

# **Welcome Home, Janissary**

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*A complete story taken from the anthology...*

Further Conflicts

Edited by Ian Whates



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## Welcome Home, Janissary

Escandala came out of her feint to deliver a sweeping kick at Horden's legs, pivoting on a gauntleted hand attracted to the *Osman Bey's* charged outer hull. She committed all her momentum to this one attack.

Horden jumped out of the way, an instinctive reaction strong enough to break the electrostatic attraction sticking his boots to the hull.

Escandala felt the natural human chemicals of release flood her body because in this zero-gee duel fought without thrust packs, Horden had already lost. Gravity's tendrils plucked at him from Akinschet, the gas giant thousands of clicks away.

Reinforcements always forced change. When Horden's four hundred human marines had arrived to fill the squadron's gaps, they had brought trouble too. Dangerous ideas about helping Earth were spreading through Commodore Gjalp's human contingent.

No!

Horden had exaggerated his leap. He was only a fraction of a meter off the hull, but Escandala's leg still followed its arc toward him. She scrabbled for a firmer hold, grunting with effort. Horden was fighting for prestige and influence but for Escandala this was all about her son. She *had* to win.

But she had already converted all the tension stored in her limbs into the thrust behind her kick.

Horden locked his legs around hers. His added mass slowed her scything motion then snatched away her weak grip on the hull and flung them both into space, circling each other as if dancing.

Inside her EVA suit, Escandala felt her shoulders slump when she traced forward the pattern of their dance and saw Horden's victory there. When time caught up with the inevitable, Horden grabbed hold of the communication boom and released his grip on her legs.

Escandala drifted away from the *Osman Bey*, her cramped world for the last eight years. She tumbled into the void in nothing but her EVA suit.

All the humans in the squadron watched her defeat.

She stealthed her suit and drifted away. As victor, Horden now commanded them all. She had no concerns about his ability as commander; the Jotuns would never have let him challenge for leadership unless they considered him fit. Horden's perverse attitude of allegiance to Earth bothered her far more.

The people of Earth had sold the ancestors of every human here as breeding stock, the price of patronage demanded by the masters, the White Knights. President Horden had signed the Accession Treaty on behalf of all humanity. Now his many-times descendent harboured dangerous ideas for the slave-soldiers.

“Please, little bird. De-stealth so we can bring you home quickly.” The voice relayed through her helmet speaker belonged to One-Ear, the alien officer responsible for training human marines on the *Osman Bey*. His Jotun palette clicked as he tried to articulate human speech, sounding like a human boy with his throat half ripped out. “I am sorry you must relinquish command.”

“Horden is welcome to that burden.” Escandala was happy to let her voice betray her position. Hiding was not a serious proposition.

“That is good,” said the Jotun. “You have seven months remaining in defence of Akinschet. Then we return home to Tranquility where you must give up your son, Zenothon. Horden's victory means you can spend more of those last months with your boy.”

She laughed, a cracked sound that swamped her helmet with bitterness. When they had taken away her previous two children, to train and deploy as slave-soldiers, her aching loss had been buttressed with pride. With Zenothon her feelings were too tangled to interpret.

Six years ago, breathless and sweat-drenched, she had shared an irrepressible smile with the gurgling, messy bundle floating nearby in the birthing cocoon. Still secured by a natural umbilical tether, their bond had been unconditional. Since then, not only had the servants of the White Knights cut the cord, they had done things to her boy.

“Did I speak inappropriately?” Poor One-Ear sounded worried, though who could really guess what an alien felt?

Gunner Valthrudnir, as One-Ear insisted humans address him,

had always been kind. And the Jotun officers were just as much slaves of the White Knights as the humans. She pictured the two meter high furry hexaped, good ear erect in concern, contorting his throat painfully to converse in human tongue.

“Your words are not inappropriate,” she replied. “Merely inaccurate. I was fighting for my six-year-old boy, all right. Fighting to keep away from him. He frightens me.”

\*

“Don't you want to play with the other *Osman Bey* kids?” Escandala nodded toward the children rampaging back and forth over the gravitoid's hillocks with the kids from the *Garuda*, the other TU currently docked with the Sleeve. Giggles and simulated explosions vibrated through the thin belt of atmosphere coating the artificial worldlet.

“No, Momma,” said Zenothon, frowning gravely. “Not just yet. This might be the last time we spend on the gravitoid before we go to Tranquility and the Jotuns upgrade me to become a man. I can feel this worries you.”

Escandala suppressed a shudder. Zenothon's augmentations allowed him to read her feelings like a viewscreen and write his own at will. What was it like to sense and interpret sweat and body temperature and other physical tells, considering such analysis to be as natural as his other senses? The kids even communicated using targeted nano-packets which delivered tailored cocktails of hormones. *Gifting*. That's what Zenothon called it.

“I have made you a model,” said Zenothon. “Do you like it?”

Escandala guessed her son issued some kind of command signal from his head. From behind a hillock, a half-meter long model of a Sleeve floated toward them, taking up a holding position above her head. The Sleeve itself was a container vessel, a hollow mesh tube holding the spherical tactical units and the gravitoid. A flattened bulge around the middle of the tube contained the command and FTL communication section. Globular engines for interstellar travel took the rear, and the cone-shaped nose housed the gravity lens shield which prevented the seemingly empty vacuum of deep space from turning into a lethal radiation bath at near-lightspeed velocities.

Zenothon's model Sleeve shepherded six spherical TU's and a

similar sized bumpy globe with a shimmering illusion of atmosphere.

"It's *our* Sleeve," she said. "Very impressive."

Zenothon moved the model in front of her face. "Look. There's the *Osman Bey* in front." Green letters on the hull spelled out the name. "Then behind us, we've got *Thermopylae* and then the new TU's that joined us with Mr. Horden: *Dreamwalker*, *Jade Buddha*, and *Great Cycle*. And at the end, the gravitoid where we are standing right now."

Escandala tried to smile but then quickly dropped the pretence. Zenothon was more perceptive than a human had any right to be. She made to give him a hug, but decided the time for such human affection had passed. She squeezed his shoulder instead. "You'll be moved to a real planet soon."

"Tranquility. I wished I was being moved to Earth. Everyone's talking about that. Christophe even showed me pictures Mr. Horden sneaked past the knowledge filters."

Escandala sucked in her breath sharply. "Let's not take things that don't belong to us. Especially from that man. He'll cause trouble, mark my words."

"I'm sorry Mr. Horden bested you, Momma."

"That's not important."

Her little boy looked up and shook his head, disappointed. "Please don't lie, Momma. I can interpret the micro-tremors in your voice. I know you are fibbing. Please, hold my hand."

Like the rest of his generation, Zenothon carried a matrix of subcutaneous implants and these now injected a small army of nanobots through Escandala's skin, seeking her hypothalamus to deliver their cargo of effector triggers. Her glands began to sing to each other in a harmonious cascade of wellbeing that resonated through her bloodstream.

Her mind rebelled. These feelings were not her own. She had been *programmed*, and by the thing her son had become.

"How can you do this?" she shouted, snatching her hand away. "You're not even human."

Zenothon said nothing, merely observing as Escandala backed away. Then, just for a moment, his eyes reddened and moistened. But the emotion was quickly repaired. Zenothon spoke calmly. "I am sorry if you feel I have failed you in some way. I was never trained

to socialise with humans who have your... limited means of communication.”

Escandala did not even want to know what Zenothon meant. “You're only six,” she wailed. “You shouldn't think like that.”

“You talk of 'six subjective years', as if everyone's mind works to the same clock. That may have been true for earlier generations. The meddies told us that...”

Escandala did not hear what the medics had to say. “You aren't human,” she said quietly. “I don't want anything more to do with you.”

And then she was running, fleeing her son.

\*

The two war fleets faced-off across the corridor through the minefield surrounding Akinschet and its moon, Utgard. The safe passage was filled with laser-blurring aerosol. Soon, Escandala's tactical unit would break the lull by bursting through the corridor from the planet side.

Her squadron was here to ensure the mining operations on Utgard continued to slingshot chunks of refined heavy elements around the local star and out along the interstellar trade routes to fulfil supply contracts, a journey of a thousand years. It scared her to think how the White Knights operated on such inhuman timescales.

But then so too did their enemy: the Muranyi Concord.

Escandala studied the Muranyi deployment in the tac-display beamed to her helmet, but that only deepened her unease. It was all wrong. Why was the enemy floating there, as if waiting?

Survival in ship-to-ship combat depended on speed, and the ability to change velocity rapidly. Instead of shooting through the corridor at a respectable fraction of  $c$ , the seventeen enemy vessels had slowed to a halt just outside, like an ancient blockade of a narrow water channel.

The White Knight's little empire had been fighting this border war with the Muranyi Concord for seven centuries, but Escandala had never seen tactical records of attacking ships sitting still.

This had to be a trap.

She waited hour upon hour, alone in her grey launch chamber. Overt physical needs were catered for by plumbing directed inside



her body openings, yet she still suffered anguish from the pain of forced inaction. Every primitive instinct demanded she fight or flee, and still she waited.

Zenothon wouldn't have to live this nightmare when his turn came to wait in an EVA chute. With his freaky control over his body chemistry, he had been engineered to feel whatever he wanted, or had been ordered to feel. This, according to the Jotuns, was the principal reason why the White Knights reworked their client species. The Jotuns left dark hints too of the White Knights' obsession with forced mutation, speculating that Utgard might be sprinkled with mutagens.

In order to protect this mining world, Gjalp had detailed three of his Sleeves to attack the enemy directly. The rest of the squadron kept a fast orbit of Akinschet.

After Escandala had waited twenty-one hours in the launch chute, events unfolded in rapid escalation. In the tac-display etched into her visor, narrow blue course projections sprang toward her from the enemy markers. They fattened steadily as the Muranyi ships sped up.

The *Osman Bey* set off, the violent acceleration slamming her back into the buffer gel in her suit, and pushing her suit against the semi-intelligent amniotic fluid that filled the launch chamber. Despite all this protection, several marines would black out at some point during hard manoeuvring. She was determined she would not be going into combat unconscious.

The tac-display reported the enemy ships hurtling through the aerosol corridor to be Type-47 cruisers: big ships but constructed many objective centuries ago, and no match for the nimble TU's. The intruders wouldn't have floated there in space unless they possessed some secret advantage, a trap that Gjalp had tasked *Osman Bey* to spring for the greater benefit of the squadron.

A missile lock alarm pinged in her helmet, followed by an image of green missile attack paths zigzagging their way toward her.

Escandala ignored the missiles. Not her problem. If they hit, they hit.

She concentrated on the shape of the Muranyi box formation. Two ships at each vertex and a larger Type-60 'colony buster' in the centre.

Eight of the eleven marine TU's were each paired with one of the enemy ships that made up the nearest face of the enemy's box. The *Osman Bey*, though, was to destroy the colony buster, running the additional risk of crossfire. This was not completely a forlorn hope because *Thermopylae* and *Dreamwalker* hung back alongside *Osman Bey* to act as her shields.

The first wave of TU's ejected a constant confusion of chaff as they split up to close with their target assignments. Escandala tensed when they left the safety of the aerosol corridor and sheltered instead behind the chaff thrown out by *Thermopylae* and *Dreamwalker*. An orange flash bottom-left of her display warned that her EVA suit had administered a medical patch.

Immediately, she needed to kill.

Doubtless this battle lust was inspired by a crude hormonal adjustment forced into her endocrine system.

Defensive munitions obscured the TU's. The Muranyi tracking lasers couldn't find the clear path they needed to trigger the massive increase in beam power that would burn through armour.

A blue shimmer grew around the *Osman Bey* in her tac-display. Gunner Skaldi must have initiated a sweep of *Osman Bey's* Fermi cannons.

Fermi levels surged in all matter caught within the focus of the beams. Electrons imprisoned for centuries within predictable energy functions frolicked in hitherto unobtainable conduction bands. The semiconductor materials in the missile guidance systems suddenly became conductors, ruining them utterly. If chance brought the now aimless missiles too close, *Osman Bey's* defensive munitions would clear them away.

*Osman Bey* and its shield maidens accelerated toward the Muranyi flagship, zigzagging to the limits of their crew's physiology, still desperately throwing out chaff.

*Thermopylae* disappeared from the tac-display. It could have been due to a hidden missile or momentary weakness in her chaff system. Whatever the cause, forty-eight humans and five Jotuns, Escandala's comrades these past eight subjective years, were dead.

She tried to care, but couldn't. All she wanted was to kill.

The pressure on her back ceased momentarily as the *Osman Bey's* outer propulsion shell spun through 180 degrees, then the

crushing force smashed her chest and transfixed her groin. After a thirty-second torrent of hammer blows came an instant of blissful weightlessness, before a squeezing sensation rippled through her as she was vented into chaff-filled space. The shower of amniotic fluid froze instantly into a glittering amber halo.

Then the TU's accelerated away, leaving Escandala in hard vacuum a few hundred meters away from an enemy warship powerful enough to sterilize an entire planet.

She was alone, cut off by strict communication silence from the thirty-five other marines sphinctered from *Osman Bey*. Stealth suits rendered them invisible. Even the exhaust from her needle gun and the thrust pack pushing her toward the nose of the target ship were cooled to ambient temperature, with the accumulating excess heat stored in energy batteries.

She could stay hidden this way for hours before the batteries would be fully charged, and hiding was something Horden had ordered her to do. She was one of ten marines ordered to act as a reserve, responding as they saw fit to enemy anti-personnel defence.

There came a flicker in her peripheral vision. She tilted position and magnified the image. It looked like a ripe seed pod exploding its contents in a gust of wind, but the seeds were jagged scraps of ceramic accompanied by the fragments of frozen blood and viscera from her comrades caught in its blast.

More flashes now, but the deadly blooms around the hull of the enemy ship did not contain human corpses this time. The enemy was firing at random.

“They're making a sally out onto the hull,” said one of the marines through her helmet speaker. “Sweeping from aft –”

The voice cut off abruptly. Escandala flew from her position near the ship's nose to hover over the dimpled cylinder that was its main hull section. From the far side of the ship, white suited quadrupeds – Muranyi marines – had attached swivel-mounted heavy weapons to the hull and were spraying the area in front of them with a hail of lead slugs and dye. A half dozen human marines, made visible by the sticky yellow dye, were now dancing under the lash of the slugs.

She shouted a primordial battle-cry in the privacy of her helmet and then took off to close with the enemy.

Below her, Muranyi marines were moving to clear the hull of bacteria bombs left by the humans. She headed for the enemy slug-and-dye weapons now aiming their fire into space. Their aim was random, defeated by the stealth suits.

Escandala showered them with black needles of death from her gun. The enemy went limp, but some hadn't died at her hand. There must be another human here, as invisible to her as to the enemy.

She trained the enemy's heavy slug thrower on their own troops, brushing them off like the wind sweeping snow from the branches of the trees outside her shore leave quarters on Tranquility.

The thought of a planet with weather and seasons penetrated her combat numbness for long enough to remind her that she did have something worth fighting for: her son's chance for a few years of peace on a real world. Perhaps that would put some humanity back into Zenothon. She supposed she should feel ashamed that only now did she think of her son in the shielded crèche at the centre of *Osman Bey*.

Escandala took the bacteria bomb from her hip, secured it to the hull and activated. As she punched the vacuum in triumph, an injection of atmosphere and nutrients awoke trillions of bacteria from diapause. Hungry, they began to feed on the metal in the ship's hull. The population was predicted to attain critical mass at about six minutes for this class of vessel. After that, nothing could save the ship from rupture.

She moved up off the hull seeking a better position to defend her attack.

A bomb placed earlier by another marine cracked the outer hull, launching a geyser of gas and enemy bodies forced through the narrow breach.

A few minutes later her bomb caused its own explosion. With nothing left for her to do, she withdrew a klick from the doomed ship. Now she must wait, hoping her side would win.

The stratagems of Gjalp's slave squadron were already proving successful. The tactical units from the three attacking Sleeves had eliminated half the enemy fleet, and now swarmed around the surviving Muranyi, probing for surprises.

Finding none, the uncommitted squadron reserves spun away from orbit and wiped out the enemy the easy way, imparting their

velocity to kinetic torpedoes that accelerated to near-relativistic speeds before impact.

From the initial acceleration through the aerosol corridor to pickup by the *Osman Bey*, the entire operation had taken forty minutes.

Afterwards, *Dreamwalker* hosted the Sleeve's victory celebration on her briefing deck. There was plenty of space: of the six TU's in her Sleeve, only *Osman Bey* and *Dreamwalker* remained.

Escandala stood near to Zenothon while Gunnlod, senior Jotun commander of the Sleeve, called out the names of those who had sacrificed all in service to the White Knights. Escandala wept, blaming her emotion on the combat drug toxins, but conscious of how close Zenothon had come to becoming a fleet casualty statistic.

"You'll be fine, Momma," he told her after the ceremony and moved toward her as if for a hug.

She backed off and walked away, unwilling to have him programme her feelings. It wasn't as if anything she said or did could upset the thing that had once been her son.

\*

Gjalp ordered the squadron to examine the enemy ships and corpses, looking for explanations for their strange behaviour.

There wasn't much left to be examined.

Horden manipulated assignments so that he examined one of the largest chunks of dead metal along with Escandala. Once they were out of direct sight, he unexpectedly grappled her. She reached for her knife but when their helmets kissed, Horden initiated a conversation the old-fashioned way: using sound waves.

"None of us will ever go home," he said.

"What?"

"I was an observer at the last Jotun strategy briefing. The Muranyi are using outdated materiel and expendable convict crews to wear us down on the cheap. There's a major offensive on the way in this sector. No one will be going home to Tranquility. Ever. We'll be off to our next battle soon. Our Sleeve has just suffered seventy percent casualties. If it's not our turn to die next, then it will be the time after."

"But you can never be sure. There's always a chance."

“Mathematical possibilities.”

“So what? We were bred to die. We've always known that.”

“That is exactly how they rely upon us to think. Why else would they be so open about our prospects at the briefing I saw?”

“I suppose your Earth-supreme credo gives you a better idea. What do you suggest we do, mutiny?”

“Yes. And the offensive means time is short.”

Escandala struggled to absorb this. Mutiny had never seriously occurred to her. “Even if we secured the ships without being killed, what would we do? Turn them around for the ninety-year trip back to Earth?”

“All I need is a few minutes to myself.”

“What good will that do us?”

“For us, nothing. But for Earth, a little. Think of the advantages that our augmentations give us. Our children more so. They can will their metabolism into the hibernation state for interstellar travel. We require complex machinery to achieve the same, but Earth natives can't even manage that. Think how this one advantage will benefit our species. I have the augmentation designs on memory crystal. These augmentations might not seem much in comparison with the huge advantages the other species have over us, but I believe in human ingenuity. All I need is to gain access to a powerful enough transmitter or the quantum telegraph. With your help I could do that. The Jotuns trust you. Think how we can turn this to our advantage against —”

“Our? Keep me and my son out of this. You might impress little boys by stories of embattled Earth, but the planet can rot for all I care. Never forget they sold our ancestors into slavery.”

Suddenly, alarms pierced the fleet with sound, vibration, and scent alerts. Engines fired up and began to accelerate ships from standing.

Escandala didn't understand the panic until she heard a single phrase over and over: *Projectile assault! Projectile assault! Projectile assault!*

She watched an onrushing arc of dancing lights. They offered teasing hints of their form, twinkling briefly in Akinschet's illumination before winking back behind the veil of darkness.

Escandala guessed the instrument of their doom: broken

fragments of a proto-comet, too small to detect remotely but fast enough to penetrate ship armour. The trap must have been set months or even years ago, waiting for Gjalp's squadron to be lured into a precise point in space and time.

Horden jetted away, aiming for the biggest gap between the ships.

Escandala followed.

The first exploding TU was quickly followed by the rest of its Sleeve. TU's with enough velocity scattered, abandoning the slower Sleeve frames.

Too late.

A cluster of cometary debris shot past. She didn't even know it was there until the glare of light from a passing TU's engine lit the scene.

A TU passed close by. *Osman Bey*. She prayed to the Creator that Zenothon had been allowed the time to reach the shielded crèche at the heart of the ship. If he was caught in some connecting tube he would be pinned by the acceleration, unable to grab onto the adult-sized handholds that led to the acceleration protection dotted about the vessel.

She straggled behind the *Osman Bey*, which accelerated from brisk to flat out. In a few seconds, the zero-point engines would kick in and deliver near-relativistic velocity. Zenothon was now either in protection or he was dead.

She saw the rock moments before it hit *Osman Bey*.

The resulting fireball engulfed her mind.

Fragments of the ship spun outwards like a cracked helmet visor blown out by explosive decompression. She closed with a section tumbling toward her.

Horden bumped into her from behind and slowed to match her velocity.

"Is anyone there?" asked Horden, speaking through the general comms network. "Please notify."

She expected no reply and got none.

They waited.

She repeated Horden's plea until finally trailing into stillness. They were alone. Even the comet fragments had finished their assault and vanished into the darkness.

“Come on,” said Horden. “We only survived because we're tiny in comparison with the ships. They didn't stand a chance, but that's no reason to think there are no survivors.”

What was the idiot talking about? She surveyed the wreckage of broken ship fragments plunging through clouds of frozen air, blood, and meat.

“Just because there is no signal doesn't mean there are no survivors,” said Horden.

“But no signal means no one in a suit. That means all are dead.”

“Unless they are in a crèche.”

She guessed the origin of the *Osman Bey* shard that had passed them and accelerated toward that point. The crèches were pressurized, armoured and shielded. It was just possible that Zenothon was alive.

\*

“All secure,” said Horden. “Let's go.”

*Secure* was an optimistic way of describing the lash-up of mag-clamps and webbing the two humans had improvised from insulated-encased power cables. But wrapped in this embrace was the *Osman Bey's* crèche with its cargo that might be Zenothon and six other children, or might be corpses. The crèche was connected to a salvaged Sleeve vessel, *Pheidippides*, which still possessed a little rigidity in its shell, and retained functioning communication equipment. Gaping holes in the Sleeve's control section meant they had no way to pressurize *Pheidippides*, let alone produce a breathable atmosphere.

It might not hold and there may be other survivors. No matter. Either way, they had to seek help amongst the mining settlements on Utgard.

Escandala engaged the engines, and felt a jerky vibration through her grip on the control panel. The engines were only vector adjusters for fine control during slow manoeuvring such as docking. Thrust was pitiful, but the engines were fixed securely and the result moved them toward Utgard.

Horden had strapped himself to a communication console, looking childlike in the vast expanse designed for the hexapedal Jotun frame.



TU's carried short range radio and microwave transceivers, but all the Sleeves in their squadron held communicators quantum-entangled with Severin, their supply depot orbiting Tranquility, 43 light years distant. Had they possessed the codes to activate the equipment, they could have asked Severin to request rescue from Utgard. As it was, they had to hope the miners were intrigued enough to investigate what would look to them like drifting wreckage.

"I know what you're thinking," said Horden, fiddling with the controls. "If only we could get this communicator to work, it would give the children a chance. But there's more. Geirrod, my old Sleeve commander, explained that he could use Severin as a relay to patch communication to any receiving station in the network. I could get an FTL message to Earth."

But that was impossible. Humans bred for the fleet were denied access to the interstellar communications network. One-Ear had explained that this was to protect them from distractions, but his mouth had been gaping, indicating heavy irony.

"Why bother?" asked Escandala. "We have at best three hours air left in our suits. If all the children still live, they have maybe a couple of days before they too run out of air and water."

"Done," he said, giving no sign he had heard her. "I've set up a distress signal of sorts which should reach Utgard, although there's no reason to hope they'll be listening. It's a sequence of primes. Not very informative but clearly artificial. Best I could do with no understanding of their language. It's the children's best chance."

Escandala grudgingly admitted she was impressed. She said nothing, though, conserving oxygen instead.

\*

Utgard's sulphurous globe looked so far away to Escandala, yet it was close enough for a shuttle to launch from the mining port and rendezvous with them within about forty minutes. Not that there was any reason to hope for such a deliverance.

Her suit diagnostic reported two hours of air remaining.

"Still no response," said Horden. He looked up from the communications console and threw out his arms in frustration. "Let's face it, no one's coming."

“Your timing is impeccable,” said Escandala, jabbing her finger at a point behind Horden's shoulder. “Someone *is* coming.”

The fast growing speck came not from the moon, but from the jumble of debris that had been two opposing fleets a few hours before. She laughed maniacally. Horden with his big ideas of being an Earth hero! This must be a Muranyi follow-up to eradicate any survivors.

She zoomed her visor display upon the ship. But this was not an attack. It was a bulky six-legged figure in a fleet EVA suit, a Jotun riding an inspection disc.

“Identify,” came the command in the whistle and plosive yodelling of the Jotun speech.

Horden and Escandala obeyed.

“Would you believe it? It's my little hatchling, Escandala, and our friend Mr. Horden.”

“One-Ear!” Escandala spoke his human nickname in the Jotun tongue, and hugged him as tightly as the suit allowed.

“You have done well,” said One-Ear, “for such a—”

“How did you see us?” interrupted Escandala, peering into One-Ear's visor. “You're...”

“Blind. Yes, I thought you might notice that. Caught a heat flash when 'E' gun exploded. Melted my eyes and didn't do the rest of me much good either.”

“You haven't answered Escandala's question.”

“Well, Horden, you need to understand that we Jotuns have many faculties even you know nothing about. Despite your frequent ransacking of restricted parts of the data store, we still have our secrets.”

Even under the layers of his suit, Horden exuded unease. “I have never —”

“Let's get word to Utgard, shall we?” said One-Ear. “We can talk directly to Severin through the quantum link, and they can route a message to Utgard. We'll have you and your hatchlings down there in no time. Here's how to operate the quantum telegraph.”

Horden followed the blind Jotun's instructions to patch One-Ear through to Severin base.

“They will order Utgard to send help,” said One-Ear after completing his report. “Looks like the mining life for us,” he said.

“Perhaps for the next few decades. I expect they'll send a fleet to defend or retake the mines – can't leave them to the enemy – but the nearest reserves are forty-three objective years away. Not so bad in a ship, but *we* would have to live those years the old-fashioned way. So please don't forget your old friend and tutor, or I would be ever so lonely.”

“You silly old flea colony, of course we won't forget you.”

“It's just that... Well, I know you humans too well. With nothing much else to do you'll start breeding within a few days, and not stop until you die.”

The humans turned to each other and laughed.

“You humans! For such a fecund species, you exhibit a bizarre coyness about the actualities of your breeding. It would be different if Jarnsaxa had survived to be with me.”

“Jarnsaxa?” Escandala allowed herself to relax and enjoy One-Ear's revelation. “Are you telling us that you were in love with Captain Jarnsaxa?” She giggled, surprised she could still feel such levity.

She stopped abruptly. Her guilty amusement was raw loss to One-Ear.

The Jotun said nothing for an uncomfortable while. “If you must know, I did have some fantasy of an impossible companionship. It hardly seems worth denying now she is a cadaver. She survived the initial attack, but wreckage from our ship pierced her pressure seal. By the time it self-sealed, enough blood plasma had vaporized to cause an embolism. She died in my embrace.”

“I am sorry,” said Escandala, using formal grammar.

“Don't be sorry; be grateful. Jarnsaxa felt our victory was too suspicious for our entire squadron to be sitting stationary in one clump. Gjalp was too busy gloating over her victory to act like a proper squadron commander. Jarnsaxa disobeyed Gjalp's order to power down the point defence systems. We shot up most of the comet fragments they threw at us. Not enough, but we suffered less damage than the other ships. That's why your hatchlings could be alive.”

“Jarnsaxa sounds like a great leader,” said Horden, entering more instructions into the communications console. “Perhaps she should have been squadron commander?” He withdrew a memory

crystal from a hip pouch. “Did Severin tell you anything about the rest of the war? The Muranyi must have been planning this for decades. It cannot be a –”

“Radio silence. Now!”

It took a moment for One-Ear's command to penetrate. She looked to him for instruction. He pointed to Utgard.

Escandala looked where One-Ear pointed, could see nothing, so magnified the image until she saw a flash on the surface of Utgard. Then there was another; it was an attack on a mining settlement. Scanning for the source of the bombardment, she saw a pair of Muranyi monitor ships: unarmoured weapons platforms with poor manoeuvrability. Perfect for nuking defenceless worlds into glassy slag.

She noticed Horden insert the memory crystal into the console, ignoring the slaughter around him.

Millions lived on the moons. Aliens, it was true – she couldn't even remember the species – but they were her wards.

“Horden!” One-Ear barked the name in the human tongue, prompting Escandala to turn to her mentor. “Do not make that communication to Earth.” He had a sidearm aimed at Horden.

“I won't stop,” said Horden. “You will have to kill me.”

“Do not make me.” One-Ear ground his teeth in irritation. He reasoned with Horden in the Jotun language, “We were told the Earth-loyalty meme sweeping through the humans on Severin was to be tolerated, a harmless morale booster. The White Knights will be very disturbed if they even suspect one of their human slaves had contacted Earth. When they are disturbed they lash out. Their punishments are severe and indiscriminate.”

Horden stopped, looked at Escandala, and then turned back to his task at the communication console.

One-Ear stiffened the grip on his weapon.

Horden spun around, his combat knife arcing toward One-Ear's throat.

One-Ear fired. A jet of plasma burrowed through Horden's chest, out his back and into the vessel's communicator, which sparked and went dim. Twin plumes of crimson steam erupted from the holes in Horden's suit, freezing instantly.

Escandala looked to One-Ear. Horden's knife was buried deeply

into the Jotun's throat.

Both were dead.

She alone was responsible for the children now. There would be no last-minute rescue from the radioactive ash on Utgard's surface.

Her suit reported only seventy minutes of air remaining.

\*

Their remnant of the *Pheidippides* never did reach Utgard orbit. Instead, it began yielding to the pull from the mass of Akinschet. When the Muranyi monitor ships passed around the far side of Utgard, Escandala relaxed into a final hour to be spent in appreciation of Akinschet's murderous beauty. With her boots wedged in the Sleeve frame, she hitched a ride on the *Pheidippides* only tens of metres away from the crèche with no way of knowing for sure whether anyone lived inside. Until a child's voice spoke in her helmet.

“We heard everything you said. You and Mr. Horden.”

Distortion scratched at the transmission but there was no mistaking the voice was her son's. “How can you—?”

“No time. Christophe is eldest and most augmented. Do you know, he can launch processing threads in his cognitive implant up to a limit of eight teraflops? Still took a while to rig a short-range transmitter. Listen, we can effect Mr. Horden's plan, though we must do it the hard way.”

“Explain.”

“We will deliver the design of our augmentations inside our desiccated corpses.”

“But... Zenothon!”

“No, it's all right, Momma. Christophe has found a way to pump a semi-inert atmosphere by reversing components of the air scrubbers. That might prevent us from decay and the crèche will shield us from cosmic radiation.”

Zenothon mistook her again. How could she explain? She didn't want them to succeed!

“Christophe has been hacking into the navigation system for the last three subj-years,” said Zenothon. “Calculating a couple of slingshots around our star to aim at Sol is no sweat.”

“What? In this?”

“Yes.”

She did not doubt them. Not their capability but she did doubt the rightness of forcing their change upon Earth. If the child corpses ever did get to Sol, no good, nothing *human* would come of it.

“Good luck,” she said. She lied, knowing the children would detect her lie.

Then she let go. A quick burst from her thrust pack and her velocity diverged enough from the *Pheidippides* to watch the twist of silvered metal drift away.

“We need your help,” said Zenothon.

Escandala ground her teeth. She did not wish to give her help.

“We need two of the engines shifted to the port side, aligned with the others. Doesn't have to be precise but we need this soon.”

The engines already on the port side burst into a violet-blue flare for ten seconds.

“Please...”

Another burst of fire. The *Pheidippides* was pulling away, shrinking against the churning disc of Akinschet.

“We can't do this alone.”

Escandala felt her thumb on the thrust control trigger an impulse in the direction of the children.

A long sigh escaped her lips, fogging her faceplate until the environmental systems cleared the obstruction away.

She recalled harsh words to her son on the gravitoid. “You are no longer human,” she whispered. “But I am.”

She gave freely of her fuel until the *Pheidippides* drew nearer. In her heart, she knew that her *Zeno*, however corrupted, deserved hope and purpose in his breast when he died.

To realign the vector adjustors to Christophe's requirements was a simple task of minutes.

“Thank you,” said Zenothon. “We can go home.”

The engines she had positioned began a series of short calibration bursts. Escandala released her grip on the *Pheidippides*, letting go of the children.

“You imagine your home is Earth,” she told them. “Mine was always here, in vacuum lit by someone else's world, fighting another's war.”

Overriding the safety, she took off her helmet and freed herself

to the void. Air exploded out of her open mouth; her tongue prickled as its moisture boiled. The cloud of steam erupting from her mouth obscured forever her view of Zenothon's vessel as it began the long journey home.

## About the Author

**Tim C. Taylor** recently began a sabbatical from the software industry to be a full-time writer. He hopes this will also mean a restart to his home brewing operation but suspects that his son will have other ideas, centering on the construction of various Lego edifices. Tim has had half a dozen stories published in the small press and one in NewCon Press' *Shoes, Ships and Cadavers*. Currently he is working on a series of novels linked to *Welcome Home, Janissary*, and setting up an e-book publishing business at [www.greyhartpress.com](http://www.greyhartpress.com) Phew! Some sabbatical!

Find him online at [www.timctaylor.com](http://www.timctaylor.com)



## Further Conflicts

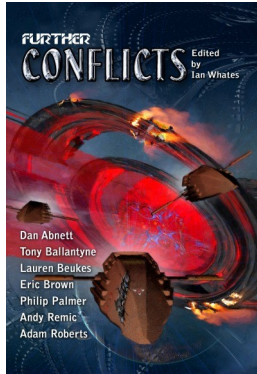
*Welcome Home, Janissary* was taken from the anthology *Further Conflicts*, available now from all good retailers in print and eBook editions.

**Edited by Ian Whates**  
**Cover Art by Andy Bigwood**

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