'s rearward tracking. However the zhīzhū had obtained this opportunity for their unexpected, suicidally insane human allies, she could not afford to waste it.

She pulled back slightly on thrust. If *Mundi Astrum* was fully engaged forward, it would give less attention aft. She needed to give them time to get too busy to worry about a small Jin Jun vessel.

Mundi Astrum was maneuvering to bring batteries to bear on the remaining zhīzhū ships. She would race by them, much as so many zhīzhū ships had raced by Fleet defensive perimeters. They would have the upper hand, fire all their missiles, leave no defenders behind.

Missiles streaked away, leaving behind only flickering sensor contacts. Missile after missile fired off at the approaching zhīzhū ships. The tactic was simple: overwhelm the defenders with massive firepower. As good as they were, zhīzhū defensive gunners and helm operators would be severely tasked to defend and survive against the onslaught. *Mundi Astrum* was rapidly exhausting her missile stores.

Avi keyed off the verbal warnings and jammed the throttles to maximum. A slight course correction brought *Granuaile* on a closer arc. *Astrum*'s heavy fire gave her all the details she needed for her own course calculations.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

Urk went around O'Meath in the tight space, got the smaller man behind him. He felt his voice go quiet. "My specialty. No more Jin Jun bullshit." He signed to Fahnisht, spoke at the same time. "Form on me. Keep Kameef alive – we need *him* more than either of us. Got it?"

Fahnisht managed a human-like thumbs-up. "Kameef lives,

we buy blood.” There was satisfaction in the non-human growl. “*We will together honor the Flames that consume us,*” he added in his own language.

“And stick to Common,” Urk added. “No time for translation. You know Common better than I can bark like a dog.”

“Buddha Christ Almighty,” Murphy grumbled. “Shouldn’t have explained Jin Jun protocol to you, you big asshole.”

Fahnisht half-turned. “*Buhll-schidt,*” he managed.

Urk smiled firmly, returned the thumbs-up. Humor kept the fear at bay.

Avi’s voice cut through the chatter. “Closing! Bleed the lock.”

“Suits tight.” Urk tapped the controls. His battlesuit grew rigid as the air was scavenged into the ship’s tanks. The hatch indicator went from red to green.

Urk took the line-gun from O’Meath. “Take hold. Clips on rings.”

He clipped a meter-line to his belt and Fahnisht’s. Murphy did the same for himself and the Horn. Urk tugged at the lines, assuring himself that both were tight, then tapped the grav control.

Like the atmosphere, weight bled away, diminishing to allow blood pressure and circulation to adapt. In moments, he felt weightlessness through the end of pressure on his soles and the release of knee joints. Only the anti-inertial fields kept him from slamming into the back of the lock.

Urk pushed the hatch control. The circular plate split into two halves and slid back into the bulkheads. The deep black vacuum was revealed, stars too far away to give any hint of motion.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Fahnisht)

Fahnisht gazed outward. Suddenly, he was back on the plains, looking up at the night sky. No horizon kept him upright.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

No grass-sweet breeze flared his nostrils. The whirring of small fans and sounds of his own breathing filled his ears, not the whirr of insects and movement of small animals. Blackness, as complete as any Horn had ever seen, filled with sharp pinpoints of white and color.

Kameef had described it to him. The words could not say the immensity of empty.

The stars whirled. "We're about to pass *Astrum*," Kameef commented. "Then brake."

Fahnisht watched a long object flash by – two mountain's worth of metal. Then there were two separate mountains, with a gap between, and various angles of metal holding them together. He recognized it as the *Mundi Astrum*, as he had seen it in the displays Kameef and the others had studied. Alternating lights and shadow played across it. He thought he saw figures in the distance. It was gone in a second as the stars continued to wheel around.

He looked down at his left arm for the weapon Oorh-whaah had patiently taught him to use. It was no fit weapon for a Horn Clanlord. There could be no honor in using it, killing from afar.

Hornless, he now was. He would fight without even a hint of honor. No other choice was given. This was battle for more than one circle of the plains. He touched the haft of his sword through the restricting gloves. He had insisted on bringing it. Oorh-whaah had doubted, Kameef had not.

Now a brighter light could be seen ahead, growing brighter. The light took shape, becoming a rectangle, then a series of connected rectangles. He again recognized the rearward portion of the enemy ships. It approached slowly this time.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

The two zhīzhū spheres were gone, destroyed in the hail of missiles from the joined missile corvettes. She could no longer

depend on distraction to protect her from *Astrum*'s guns.

Avi tapped a key to her left, returned her grip to the dual control sticks. *Granuaile* confirmed the order: "Firing bow approach pattern."

Avi watched the aft end of *Mundi Astrum* grow closer by the second. At this range, the computer picked off her targets with ease. Particle accelerators and lasers were pounding EM and radiation into the main sensor arrays, blinding the enemy. She held the remaining close-combat missiles back, per plan.

The long-range visual tracked and zoomed on the display to her right. *Astrum*'s duel hulls skewed, seemed to pivot. Avi cut back the throttle. *Granuaile* flashed by the paired missile corvettes. Avi wasted no time, using the control sticks to rotate and pivot. Her own internal calculations kicked into overdrive. For a moment, she envisioned red rock walls, felt the phantom of air sweeping past her ears. "*Queen of Helper*" whispered from nowhere, but the voice wasn't Donal's.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Ramachandra)

Alarms keened throughout the bridge. Ramachandra glanced at the digest from main sensors: the damned Jin Jun ship had burst into space. It was accelerating toward the planet and *Astrum*, where *Astrum* was firing to brake. "Captain, target *Granuaile*," he said.

This time, Avinashini had come out of hyperspace in close pursuit. Her skills were improving.

"Both spheres are done. We've emptied the bow magazines," the Captain replied. "Sensors, get good data so we can fire the particle cannons, before *Granuaile* ranges us!"

More alarms sounded. Red lights flashed on his displays. The forward sensor arrays were off-line. *Granuaile* had already gotten her shots off, with pinpoint accuracy. Ramachandra directed an obscenity at his betrothed, wished she was in front of

him for a proper beating.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

Far enough. She cut the drives entirely, spun *Granuaile* to reverse thrust. Still pulling away from *Mundi Astrum*, she kicked full power back into the mains. *Granuaile* shuddered, protesting the rough treatment. Another key-tap brought *Granuaile's* acknowledgement: "Firing aft approach pattern."

Granuaile decelerated hard. She closed to within a hundred meters of *Astrum*. The visual zoomed up along the hull. As expected, combat-suited marines were rappelling down from the aft, simple inertia serving in place of gravity. The lines emerged from empty escape pod docks in the engineering regions. The marines were already more than a third of the way forward, attesting to rapid work.

Avi zoomed in on the most successful of the four, locked the sights on him. She keyed the forward arms. Rapid laser pulses flashed out. The marine writhed, probably screamed for a brief moment of agony – burning, decompressing, and blowing apart from steaming internal organs, all at the same time.

He or she had once been a comrade.

She got a second marine in the sights, again did what was necessary. Again the death was quick, as far more focused power than was necessary to kill a person.

The other two marines must have realized what was happening, or been warned. They took what cover there was, the make-shift connecting framework itself. The lasers could pulse through the metal in time, but Avi did not want to waste time.

She veered *Granuaile* to port, gaining enough angle to see another marine. This one was paying attention, moved to maintain cover. Avi missed with the first blast, waited for the pulses to recharge.

A small missile burst out toward *Granuaile*. It was too close,

to fast, to defend. She felt the hull quiver as it burst against the turret. The computer tracked it back, faster than she could have, and locked on a figure: another marine, hefting a shoulder-mount missile. The fool – brave fool – was attacking a starship with an anti-tank weapon.

Avi keyed permission, agreeing with *Granuaile*. Laser pulses flashed out toward the prow, holing his suit, killing a third marine.

Another anti-grav missile flew from another angle, following the laser pulses back to the source. *Granuaile* trembled again. Amber lights flashed on the gunnery panel. The gun itself was not damaged, but the aiming systems had been. Her arc of fire was limited.

Avi angled *Granuaile* to compensate, tried to find the new attacker. This one, though, had been ready to move as soon as the missile launched. *Granuaile*'s slight delay in tracking the missile back had not been wasted. The two marines remaining on lines were rappelling back again, seeking to plant their final charges. Avi maneuvered and angled to get one in the sights.

Another small missile burst away from the enemy vessel, slamming into *Granuaile*'s laser tower. Flashing amber lights became red. "Aiming motors are off-line," the computer reported.

Sensors and simple visual picked out the forward-most connecting gangway from the belly of one ship to the other. It was an ugly makeshift cylinder, welded from one to the other. Avi tapped to lock their internal trackers on it, fired off the last of her close-combat missiles.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Fahnisht)

The air-pitcher changed as enemy ship loomed. The glare of the rectangle-lights was somehow reduced, allowing Fahnisht to look at them almost directly. He tried to understand the woven

framework and structures beyond the two sets of lights.

The enemy ship changed. Fahnisht tried to understand from what Kameef and Oorh-whaah had explained. The ship was changing position, not shape.

And then they flashed past the ship. Fahnisht began to understand size and perspective. This was not a small thing. Yet they were beyond it before he could count, before he could take a moment to aim the weapon he had been given.

He felt *Granuaile* swivel, felt the change, so the stars whirl into new positions. The larger vessel approached again.

Beings, humans in air-pitcher-suits, worked their ways down the ship on ropes. Two of four writhed as puffs of gas escaped. Two others scrambled for cover.

One, another, two more streaks appeared from above *Granuaile's* upper disk. All four trails sought circular protrusions from the hull. Four silent bursts of light and vapor carried chunks of the vessel with them.

The view changed; the enemy ships appeared to veer sideways as they loomed closer. Kameef's ship pulled even, went forward of the cylinder that had been blasted. With almost no sensation of movement, *Granuaile* rotated so that they faced the side of the enemy.

Urwah fired the harpoon gun. The projectile flared away, a thin rope trailing behind. The projectile contacted the enemy ship, attached in some way Fahnisht could not understand.

"Push off," Urwah ordered. He did so himself, leaving the hatchway, pulling on the line connecting the other two. Fahnisht and Kameef followed into the emptiness beyond, feeling Urwah tug.

The line became taut and straight. The three arced toward the enemy hull, vector changing. Fahnisht waited, as Urwah had been instructed; the marine and Kameef would handle matters until they reached the enemy ship.

Kameef and Urwah each pointed fingers at the figures already on the hull of the enemy ship. The weapons attached to their right arms flashed. Two more humans fell away.

Fahnisht found himself twisting in the void. He no longer

saw the enemy ship at an angle. Instead, it was above his head, and he was rushing toward it. He felt a push against his shoulder, spun faster, so that his feet were to the enemy ship.

They made contact, absorbed the force with their bent knees. Urwah pointed at one of the damaged disk-like protrusions, perhaps five meters away. The line passed within a meter of the crater-like hole. “Avi hit that one dead on,” he commented. “I’m point. Kameef, you help Fahnisht.” He handed back the harpoon launcher, disconnecting its belt tether from his own belt. “No games, lock on.”

Kameef complied as Urwah pushed forward, pulling himself hand-over-hand along the main tether. Murphy touched a stud on the harpoon gun; its line began slowly reeling back into the bore.

There was no resistance as they came to the damaged spot on the hull. Urwah left the line. Fahnisht looked through the hole, saw more evidence of ripped metal and materials. Urwah was at the deepest end of the hole, attaching a small package. He pulled himself back out and over the rim. “Twenty seconds.”

Murphy pulled Fahnisht back. “Keep clear.”

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Ramachandra)

“Deadfall’s being boarded,” the Captain reported.

Ramachandra wiped sweat from his forehead. “That’s why we brought marines. Send them all back over.”

“We won’t waste marines. Move on separation.”

“I will handle my work. You must do *yours*.” He focused on his boards. There was nothing a few boarders could do. Vector was almost perfect.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

The shaped charge flashed in what remained of the lifeboat recess. Gas, dust, fragments rushed out, pushed by the burst of pressure that had been released. Urk looked over the edge, confirmed that the hatch was fully breached. "Let's go." He pulled a grenade from his belt. There would probably be little resistance. He pulled himself headfirst to the hatch, tossed the grenade through. Another silent flash reported its detonation.

Urk pulled himself in, tightened into a weightless ball, and bounced against what was left of the high ceiling. They were in a supply hold, by the look of things. Arresting himself, he took stock. No IR signatures showed on the heads-up. "Clear!"

Fahnisht came through, more graceful in weightlessness than most first-time grunts. O'Meath followed. "Let's get to the engineering deck," Murphy commented. "We're tight on time."

A glop-coated grenade struck the wall beside Fahnisht, stuck as it was supposed to. Fahnisht kicked it away, recognizing the threat as Urwah had instructed. It sailed into the open space of the hold, flashed silently.

"Sons of bitches are ready," Urk commented. "They're all suited." He looked at his heads-up again, trying to locate the source of the grenade. "Let's move, we're in the open."

There – the assailant was near the entry hatch. The IR signature was masked by a battlesuit, but the design was older. Urk pointed, painted with the targeting laser, gaussed off a stream of needles. "Move!" He followed the command by tossing a contact grenade of his own. The grenade struck the wall behind the opposing soldier and stuck.

As the grenade blew, Murphy was pulling Fahnisht toward a gangway, too open and visible for comfort. Urk gaussed off further cover fire, then followed himself. A flume of vapor spewed from the guard's battlesuit, grim evidence that he or she was finished.

Murphy had the hand-crank out of its ceiling recess. He spun as quickly as he could, getting the hatch aside. "Fast, Meef,

we're outnumbered."

The hatch was in its tween-deck recess. Murphy looked, then pulled up into the next deck. "Moving, moving!" Fahnisht leapt up, his legs disappearing through the square hatch. Urk followed.

Murphy was already at the end of the corridor, waiting, looking back and forth. "Main engineering's one more deck," he said. "You did good getting us in."

"Move, don't chat, idiot!" He grabbed at a handhold himself, building speed for a quick trip through the vessel.

Chapter 18

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Larissa)

Larissa got her fire team together. “Delphi and Urbana are on the way. Kliban’s in engineering. Us.” She cursed. “They picked the others off on the hull. They’re keeping the rest of the marines on *Mundi*. Iffy off.”

She switched off her own transponder. “We’ll know them when we see them. Could be wearing Jin Jun markers.”

Larissa keyed her heads-up. Three dots keyed into the ship schematics. Two bore Jin Jun codes. The third was a familiar marine code. “Urwah. Traitor.” She activated all weapons. “They’re coming through from Tube Two. Let’s go, double march. Delphi, Urbana, use anything you have.”

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

A red dot appeared on the wall behind O’Meath. Urk tucked, rolled, reversed, and fired a spray of needles behind. His own heads-up sought a target-lock for the arm laser.

Two grenades flashed silently past his head, from behind.

Two more targets were caught in the bursts – two more down. “Dead on, Fahnisht!” Urk chased away the fleeting concern for Fahnisht’s sense of honor. “Go!”

Pulling along, the three came to the gangway. Fahnisht got there first, launching to the next deck ahead of the other two. He had learned well from coaching during the long hyperspace trips. Urk halted himself, took rear-guard, then followed Murphy. The three reached the main entry to the engineering section in tight formation.

Urk slid his toes under the toeholds beneath the manual wheel, gripped the wheel. It resisted at first, finally spun free. The hatch slid into its recess.

Murphy slid through as soon as the gap was wide enough. Fahnisht followed. Urk stayed, turned the wheel the other way, sealing the hatch behind them. He took a guard stance, waiting.

Minutes crept silently by. Murphy talked his way through steps over comm, cursing as nothing worked.

“You should shut off your ‘iffy,’” a voice commented on the command line.

An almost electric shock bounced through Urk’s innards. “Larissa.” He took her advice, silenced his iffy. Using his command override, he did the same for Murphy and Fahnisht.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Murphy)

Murphy pulled himself along the catwalks toward the main engineering console.

Fahnisht stopped him, pushed ahead. “Urk so told.” He moved forward, through the tight gaps. Murphy saw him stop. The Cetian raised his gun-arm to fire, then seemed to think better of it. He pulled his sword from his belt, found a place to plant his feet in the weightlessness.

The Cetian pushed off, his sword pointed forward.

Murphy followed, gauss weapon ready. Fahnisht was pulling

his blade from the decompressed pressure-suit of a dying engineer. Blood globules bubbled and floated free from the slit in her suit. Fahnisht pushed her away, further aft.

Murphy reached the console. There was no seat in place. "Standing" watch was an engineering tradition in Fleet, the silly, pompous idiots. Murphy found the toeholds, slid-and-pulled himself into them. He pulled out his handheld, looked for the link. As expected, wireless was ready, but locked away from his system.

He ran his commodore's pass-codes, then the House of Knights override codes. Finally, he ran several other Fleet-related codes he'd stolen from Zhaohui, though with no real hope that they had been overlooked.

None unlocked the network. Finally, someone with a Fleet background had been thorough. He ran another set of back doors that he had bribed out of a disgruntled Fleet computer specialist. Found and locked, like the others.

He ran the codes Avi had provided. Again, nothing worked. Murphy profaned several deities.

He tapped at his handheld, calling up a file he should never have been able to obtain. Zhaohui had been sloppy more than once in her own quarters, and he'd been thorough when seeking useful information. Knowing her, the 'sloppiness' had been entirely intentional. She pretended deep trust, hoping he would not betray the trust – at least until claiming betrayal seemed to be within her own best interests. He'd pretended to not know that he was a calculated risk at all times, never said a word about what he had "stolen."

He had no choice now but to tip his hand, possibly render those codes useless in the future. It was a shame Zhaohui would not be here to see it. These codes should be so deeply imbedded no one would ever know to look for them, much less remove them. There were no other back doors left.

Murphy keyed the codes manually into the system, almost holding his breath.

A display powered up. "Access granted. Imperial family preservation overrides in effect. Unauthorized or inappropriate

use of these codes will subject the user to summary death sentence without trial.”

Zhaohui was usually more subtle than that. Possibly her predecessor had set up the program.

Murphy tapped at his handheld, then the main board. “I’m starting to own her,” he reported. “Urk, you can get in here.”

There was no reply.

“Urk.” Murphy called up his suit computer.

The marine’s iffy was off. All of them were. “Where the *hell* has he gone?”

“I will seek,” Fahnisht said.

“Okay. Put your feet down, I’m powering the grav.” As Fahnisht complied, Murphy keyed up the environmental subsystems. “Air and light, too.” He ran the power, let gravity build up gradually over thirty seconds. After a moment of dizziness, he was steady on his feet. “Don’t waste time,” Murphy said. “I want to get this done and get going.”

Fahnisht signed assent, started moving down the catwalk, back toward the main entry.

He had to get control of the navigation systems. Those were still linked to *Mundi Astrum*. Even with Zhaohui’s codes, hacking the *Astrum*’s computer wasn’t going to be a cakewalk, especially if there was a human on the other side of the firewalls.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Ramachandra)

An alert flashed up on Ramachandra’s main display. Deadfall’s main computer had been breached. He keyed comm for the main computer systems tech. “Our firewalls are being breached. You are to end it now.”

“I’m working on it, asshole.”

“We require three more minutes at full boost to assure terminal trajectory. If we are forced to break away now, he will be able to build back to escape vector.”

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"I know the damned timing! Get out of my face!"

Ramachandra looked at his boards. There was no substantial maneuvering that he could do until break-away. As a helm operator, he was useless until then.

He used his own codes to get into the main security systems and began analyzing the attempts to break through the firewalls. The attack was simplistic, on its face. The attacker was using old command codes, over-ride codes into backdoors that were themselves hidden from view, probably protected under multiple layers of security. An extremely high-level code that had been deeply hidden had keyed. Deadfall's computers had begun to open, one system at a time. Ramachandra admired the elegance, at least momentarily.

He started digging deeper, keying rapidly, changing codes and shoring up the firewalls.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

Urk felt the gravity coming up. He oriented into a crouch, bumping down against the floor. "Lar, I thought you were on *Harris*. How'd you get here?" Urk called up his head-up, looked for any sign of his former comrade.

"I *volunteered*, Urk. Just in case someone filled up with Jin Jun bullshit tried to stop us. *Had* to be you. I knew you were his stooge once, Urk – but I thought maybe you were coming around."

Urk was shocked. "Not a stooge, Lar. Don't have to buy into all the Jin Jun bullshit to know what's wrong." Urk crept forward. There was nothing on his IR scans. He moved around the corner into the next corridor.

"What's wrong? We're out here doing *right*. Finishing something we could have finished a long time ago."

"You can't call killing a whole race *right*, Lar. Prophet never called for such a thing."

He saw a blob fade up through a partition wall, ahead and to his right. Heat – human-sized. It was too much to be from a modern battlesuit like Lar’s. It might be an older suit.

It might be a simple trap.

“See? You’ve bought all the bullshit. The zhīzhū don’t argue fine points like ‘genocide’ when they want something. They just take it, and eat whoever gets in their way. You think we’re the first race they’ve met out here?”

“Maybe not, Lar,” Urk conceded. He didn’t like the thought. “Can’t say I really like the zhīzhū around. I can’t see that the Horns did anything *like*, though.”

“They’re in the way. It’s our planet.”

“Ours? Who gave it to *us*?”

“The One True God.”

“Bought into it all, you did.” Another IR source faded up, this one to his left. Again, it was behind a partition. Damn. Retreat – “better part of valor” – would bring these idiots back to O’Meath before he could do what he had to.

Lar certainly had her own battlesuit from *Harris*. Otherwise, she probably would not have been able to see Urk’s iffy. With Lar’s iffy off, it would be almost impossible to detect through walls or partitions. The two he could detect were perhaps insurance for Larissa, perhaps simple distraction.

Urk hop-stepped over a meter back, firing grenades at both partitions. The blasts filled the corridor with smoke and debris.

IR sensors alerted him to something dropping down from the space above the ceiling pipes: another battlesuited marine. Height, movements, all of the clues added to one conclusion. Urk brought his arm-laser to bear.

Hesitated.

Lar did not. Urk’s heads-up disappeared as a precise laser burst struck the main sensor grid. The jolt of energy at least tripped the breakers, possibly more. Urk optimistically keyed the reboot as he moved.

He dove through one of the holes he had recently blasted in partitions. Rolling, he came up to a one-knee firing position. He found himself beside a dying marine. As expected, the battlesuit

was an older model.

Urk's heads-up rebooted, but the sensors were still down. Weapons were powered and ready.

A grenade came in through the hole, bounced against a partition. Urk launched himself back outside. The grenade blew, slamming him against the opposite wall. He fell back.

Lar stood over him, arm-mount gauss rifle pointed at his face plate. There was no retreat left. "Do it."

"We need men like you. See what I've seen. Come back with me, Urk."

A rocket grenade streaked past Lar's helmet, only a centimeter or two off. Larissa turned to face the new attacker, fired both laser and gauss down the corridor.

Urk rolled over, pushed himself up, and launched onto her back. Larissa fell forward, guns still firing. Urk slammed her faceplate against the deck.

Lar rolled, flipped Urk off, got back to her feet. Urk rolled onto his back. As Lar fired a gauss burst, Urk kicked at her hip, knocking her sideways. The needles ricocheted off the deck.

Urk got to his feet, jumped back into the room with the downed marine. He'd seen something, in his rush, a rail gun.

Larissa must have given orders to make this personal. If the rail gun had been fired, he would have been dead. It had not been fired. Lar had wanted to make the kill herself.

Urk picked up the weapon, spun to face the hole in the wall. Only Lar's glove was visible at the edge of the ragged new entry. She either didn't know Urk had the weapon, or believed Urk would hold off.

"Allah, forgive," he whispered, pressing the firing stud. The heavy spike flashed out, pushed by the magnetic pulse. It left a neat, perfectly circular hole in the wall, where Urk estimated his former comrade's heart to be.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Fahnisht)

Fahnisht raced through the corridors. He heard Oorh-whaah talking to someone over the comm channel, someone whose voice was pitched higher than Oorh-whaah's.

He came up the corridor, saw two men in similar air-pitcher suits. One was certainly Oorh-whaah, the other – a brother?

How could one tell a warrior in these foolish ways?

“Do it, Lar.”

She responded, her words difficult to translate. The one on the ground seemed to be submitting. Urk? He still could not be certain.

Fahnisht raised the cur's weapon he had carried, operated it as Oorh-whaah had instructed. He aimed carefully, pressed the firing stud.

The grenade streaked by the head of the standing human. The standing human turned to face him, raised both of his arms. The other moved quickly off the deck to tackle.

Fahnisht's legged exploded in pain, the suit around him puncturing and shredding. Something closed tight around his upper thigh, squeezing so hard that he could feel his blood throbbing to push through.

Fahnisht fell to the deck. He had been sliced enough times in life, felt fire against his horn, enjoyed all of the pain of honorable battle. This new pain was greater than those. His leg burned. Fahnisht lost consciousness.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Murphy)

The main engines continued at full power. Murphy dug deeper into the layers, looking for the route to break navigational control. He needed to cut the thrust, break away, and accelerate again. He damned well needed proper vector.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Someone else was in here, in the main computer, blocking the back-doors Murphy needed to open. If he opened one of them, it would peel back the layer so his opponent could see and possibly close the back door.

An ID flashed up the screen. It was Avi's betrothed, Ramachandra. Damn. From what Avi said, he was a damned mathematical genius. He probably knew something about computers.

Murphy began to sweat.

February 10, 2375 (Twenty Years Ago) – Earth (Avinashini)

“Do the next set of problems now. Look at Ramachandra, he isn't stopping. You're almost as smart as he is.” The Admiral stabbed a finger down on the table. “The gods want us to be the best. They want us to bring truth and open new worlds. You will be part of that.”

Avinashini looked to the other parent, sitting on the couch reading, for relief. None came. Eyes met, then were again hidden behind the old-fashioned book.

She schooled herself to remain passive, as she had learned she must. The Admiral had her expectations, and they would have to be met. Nothing more need be said. Little could be said to change the gods' expectations, and nothing at all would move the Admiral.

Avinashini began running the next set of ballistics problems. The sounds of other ten-year-old children playing outside could not be allowed to distract her.

Ramachandra waited until the Admiral's back was turned, and she was out of earshot. He stared at his cousin with cold disdain. “You are just an insignificant girl. You'll never pilot a starship, no matter what the Admiral thinks. You'll be stuck on Earth your entire life. You'll stay here and make my babies. That is all you can do.”

Avinashini held the tears inside, kept her face as clear and

impassive as the Admiral taught. “I have no wish to make babies with *you*. Better to die barren and dried up.” She wanted to punch Ramachandra, but of course could not – the Admiral knew he was the better mathematician.

The Admiral would probably agree with Ramachandra. Avi would never be allowed to believe that she was his equal, in any way, though she most certainly *would* go far beyond Ramachandra.

Hiding behind her bravado was the fear that Ramachandra would turn out to be correct, in some way. She had overheard several discussions; the Admiral was already suggesting a future marriage with her third cousin.

Avi gave her full attention to her problems. She would not allow Ramachandra to be correct about her skills.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

“O’Meath, you’re taking too long. You’re closing in on the point of no return.”

“Your damned fiancé is right in there, blocking me – I can’t get nav control!”

“Keep working. And you needn’t worry – I’ll marry *you* before I will let him between my legs.” Why had she bothered to waste breath with such words? Avi pivoted *Granuaile*, aimed the lasers and particle accelerator at the bridge.

The lasers refused to aim. The particle accelerator fired off a spurt, gave out again. She had no weapons left. Ramachandra was safe on his bridge.

No. She had one more attack.

“*Granuaile*,” she said, slowly. “Lead Jin Jun B. P. Avinashini, identify. Open deep command sequences. Aodh Agni.”

“Identified,” *Granuaile* responded. “Deep command sequence Aodh Agni loading. Manual key confirmation required.”

Avi tapped at the proper keys.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

“Key confirmation accepted.”

Avi began the “sterilization” overload sequence as planned, shutting the plasma vents off. Amber and red lights began flashing. The strained power plants would overheat quickly.

As pressure built she maneuvered *Granuaile* as close to the bridge as possible, pivoted again. She estimated the proper angle, watched amber lights sequence one by one to red. The engineering alarm began to shrill throughout the con.

Avi keyed comm, went to Fleet’s standard channel. She input her own code. “Ramachandra, this is your betrothed before the gods.” She waited a moment, hoping he would see it, hoping he would register it. Avi stabbed at a key.

The rear valves opened prematurely. Plasma exploded from them, pushing *Granuaile* away from *Mundi*.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

Urk looked at Larissa’s body. There was no doubt that she was dead. Blood dribbled out of both the hole in her chest and the exit hole in the rear of her suit.

He went to Fahnisht, keyed the suit monitors. The Horn was still alive. His lower leg was a mess, but the built-in tourniquet had ended blood loss.

Urk bent down, picked the alien up, and put him over his shoulder. He needed to get him back to O’Meath in engineering so that the three of them could get out together.

He came to the hatch, opened it, carried Fahnisht back to the console. O’Meath saw. “Is he alive?”

“Yeah,” Urk replied. Let’s go.”

“I’m not done.”

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Ramachandra)

The comm came straight to his console. “Ramachandra, this is your betrothed.” He did not let the woman distract him, though the codes confirmed it was her. She had done well so far, learning from the material he’d imbedded in his last letter. The bitch needed punishment.

O’Meath was also good, closing in on full control of Deadfall despite all the defenses Ramachandra raised. The wayward bitch would have to be punished later.

Ramachandra was pitched forward, then back, as sudden sweat beaded his forehead. Stanchions and bulkheads screeched with twisting. The bridge lurched, spun. All of the boards and lights went black. The room temperature leapt up by at least ten degrees.

Alarms blasted throughout the bridge: hull breach, pressure dropping, power surges, other damage. A few dim emergency lights came on, but Ramachandra’s console stayed dark.

They’d been hit with a plasma burst. The bitch had somehow fired plasma at the bridge itself.

As rivulets of sweat poured off, Ramachandra pulled out his handheld. It still worked, linking him to the main systems. He opened comm. “Transferring helm to emergency con,” he said, and keyed the sequence that did so.

He stood, ran to the hatch. Some of the bridge crew were still at their consoles, either shocked and injured or giving futile commands. He got to the main hatch, went through, and sealed it behind him. Anyone still inside would die.

Insignificant losses.

The emergency lights were fine in the gangways. Ramachandra got to a ladder down. Moving rapidly, he went down two decks, came to the secondary bridge.

Other officers were already there, at their posts. Ramachandra pushed at the idiot woman at helm. “Clear the station,” he ordered.

She glared, but also looked relieved. Pulling her safety har-

Demand the Debt That's Owing

ness' quick release, she yielded stood to the side.

Ramachandra sat, pulled up his key-configuration. The readings were good. Thrust had not been interrupted. Even if O'Meath gained navigation control, he would not have time or thrust to regain escape velocity. Deadfall would go into atmosphere, slow further, and impact. The rock would crack and release the viruses it protected through re-entry.

"Uncouple," he ordered through comm.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

A hundred or more explosions flashed along the connecting framework. The sequence almost separated the vessels. Avi used external cams to eyeball the framework.

One connecting pylon still held on the port side.

The main vessel cut main drives, used belly thrusters to yaw and pitch. The pylon bent, then sheared away, pulling away part of Deadfall's hull. *Astrum* pushed further away, changed angle slightly. The main drives pushed it away on a new vector that would keep it out of atmosphere.

"You are a *coward*, Ramachandra." Avi hoped he was still monitoring comm.

He was. "I am a realist," he said. "You are a stupid whore, as you always were. Our children would probably have been inferior." He cut comm. Effortlessly, exquisitely, *Mundi Astrum* began to pull away, shrinking on the external camera views.

His insults, she found, were meaningless. Avi targeted engines, set the lasers on auto-fire. At this range, they might pack enough punch to reduce output, at least. The lasers failed.

She again tried the particle accelerators. They remained offline. *Mundi Astrum* was going to get out of the system. Avi had nothing left to stop her. Her stomach ached. She had *lost* to Ramachandra. She spoke, whether or not he heard her. "Thanks to gods I will never marry you."

Avi quickly updated Deadfall's trajectory. It would still plough into atmosphere. Murphy did not have enough power to push back to escape velocity. Despite this, he had powered the thrusters. He had already spun the vessel on its axis. Deadfall was angled to avoid atmosphere, if it could rebuild its velocity.

Avi ran the calculations in her head as she keyed them into the computer. Murphy needed more thrust than Deadfall could deliver. The computer confirmed her own conclusion.

Avi maneuvered *Granuaile* toward the missile corvette's converted nose bay. Reaching to the side, she again keyed the plasma build-up program. This was the only choice left.

While she was at it, she extended the landing gear. Close contact was needed for the plasma to have a chance to reach deep enough. She would push against the hull itself to hold close while the drives burst.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Murphy)

The ship yawed, pitched. Urk fell, struggling to keep Fahnisht from further injury. Murphy held to the console.

With the final lurching disconnection, *Mundi Astrum* no longer controlled Deadfall's computers. Ramachandra was no longer fighting access attempts. Murphy quickly pushed through the remaining security and pulled control over to the console.

Mundi Astrum had disconnected and pulled away.

Murphy began to change course. The old corvette made an unwieldy turn around its axis, positioning the main drives to accelerate almost directly toward the planet. He wished for Avi's innate navigational skill. The onboard computer ground slowly to an approximation.

He needed more thrust to avoid gravitational capture.

Urk stood, Fahnisht still over his shoulder. He acted as if the weight wasn't there.

Murphy looked at the displays he had, tried to nurse another micro-joule out of the drives. The micro-joule wasn't there.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Without more power, the ship's vector couldn't be changed enough. Accumulated vector would still send it into atmosphere. Enough of the damned rock in the damned nose bay would survive atmosphere to strike and release whatever damned crap had been put into it.

His weary eyes met Urk's weary eyes. "We're out of options. I can't jettison any more fuel. The lifeboats are still on board – get to one. Get out."

"You're coming?"

"I'm going to try like hell to push this thing through to escape speed. I'll manage better if you aren't asking grunt questions."

Murphy saw Urk nod gravely through the faceplate. "Fuck you too. Tell me how to help."

"I told you, for Buddha-chrissakes. *Get the hell of this ship. Take Fahnisht. Do it.*"

Urwah stood, uncertain. "Lar's dead, you know."

Murphy nodded. "I heard you talking to her. There was nothing else you could do. You did the job."

"For fucking zhīzhū." Urk's voice was weary, almost decided.

"For Fahnisht, and the Horns. Don't throw that away. Survive. Be a witness." Murphy looked at the display. "And do it *now*, dammit – I need to get on this, or we've lost."

Urwah hesitated only a second more, then came to weary attention. He saluted. "Commodore."

Murphy smiled. "Jin Jun bullshit, Lieutenant."

Urwah steadied Fahnisht over his shoulder. "Come on, brother – we need to get out of here. Your Tentlord's going to barbecue himself."

Fahnisht was apparently conscious. "We will see Kameef again," he said, weakly.

"Gravity's off, forward of the bulkhead," Murphy pointed out. He pulled up the status board. "Move fast – EP-17 is in place, and looks fueled."

Urk went back toward the hatch, carrying the Clanlord.

Chapter 19

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

The landing gear scraped along the deadfall's belly. *Granuaile* lurched up against the remaining framework, snagged, slid, then caught. Dorsal thrusters helped push *Granuaile* down, maintaining the lock. Avi increased primary thrust, hoping *Granuaile* would stay caught.

An idea struck. Avi pulled up the nav systems and rapidly ran numbers. It was possible.

Deadfall needed still more vector. *Granuaile* had some to give, especially with the high power output she had ready to go.

She kicked power output dangerously high, just below the melting point. If the core melted out after they skimmed past atmosphere, so be it. Avi angled to thrust to add vector to the deadfall.

She ran the numbers. The vector was increasing, but they would still dip into atmosphere at a terminal rate. Atmosphere would still bring them all down, destroying ships, leaving the rock intact. She calculated the minutes to atmosphere in her head, started the timer.

The program would not destroy the entire asteroid in the nose, but it would heat it through. It might sterilize, would at least weaken the biologicals implanted deep. It would be a hotter

-than-planned re-entry.

She keyed comm, set the channel to "open." "B. P. Avinashini commanding Jin Jun Cruiser *Granuaile*, to any units, human or zhīzhū. The deadfall is still on terminal vector. Repeat, still on terminal vector. At 200 kilometers, I will overload *Granuaile*'s plant in hopes of sterilizing the biologicals. If you have any nukes, set them to impact at 200 kilometers. May the gods grant it be enough." Avi keyed the channel closed.

"*Granuaile*," she said, "Lead Jin Jun B. P. Avinashini, identify. Open deep command sequences." She shook her head at the code words he had selected, but had not wasted time to argue. "Aodh Agni."

"Identified," *Granuaile* responded. "Deep command sequence Aodh Agni loading. Manual key confirmation required."

She tapped at the keys.

An incoming comm stream demanded her attention: O'Meath. The signal was weak, disrupted by the equipment and metal around him. "Get your sweet round ass *out* of there. You *can't* do enough that way. It won't vaporize the rock. *One* of us needs to report back."

"You're rationalizing, you vile heathen, and you know it. I need to do what I can."

"Use the escape pod, at least."

"Who would rescue me – the zhīzhū? I do not intend to be a meal."

"This – it's – Christ, this is an *order*!"

"I am Lead Jin Jun," she reminded him calmly. She smiled at the ease of the statement. "I give *you* orders." Avi hesitated. "Perhaps we'll have another life to meet again, Murphy. If the gods permit, you will even be a proper Hindu and tall enough for a lady."

Avi shut down the link to the Jin Jun. Two minutes, twenty-one seconds of aching discussion with the arrogant half-ape would be too long.

She had no intention of crying over such a man.

Granuaile lurched and bumped. Nausea blasted into her gut. She tapped in stabilizing commands as the main lighting

dimmed.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

Urk found the lifeboat hatch, opened it. He floated Fahnisht through, followed into to small capsule. The simple acceleration couches – barely-padded stretchers – waited below. Urk managed to strap Fahnisht into one. He looked, saw the emergency medical kit where it should be. He connected it into Fahnisht's suit. With any luck, the kit was still fully charged and workable. With a little more luck, human-based drugs wouldn't kill a Horn.

Urk started to strap himself into the couch-stretcher beside Fahnisht.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Murphy)

Murphy let out a string of expletives, mixing Common, Chinese, Horn, a few others. "She doesn't need to suicide!"

Urk's voice came over the earpiece. "Neither do you, Meef. I've got a full-sized lifeboat, C-deck forward. Get your ass up here. Avi, he goes, you go!"

"Not enough time." Murphy saw a blip in the power outputs, made an adjustment. "I have to see it through. Blow the seal now."

"Kameef." Fahnisht's voice was weak.

"Urk, go. Avi, tell him to go, and go *yourself*!"

She made no response. Damn her stubborn, stubborn silky cinnamon hide. "*Take a goddam order to save your own life, Urk.*"

Red lights flashed on the console. Murphy looked, keyed rapid adjustments. The fusion plant's gravitic containment field

Demand the Debt That's Owing

was stressed to near-failure. He would have little problem adding plasma to the attempt to cook out the biologicals. How deep in the rock were they?

He keyed up specs, wondering how big a bang he could coax out of the power plant. It would not be enough to entirely vaporize the damned rock all the way forward in the bow, probably – but he could hope.

It would at least be a glorious damned flare.

Two minutes. Murphy called up systems, began scrabbling together a sequence like that which he had set on *Granuaile*. With any luck, he could bypass the safeties without having all of the right codes.

Deadfall pitched, yawed. Murphy felt a nauseating hammer-blow through his body. Retching, he stabilized the deteriorating vessel, leaning on the console as dizziness joined the nausea.

A second lurch threw him to the deck, bouncing as the entire ship bounced.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

Urk keyed in the auto-launch sequence. The idiot Jin Jun might be right or wrong, but there was no time left to find out. The lifeboat sealed and kicked away from the hull, pressing Urk and Fahnisht into the netting. Three g's pushed, then reduced to a steady one-tenth g. With any luck, the autopilot would find its way down to the surface.

Zhīzhū surface. He could survive the attack to be lunch for the ungrateful damned zhīzhū.

The console demanded attention: a simple choice. The lifeboat could seek to land near signs of population, or in wilderness, as far from population as possible. Zhīzhū population centers might not be helpful to a human and a similar biped.

Urwah punched the “wilderness” option.

Lar's body was back there, aboard Deadfall. There would be

no chance to bring her back if Murphy and Avi burned the ships up in a meteoric blaze. That was probably better. She would be too well-done to be at all interesting to a zhīzhū. How could Lar have fallen for the Humanitas line? Why was she dead?

Sudden waves of nausea were more powerful than the tossing and buffeting of the small craft. Urk was secured in the couch by straps, but squeezed tight on the handgrips nonetheless. Collision alerts blared as a quarter of the stars visible through the canopy were obscured by a ripple.

A zhīzhū sphere appeared through the distortion.

The lifeboat cut main drive, pivoted, and blasted a new vector to avoid the collision. A console helpfully pulled up a display, splitting into visual and sensor readings. The zhīzhū ship was close, not more than a kilometer away, and closing on the deadfall. It was a smaller ship, not one of the massive battle-ships.

The sphere kissed up against the deadfall, almost gently. Its grav-thrusters flared bright.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Murphy)

Murphy pulled himself up. Comm flashed urgently. A text-only message flashed on the main display: “Humans O’Meath Avinashini hold course thrust zhīzhū Hogajue makes additional vector not sterile projectile not overload listened your messages see you do hold course thrust zhīzhū Hogajue makes additional vector not sterile projectile not overload.”

Son of a bitch.

The zhīzhū were communicating. Intentionally communicating, to humans, in a cooperative effort. They had gotten the messages – one ship, one zhīzhū, had listened to a human message and understood.

Son of a *bitch*.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

Avi felt the nausea subside. She flicked her eyes over the displays. A zhīzhū sphere had come from nowhere to jam itself against the corvette's mid-structures. It must have jumped from in-system – close in-system, at that.

No other explanation made sense. The pilot had calculated a jump no human could match, or would want to. A human ship would probably break up under the stress of such a jump, entering and immediately exiting, especially so deep in a gravity well.

The zhīzhū was already adding its own angled thrust to the push. The pilot had intended the exact course. He had vectored through an impossible jump to make an impossible contact and impossible vector. It had nosed perfectly – impossibly – into the deadfall's belly.

Comm flashed a text-only message, confirming her guess: “Humans O'Meath Avinashini hold course thrust zhīzhū Hogajue makes additional vector not sterile projectile not overload listened your messages Jannah system Wolf see you do hold course thrust zhīzhū Hogajue makes additional vector not sterile projectile not overload.”

Avi tried to grasp the reality. The zhīzhū had been at Wolf. It had near enough to get her last message at speed of light, then plot and execute a suicidal jump.

How had she ever defeated *any* zhīzhū ship if a zhīzhū could play with hyperspace like children throwing rocks?

Avi blinked, keyed to step back the overload program. There would be time to speculate later, if they survived this three-ship dance.

November 10, 2395 (Two Weeks Ago) – Deep Space Vicinity
Wolf 359 System (Hogajue)

Hogajue felt thin. They had been observing the human preparations for a week. They were prepared to jump back out as soon as the next sphere in the rotation arrived. Electromagnetic wave formations took hours to travel from the inhabited cluster to the sphere's position. They showed new patterns, though. Ships were taking new positions. The vermin were making a change soon.

The majority of the Nests were prepared to finally get the infestation under control. Hogajue knew that this was the logical course. Humans demanded all of the good worlds, blocked the necessary expansion of the zhīzhū.

It mused about the one human, O'Meath. That one remained of curiosity. It would be interesting to see whether that one was genuinely willing to communicate. Discourse with the Reality-nester over the last several months had slowly convinced it that O'Meath offered something akin to a blending. Such a blending would of course be unsatisfactory.

Hogajue's monitoring lobe notified him of an event: gravitic ripples. There were two sets, both greatly attenuated. They came from a location near the primarily occupied mass in the system.

Both ripples were tightly coiled, but the patterns were not perfectly spherical. Only a badly damaged sphere would generate such a pattern. Such a sphere might not survive its travel through the brightness.

Hogajue formed a suspicion. It performed additional analysis. The calculus gave it a high probability of the origin of the two vessels: the vermin home system.

The vermin were clever. They had learned how to manipulate the exit, as did the zhīzhū. An additional reason supported the proper action.

Hogajue called the rest of the subNest to secondary acuity. Passive sensory extenders would need fine-tuning in the time available. All data possible would have to be collected when electromagnetic waves caught up with the gravitic propagation.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

As the zhīzhū aboard settled in to analyze the signals to follow, another gravitic wave propagated. The flash of cooling brightness in the central lobe was dim, thus far away. Hogajue analyzed and calculated.

One of the human vessels had left, almost as quickly as it had arrived. Careful study of the entry pattern pointed at only one possible destination. Those humans were going to the Groombridge colony.

What could one vessel do that a vermin task force could not?

Hogajue made its wishes known through the neural links.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Murphy)

The deck was buckling under the stress. A bulge formed under Murphy's feet. Despite minimal sensors, Murphy had a damned good guess where the zhīzhū ship had chosen to collide. Sparks burst out of a power coupling before the circuit breaker cut it off. Creaking noises intensified.

Murphy shunted still more power through another strained coupling. The thrusters *had* to maintain power output. Vapor filled the deck – smoke, fire retardant, Buddha Christ Almighty knew what else. Rending and ripping metal moaned through the deck, interrupted by ear-splitting cracks as stressed stanchions gave way.

Atmosphere blasted out of the hull, pulling the vapor with it. Murphy clutched a console hand-hold as amber and red lights urgently outnumbered green on the displays. His feet slipped out from under him, friction useless against the rush of decompression. Debris, loose parts, paper, similar crap replaced the vapor, at least momentarily.

The windstorm ended. The deck again in vacuum, Murphy regained his footing. He focused on the board. Another power shunt, another adjustment to the gravitic bottle, brought all of the red lights back to amber. The drives had to hold together for an-

other two minutes, no more. All Deadfall had to do now was skip back out of atmosphere.

November 10, 2395 (Two Weeks Ago) – Deep Space Vicinity
Wolf 359 System (Hogajue)

The observations could not be more clear. The vermin were prepared to attack each other in open conflict. Two of the old attack vessels cruised together in tight formation. They were aided by two larger vessels, a tanker and the vessel designated *Hibernia*. The smaller vessel designated *Granuaile* pursued. Did the human O'Meath remain in control of that vessel?

The Nests had not allowed such a destructive conflict in at least twenty generations of distilled memory. Even the foolishness raised by the Reality Nests had not caused such a division. They were kept in their proper place, but not destroyed, not fought.

The interesting human O'Meath was part of it. That was clear. The vessel was sending a message and data. There was no depth, no scent to the transmission. In less unusual circumstances, it would be ignored.

With distaste, Hogajue accessed the Reality observer through the neural connections. It was useful in this regard, at least. The Reality observer was eager for the contact after long isolation. It readily provided the gist of the message.

Hogajue disputed the correctness of the translation. Bad enough that the vermin would burn meat before ingesting it. To kill with disease, contaminating the truth in the death, was nonsensical.

The human O'Meath stated that some humans would be so nonsensical, yet it would interfere. The second biped, a type yet tasted by the zhīzhū, approved. Their machine-recorded pictures showed no deception.

Would the new biped taste proper?

The third repetition of the message halted, then started again.

Hogajue reluctantly gave new attention. A visual representation of a second human was supplied, along with the best approximation of her self-identification phrase.

The Reality observer's translation expressed skepticism. The human claimed to have individually destroyed twenty-three spheres, large and small, when the long-growing colony was rescued from incipient infestation. The Reality observer was prepared to disregard anything said.

Hogajue ordered it to proceed with a neutral translation. There was no time or desire to reveal long-hidden consternation over the neural connections. The Nests had determined that such information should not be common knowledge.

This human might well tell truth in its one-dimensional communication forms. Careful analysis demonstrated that an unusual confluence of human vessel position, unexpected warning, and genius-level human mathematical talent had resulted in a stunning defense at Groombridge, destroying a third of the spheres. This individual claimed to be the fortunately placed human genius.

Hogajue listened carefully to the translation, as internally inconsistent as it seemed. Was the translation garbled, or were humans so lacking in logic? Like O'Meath, this human vowed to protect the zhīzhū from other human nests. Could she – humans allowed themselves one gender only – truthfully mean this?

Fools.

Fools?

Could the other humans actually succeed in destroying the zhīzhū with biological weapons? They would, if they could.

Some would.

Other zhīzhū aboard drew his attention back to the events that had unfolded hours ago. Degraded and attenuated signals told enough of the story. Some of the vermin protecting the two vessels had turned on their own. O'Meath and its ship tried to close, tried to destroy the two vessels. Almost close enough, the two vessels disappeared, beginning the trip to Groombridge already detected hours ago.

A new gravitic ripple, barely detectable, lapped up against

the sensors. Hogajue performed rapid calculations with all four lobes, educated by reasonable assumptions. The exiting vessel was certainly *Granuaile*, and even more certainly beginning the trip to Groombridge.

Hogajue considered. Four lobes connected in series drew the only possible conclusion: O'Meath, Avinashini, and that other believed what they were saying. They were insane, even by vermin standards.

Their insanity had infected other humans. Other humans had turned against their own and let them proceed. They were themselves infected.

Infection was the true concern. The zhīzhū might well be harmed by the disease created. The spheres now stationed at the fledgling colony were unlikely to be prepared for the threat. Even if they were, they would be wholly unprepared for a human vessel adopting apparently zhīzhū tactics. The defensive fire might well cripple the dual human ship, but would not sterilize its real weapon.

Small as it was, this sphere had no option. It must take the information to Groombridge. Hogajue brought the subNest together through the neural connections and began the necessary preparation.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

Avi reduced thrust slightly. The heat shield would demand power as they pushed into atmosphere. “Agni,” she muttered, half consciously. The old fire god could take, or protect.

The first wisps of atmosphere heated the outer hull. Avi felt *Granuaile* minutely slide. She adjusted the dorsal thrusters, jammed more power through them than specs ever intended. She could afford to fry circuits and breakers now, if it meant pushing Deadfall to skip back out into space. *Granuaile* rattled, but continued to push landing gear against the lower nose of the bay.

External cameras picked up the growing flares flowing out-

Demand the Debt That's Owing

side. Eddies and wisps of pre-plasma flowed around the hull, streaking off the landing gear like massive blow torches. Full plasma temperatures would melt the landing gear away. The plasma shunts weren't designed to operate with the gear extended, the gear housings open.

Avi changed views, looking at what she could see of the forward missile-bay housing. Pieces of damaged hull were peeling away already. The rock inside would shift as friction-superheated gas cut small holes, larger ones.

Avi glanced at the estimates. Twenty more seconds would guarantee escape velocity.

Granuaile's nose dipped "down" against Deadfall's ventral surface. The front gear bent with the heat, bent again.

Held.

Fifteen seconds.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Fahnisht)

Weariness left Fahnisht's neck almost limp. He looked at the display in front of him, barely understanding what he saw. He recognized *Granuaile's* shape against the larger shape of Deadfall. The other ball-shaped machine must be a zhīzhū ship. All three were somehow pushed together, metal insects riding on metal insects. A gaseous ball formed, flame – good flame.

This was good. Kameef and Avee-nah-sheen would die in battle and flame both. Fahnisht struggled against pain and the locked-away-cloth-feeling of the battlesuit's medicines, tried to form the words of a pyre chant for such magnificence.

The flames built, engulfed the insect-on-insect shape. Oorh-whaah muttered in Common, prayed perhaps: "Come the fuck on."

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Murphy)

The entire compartment rattled, shuddered, twisted. The bucking threatened to throw Murphy down. He held on, nursing what more he could out of the engines.

The deck was hot, threatening to toast the soles of his feet through the battlesuit. Murphy felt a bead of sweat form on his forehead. The suit's cooling system was made for easier conditions. An urgent chime insisted that he look at the heads-up. His life-support had shut down. Heat expansion would probably burst a seal in minutes.

"Next life for sure, Avi. Next life for sure." He would not survive a serious plasma flare into the compartment, but Deadfall was close to skimming out of the first onion-peel of atmosphere. Dead or alive, he'd already finished the job.

November 11, 2395 (Two Weeks Ago) – Hyperspace (En route to Groombridge 1618) (Hogajue)

The deliciously cold Brightness washed delighting clarity through the lobes. Hogajue allowed every neural fiber its taste of the contrasts and beauty.

On this trip, though, there were tasks more important to perform than smoothing the path ahead. Hogajue regretfully presented its second with the unusual privilege of controlling the sphere through the joyful excursion. Once the second's neural paths were fully connected, Hogajue began withdrawing its own connections. As fibers released in sequence, the brightness receded. The four peripheral lobes first experienced the dimming and warm fogging back to almost-normal perception. Only the central lobe maintained a connection with bright space, and that no more than any other in the subNest would know.

As Hogajue disengaged its primary umbilical from the space below, it again disbelieved that the vermin chose to send ma-

chines through Bright space with their messages. Surely their own pilots would choose the privilege of personally delivering information.

The recent compromises with the dissenting "Reality" Nests had forced at least one observer on the subNest commanding each sphere. The compromise had not mandated allowing the observer unobstructed access to the sphere's neural fibers. Full sharing had not occurred on any sphere controlled by the majority Nests.

Hogajue's objectives had made the observer occasionally useful. The Reality Nests had made an effort to comprehend the patterns of the vermin, as if that mattered. Some, like this one, had even forced itself to funnel information into the narrow mathematics and terminology employed by the bipeds.

Hogajue could not have focused the necessary effort on this new endeavor while also smoothing the travel through Bright space. It also desired to limit the natural spillage of information along the fibers. The subNest could not be poisoned with stupidity.

If stupidity it was.

The second would become first if Hogajue rationally determined afterward that this sharing was a mistake. The idea that the vermin would limit conflict intrigued. Nonetheless, Hogajue would not allow the Nests as a whole to be endangered by its own curiosity.

It came into the observer's space. The observer extended its front-most handling limb and tentatively exuded fibers for sharing. Hogajue extended its own front-most limb and allowed its own nerve fibers to touch. The sensation was unpleasant. The observer was eager to impress the irrationality of its ilk on Hogajue.

Sharing was slow. Days passed. Information moved too slowly, even in the efficiency of neural paths shared from lobe to lobe. Information was not the depth of conceptualization, nor the depth of knowledge shared from generation to generation.

Hogajue knew that the sphere would be leaving the Bright space before enough could be shared. A decision was no closer.

Hogajue had to be enmeshed in its web at the exit into duller space. A decision could not be made without fuller ingestion of information.

To Hogajue's surprise, the observer agreed and assented. It offered its self-identification.

Hogajue accepted. Scuttling closer, it extended its feeding proboscis. The observer settled itself and leaned its closest eye forward.

Hogajue pushed its proboscis into the proffered eye. Without hesitation, it began ingesting the eye-nerve, then into the brain-lobe behind. An overarching structure had been imposed on the information in all of the time the observer had been given to prepare. The observer demanded that Hogajue accept its reality.

In its reality, the humans were not vermin. They were still dangerous competitors, but that did not end its analysis. The "Reality" Nests had gone into insanity. The observer and its ilk were prepared to argue that the humans could become a cooperating species, even symbiots.

In the cold brightness of hyperspace, this analysis became reasonable.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

The vessels plowed through an air-pocket. *Granuaile* lurched free, slammed back down. Avi keyed the adjustments she could make to the thrust. Red lights vastly outnumbered amber, and almost nothing was green. It should have failed, fallen away to burn up with all the stress it was taking.

Gods let her hold together a few more seconds.

Plasma static marred reception. "Next life..." was all she was sure Murphy said. He sounded bad, probably suffering almost-instant heat-stroke. The engineering deck was breached already.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Murphy was dead, or about to be.

“Escape speed Human Avinashini Human O’Meath prepare drive not power.”

Years of careful, intentional inhibition were nowhere to be found. Avi keyed rapidly back: “Who put you in charge?” She hit ‘send’ before she thought better of the comment. Correct as the damned thing was, what right did it have? *What right?* She barely resisted the unproductive urge to bang at the console. The gods-forsaken Euro O’Meath was teaching her bad habits.

The plasma flares were already receding as the ships pulled out of the atmosphere. More letters flashed up. “Human Avinashini amusement but time drive not power Human Avinashini do.”

Avi breathed in, held the breath. The zhīzhū was right. She pushed and tucked the feelings back in their deep storage safe. Rapid keying shut down the dorsal and main thrusters. For a moment, *Granuaile* seemed stuck. The plasma must have fused landing gear to hull.

The brittle weld gave way. *Granuaile* veered gently away. Avi steadied her, staying less than a meter off the missile corvette’s fractured bow.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Murphy)

Text flashed on the comm heads-up: “Escape speed Human Avinashini Human O’Meath prepare drive not power.”

Murphy’s knees buckled as his head swam. Despite the heat, he felt as if he was drifting off to sea.

He held himself up long enough to shut down the engines. Gravity shut down with the power. That done, he drifted into the rest of the refuse.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Fahnisht)

The flames diminished. The insects were still there. Fahnisht watched as *Granuaile*-insect left the other two. Done well, Kameef. Oorh-whaah was shouting, human-happy-anger not too different from what he knew of the plains. Oorh-whaah's Horn was unseen, like Kameef's. Fahnisht felt warm pleasure to finally be certain of Oorh-whaah. Oorh-whaah could join Kameef at the pyre and wish his soul luck. Avee-nah-sheen also.

A new sound came from Oorh-whaah. Pain, unmistakable pain. It was the pain-sound Fahnisht had made – when? How long ago had his beloved been taken?

As consciousness drifted away, he remembered Effrash's too-human face when he killed that other in the ship. They had been close, Effrash and that other. No, Oorh-whaah, not Effrash. Oorh-whaah.

Much blood debt to Oorh-whaah-Effrash. Much would be brought to the Pyre.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

The lifeboat ended thrust, then rotated for entry. A green light on the simplified console assured him that the re-entry heat shunt was operating. Additional hull material was in place to burn off. Plasma flares would be shunted around the capsule. He was now no better off than the earliest humans in space. His life depended on fancy insulation and a computer's entry-angle calculations.

Urk got up to check on Fahnisht. The Horn was breathing well, and seemed comfortable in the netting. All of the stays were secure. Urk pulled himself back to his own netting, re-secured himself.

The lifeboat slid into the atmosphere. The first thin layer of

Demand the Debt That's Owing

the onion began to vibrate the flattened cone. The gravitic engine served only one minor purpose, enveloping the cone and deflecting the heat. He'd sure as hell prefer to have Avi and a full-power landing just now.

The zhīzhū had better have the decency to kill him before they started eating.

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

“*Granuaile*, remote command mode. Avinashini only.”

“Authorized.”

Avi sealed her light vacc suit. A battlesuit would have been more sensible, but she hadn't adjusted one for herself. She would be safer in a properly fitted light piloting suit than an ill-fitting unit, even in the wreckage inside the now-crippled deadfall. The time she would waste adjusting a suit wouldn't really matter to O'Meath's corpse, she supposed. Unreasonable hope propelled her.

The pilot scrambled down the gangways to the lowest deck, then forward. The EVA locker opened to her. She shrugged her shoulders into the extended support pack, hastily clamped the standard hose and power fittings into place. The pack's on-boards linked to the helmet's on-board. Diagnostics flashed onto her heads-up, assuring her that the suit was tight.

She wasted no time on a manual double-check. Avi stepped into the airlock. “*Granuaile*, cycle personnel lock.” Compressors scavenged away the air; artificial gravity diminished and shut down. The outer hatch opened.

The line gun was somewhere on the other vessel. Avi would have to cross the gap on her own. She clipped a safety line to the frame. Rotating to look out, she scanned the pitted hull below. With a tug against the hatch frame, she left the comfort of *Granuaile* for the missile corvette's nearby hull. Connecting feet-first, she began to creep along the hull. She easily pulled herself

to an empty lifeboat hatch.

She clipped the other end of the line to a ring. The manual crank for the hatch was to her left. She turned the crank smoothly. Avi pulled herself into the decompressed hull.

The Admiral's first command had been one of these corvettes. The deck plans and operating manuals had been part of Avi's youthful play. Just perhaps one doll might have been tolerated? Avi wasted no time finding her way aft, bypassing central corridors that had logically made way for the extra fuel tanks.

The port hatch to main engineering was dogged shut. It looked safely airtight. The airtight bulkhead further toward the centerline was ruptured and rent, though. Rather than wrestling with the wheel in weightlessness, Avi pulled herself to the gap.

She slid easily through, never snagging her suit. Unidentifiable chunks of metal and drive, stanchions and wiring drifted through the chamber. Avi sidled carefully between the junk, looking for the main panel Murphy had planned to hijack.

The deck was buckled in too many places to reference half-remembered plans. Too much machinery was free, or off normal kilter.

"Heathen!"

If the ship had held tight, all she would have heard was an echo.

She pushed further back, past an overturned rack of heavy wrenches.

"O'Meath! Idiot, crazy *Jin Jun*. Sound off!" She looked at the massive bulk of the main fusion chamber. She was too far aft.

Some small bit of metal drifted into her life support backpack. The tiny tap vibrated into the small of her back. Avi ignored it. Nothing was moving fast enough to hole her suit.

Avi pointed her light randomly into the huge chamber. With all of the configuration changes, the main boards could have been moved almost anywhere. If it had then torn loose from the mountings, would O'Meath be holding on?

Something else struck her backpack. This hit harder. Avi half-turned, saw a wrench spinning off into the wreckage.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

A third wrench spun toward her helmet. Avi dodged, spun, waited until she could track the trajectory back. Tangled in ripped cables, a suited arm, a battered helmet had pushed out. A fourth wrench was almost in reach.

Avi ended her spin, oriented, and pushed off to the cable bundle. An embarrassing tear slid out of her left eye, goading her behind the faceplate. "You damned Euro *heathen*." She braced herself against the rippled deck and tugged him free of the mess.

She looked through the faceplate. His eyes drooped. Murphy looked drawn, tired, dehydrated. The external telltales were fused and melted. He seemed content to drift in the weightlessness. She had no other way to assess his condition.

She touched her faceplate to his. "Agni gave you back from fire. He favors you despite yourself."

His response was barely distinct: "Bullshit." He remained limp.

She discovered with a repressed smile that she would have been unhappy with a more respectful response.

She needed to get him back before he breathed away whatever air supply remained in his crippled battlesuit. Avi's own flight suit lacked sufficient clips and loops for serious EVA work. She looked around for an easy way to pull the Jin Jun along. An abundance of torn cables would have been helpful if she could have cut one free.

She wasted no time looking for cutting tools in the wreckage. She would simply have to push and pull as needed. The trip back to the corridor was the most difficult. Avoiding obstacles required the effort of changing directions for two.

She reached the hole in the bulkhead. O'Meath's bulkier battlesuit required effort to manage, especially with no help from its resident. Avi began to perspire. Muscles complained.

Finally, he was through, drifting in the corridor. She followed him through, began guiding him back toward the bow. She looked through his faceplate at her first opportunity. His eyelids were open, the pupils rolled back.

Was he breathing? Avi opened her suit-pouch, took up a

field ampoule of stims. Pulling the cover from the needle, she located the small port near his left bicep. She stabbed the needle through the round valve, jabbing deep into the meat.

She moved on, hoping O'Meath would revive. Short as he was, he seemed heavy and bulky in the awkwardness of weightlessness.

She came to the lifeboat port she had used to enter. Stars shone through, diamond-sharp on black velvet. Avi wrestled him through the round hole, then followed. He began to drift. She grabbed an ankle, got a tight grip with one hand.

Avi reconnected the safety line to her suit. Sighting *Granuaile* carefully, she corrected for O'Meath's mass. A firm push-off with the knees sent the two across the gap, directly into the waiting airlock. The lock cycled at her command, sealing the hatch and returning air to the cramped space. Gravity slowly eased upward. O'Meath became limp weight against her body. As soon as she was reassured by a green light, she opened the inner hatch.

Murphy fell backward to the deck. Avi got around to his head. She knelt and tugged at the latch releases.

Two of the three resisted, heat-fused. The third released hesitantly, then snapped off in her fingers. She looked through the faceplate, could not tell if he was breathing or not. She needed the suit open to help, if he could be helped at all.

Medical bay. She had seen the standard suit-slicer when they removed Fahnisht's horn.

Avi stripped of her own gloves. Taking a solid grip on his pack, she pulled. She fell back. A little man like this should not weigh so much.

Training kicked in as she stood, reflexively brushed off her pants. "*Granuaile*, remote command access, Avinashini. Reduce gravity to one-tenth."

Avinashini felt herself lighten. She again gripped the life support pack and pulled. This time, he moved easily. She pulled him down the corridor to the access upward. "Zero gravity." *Granuaile* complied; she pushed off, trailing O'Meath behind her.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

At the main deck, she returned gravity to a tenth, allowing her just enough weight to walk. She pulled the limp Jin Jun to the medical bay, stretching him out beside the treatment coffin. Bending at the knees, she balanced him across her arms and lifted him to the table.

Avi pulled open the surgery drawer. The bone saw was where O'Meath had haphazardly tossed it. Beneath it, properly stowed, was the suit-cutter standard to shipboard medical kits. Avi took it out.

A touch of the thumb-stud assured Avi that the cutter was charged and ready. She ran it from the center of the collar-ring down and around the chest gear, then down to his crotch. The smell of sweat and singed flesh wafted out. She moved back up, cut away the collar ring to remove the helmet.

His face was red, but not as badly so as she had expected. "Murphy!" She tapped the reddened cheeks. "Murphy, are you with me?" She reached to the wall for the oxygen mask and feed.

His lip twitched. "Mouth-to-mouth." His whisper was a dry rasp. "A little tongue, maybe."

Her cauldron of emotions boiled over. Streaming tears, she slapped his already-red face. "I should have *left* you to *rot*." She lifted his head roughly to strap the mask on. She ignored the ghost of his ridiculous grin as she adjusted the mask over his mouth and nose. Avi let his head fall back.

Again taking up the cutter, Avi sliced away sleeves and legs, pulling the bits of suit off until he was left in undergarments. Murphy cooperated as he could.

"Lay still." She closed the upper half of the cylinder over his body. It latched tight with a proper click. The auto-scan activated. Hums and whirring sounds came from the automed. "First aid only. Stims and fluids. I need him up and awake." Avi leaned back against the wall. She was suddenly tired. Adrenaline would not flow indefinitely.

Damn the foolish pygmy Euro, joking about kisses when he should be dead.

"Auto-scan complete. Patient: O'Meath, Cuchulain. Primary diagnosis: dehydration, heat exhaustion, and low-grade

skin-surface burn over 80% of body. Probable electrolyte imbalance. No irreparable organ damage. IV line placed for fluid and medication infusion. Patient should be sedated with command consent. Lid may be opened.”

Still angry – furiously relieved? – Avi considered leaving him shut in, without sedation. It would be entirely fair. He had no right to claim any part of her concern. She didn’t need him that much.

A small tendril of sense kept her from authorizing the sedation. Urwah and Fahnisht were yet to be retrieved. If the lifeboat had functioned properly, they were somewhere on the ground by now. *Granuaile* would almost certainly need O’Meath’s help to make ground. *Granuaile*’s own lifeboat might make the orbit-to-ground round trip, but wasn’t vessel enough to deal with the kind of emergencies she might face.

Chapter 20

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Murphy)

“Lie still, please. I am performing a diagnostic evaluation.” The computer voice had been selected to be soothing.

The painful tingling in his cheek was of more interest. Hidden beneath her brilliant, calm piloting and lovely form, she was passionate.

What the hell had he gotten into?

The system finished its testing. Gentle light came up, and a display came on in front of his eyes. “Vital signs stable. You are dehydrated and have a mild surface burn over much of your body. CT scan reveals no organ damage. I am inserting an IV into your right arm. Blood tests will be taken. Your Lead Jin Jun is being advised.”

He felt a blood-pressure cuff wrap around his upper arm and inflate. There was a prick as a robotic extension inserted the wide needle, hitting his vein the first time. A different extensor tapped a different vein for blood to analyze.

The lid lifted up. Avinashini stood there, once again all business. “Urwah and Fahnisht escaped in a lifeboat. They’ve probably set down. I need your help getting *Granuaile* to surface.”

All business. Murphy pushed himself up, putting aside the aches and dizziness, dangling his legs over the edge of the automed. “Don’t need him killing half the zhīzhū we just saved.” He pushed himself off, leaned against the automed, waiting for the dizziness to pass. “What do we need to do?”

“I’m mainly concerned about the landing gear.”

“Nothing easy, of course.”

“If I could repair her myself, I would have left you in the automed.” She turned to leave. “Get dressed,” she said over her shoulder as she exited.

Murphy detached the IV pump from the automed and started toward his bunk.

Memory flickered back. “Hey! The zhīzhū *talked* to us.”

November 24, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

The white noise of re-entry roared through the tiny cabin. The temperature climbed, remaining barely safe.

The capsule lurched and bounced. Fahnisht winced at the jolt. The first drogue chutes began decelerating the capsule. Urk glanced at Fahnisht, made sure that the Horn was breathing comfortably.

Urwah reviewed his survival training. The LB should have gear and concentrates. The stuff would be old, but probably edible. In any event, an Earthlike-world would have edible plants and animals. He had no doubt that Fahnisht could hunt with whatever the LB carried. By his recollection from briefings of five years before, though, the planet had little live game. The plant life was not especially nutritious to humans. The LB would also provide shelter, at least for a time. This assumed, of course, that no hungry zhīzhū decided to stake it out while they foraged, or break in while they rested.

The drogues released with a jerk. Urk counted the Mississippi. At “seven,” the capsule rumbled and jerked again. The

Demand the Debt That's Owing

main chutes were inflated to allow the final descent. Ground was only minutes away.

He unlocked the overhead panel. Five pistols sat in the rack, are clips ready. The first necessity, defense, was at hand, if long years of deep-space mothballing had done no harm. He pulled one down, looked it over. It was an old-style firearm, easier to maintain and repair than a laser or gauss-pistol. On the other hand, its ammunition was limited.

“Fahnisht.”

The Horn remained unconscious.

Nothing like a lone defense in a wilderness landing. The internal display lit up. “Prepare for ground. Sixty seconds.

Urk took out a second pistol, loaded a clip, and returned it to the rack. He rushed to repeat this three more times, perhaps saving time on reloads. When done, he closed the locker.

Muffled hissing sounds emanated from multiple points underneath the cabin. The bouncy-balls were inflating, ready to cushion the landing. The capsule jolted, bounced, rolled. This was repeated numerous times before the capsule finally came to rest. It sank down as the bouncy-balls deflated. He felt it settle against hard ground.

The computer confirmed his conclusion. With a polite chime, it displayed a message: “Grounded. Beginning environmental assessment, passive only.”

The basic sensors ran, quietly, sampling air, analyzing gravity, looking for EM emissions. It would not betray its position with active sensors unless Urwah ordered it to do so. Urk tugged at his harness, releasing himself. Sitting up, he retrieved the pistols.

The computer chimed again. “Oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, acceptable pressure. No obvious atmospheric poisons in significant concentration. Gravity 93% of Earth-normal. No obvious signs of sentient life within passive scan range.” All of that information more or less meshed with his recollection from the colonization attempt.

Urk looked over Fahnisht. The Horn was breathing comfortably, but still sedated. The on-board systems seemed to be

able to handle his biochemistry well enough. Murphy had seemed to think that it would.

Urk clambered up the ladder to the cone-hatch and twisted the latches. He opened it a crack, raised his head, and peered out at the landscape. The vegetation was reddish, scrubby, not entirely like Terran stuff. The terrain was rocky.

He opened the cone fully, let it bump down along the sign. It jerked short on its tethers and hung against the side, allowing him to pull it up and seal the hatch again, should he want to. He climbed up two rungs, pushing his shoulder through the hatch.

He looked out on the hillside. It was an arid landscape, cold and uninviting. The sparse vegetation was low and tough. Murphy could probably guess what it was, with his survey training.

He had a clear view down the hillside. In the distance, at least five or six kilometers away, he could see a cluster of beehive-like hemispheres.

Zhīzhū. Adrenaline shot through him, preparing him. The thought – why should he fear someone whose race he just saved? – flitted through his mind only momentarily. He was not going to be food without a fight. With little laser power, no needles, it might well be a short fight.

Urk calmed himself. They would probably investigate. If they had a gravver or chopper, it would be sooner than later. There was no sign that they were aware of the landing yet.

As if they could have missed it.

Urk clambered out onto the exterior of the capsule, then down the slant to the ground. The deflated bouncy balls gave way to the mossy rocks.

Several hundred meters further up the hill was an outcropping that looked defensible. He climbed it as quickly as he could. Ledge, an overhang and stones provided at least some cover.

It also provided little escape. There was no cave, no other hiding spot. When the zhīzhū decided to have dinner, they could have dinner. He and Fahnisht would be too readily available.

Urk went back down the slope toward the capsule. A strip of recessed handholds and footholds helped him up the flattened

Demand the Debt That's Owing

cone. He climbed back in, feet-first, got back onto his couch.

There was enough power for the grav systems to float the capsule and cruise at low speeds. They would not be able to outrun a proper gravver, but he could look for a better position, further up the hill, perhaps over the ridge. He hesitated. Movement might attract further attention.

He had no better choices.

November 25, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Murphy)

Avi was already up the gangway and going into the con. Murphy found himself moving faster. “Hey! The zhīzhū spoke to us,” he repeated. “They worked with us. A first. *Two* firsts.” He came through the hatch. “They goddam well helped us.”

Avinashini stood in front of the main console, her posture defining a mix of surprise, anger, and concern. “They seem to want to continue to do so.” She let Murphy push in beside her to look at the display.

Three zhīzhū clustered around the port front landing gear. Their EVA suits were small pods that must fit closely to their bodies. Mechanical appendages extended in place of both arms and legs, keeping the actual extremities inside the egg-shaped units. The three were working rapidly with the tortured gear, detaching it from the connecting base within the ship.

“Or they’re scrounging for souvenirs.” Murphy shrugged. “Suppose I can’t blame them.” Murphy reached forward, keyed for additional views.

The zhīzhū sphere was still with them. A cargo hatch stood open to space, a fourth zhīzhū exiting from the hold. Its maneuvering units pushed it off toward *Granuaile*, but not toward the cluster of other zhīzhū. Murphy followed it with the external cam.

It came to *Granuaile*’s forward lock, arrested motion. Waited.

The comm display came up. A harsh, hoarse-sounding monotone came over the speaker. “Zhīzhū Hogajue require entry.”

Avi shuddered. Murphy touched her shoulder. “Are you going to be okay with this?”

“I have no choice.”

“I’m giving you the choice. Me – I’ll risk being lunch. I’m not going to ask you to put up with one of them. Stay here in the con.”

November 25, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

Avi let herself be distracted by a momentary warmth at the sign of concern. Comm interrupted again. “Hogajue require entry. Open. Now.”

Avi took a deep breath. “*It is not giving me the choice, however.*” Her shoulder relaxed. “This is – must be – a new time, Murphy.” She contained yet another emotion: revulsion.

November 25, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Murphy)

Murphy keyed comm. “I’m opening the outer hatch. Squeeze in.” He keyed comm off, keyed the hatch from the station. “Let’s go.” He led the way out of the con, down to the cargo deck, and to the forward corridor.

He bypassed the airlock momentarily, went on to the weapons locker. He looked inside, frowned. “That damned marine took the best stuff.” He selected two gauss pistols, made sure the clips were full and the charges topped. He handed one to Avi. “Pump straight into whatever eye is facing you if it seems hostile.”

Demand the Debt That's Owing

"It will *seem* hostile even if it is dead," Avi replied.

Murphy shrugged, clipped his own holster to his side and went forward to the lock.

The airlock was finished cycling. The zhīzhū must have figured out at least some of the controls. Murphy looked at his handheld, made sure that the inner hatch was still locked. He looked back at Avi. "Are you ready, lovely?"

"Yes, heathen." She had the pistol out, at her side. "Take care that I don't shoot *you*."

Murphy keyed the lock from his handheld. The hatch opened. The zhīzhū "suit" had split open, somehow. Its shell was more flexible than it seemed. The zhīzhū stepped out of the shell and lock, into the corridor.

Murphy looked cautiously at it – twenty centimeters shorter than himself, eggplant-purple, rounded, no real head, an eye at the center of each of its four "faces." The four arms were offset from the eyes, and below, as were the four powerful legs. The skin, or chitin, or bark, or whatever its outer layer was made of, seemed vaguely repulsive without logical reason.

"Welcome aboard," Murphy said. The words were insufficient, somehow. Who the hell else had ever spoken to a zhīzhū, face to face? He waited for the hoarse monotone to respond.

The zhīzhū tilted forward on its two "front" legs, shifted its large eye to look deckward, then straightened. One its above-eye breathing trunks snaked around to face them. "Not sensible. Humans Kameef Avinashini Grunon not sensible Cetian Fahnisht not sensible no sensible. Help Nests not wanted. Nests live superior. Die not superior. Humans Kameef Avinashini Grunon not sensible. Cetian Fahnisht not sensible kill all humans sensible Fahnisht. Other humans most sensible. Kill me kind. Sensible *let*."

November 25, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

Avi exhaled. The zhīzhū was explaining its decidedly Darwinian conventional wisdom. Species survival was its all. Beside her, Murphy chuckled. Avi saw the irony with less humor.

The breathing trunk flicked. “Human humor response. Like. But not speaking humor speaking truth mathematical. Torpedo words *Avinashini* understand. Others not sensible *not*.”

“I don’t understand,” Murphy said.

“Yes, you do,” Avi interjected. “It’s calling us fools.” She shuddered. “Except, perhaps, me. It thinks we are *idiots* for saving the entire zhīzhū species.”

“Ah word fool Avinashini well say,” the zhīzhū agreed. “Fools. Nests live must. Not choice hope desire. Must. Hunger, need, more need. Biology. Must. Nests *must*. Two thousand six hundred twenty-one nests all *must* bigger more.”

“So why aren’t we already *your* dinner?” Murphy crossed his arms, glanced at Avinashini, and back to the zhīzhū.

“Two hundred five nests must curious *not* sensible humans not truth mathematical resist *must*. Learn *new* must.” It twitched several arms. “New *reality* must.”

Murphy smiled broadly. “That’s the point, isn’t it? We need to learn new ‘musts,’ too.”

“Hogajue Nest two-thousand six hundred twenty one, not two hundred five. Hogajue ingesting new data. Uncertain two hundred five correct. Ingest new information continue.

“That sounds indecisive,” Murphy commented.

Avi ignored him. Perhaps he was still ailing, and thus unable to stay on point. “What do you now suggest?”

“Now together Hogajue Human Avinashini Human O’Meath together must. Nests planet ‘must’ nests. Must tastesmell Human Grunon Cetian Fahnisht. Not must considered now to Hogajue. Zhīzhū Hogajue Human Avinashini Human O’Meath retrieve Human Grunon Cetian Fahnisht. Hogajue ship broken more *Granuaile*. Use *Granuaile* retrieve Human Grunon Cetian Fahnisht. Planet nests *not* tastesmell Fahnisht Grunon.”

Demand the Debt That's Owing

“Blood debt,” Murphy mused. “You’re getting the idea.”

Avinashini resisted her nausea, regretted the feeling though it was beyond conscious control. She reached for the forward “hand” of the zhīzhū. She took it between her two hands, clasping it, hoping that the intended positive energies would flow. “*Namaste*. Thank you for not being ‘sensible.’ How long before we can go in?”

“Not one your hour Hogajue subNest fix.” The zhīzhū pulled back its arm. “*Namaste* not word learned known. Taste word later.” It scuttled back into the airlock, stepping into his pod.

Murphy closed and cycled the lock. “A trick? Get us all down there?”

“It could have already tasted us, Murphy. How would you have stopped it?” She looked at his sidearm. “Even if you’d fired right through its forward eye, you’d only have damaged one of its brain lobes. When the gods send a gift, accept it with joy.” She reached out, took his free hand between hers. “*Namaste*.”

November 25, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

Murphy felt the warmth of her two hands on his one. He reached with his other, leaned inward. Avinashini divined his intent, pulled back.

Mixed messages, from one side or the other. Murphy let her release his hands. “We’d better get ready.”

November 25, 2395 (Present Day) – Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

The line of zhīzhū was winding up the mountainside. From what Urk could see, they were not heavily armed. These were not fighting zhīzhū, most likely. With limited ammunition and

limited weapons, though, they could and would overwhelm him eventually.

He considered climbing back into the capsule and granting Fahnisht final grace. That much, he should do. He was not sure what the Horn would think of such a thing, but he would have to assume that human impulses would suffice. He might not have the time to finish him when the zhīzhū got too close.

He had at least ten minutes to decide. He would wait until he had to begin firing.

November 25, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

Comm came up. “All hatches and covers are tight. Heat shield reads tight, all generators optimal. They’re fast workers. We’ll make the braking burn this orbit.” Avi looked at O’Meath’s face on the display. His stubborn endurance was remarkable, but the lines of exhaustion were clear. “You should rest. I can handle a re-entry burn.”

“Wish I could. Good thing we have atmosphere at surface. I’ll get Hogajue back on board.”

“You have seven minutes,” she affirmed.

Murphy keyed comm off. Avi went through her own final checks. The zhīzhū were clearing away, heading back to their sphere. She set the computer to begin the braking maneuver automatically, reserving her override.

Two minutes later, O’Meath reported again. The zhīzhū was already on board. He and O’Meath would take the touch-down in the engineering deck, where Hogajue had enough space to brace himself against unusual acceleration. She mused for a moment – what kind of acceleration ‘couch’ would fit a quadrilateral, four-eyed eggplant-spider?

Granuaile finished its back-flip and positioned the gravs for the braking thrust. Thrust applied; the ship broke orbit. *Granuaile* flipped back to forward flight. Avi monitored the ma-

Demand the Debt That's Owing

neuver calmly, letting the automatics handle this.

The grav-generated heat shield formed as scheduled. Atmosphere gripped the frame, flowing over the layer of force.

She expected unusual vibrations, but felt none. A full Fleet maintenance crew probably would not have done so well. The zhīzhū certainly had some skills with equipment, even alien equipment.

No rescue transponder signaled from the surface. Urwah had no doubt set it for a hostile landing; it would respond only when *Granuaile* got close. Hogajue's data would bring them into range.

November 25, 2395 (Present Day) – Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

A hollow boom echoed through the hills. Urk flashed back the years, remembered the sound of an FDC screaming overhead.

There was no point in hoping that any such vessel was near enough to help. If anything, the local zhīzhū had called for reinforcements. The line of zhīzhū continued up the mountainside.

A dot appeared in the distance. Urk raised the field glasses, but could not discern any details. A computer voice spoke up from below, muffled through the exit tunnel. "Receiving rescue transmission."

Urk blinked, looked again, squinted through the glasses. Was that a disc with two outboard drive pods? *Granuaile*? Sweet Avi hadn't killed herself for that red-headed Jin Jun pygmy after all.

November 25, 2395 (Present Day) – Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

Granuaile cut through the upper clouds and slowed. A muf-

fled sonic boom sounded out as a mountain range came into view. Avi banked, closing on the lifeboat's landing site. The lifeboat's transponder finally awakened. She adjusted the path, began scanning ahead for a reasonably flat area to set down.

Nothing both clear and level presented itself. She keyed comm. "Murphy, can you launch that gravver from hover? If you cannot, I will have to ground in the valley."

"I'm the best damned gravver jockey in the Jin Jun, I'll manage."

"Best' says little for your fellow Jin Jun. Two minutes."

The zhīzhū's voice came over. "Hogajue out near planet zhīzhū must talk Human Avinashini stay near weapons ready."

"*Happily*." The vehemence of her emotion surprised her, but Avi said nothing more. She could will herself to except Hogajue from her general views of zhīzhū, but not others yet unmet. Hogajue was an oddity, even a rebel, by his own garbled admission.

She scanned forward, noting the position of the line of zhīzhū, adjusted course slightly. They were less than a kilometer from Urwah. She considered passing directly over the zhīzhū, slamming them with a burst of thrust from the belly plates, perhaps even a plasma burst from the exhausts.

They were life, she reminded themselves. Hogajue had finally provided proof that cooperation might become possible. She banked slightly, passing to one side of the zhīzhū line as she slowed to hover.

Under her deft fingers, *Granuaile* rotated gently to face the bow at the fifteen or sixteen zhīzhū. The group halted.

Before she could clear him, O'Meath had opened the cargo hatch. The gravver skittered out of the main saucer and swung above, into cam range. Murphy sat at the open-framed utility vehicle's controls; Hogajue sat in the rear cargo basket, holding on with three out of four upper appendages.

The gravver barely touched the surface; the zhīzhū jumped off, sleekly coordinating its limbs. Murphy lifted and reversed course, heading for the life capsule. Avi set the aft cams and sensors to track him, but kept her primary attention on the zhīzhū.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

The zhīzhū group was almost a mob. Avinashini saw no obvious weapons; instead, they carried recognizable farming tools. Hoes, rakes, and similar implements stood out, often two per individual. These zhīzhū were agricultural serfs facing an invader across their fields.

Hogajue went to one of the lead zhīzhū and planted himself in front. Hogajue's coloration was darker, and he wore something like a utility belt; she could distinguish him from the others. The sound pickup was little use over the deep bass thrum of the belly lifters, so she could not listen or record. She saw the speaking trunks move and gesticulate wildly.

The conversation ended abruptly. Hogajue raised an arm, revealing a zhīzhū gauss pistol. It fired a burst through the other zhīzhū's front-most eye. Hogajue scuttled around the other zhīzhū, firing into each of the four eyes.

As zhīzhū ichors spewed, the other zhīzhū's legs gave way. It went down to its lowest portion, then fell over sideways.

Hogajue calmly scuttled forward to straddle the corpse. Avinashini shuddered as its feeding trunk extended from the rump and pushed through one of the dead zhīzhū's eyes. At the same time it engaged two other zhīzhū with two of its speaking trunks.

These two also must have disagreed, were also summarily shot. Hogajue lifted itself off the first body, sampling each of the other two in turn while speaking to the rest.

Avi felt revulsion grip the back of her throat and the pit of her stomach. She dug for her emergency bag with one hand, bringing the other to her mouth. She opened the bag in time to retch, fighting back the shameful reaction. Long education and training won; she held her contents down. Avi leaned to the side, miserable, tasting the hint of bile, waiting for the sudden spasms and internal tangling to end.

When it had, and she was sure it would not quickly return, she set the bag in the proper receptacle. She only looked side-long at the displays. A fourth zhīzhū was dead; Hogajue straddled it.

The remaining eleven or twelve zhīzhū had gathered the now-discarded farming implements of the others, and were making

their way back down the mountain. Hogajue had apparently finally made its point clear to them.

External comm announced itself to the display. "Recording incoming transmission, coded as Jin Jun Priority," *Granuaile* announced.

With suddenly exhausted surprise, Avi keyed for replay.

A Chinese face appeared. It was, beyond doubt, the First Jin Jun in the same day. "*Xiaoqin*, just out of hyperspace, to *Granuaile*. First Jin Jun Zhaohui commanding. We are incoming, ready to lend any aid requested. We are also transmitting your original message to let the zhīzhū know we are not here as a hostile force. Sir Cuchulain O'Meath is designated Lead Jin Jun, myself Second. Reply."

The time reference showed the message to be five minutes old. *Xiaoqin* had been brought over the lip fairly close to the local gravity well, though not as close as Avi's exit had been. Avi keyed the message to relay to O'Meath.

Murphy responded quickly. "Tell her that I made *you* Lead already, you're still Lead, she can make orbit and wait."

"I can as easily relay your own recorded message, especially as you seem to be giving me orders."

"Good point. So why ask my opinion? I made you Lead Jin Jun. It's recorded in the logs, upload them. We're Johnny-on-the-spot, and we're on top of the situation. Jin Jun rules and tradition. We learned quick to not let structure make us stupid.

"Besides, it'll frost her."

Avi was caught between exasperation and amusement. "You delight in unnecessarily aggravating authority."

"Absolutely. I have to help get Fahnisht out of this damned lifeboat." O'Meath cut the channel.

Avi shook her head. What was his real goal? Did it matter? He was correct. He had determined that she should be in command. Avi keyed comm. "Lt. Commander B. P. Avinashini, Imperial Fleet, commanding *Granuaile*, designated Lead Jin Jun by Sir Cuchulain O'Meath. Logs queued for transmission. Commanders of all Imperial vessels, assume high orbit and await further instructions." She remembered Hogajue's damaged vessel,

Demand the Debt That's Owing

still in orbit. “The damaged zhīzhū sphere is not, repeat not hostile. Provide any assistance requested. Acknowledge. Avinashini, out.”

The zhīzhū almost would not request help, despite the damage to their vessel. One could not be sure, though. Too much had changed too quickly. It might change back, or might not.

Perhaps O'Meath was not the only person delighting in aggravating others. She found herself pleasantly amused that she had taken command over one of Fleet's most ardent detractors.

November 25, 2395 (Present Day) – Groombridge 1618 II (Urwah)

Now certain that the approaching vessel was *Granuaile*, Urk slid back into the capsule. He deflated the air cushion under Fahnisht and released the safety catches, converting the simple acceleration frame into a wire-mesh stretcher.

Fahnisht groaned, flicked open his eyes. “Oorh-whaah.” He lapsed into the Horn language, ending with a single repeated word: “Efrash, Efrash, Efrash.” Urk could make nothing more of the language without the translation systems nearby.

The hum of an approaching gravver sent him back up to the exit. Damned inconvenient design, these lifeboats. Someone had chosen ease of construction and water safety over ground-based convenience. The same design was used throughout the Fleet. The engineers should be put into a battlesuit and left inside one of these for a week before the next model was designed.

Urk activated his almost-empty suit weapons and poked head and shoulders out. He aimed at the approaching vehicle and zoomed on the heads-up. One of *Granuaile's* gravvers was close. The red-headed pygmy was piloting.

Comm came on. “If you shoot me down, I'm telling Avi to leave without you, you grunt son-of-a-bitch.”

Relief ran through him. “Jin Jun *bullshit*. Get down here and help with Fahnisht.”

Murphy slowed the gravver to a hover, almost above. "Is he in a stretcher?"

"Tied down tight."

"Catch." Murphy tossed down a line.

Urk let the heavy snap bounce off the side of the capsule. He reached for the dangling line, took hold, and drew the hook mechanism up. A moment's work had it inside the capsule and secured to the head-end of the stretcher basket.

Urk keyed comm. "Lift him easy. I'll guide him through the hatch."

The line became taut, lifting the head of the basket. Urk maneuvered it into the nose-cone hatch, making sure Fahnisht was not seriously banged about. The basket lifted through, revealing open sky. Urk scrambled up the ladder and hoisted himself through the hatch.

The basket swung gently in the mountain breeze, a few meters above the surface. "I'll set him on the ground so I can land," O'Meath noted. "You help the stretcher lay down gently."

"Right." Urwah slid down the scorched outside of the cone and took his position. Murphy reduced altitude slowly, lowering the basket gently to the rock. When that was done, he let the gravver settle a few meters away. The two made quick work of securing the stretcher to the cargo platform. Urk and Murphy got into their seats.

Murphy piloted the gravver in a smooth lift and circled back in the direction from which he had come.

November 26, 2395 (Present Day) – Groombridge 1618 II (Murphy)

Murphy and Urwah gripped the stretcher basket's handholds tightly, lifting it off the gravver cargo rack. Fahnisht lay stoic, uncomplaining. From there, they pulled him through the hatch into the access corridor. Moving forward, they came to the almost-vertical gangway to the main deck. Urwah glanced upward.

“Bad design,” he muttered.

“Kick the grav into neutral,” Murphy said, beginning to set down his end of the basket. “There’s a lot of local control built in.”

The forward air lock opened behind them. Murphy straightened. The zhīzhū Hogajue scuttled through the hatch, coming toward them. It stopped, assessing the situation through its forward eye, then continued forward. “Fahnisht burden I vertical,” it said in its strained, gravelly voice. It moved forward to skirt around the gangway.

Urwah stiffened, clearly resistant. Murphy understood the distrust. He had no way of knowing exactly how much Urwah understood about this zhīzhū’s recent apparent understanding and cooperation. “No eating,” Murphy said, direct to the unblinking eye facing him. “Fahnisht isn’t supper. Not so much as a god-dam nibble.” He gestured at his gauss pistol.

“Not nibble,” the zhīzhū agreed.

Murphy set down his end of the stretcher basket, looked Urwah in the eye. “Trust this.”

Urwah glared. “You’re crazy, O’Meath. You can’t reason with the zhīzhū.”

“We’ve done pretty good lately,” Murphy replied. He lowered his voice. “I’m sworn to Fahnisht by fire and blood. He’ll be safe. We’re wasting time.”

Urwah yielded them, slowly lowering the basket to the deck. He went over to the zhīzhū. “I’ll kill you and eat whatever the hell you have as a heart, raw,” he said, warning. He stepped back from the basket, uncertainly, gripping his side arm.

“Secure be both.” Was that a chiding tone?

Murphy stepped back to join Urwah. The zhīzhū scuttled forward, grasped the basket easily with two of its arms. It backed into the ladder, gripping it with its other two arms, and then two feet. With ease, it crawled part way up the ladder, then gently passed the basket through the hatch above, angling it to slide gently onto the upper deck. The zhīzhū followed it up and slid through the hatch. They heard the scraping and lifting of the basket again. Murphy let Urwah clamber up the ladder before him,

then followed.

By the time Murphy was on the deck, Urwah and the zhīzhū were already in the medical bay. Urwah had the upper portion of the automed open, looking at it uncertainly.

"It's not programmed for Cetian biology," Murphy said. "Set it to diagnose only."

Fahnisht's eyes were open. "*It is my time for the pyre.*"

"No." Murphy crossed his arms. "No pyres today."

They were interrupted by Avi's voice over comm. "We are cruising in the upper atmosphere," she reported. "I have signals from *Xiaoqin* requesting that we make orbit."

Murphy did not try to hide his surprise. "Smoothest flying, lovely legs. Can you get us to orbit without stressing Fahnisht?"

"Absolutely," she responded.

"Well, you're Lead," Murphy said. "It's your call." He returned his attention to Fahnisht. "Let's get him into the automed."

With surprising gentleness, the zhīzhū undid the straps holding the Horn in the basket. It cradled the Clanlord, then lifted him over to the coffin-shaped unit. Urwah stood to the side, allowing the creature easy access. Hogajue laid Fahnisht in, stroked the smoothness of the lid for questioning second before closing it. Urwah punched the button for diagnostic mode.

Chapter 21

November 26, 2395 (Present Day) – Groombridge 1618 II (High Orbit) (Murphy)

The humans crowded around *Granuaile*'s galley table. The lone zhīzhū, anomalous, rested on its quadrilateral haunches at the end of the table, in the common area. "Bodies other humans remove if not to eat," Hogajue indicated. "Hogajue crew told accept foolishness Human. No zhīzhū on 'Deadfall.' Not always."

Zhaohui, herself seeming out-of-place herself, waved away the statement. "We should leave the bodies here – perhaps even as propaganda. Let the zhīzhū feast."

Urk glowered. "Ice your holds."

"There are considerations -"

"Ice your holds!" Urwah stood, slamming the table with balled fists. "We aren't zhīzhū, and we're *not* leaving behind bodies to be eaten. It doesn't matter what we think about these Humanitas idiots – they're still humans, and we'll *treat* them that way."

Fahnisht, his first aid treatments barely complete, weakly lifted a hand, touched Urwah's forearm. "Effrash," he whispered. He gently directed the marine to sit down again. Urk paused, then collapsed to the seat, still glowering.

Zhaohui folded her arms. "Fleet's marines do not make pol-

icy, and certainly do not scream and bang the table at me.”

Murphy leaned forward. “He’s a Jin Jun on *my* crew, and he speaks and bangs *my* table when he damned well wants to.” He cleared his throat. “Especially when he’s *right*. Rebels or not, they’re *human*. Bury them in a mass grave on Luna for all I care. Orbit them into the sun, or grind them up for fertilizer. *Don’t* leave them behind when we have a zhīzhū willing to admit that our ‘foolishness’ is due ten minutes of respect.”

“This – *thing* here can’t be rated highly in the zhīzhū structure,” Zhaohui retorted. “It’s some kind of surveillance ship pilot. And it barely manages Standard – what use are the computer minds if this is what we deal with?”

Hogajue apparently understood the jibe. “Hogajue brain grown hyperspace know best. Not grown Human speech know. Tastesmelled another quickly sound language. Nests will tastesmell my sights sounds learning Humans all. New tastesmells new zhīzhū grow.”

Avinashini avoided looking at the two visible eyes. Her own memory of Hogajue’s communication methods was still too raw. Nonetheless, she spoke up. “He means that it might become more important – or at least that he will bring them new perspective.”

“Nonetheless, these rebels are to be left for the zhīzhū,” Zhaohui reasserted.

“And I, as Lead, order that we take properly human steps.” Avi kept her tone even, expression neutral, and gaze locked on Zhaohui. “Urwah, you will determine acceptable disposal, without military honors. There is no further discussion.”

Zhaohui shrugged. “The disposal of rebel bodies is a small point.”

“No, it’s not,” Murphy responded. “Frankly, Zhaohui, so far as I’m concerned, genocidal types deserve whatever they get.”

Urwah shot a hostile glance. Murphy continued. “They deserve what they get – even when they’re our brothers and sisters at arms. But they *are* our friends, and brothers, and cousins. Literally. It’s a hell of a sight easier to make martyrs out of bodies we leave behind as a lunch treat than it is to convince all of the

Empire that the zhīzhū aren't so bad after all."

He looked her squarely in the eye. "We're *not* giving Humanitas any help. *No help.* That's my *operational* decision. Lead Jin Jun. Ice the holds."

"I thought you insist that the traitor's daughter is Lead. She acts like she is."

Murphy caught himself. "She is – the minute you accept her. Sorry, Avi. Until then –"

"Her *mother* provided the ships, and her fiancé helmed them. Traitors. All of them."

"Bullshit. *Jin Jun* bullshit. You've seen my logs. She's a better damned Jin Jun than I *ever* was – bet she'd follow orders if you gave them in a half-nice voice. Buddha Christ Almighty, Zhaohui, you're *not* stupid. Why the *hell* are you acting like you are?"

"They plan to destroy our government. Assassinate my nephew. Leave us to zhīzhū with half of Fleet stolen and the other half possible saboteurs. Why not plant her as bait for *your* capture-the-flag penis? Do you think our enemies have not studied all of our weaknesses? Was spreading her hairy purse worth it?"

"I am *not* a traitor," Avinashini said, quietly but with angry certainty. "Nor have I allowed O'Meath what only a *husband* may have." She paused, looked directly into Zhaohui's eyes. "And I would hope that *ladies* of the Court do not speculate about another lady's pubic hair."

Avinashini stood. "I have sat through enough silliness." She left and started down the corridor toward the con.

Murphy watched her leave. "I quit," Murphy said simply. "If you can't trust me or my cock to put Yi Tan first, my oath is worthless to you." He stood, turned to leave, turned back. "We were a long time ago, Zhaohui, and I'm sorry that I was too young and stupid to realize it wasn't just politics for you. How many more times do I apologize?"

Zhaohui flushed, spoke angrily in Mandarin. "*This is not a matter to discuss with others present.*"

"Don't pull court hypocrisy on me out here, Zhaohui. And

stop thinking with your own sex parts. Avinashini is Lead.” He, too, strode out.

Murphy walked to the central gangway and clambered up to the con. As expected, he found Avinashini at the main station, flicking through sensor readings.

She sat, rigid, keeping her gaze on the display. “I am a good Hindu, O’Meath. Whatever the Admiral has done, she has not raised me to be a prostitute. She raised me to serve. She did well enough that I am ashamed of her now.” She stopped, fought back a sob. “I am not a prostitute for the Admiral *or* for Humanitas.”

“She knows,” Murphy said. “She just has to face that she knows.”

“You slept with her.”

Murphy tightened his lip. “Yes. Mostly ten years ago.”

“She is married. And was then.” Her tone was accusatory.

“Yes. Legally, at least.”

“That is a poor excuse. Marriage is a commitment. You helped her break it.”

“She didn’t need any help. Zhaohui married who she was damned well told to marry. Neither of them were all that interested in one another apart from Imperial duty.”

“Duty is duty.”

“You’re supposed to marry a man you just tried to kill.”

“At least I tried to kill him *before* I dishonored the vow!”

Murphy chuckled. “You have a point. In any event, it wasn’t something that was ever intended to be more than it was. Not by either of us.”

“Of course. Being a typical, stupid male, you *ignored* the truth to get your momentary pleasure.”

“I wasn’t the only one in the bed, you know. I thought about marrying her, but divorce wasn’t on the table. Especially after my sister got involved.”

“Divorce is wrong,” Avi agreed. “So of course your family disapproved?”

“Hell, no, my sister the good Catholic pushed for it. First time she ever bothered to treat her bastard half-brother as a hu-

Demand the Debt That's Owing

man being, in fact. Made me think hard enough to tell her to go to Hell and let me stay in peace.”

“Gods, I had begun to believe that you might have some understanding of women.” She crossed her arms tightly across her chest.

“You’re the only alien race I can’t figure out.” He smiled at his own humor.

Avinashini glowered at him in disbelief. Recovering herself, she stood to face him, drawing herself to her full height in a regal stance, tilting her head downward to lock gazes.

“I would slap you,” she said, her words measured. “But I have better control than you.” Avinashini pushed by him and went out the back hatch.

Murphy rubbed his cheek. Somehow, it stung more than if she *had* slapped him.

November 26, 2395 (Present Day) – High Orbit, Groombridge 1618 II (Fahnisht)

Effrash Oorh-whaah helped him stand. He offered gestures and words of honor to Zhaohui. “Rest,” he said to the magnificent warrior. He did not know whether he spoke Kameef’s odd words or his own.

He leaned on the warrior’s arm. It was wrong, weak. He tried to push himself off, to stand and walk alone.

Falling to the hard metal should have hurt. It did not grant that honor, any more than Kameef or Oorh-whaah would grant him the honor of a clean blade, a hot fire.

November 27, 2395 (Present Day) – High Orbit, Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

Hogajue watched as the humans rushed about. The large

dark male ministered to the smaller Cetian. The smaller male, O'Meath slid down the ladder from the control area, stumbling in the rush to help. The female, Avinashini, went gracefully around to reach the collapsed Cetian first.

Their words and jabber were too fast and broken to comprehend. It appeared certain that they were concerned. Nothing else was certain.

In a moment, Urwah lifted the Cetian. Without hesitation, the man carried it into another room, followed by O'Meath and Avinashini. Hogajue followed. As he watched, they put the compact biped into a cylindrical structure, laying it back and helping attach devices and such.

Hogajue reached a conclusion: the Cetian was dying. Nothing of what they did seemed destined to conserve the essence of the being. Why would intelligent beings fail to do that?

November 27, 2395 (Present Day) – High Orbit, Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

"I've done what I can to adjust it," Murphy explained. "Schwartz's latest information helped. And we're lucky there are a lot of parallels in the biology. Similar DNA helices and such."

"So he'll heal." Urwah looked too large to sit helplessly hunched on a stool in the corner of the med-bay.

"I expect so." Murphy walked to the small sink, pumped cleanser into his palm, and began washing. "I've put him on support. Nutrients, that sort of thing. A long healing coma. The brain chemistry is pretty similar, so he can be kept under for a while. Plenty of neuron-repair. If his brain is as plastic as the human brain, he should recover pretty well. The stroke wasn't massive, so far as I can tell. One clot, thrown from the leg. It's dissolving. That's pretty good for healing."

"How much do we really know about Horn brains?" Urwah asked. "For all you know, he's fried for good."

"He's mean. A fighter."

Demand the Debt That's Owing

“What the hell do you know about strokes, anyway?”

Murphy shrugged. “Killed my father. They run in the family.”

Avi touched Urwah's shoulders gently. She said nothing, not wishing to give false hope. When Urwah had been out of the compartment earlier, Murphy had quietly cursed over the reality that his best medical information wasn't good enough. It was spotty. He had programmed the system as best he could.

“The leg is the bigger issue,” Murphy added. “The wound, then local oxygen deprivation and freezing. All pretty hard on bones and muscles. I don't know how much the automed will be able to do. Its nano is human-based. Can't fully adjust.”

The small observation base on Shānhé-Wòtǔ had collected lower animals and sent them to Earth for study. O'Meath had been permitted to get a few samples and scans of living Horns. Humanitas, perhaps, had conducted the most comprehensive review of Horn biochemistry. Deadfall's computers had contained that information. It was mostly related to immunities, though it had provided some insights into the function of the Horn brain. Not enough, but some. Speculation was what they had left.

Avi made a small prayer to Ganesh. As an afterthought, she added Agni, the fire god. No doubt Fahnisht named him differently, but perhaps the Horn god would forgive the confusion – if, indeed, they were different gods.

Murphy's handheld beeped. He tapped the key. “Sir Cuchulain, get to your con,” Zhaohui ordered. “A large vessel has just come out of hyperspace.”

“Buddha Christ Almighty When the hell do we get rest?”

Avi was already on her way as Murphy locked in the automed's final settings.

November 26, 2395 (Present Day) – High Orbit, Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

They stood crowded around the circular console display to-

ward the rear of the con. "It's one of the big spheres," Avi said, expertly keying through the sensor readings. "They're generally built around a central mass driver. It's moving quickly, of course. It'll be in a position to fire on us in two hours, unless we break orbit right away."

"So we break orbit," Murphy said. "Choose a vector they can't match easily. We'll run to the giant, do a fuel dive and get the hell out of here."

Avi shook her head. "It's coming from that vector. We would be running into their mass-driver fire. They can outmaneuver us in-system. Sooner or later, they'll have fuel and we won't."

"Ice in the Oort zone?" Urwah asked.

Zhaohui shook her head. "There will be no time to obtain the ice."

Murphy shrugged. "We'll just have to vector like hell toward the gas giant and dodge their ordnance. At least one of us should be able to get through."

Zhaohui, on the comm's display, was nonchalant. "I have eight nuclear missiles. One, at least, will get through its defensive fire."

Hogajue emitted a noise, something between a screech and a groan. "Fire Human no waste of meat. Zhīzhū meat, honor flesh, Human not sane flesh burn. Re-war. Fire Human no."

Murphy nodded. "I agree. We didn't come all this way to make the things worse between us. We need a solution that doesn't involve trying to blow these bastards out of the sky now that we've saved their asses."

"Solution Hogajue." The zhīzhū raised itself up on its legs. "Hogajue vouch Hogajue beside fire blood promise." The zhīzhū seemed to think the matter closed, scuttling back to exit the con. "Hogajue borrow Zhaohui fire missiles."

Zhaohui seemed perplexed. "Borrow? Borrow my fusion warheads?"

Hogajue was already out of the con, and working its way down to the lower deck. It made no attempt to answer.

Zhaohui spoke again. "I have a comm incoming from that

damned zhīzhū. It says that you've authorized its crew to take possession of all of our nukes. It can't think that we'll fall for this."

Murphy shrugged. "I haven't really figured them out yet," he admitted. "They don't drink beer."

Zhaohui had no response.

Avi broke the silence. "Trust it. We're all still alive. It has completed its calculations. Our emotions are part of its math."

Urwah bowed his head down. He nodded quietly. "If Avi swears it on math, she's right."

"You heard my Lead," Murphy said. "No one here disagrees."

Zhaohui looked away from her pickup, toward someone in her crew. "Release all but two. I presume it will be easiest to just eject them from the launchers."

"Hold *none* back." Zhaohui had difficulty accepting Avinashini's authority, despite the traditions of the Jin Jun. "It asked for all."

"How will it know? And why shouldn't we have something in reserve? When the Hell did Commander Avinashini's daughter turn into a zhīzhū-lover?"

"You heard our Lead," Murphy said. "Do it. She's thinking like a zhīzhū. A crazy damned zhīzhū, but that fits this one."

"And trust that Hogajue knows your inventory," Avi added. "I doubt that our codes have kept them out of your computers."

"I still do not agree." Zhaohui's face was set in stubborn denial.

"The zhīzhū evidently *despise* nuclear weapons." Avi leaned forward into the pick-up. "They do not use them, we know – but they certainly use fusion and fission for power. They eat meat raw – even their own dead. I've watched."

She cleared her throat. "Hogajue is not going to allow *us* to 'spoil meat,' but *it* will do so if it must. Perhaps it will warn them in advance."

Murphy smiled. "She's got it. Action as communication. Hogajue's making a point. Wish I'd had her on the linguistics team before."

Zhaohui took a deep breath, held it, then released. "Release all of the nuclear weapons." Zhaohui closed the channel without further discussion.

November 27, 2395 (Present Day) – High Orbit, Groombridge 1618 II (Hogajue)

Hogajue scrambled into its EVA gear. Folding its legs and taking control of the neural connectors, it rapidly used the external manipulators to close the airlock's inner hatch. Isolating one lobe to deal with guidance back to the sphere, it coordinated the other three through the central lobe.

The military mind-set of the incoming People required careful thought. They came from the same Nests that had spawned itself. Their Must was expansion, as his had been. They would be less easy to coerce than the agricultural units who had confronted them on the surface.

It did not have time to use the method which had convinced itself that a different reality might exist. Access would not likely be allowed for that purpose, regardless.

The outer hatch opened. Hogajue gave a slight kick with the thrusters to exit the human ship. Its own sphere hung nearby; closer still was the human ship commanded by the human dipole-female Zhaohui.

Three of Hogajue's crew were already converging on that ship, as ordered. Hogajue corrected course slightly to meet with them at the cylindrical tower behind the control dome. As they arrived, two of the self-propelled human missiles ejected silently from the tower. Their engines did not flare.

Hogajue maneuvered into position between the two slender objects. Shunting all of its revolt in into the central lobe for holding and later processing, it grasped each of the cylinders with two external manipulators arms each. Hogajue rapidly calculated the size of the weapons, concluded that they could be launched through the small central mass driver of its own sphere.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

Three more pairs of the evil devices ejected. Other members of its crew took hold of them. They all followed Hogajue back to the sphere.

As it entered the main airlock, Hogajue concluded that it had determined the best possible message for the approaching sphere. If its central zhīzhū would not accept the new Must, Hogajue's own Must would waste meat with fire.

The observer Hurquefei's memories, logic, and comprehension of the vermin – humans – were all still fragmentary within Hogajue. The reality Nest observer's linguistic skills had been the priority in the hours before emergence from the Bright. Comprehension of the human Must could be deduced somewhat from language, but its own observations were of the essence here.

Humans O'Meath, Avinashini, and Grunon had risked all for an illogical Must. They would respect Hogajue's own anti-survival choice. It was not sure why. It was an exchange of contra-survival illogic to ponder. Individual units would risk all for their own species; that was logical. To risk all for a competing species still defied logic. That logic must be expressed.

Something in Hurquefei's recollection clarified Hogajue's understanding. If neither species could survive the final conflict, the conflict itself became contra-survival. In that case, reality required concession of territory.

The illogic of the human species lay out for all of the People to understand.

As soon as all of the missiles and zhīzhū were aboard, the hatch closed behind them. Hogajue ordered its Second to power the drives and set a course directly for the incoming military sphere. Hogajue allowed to other zhīzhū to take the missiles it had retrieved and shut down the EVA suit. As soon as the external atmosphere had built back up, Hogajue exited the suit.

Scuttling rapidly to the main control section, Hogajue prepared itself. Its own crew might find its actions unacceptable. If they did, there was no question that it would be dead in short course. The other People on board might well dislike the taste of Hogajue's actions.

Hogajue entered the control area and went to its customary

seat. The four padded petals closed in snugly. The Second's rapid inquiry toward being relieved was rebuffed. There was no point in keeping even one lobe on navigation.

Hogajue opened communications and began sending as rapidly as possible, in four parallel streams. One stream summarized the actions of human O'Meath and its crew against the opposing human Nest. Another summarized the favorable results obtained. The third repeated, over and over, that there was no Must to destroy the trespassing human vessels, especially that under the control of humans Avinashini and O'Meath.

The final stream was distasteful in the extreme: Hogajue advised over and over of its willingness to protect the humans at all costs. Repeatedly, Hogajue warned that it was prepared to do more than battle. Against the overwhelming armaments of the military sphere, it would use the nuclear weapons now at its disposal. As disgusting as the thought was, Hogajue warned that it would immolate the incoming sphere if it chose not to respect the efforts of humans O'Meath, Avinashini and Grunon, along with the Tau Cetian Fahnisht.

The oncoming military sphere made no response. When he had completed his message, Hogajue began to repeat it.

A series of rapid magnetic pulses announced the military zhīzhū's opinion. Hogajue's Second reported four projectiles rapidly approaching, with maneuvering drives powered and clear signals showing lock-on to Hogajue's much smaller vessel. Hogajue expressed its annoyance at the military Must. Quickly, Hogajue ran the targeting system of the rather simplistic human computers, locking one of the missiles on the oncoming projectiles.

He ejected the missile through his own much smaller mass driver, activating its drive after it was free in space. Hogajue watched the sensor feeds. The device closed on the oncoming projectiles. The sensors recorded the expansion of hot plasma directly in front of the projectiles. The projectiles evaporated.

Hogajue focused all four of its peripheral lobes on the central communication: "New Must: provide these humans with their opportunity to leave in the good will with which they came. Do

Demand the Debt That's Owing

not force me to waste your meat in such a manner. The Must is not in wasting the uniqueness of this vector.”

The internal communications network buzzed with debate over Hogajue's sanity. At least one voice of support was cut off in mid-argument; a liquid sound of domination and tastesmell followed without hesitation. Hogajue questioned whether it would be able to carry out its threat against the military sphere.

Internal debate subsided. Oneness of purpose resumed. The subNest was stronger still.

A single communication thread came from the war sphere. “Open all channels to data exchange forthwith.”

Hogajue ordered its Second to do so, then placed every possible neural link into its own thoughts and organization. All communication from its own scouting sphere channeled through its central lobe. The peripheral lobes felt glutted as each organized data for the stream. Hogajue noted something in passing; the Reality Nests all seemed to have a larger capacity for communication, among themselves and otherwise.

The ability to communicate was the ability to consider actions and positions deviating from the expected norm. that fact was worthy of including into the datastream. Recollections and images of O'Meath, Avinashini, Urwah, and Fahnisht were mixed into the stream, all of them smelling of human exhaustion. Images of conflict at Wolf and the best available translations of the human and Cetian messages flowed through, annotated and explained in a theoretical matrix Hurquefei had supplied.

Only on intent could be divined from the return communication over the narrow electromagnetic spectrum: the humans would be destroyed, first here.

Hogajue prepared the second launch of missiles.

November 27, 2395 (Present Day) – High Orbit, Groombridge 1618 II (Avinashini)

Urk entered the con. “Fahnisht is all set,” he reported. “The automed seems to be handling it.”

“Good,” Avi responded. “He will die more comfortably than the rest of us.”

“We’ve been cheating it so far,” Murphy noted. He reached over to touch her hand. She did not refuse the contact. “It is what it is.”

Avi let his hand rest there for a moment, then took it away to key comm. “Zhaohui, are your messengers ready for launch?”

“They are. You are a fool.”

Comm demanded attention. It was a new signal, from neither Zhaohui’s ship nor Hogaajue’s sphere. Murphy keyed it to the main display. “It’s the zhīzhū,” he commented, unnecessarily. “Not Hogajue, that big bastard of a battleship.”

Avi keyed to listen. The voice was harsh and grating, more so than Hogaajue’s attempts at Standard. *“Humans allowed depart no attack. Rush now. Human species interesting insanity displayed, still leave zhīzhū alone, out zhīzhū space. Humans O’Meath, Avinashini, Grunon, Horn Fahnisht engage hyperdrive last.”*

The communication ended abruptly. No response seemed invited.

“Friendly bastards, aren’t they?” Murphy scowled. “Maybe I was wrong.”

Avi cocked an eyebrow. “A zhīzhū battleship is communicating in Standard and holding their fire on four human ships. Isn’t that a good start?”

“Flowers would be a nice touch.”

Avi burst out laughing, then forced it back. She gave attention to her controls, as if emotion had never escaped against her will. She keyed comm. “Avinashini, Lead, acknowledging. All human ships will comply as ordered. We thank the honorable zhīzhū for their forbearance.” She closed the channel.

“Angling to be the first ambassador?” O’Meath again wore the impish half-grin.

“No.” She pushed down the nauseated panic the idea evoked. “I have no intention of ever cooperating with the zhīzhū again.”

Chapter 22

November 28, 2395 (Present Day) – Vicinity of Groombridge 1618 II (Murphy)

Murphy sat to Avi's left. The gas midget was well behind. *Xiaoqin* had just slipped into hyperspace. Avi was completing the calculations for *Granuaile*'s own entry.

"Tight beam laser communication incoming," Murphy noted. "Someone's pointing it right at us." Murphy keyed the playback.

"Zhīzhū Hogajue speak Humans Avinashini O'Meath Grunon, Cetian Fahnisht. Useful insanity hope experience again Hogajue regular route schedule given after. Zhīzhū Nests time to learn more Nests resist old Must. Thank you Nests Must Nests Reality Nests all Nests preserving. See you all four eyes soon." The voice message cut off, but a data stream replaced it: a file download in both human and zhīzhū mathematics.

Avi glanced at the data as it scrolled through the display. "I think this is a route and schedule, Murphy."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Hogajue wants us to meet it again."

Murphy drummed his fingers thoughtfully against the edge of the console. "We just got our flowers."

December 2, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Groombridge 1618 to Wolf 359) (Urwah)

Urwah stood, rolled his prayer-rug. The hold was not ideal, but it was where Lar's remains were. The original mandate of the *Lady*-class included exploration, and thus cryogenic storage for large biological samples. Lar would await proper services.

He felt uncomfortable with the thought of seeing his parents and Lar's family, though they were only weeks away. He was not sure what he would do.

Murphy was again nursing the drives, Avi again keeping her eyes on the con. They had enough to do. They would be too busy to worry about whether they had taken part in the extermination of the human race.

Urk climbed the ladder to the main deck. From there, he went forward to the cabin he had claimed for himself at the beginning of the trip. How long had that been? He felt like he had been on *Granuaile* as long as he had been a marine. Only a few months ago, though, he had commanded marines on a Fleet cruiser. Most had counted him a suspect, if not a traitor. How would they view him now?

He went to the galley and found one of the meals Avi had found acceptable. He heated it for her while he looked for a tray. When the timer beeped, he scalded his fingertips sliding it onto the tray.

He went aft, began walking up the gangway to the con. As his shoulders cleared the deck hatch, he glanced, saw the bulkhead hatch into the con open.

O'Meath and Avi were framed in the oval, tangled together. Their lips were locked. Kissing. Urk stopped, blinked, shook his head. Did Avi see him in a moment of coming up for air? He wasn't sure, but felt himself blush.

He backed quietly down the gangway with mixed emotions – jealousy, disgust that the pygmy would mix duty and pleasure, worry for Avi. Once again on the main deck, he went back to the galley, sat at the table. Lifting the lid off the fish meal, he blew steam away. He wasn't a vegetarian, but would not waste food,

Demand the Debt That's Owing

either.

He heard footsteps descending the gangway. They were followed by the thinking open and slamming closed of the bulkhead hatch into engineering. O'Meath had left the con in a rush, apparently unhappy.

Avi must have gained some sense and shut him down.

A few moments later, lighter steps came down the gangway and into the central part of the deck. These came toward the forward living space.

December 2, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Groombridge 1618 to Wolf 359) (Avinashini)

Murphy turned to go back below. Avi found herself reaching for his arm. He looked back, up at her. She suddenly did not know what to do, how to proceed. Her heart raced, and her body called for more.

There was only one way to shut him up. Avi tilted her head down slightly, touched her lips to his. He hesitated only a moment before responding with warmth. His arms wrapped her more firmly, bringing her closer. She pressed against him, wanting more.

He claimed to be a dog, and his reputation had confirmation in his own admissions. She should not offer herself, should not go further. Her world was in pieces, though, and the gods had placed him here. What could be wrong with taking the warmth that she so clearly ached for? She drew him toward a chair.

December 2, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Groombridge 1618 to Wolf 359) (Murphy)

That damned hinting scent of hers snuck into her nose – the faintest hint of burnt grass from a distance, perhaps. Whatever it was, it was hers, different, more attractive than the most expen-

sive perfumes.

Her hand on his wrist bespoke a sentence she wouldn't speak. Murphy stopped when she took his wrist. He turned, wrapped arms around her waist. "I'm a damned dog, Avi," he said. "You probably shouldn't" He silenced himself as her lips touched his.

He brought his hands to the small of her back, gave a single stroke down her perfect spine. She somehow shifted, pressing more closely, adjusting so that they were wrapped into each other. Lips became warmly meshed. He had no doubt that she wanted more.

She was drawing him toward one of the side consoles. The station chair would accommodate, stretch back. He began to move his hands toward her side, seeking to touch her breasts as they moved toward the chair. Whatever else came, he had never seen a point in refusing a woman's desire.

December 2, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Groombridge 1618 to Wolf 359) (Avinashini)

Before his hands reached her now-aching breasts, she folded down into the chair. Lacing her fingers into hers, she pulled him down toward her.

His fingers touched the curve of his breast, then started toward the nipple. He kissed her again, and she reached to pull him down. He started to comply, his fingers finally touching her nipples, bringing electricity from there to the top of her tongue, and elsewhere.

Then pulled back.

He pulled further away. She knew he wanted more, but perhaps something was wrong with her. Was it something in her kiss, or some other issue? She tried to pull him back down. He resisted, shook his head slightly.

Demand the Debt That's Owing

December 2, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Groombridge 1618 to Wolf 359) (Murphy)

She was on the chair, had taken his hands. Her shipsuit did nothing to hide the evidence of swelling, erecting nipples. For that matter, he was hard, already aching. He knelt against the chair, move his hand to first caress the bottom curve of her breast.

He moved to kiss her again, touched the nipple through cloth. The healing knife-crease along her jaw line caught his eye. He owed her blood, as he owed blood to Fahnisht, Urwah, others. He pulled his hand away from the breast, backed his head away. With the same hand, he touched the crease.

He had to want more from Avinashini than fulfillment for his penis.

"I'm a dog," he found himself repeating. "No better. Have been for years. I'll end up hurting you, sooner or later." He stood. "We've taken blood-oath." He started to turn to leave.

"Murphy..."

He turned to her. "Besides, no way I'm converting to Hinduism," he said. "I have enough gods to make fun of already."

She smiled, but it was forced. "We don't take converts," she said. "Not in mid-life, in any event. Perhaps you can arrange to be reborn."

Murphy nodded. "That's a problem for my Blood-sworn, isn't it?"

The pit of her stomach hurt more than the aching of her breasts. "Yes."

Murphy gazed for a moment, then turned and left the con. He rushed quickly down the gangway, before his desire turned him around. The hatch to engineering resisted as he opened it. Stepping through, he slammed it shut behind him, spun the locking wheel. He would have to stay here for the rest of the voyage to cool down.

December 2, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Groombridge 1618 to Wolf 359) (Avinashini)

Avi watched Murphy, the Euro, leave the con. She tried to sort through the confusion of truths in their apparently mutual desire, her feelings, his statements. Who was he? Why did she want him? He was not Hindu, not even Indian.

Was blood-oath his excuse to reject her? It didn't feel like an excuse.

Damn the man for arousing and then confusing her. She felt the idiot once again, as she had ten years before with Donal. Why, when the moment came, was she willing to put aside her core, twice in her life?

She sat for ten minutes, trying to understand. Finally, it occurred to her that another man on board might understand O'Meath better.

December 2, 2395 (Present Day) – Hyperspace (En route Groombridge 1618 to Wolf 359) (Urwah)

Avinashini came around the corner, saw Urk, sat. Her hair looked less arranged than usual. She lacked her usual calmness. She looked to the right rather than meeting his eyes.

"That pygmy son-of-a-bitch," Urk said, starting to rise. "He should know better than to make his moves on good women." He pushed out, toward the passage aft.

"What move?" Avi asked. "He – I –" She was at a clear loss for words. "Urwah, Murphy kissed – back." Her words began to rush. "I kissed him first. I had to bend over a little, and he just let me. And – And then he stopped, and left, he said he was a dog. Talked about this." She fingered the crease on her jaw line, let out a sigh. "I wanted more.

Urk deflated, stopped. The son-of-bitch had a conscience after all. There was no proper reason to kill him, or even take him down for a fall. "The damned pygmy has self-control.

Never thought so.”

“I must be true to the gods,” she said quietly. Her voice was resigned, yet uncertain. She stood and went back aft. Urk heard her steps go up toward the con.

The deck hatch clanged shut, followed by the muffled clunk of the bulkhead hatch closing.

Urwah shook his head. Like O’Meath, Avi was locking herself *in*.

The trip back to Wolf was likely to be quiet.

Urwah would have to amuse himself. He stood, went to his own cabin. Lying in the bunk, he keyed the computer for library materials. Chengen’s translations of the various oral histories of the Horn Bards was queued near the top, having been recently updated. He chose the first, began to read.

December 26, 2396 – Second Home of the People (Alula Australis V) (Hogajue)

Representatives of many Nests had come together, shared verbalizations, sometimes shared the tastesmells of memory and thought through the closer touching. Many were still tasting the incomprehensible flavor “human charity,” a delightful mix of repugnant stupidity and interesting possibility.

There was little agreement, but the People were considering Must in new ways. Two decisions had been made. First, humanity would not be exterminated. Not yet. There was more to learn and question. Second, part of the learning would have to come from those which had dealt closely with humans most recently. A number of other possibilities were being considered.

Hogajue had integrated most of Hurquefei’s memory, most of its views. The Reality Nests were not after all weak, nor fools. They had simply accepted truth sooner: the humans were not People, but also not infestation. They were far less and far more a threat than had been understood.

It had been foolish to spend so much time observing ship

movements and colony placements, so little coming to know the species itself. Hurquefei's memories, original and tasted from others, were rich with the scents and tastes of human emotion. Humans lived within these emotions, yet so clearly denied that their own Musts controlled their intellect. The Reality Nests had explored the scents and tastes of human emotion. Hurquefei's memories tentatively assigned equivalents to the People's Musts, or explanations where no direct equivalent could be drawn.

The convocation almost over, no final decisions made, Hogajue had accepted its own next Must. It had arranged to consult with its own Mother Nest. It had been fortunate to have been bulbed here, on a blue-green world like enough to the People's home world to allow free passage under sky and sun. Nonetheless, the Nest was buried, as it should be. Hogajue entered the shaft and began the trek under the soil.

Hogajue passed the feeding lines and entered the Nest Itself. Nutrients dripped from the deep rock walls. The watchers and assistants moved back and forth. Some were obviously ready to attack, smelling the difference.

Hogajue reviewed the organization of its information, designed to give the greatest desired effect. Each of its lobes was primed to enforce the new memory matrix. It would not allow the Nest Itself to easily ignore the clarity gleaned in the Bright.

Hogajue quickspoke its intent. Nest Itself considered for long hours. Hogajue stood, aware that its memory would not be tasted if Nest Itself ordered the assistants to attack.

Finally, Nest Itself quickspoke its assent, opened the petals of an empty bulb-bud. Hogajue hesitated a moment. Even after assent, Nest could revise its judgment. Digestion of the facts in whole, combined with other data known to Nest, might be enough to require a revised decision, a Must overriding individual judgment. It reinforced its information one more time, primed the most important tastesmell he had obtained without any eating: fear.

The humans were more afraid of the *zhīzhū's simplest* Must than of simply being exterminated. They feared the Must against never, never wasting the nourishments and information of fresh

meat. In fear of ending, the humans *wasted* their dead. They could not, did not conserve all that there was to conserve.

This lesson had been overlooked by all of the Nests, despite all of the tastings. It had even been underestimated by the Reality Nests. It was almost inconceivable that it had been ignored every time flesh had been sampled.

Hogajue had not needed a full tasting to know this. It had been in the company of the humans, all of them. It had the benefit of Hurquefei's memories. Only the Cetian, Fahnisht, had not streamed such fear from his sweat glands in Hogajue's presence. For him, though, it was likely that he simply did not fully understand human fear of tastesmell.

Hogajue looked at the small units, scuttling to and fro along Nest's many lines and bulbs, maintaining, repairing, cleaning. Their four-lobed brains were small, simple. None of them, though, doubted their judgments, their individual Musts.

Hogajue would not doubt its own Must. It Must convince the Nest Itself that each Nest, each zhīzhū, would have to ignore a Must to survive. Otherwise, the humans would eventually destroy the zhīzhū. The human Must to survive and expand was at least as powerful as zhīzhū's. Few of them could ignore that Must, mingled with the Must of their fear.

Finished with its last revision, Hogajue stepped into the bud. The four petals closed around it. The probes pushed into each of its four eyes, tapping quickly into the main optical nerve, then deeper into the four lobes. Hogajue felt its individuality drain away, its awareness begin to fade away.

It entered the last moments of self: certainty. As it rejoined Nest Itself, it knew that Nest was accepting the organization of observation, deduction, induction, direction. Nest would savor the Musts Hogajue had learned and tastesmelled, and would seek to feed the tastesmell to other Nests.

This body would almost certainly be regrown, reintegrated with its individual memory, perhaps with some redesign of its lobes to allow better understanding of the human language. The slow evolution of the many Nest's Must would continue. It would be allowed to appear at the place and time it had suggested

in the hope of Nest's agreement.

As the last vestiges of Self merged into Nest, Hogajue considered the dominant tastesmells of the almost-People it had met. So much was found in their scents, once one knew how to decipher the hints. Resisting the urge to taste more directly had become its own reward.

Human Grunon smelled certain, resolute. Of what was he certain? He was not certain he would trust the People

Cetian Fahnisht smelled of loss and desire for completion, if the human scents were truly cognates. A zhīzhū might well have sought to pass on its memories if it produced such a tastesmell. Hogajue regretted that Fahnisht might not remain long for further tasting.

Avinashini smelled of passion kept under tight control. Her sense of order, taste for the mathematics of reality also wafted through. She might well sense the Brightness at some level, as ill-designed as human brains were for such reasonable purposes.

O'Meath smelled of humor, comradeship and need for action. Humans must note scents at some level; O'Meath's scents could draw others to him. At the same time, a spice of conflict wafted through the remembered odors.

When they were together, O'Meath and Avinashini smelled of demand for merger. Passion was the word humans would give it, the powerful Must. Something also spoke of denial, a denial of logical necessity Hogajue did not comprehend. It was not sure whether Avinashini denied more, or O'Meath. Hogajue's new body would meet them soon enough to see how they would resolve their conjoined Must.

It thought the People's equivalent of a human chuckle, hoped that Nest Itself would share the amusement.

Demand the **Debt** That's Owing

The religiously pro-human Manifest Destiny Movement's genocide of the Tau Ceti's intelligent species has all but succeeded. Now Manifest Destiny seeks to launch its biological weapons against the spidery zhīzhū, voracious and uncommunicative competitors for the rare Earth-like worlds in local space. The Humanitas Church, a prime gateway to Manifest Destiny, has converted an unknown number of Imperial Fleet crews. Vessels stolen from Fleet's reserve anchorage are already crewed by deserters, retirees, and others.

Cuchulain "Murphy" O'Meath of the Emperor's Jin Jun has limited time to interfere with Manifest Destiny. Fahnisht, his non-human friend and Clanlord, intends to collect the blood debt owed for his species' near-destruction. They will do what they must to interfere with genocide, even of the zhīzhū.

Fleet fighter pilot B. P. Avinashini and marine Urwah Grunon, Fleet Marine, have both seen the ugly death the zhīzhū bring to human "cattle." Impressed by O'Meath as crew of Granuaile, they can help — or they can give Manifest Destiny its chance to end the zhīzhū's own threat to consume humanity.

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